Tales of the Fade Walker

by Rawrzimon

Summary

Playing as a character and making your choices from behind a screen is completely different from being a part of a world where the knowledge you have and the choices you make can determine an entire world's future.

When the newly renamed Athena finds herself walking out of the Fade and into Thedas proper she must contend with the fact that, although she only knew this world and these people as a story within a game, her new abilities and foresight can change the course of events and therefore the story itself. The only question now is, what will she choose to change and how will this new story unfold?

*Summary written by the amazing failisse <3

Notes

Updates: I try to once a week! <3
Spotify Playlist!
My Tumblr

*= NSFW + = art with the chapter
Break of the Routine

Like many adults entering the main of their career a few years out of school, Victoria’s days recently had turned into a never ending routine. “The Great Rut” she was calling it. She woke up, went to work, came home to eat, then went to sleep. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Today had been like any other day. She pressed snooze as many times as she could afford before dragging herself to work. Twelve hours later, she left feeling no better than she did that morning. Even though she was an extrovert, speaking to people, let alone patients, was becoming a chore. The only bright things in her day were when she could listen to music on her lunch break, or when she returned home to snuggle underneath her favorite blanket and play video games. It was a routine - but it was hers.

Victoria pulled up into the driveway with her favorite song blaring so loud it drowned out all other thoughts. Hands drumming on the steering wheel, eyes closed, she leaned her head back into the headrest and tried to sing along to the best of her abilities. She was no trained singer, nothing like her sister who could sing the roof off of her house, but she enjoyed being able to match the emotion of the singer within the confines of her safe car where hopefully nobody could hear her. It was her own private karaoke studio with the roads as her performance time limit, or sitting in the parking lot of a store prolonging needing to finish her errand.

As the song came to a close, she sighed and rubbed the back of her neck in a sore attempt to soothe the ache that had formed. Bending over beds, lifting patients, and lugging dirty laundry bags was not easy on the body or the mind. It was why she took such solace in her little drives home. It was the one place where she could get lost in music and let go for just a minute or two.

She turned off the car and got out to go towards her door with her keys, purse and papers from the day all jumbled in her hand. It took a small amount of skillful and balanced effort to open the door and drop everything on her couch that was immediately to the left. Something was missing though. Victoria stood up to pat her multiple scrub pockets, brown eyes searching all over her body for what felt so off. She had her keys, her purse, her lunch bag - Water bottle. Shit. It was under the passenger side of the seat of her car probably with hour old water sloshing around the bottom with a small layer of algae growing on the mouth piece. It’s not that it didn’t gross her out. It kind of did, but it took so much extra effort to get it out of there it was almost worth it to buy a new one.

With a small grunt of frustration, she returned to the vehicle, searching around with her hands and eyes before finally finding her prize. It had old bits of dirt and a small clump of lint from her scrubs on it. It would have to be washed or thrown away now. Its fate was sealed when it decided to be the strong dirt magnet on the floor under the seats. A soft whine came from behind her and she whipped around quickly while ever so gracefully hitting her head on the top of her car.
Standing right in front of her was a wolf, a large looking black wolf. What was it doing here? They weren’t native to the area! Crap. Shit. The car door closed behind her so all she could do was press her body against it until nearly became one with it, eyes never leaving the beast that seemed to just be sniffing the air around her. Its paws weren’t covered in mud so it couldn’t have been traveling far. Its tail stood perfectly still as it inspected her, eyes nearly sparkling in the moonlight as its curiosity apparently caused it to take a step closer to her.

She looked at its eyes and then nearly screamed. There weren’t just two, there were six identical sets of orbs all staring her down. It was now so close she could see her reflection within them, its breath hot on her skin. She wanted to call out for help to her roommate within the house but that could entice the creature into attacking. Surely it could smell her fear. Hell, she could smell herself from the shift and she knew she needed to wash her scrubs. Heaven knew what kind of fluids were causing her pants leg to stick to her skin but it wasn’t something she wanted to remain.

The wolf did a quick exhale before going back into a sitting position, head tilting to the side in what she could assume was confusion at her. Victoria relaxed a small bit, her hands going from a don’t hurt me stance to staying on guard clenched in front of her body. What was it doing here? She could have sworn it held resemblance to something she had seen in a video game but that was impossible. This was Earth; that was Thedas. The two couldn’t mix unless she was in the middle of a really good dream which was normally interrupted by her cat pawing at her face at exactly six in the morning for his morning meal. Damn cat. But this? This wolf was insane. Maybe she had worked too long?

Before she could theorize anymore what it was doing here, the wolf threw its head to the sky and howled. The howl felt like it vibrated through her very core. She slammed her hands over her ears and looked around to the people walking on the street. They didn’t react or see the wolf. They simply kept on walking and doing their nightly routines. Perhaps she was just going mad, but the wolf was then in front of her. A thought came into her mind. It had no voice but her own but something sounded off about it.

“Come with me.”

There was no time for an answer. A green light formed beneath her in a minute she was falling. Her hands gripped for some kind of reality and found nothing. She screamed, her body spiraling downwards in a turbulent tunnel of green and white. The lights were flashing before her eyes and causing her to go dizzy. The taste of bile became very present in her mouth, especially because she could see the tunnel ending with some kind of rough end quickly approaching. The smell of sulfur hit her like the landing that followed. Her body was slowed somehow but she still landed belly first onto the ground below.
Victoria groaned, taking a moment to collect herself before looking up at her new surroundings. It was dark and something felt off about the whole area. It contained a sense of dread that she couldn’t shake and there was shouting. Where was it coming from? She pushed off of the ground and took a few tries to get herself standing, her body wavering in uncertainty on whether she was going to faint or not. The sensation was foreign to her; she had never fainted before thankfully but she was suddenly wishing she had. Perhaps that would explain everything going on around her.

There were two women running towards a bright swirl of green lights. She could see their bodies climbing up what looked like a fallen over wall that had some outwards ridges for them to grab onto. The person on top was able to get to the peak and offer a hand down to someone wearing a very tall, strange hat.

Wait a minute.

That looked like the Divine. _THE DIVINE_. Divine Justinia murdered at the Conclave. Oh no. Oh no oh no. She shuffled side to side, looking at how she could get to the portal. It was the only exit from this place! If that was Divine Justinia then that meant she was in . . . the Fade. The realization hit her while a gust of wind did, her body being blown back for what felt like a large distance. She was greeted with a large rock formation. Her body slammed against its surface while falling unceremoniously to the ground.

Everything within her body hurt. Something had broken. If she was in the Fade, did that mean she died? No. The soon to be Herald and the Divine were here physically, perhaps she was too. Victoria went to breathe but realized the air had been knocked out of her. Her ribs burned with pain every time she tried to breathe so she assumed they were broken too. The world began to spin around her, a dizzying sensation taking over her. The darkness threatened to steal her consciousness but a creature stepped into her vision.

The creature, having somewhat feminine elven features, was green and sitting on its hind legs. It then bent down so it could rest its forearms on top of its knees. Its glowing yellow gaze appeared to be looking through Victoria before it nodded and stood up. The thing spoke softly to her, like a whisper, but its tone was friendly. “You look like you could use some help.”

Victoria coughed, the taste of cafeteria food and old coffee threatening to spurt from her lips. When she could finally catch some air, she asked: “Who are you?”

The creature laughed, the glow in its eyes fading as it smiled calmly towards her. “I am Wisdom.”
She looked up with a confused gaze towards the creature, eyes searching for the “Ha-ha! Got ya” moment of all of this. When there was none, she sighed, running a hand through her hair only to discover there was a wound there seeping blood into her light brown locks. “Shit.” She looked to Wisdom, giving her a quick look over. She had pointed ears and wore what appeared to be ancient robes with different designs on them. Ooooooohhh wait! She swallowed a lump of nerves before asking, her voice shaky from the journey still. “Wisdom. . . do you know Solas?”

The spirit almost seemed to jump, her eyes expanding in surprise while she took a nervous step back. “Yes. He has been a friend of mine for eons. How do you--?” The spirit then looked to the sky and her eyes began to glow while she did. She stepped forward and placed her hands upon Victoria, who was in no position to object. Her hands shook so poorly any one of her coworkers would have given her Ativan if they had seen her. The bad case of nerves had spread to her mouth which added the unsettling sound of her teeth chattering to the whole area.

The place they had landed was what she could guess was approximately two miles away from the portal where the future Inquisitor had escaped. The further away from the rift she was, the nicer the environment seemed. Since they were somewhat close it still stunk of rotten food and eggs and there were pits of a bubbling substance Victoria could not identify. While her eyes looked around them, Wisdom had closed hers. It was then that she felt something odd within her head. It was almost like a pressure, but it felt calm and peaceful. She looked to the spirit who simply nodded and she hesitantly relaxed, closing her eyes and allowing the spirit to do whatever she was trying to do.

In a flash played all of her recent memories as if on fast-forward. It went through her last work day. The breakfast, the drive to work listening to a pop boy-band of the early 00’s, the two patients she had, the fight with the doctor, her phone call with her sister on the way home, the song and then the wolf. When the spirit had seen everything she nodded and stepped back. “I understand now. You are not from here.” She shook her head, tears forming in her eyes. What would happen to her roommate? Her family? Her friends? Would they even know she was gone or would they assume she had died? The reality of the situation hit her and suddenly the woman was a mess on the ground. She sobbed into her hands, streaks of day-old mascara running down her face. The sobbing and heaving hurt her ribs but she didn’t care. She was just snatched from her world like a child in a fairy-tale and thrown into this one and it wasn’t even Thedas! It was the Fade!

Shit.

“Where is the Nightmare Demon?”
Wisdom looked over her shoulder off into the distance. “It is over far over there. But still...it and the Breach are why I cannot be here long. My friend had called for me for advice on closing the tear but...It is too bright. It hurts, even me. I can already feel myself fading from this place. We must speak quickly.” The spirit put a caring hand on her shoulder, squeezing it while smiling. Already her form was beginning to fade into the ether, its colors becoming fragmented pieces of light. “You have a magic within you, Victoria. Meditate, master it. I feel you won’t be here for long but you must survive!”

And with that the spirit was gone. She was alone.

Victoria fell to her knees and simply screamed at the sky. The Breach was above her, lightning sparkling and striking within the clouds. It simply dominated the skies, even in the fade. No wonder Wisdom was driven from this place. The very presence of the Breach was maddening, it tingled on her skin like a creep sneaking up behind her at a bar. It was something that made her very uncomfortable and she needed to get out now.

Think, think Victoria. If she got into the Fade, the way to get out was through a rift. She had only seen one rift so far and it was the one that the Divine and the future Herald came through. One that likely was protected by a Pride Demon right now with its shade followers. Well that wouldn’t work. As her scream ended, she slammed her fists into the ground. Much to her surprise, flames exploded at the impact, leaving two small scorch imprints in the ground below her. She blinked once. They were still there. Twice more. Still there. Ash flecked and floated to the ground from her hands and her voice was suddenly absent from her throat.

Well shit. Wisdom was right after all, clever spirit. Thinking back on it, didn’t Wisdom speak elvish? She sat back on her butt with a small grunt, eyes simply glued to her hands while her mind was lost in thought. Perhaps in the Fade spirits spoke the language a person understood most. Everything was possible in the Fade, right? A person's mind was the only limitation. Thanks to a lifetime of cartoons and superheroes, Victoria’s imagination was more than ready. But things like logic, fear, and reality were getting in her way.

The roar of demons wasn’t too far off and she knew sooner than later she would need to start making the trek to the portal. It would only be, what, a couple days at most before the Herald was guided by Cassandra to the Temple of Sacred Ashes? That would be her opportunity to escape...in theory.

She pushed herself to a standing position and gave one last groan of frustration in all of the mess before walking forward. Her ribs were definitely the thing that hurt most. Each breath still brought a sharp pain but it was dulling overtime. She stopped and looked down, cursing herself at her current appearance. Light green scrubs stained, messy hair, and now smeared make up around her
eyes. Good heavens if she could find a clean patch of water she would feel a thousand times better, but there were more important things than vanity at this point. Hydration was one, but she did not trust the puddles of foreign liquid existing within the Fade.

Victoria walked for a few minutes. The lay of the land was pretty flat where she was at. There were puddles of bubbling liquid where the bubbles hovered a few seconds in the air before popping. The smell wasn’t pleasant either. It was reminiscent of the pools Iron Bull and Blackwall bitched about in her game in the back of the Western Approach. There was a ghost of a smile at the edge of her lips at the thought of meeting the pair, the closest thing to happiness since she had been dragged into this hell.

The happiness didn’t last long when she heard a smooth voice behind her. The sound glided over her mind and made her feel like she was wrapped in a warm blanket, maybe the arms of a lover. That can't be normal. She whipped around with her fists raised in preparation to fight to find a creature with two horns, its body covered in colors and shapes that resembled a dark purple bikini made of scales.

“My my my, lost, little pup?”

She took in a gasp, her feet subconsciously bringing her away from the demon. It put its hand against its face, index finger resting on its cheek. It tapped its finger against its face while clicking its tongue against the back of its teeth in a condescending sound. “You aren’t a spirit and you aren’t simply a dreaming mage. What are you?” A creature resembling a demon floated towards her, poking her in the chest. It then squealed with delight, clapping its hands together while its eyes curved up in apparent happiness. “Oh you are real! I just saw someone of your kind run out of here but you must have been left behind. Poor, sweet thing. I can ease your loneliness. What is it you want?”

Demon. Of course a demon found her first after Wisdom left. She now cursed herself for not learning some spell from her before she was torn away from the breach. She held a palm out towards the demon, her voice shaky and lacking in confidence as she shouted: “You better watch out! I have magic. I’m not afraid to use it!”

Lie.

Desire laughed, the sound bell-like and too charming to be sincere. “Oh no, my dear. You and I are going to have such fun together. Now just tell me, what is your Desire?”

Chapter End Notes
Hit me up with any comments/critiques/etc!

I also have it in my mind that the Fade is unique to every person and that is why she can understand Wisdom even though we hear her speaking Elvish to Solas when she eventually dies. The Fade is a construct that can be shaped by a persons mind. Why shouldn't language be universal?
Meditation: The Key To One's True Self

What did she want?

That was a complicated question. She wanted to find a way home. She wanted to find a way out of the Fade. She wanted to continue on with this quest. At the same time, she didn’t want to die. There were so many thoughts buzzing through her head, the demon leaned forward and snapped her fingers in front of her face. The action caused Victoria to yelp out, fists rising back to their defensive position. Her hands began shaking in front of her, traitorous things. This caused Desire to laugh again, the sound sending an odd chill down her spine. The creature was enticing and terrifying in the same moment. She knew what demons were capable of, but at the same time she knew they were capable of reason. She had seen that in Honnleath when her character came across Shale the golem. Her Warden at the time had convinced a demon to let a little girl go and it simply complied. Perhaps this one would be charitable as well?

Thinking simply, Victoria looked to Desire and lowered her guard. “I need to get out of here. I know... that I won’t be well received on the other side.” She spoke slowly to ensure that she chose her words specifically. She didn’t want Desire to get any wrong ideas or try to possess her.

The demon was getting impatient. It clicked its tongue at her then spoke, its voice a mocking tone as it rolled her eyes. Each word elicited a tilt from the demon’s head, hand swaying back and forth as if it were lazily conducting a band. “You want to learn your magic, yes?”

She nodded, ashamed that she couldn’t get the words out and that the demon was somehow able to read her mind. To be fair, she was in its home so Desire had all of the power here. The demon clapped its hands together and hummed, fingers tapping in a rhythm from its pinky... claws to its thumb. “You... You are not like the others. Your song. It’s different.”

Victoria was the one to tilt her head in confusion this time, the action arousing a stiff neck she didn’t instantly realize she had. With a wince and quick neck rub, she asked, “What do you mean song? Like, my magic?”

Desire nodded while putting her arms by her side. “Most of the mages we come across have this certain song to their aura. Yours is different somehow. It’s obvious you are a novice. You haven’t even summoned a barrier to keep me out or flames to dispel me. Even a novice during a Harrowing could accomplish that.”

Victoria nearly squeaked in embarrassment. She felt so vulnerable in this place. She had no armor, no staff to even channel magic through, and no clue on how to bring her magic to bear. Earlier it
was when she was frustrated and screaming at the sky. Perhaps it was linked to emotion? That was how it worked in a lot of the shows she watched. Avatar, Dragonball Z, heck even Star Wars. They always talked about mastering their emotions in order to focus on their abilities. She hoped it was the same here.

Except Victoria was absolutely awful at hiding her emotions.

She was the type of person who would tell her story to anybody and be willing to listen to them in return. She had to fight. It would be the only thing to ensure her survival in this awful place. With a firm nod, she opened her eyes to meet the demon. “How about a deal?” She asked and suddenly Desire looked interested. The flames floating between its horns turned from a dismal black color to one that was bright pink. Victoria saw it as a demonic mood ring, which brought a satisfied hum from her. The demon took a step closer, its interest obviously peaked.

“Well, child, what kind of deal do we have?”

She looked to the side to gather her thoughts for a moment before looking back, her face remaining as neutral as possible. “You help guide my self-taught lessons and I’ll show you images of my world. You say my song is different? I’m not like the people you have met. From where I’m from, there isn’t magic. There aren’t demons. But we can still fly. We can get from one side of the largest country in the world to another in hours!”

The last bit got the demon’s interest. Her lips curved into a smile. “What? You're lying. Do you use portals?”

Victoria shook her head and crossed her arms across her chest. “Nope.”

Desire frowned. “Wings?”

Another shake of her head.

The demon pouted, putting most of her weight onto one hip while it also crossed its arms underneath its scaled breasts. As the creature went to guess again Victoria gained the confidence to interrupt it with a raised finger. “Ah-ah-ah Desire. You don’t get to know unless you help me.”

Desire whined, throwing its hands up in the air before coming to a frustrated conclusion.
“Fiiiiiiiiine.” The demon's voice dragged on like an irritated teenager taking out the trash for her mother, hands flopping to the side while its body posture slumped. Victoria gave small “hmph” of triumph, extending one hand to the demon. “We have to make a deal or this isn’t official. No back-stabbing. No possessions. Nothing. Do you agree to these terms?”

The horned creature looked up and shook her hand before retreating her hand to the comfort of her crossed arms. The momentary touch left a sensation of dread on her hand but Victoria shook it off, chocking it up to a side effect of dealing with demons. Desire then perked up, the color of the flame turning into a mysterious purple cloud that had small bits of lightning within it. “Wait. How did you know my identity, Outsider?”

She paused, voice trapped within her throat while taking a guarded step back. “Uh, this is difficult to explain. In my world... I was able to watch this one. Through a type of screen. She made a rectangle shape with her fingers then expanded it outward to roughly the size of her TV that sat in her living room. The demon didn’t look convinced but then scoffed it off like it wasn’t interested. “Fine. Start your training. I’ll watch over you but you must answer my questions! We have a deal, you and I.”

Victoria nodded and sat down into a crossed leg position. The movement put pressure on her ribs and back but she moved through the pain and took in a deep breath. In college she had taken a yoga and meditation class. Granted, it was only for three weeks because the class met at eight AM and her other classes left her drained, but the three classes were enough to teach her how to properly meditate. Plus her sister was into the crystal, meditation, and Reiki therapies so she got influence from there too.

With each breath she focused on how the flow of air was moving. She felt the rise and fall of her chest and the cool feeling her throat got when she took in a deep breath. She felt the way her heart pumped against her rib cage underneath her left breast. To steady herself even more, she placed her hand underneath the elastic of her sports bra to feel her heart beating there. The steady rhythm centered her mind, gave her a clear space to simply feel what her body and mind was doing. In the center of her body, a flicker shocked her. Her brown eyes flew open and Desire was laying across from her on her side. It supported its head with one hand while drawing lines in the dirt with the other. “You feel that?”

The demon nodded, putting a hand in the center of its chest where she felt the spark like fire burst. “That is your magic, the spark of it at least.” The demon then yawned and lied on its back, its somehow perfect breasts not sagging to the sides. Victoria shot a glare at her. Damn Fade magic and its unrealistic expectations. No wonder so many young mages fell to demons during their first trials. How could they not when the things in the Fade would never compare to those in the real world? With a huff of air Victoria returned to her meditating position, this time gripping the tops of her knees instead of feeling her pulse.
The breaths came smoother now. Her mind blocked out the pain of the expanding as every breath passed. The spark came back quicker. It felt like a calm warmth within her body. With another exhale the feeling expanded from just her chest to her entire body. It caused her skin to tingle like when she went from a cold room to a warm bath. It sent a quick shiver down her spine which caused her to arch her back and neck from the feeling. A genuine smile came over her lips and she didn’t realize she was doing it. While the magic tingled on her skin she heard the voice of Desire. “Push it outwards.”

She nodded and focused, feeling the energy around her body before willing it to go outwards. Within moments it followed her command, expanding to the size of a small dome that encircled her. She opened one eyes to see if it was working, not moving a muscle so it wouldn’t go away. Desire had moved backwards from the push of the barrier, eyes lighting up with something that looked akin to Pride.

“We’ll make a mage of you yet. Now tell me, Fade Walker, how do you fly from one end to the other in such a small amount of time?”

Victoria gave her a victorious grin, the barrier holding strong while she answered. “Giant metal birds that can fit over a hundred people in them.”
I've Got the Magic in Me!

It felt like the demon and her went back and forth for an eternity.

Desire asked her of machines, people, and animals. The demon seemed to be turning into an excited little school girl, its words fumbling out of its mouth as its mind processed her answers and came up with rebuttals. Victoria was working on how long she could hold her barriers while expanding their size. It was exhausting but somehow in the Fade she felt more energized? It was like there was a constant stream of coffee running through her veins to keep her awake and focused. The coffee in the hospital was always terrible and smelled of burnt Starbucks but they would occasionally sneak away to the waiting room and get the good stuff.

It was then that she realized she hadn’t eaten in hours but she wasn’t hungry yet. She choked it up to the Fade and brought her barrier skin-tight. It hummed along the surface of her skin while protecting her. It felt like a cozy fall jacket and it was definitely a sensation she could get used to. After a long question string regarding religion and the ilk, Desire stood up and looked to the rift. “You should learn an attack. What’s the emotion that comes easiest to you?”

Victoria scoffed with a laugh, answering easily while lifting her hands that had shadows of ash clinging to them: “I think Fire would be best. Don’t you think?”

The demon smirked and nodded in agreement. It extended a hand to help the new friend up. She wiped the dust off of her already ruined scrub pants and shrugged. Desire didn’t give any instructions, just gave her a head nod and a gesture that meant “okay, go on!”

She then sighed, opening a palm out in front of her facing up. The energy still hummed on her skin so she withdrew it into herself. It was suddenly obvious that it pumped through her veins. It wasn’t just in her heart. That might have been her center but her magic was a part of her now. It filled every breath and went all the way down to her toes. She opened her eyes and focused on the palm of her hand. She focused on the frustration of her being yanked from her car to the Fade. The frustration of the doctor arguing with her over fluid orders for her patient. The frustration of her cat knocking her phone off of the night stand earlier that morning causing her to scramble through her alarms. All of the matters seemed trivial now but they were the easiest thing to summon in a quick moment.

Small, but sturdy, a fireball formed. It swirled within her hand. The fire pulsed in time with her heart and if she didn’t know any better she would have said it looked like a little Calcifer. The skin of her hand began to ache and Desire quickly put her hands out as if to guard her. “Barrier your hands, idiot!”
Victoria dropped the fireball and shook her hand off to cool, the minor burn fading away until her skin was back to being its normal ivory color. The flame ceased with a hiss against the ground. A scorch mark was left in its place but even that gave her a small bit of triumph.

Well smack her ass and call her Zuko, she did it!

She pumped her fist in the air and jumped, a sound of victory coming from her lips as she celebrated. Desire rolled her eyes and pointed to the rift. “Your time is running out, Outsider. Do you think this will be enough to get you there?”

All of the celebration and happiness stopped. “Oh... I didn’t think of that. How much time do you think we have left? Shit!”

They were both rocked to the side as the sound of a large tear rang through their ears. She closed her hands over her head and Desire turned behind them with flames in its hand. In the far distance was a rift that suddenly ceased it exist. The colors faded from the bright swirling to the simple background colors of the Fade.

Her pupils dilated and her mouth hung low in shock. “No. No. NO! We have to move.”

Desire stepped forward, eyes actually full of something that would resemble worry. “You’re not strong enough yet! Stay with me! I can make you powerful!”

She began to walk towards the rift that she knew the Pride demon was in front of. Her walk then became a panicked run, her heart pounding against her rib cage. She could feel her pulse in the side of her neck and back while she ran. Gods she was out of shape but that wouldn’t hold her back from getting to some people who could actually help her. What would she say to them? How would she explain her current situation? What was something Varric said to the Herald at first? Should of spun a story?

Spin a story she shall.

Victoria was now at a full sprint, her goal coming within reach. During band in high school they forced them to run two agonizing laps around the football field. Compared to this that was nothing. If only she could go back in time and slap the skinny, careless self she used to be. That girl knew nothing of pain. This was pain, running in a foreign territory with a demon at her back with broken ribs.
The pair ran past shades that couldn’t be bothered and a sloth demon that was sleeping on a large pile of bones. Perhaps it was her experience with death in the hospital or the fact that she had befriended a desire demon, but suddenly these things weren’t as frightening anymore. She ran with her barrier around her. It kept her from crashing into rock shards and kept the other demons from coming near her. It also helped that Desire was right on her heel, apparently giving looks of possession to the others that Victoria was its and its alone.

That part was strangely comforting.

*Roooooooaar crack!*

The second rift with the scouts on the mountain. It was behind them but she knew that meant that they were all close. Cassandra, Varric, the Inquisitor, and oh god. Solas. She suddenly halted in her tracks, feet making two scorch marks against the ground as she did. Desire nearly collided behind her, its claws hands pushing against her back to stop. “What? What’s wrong?”

Victoria was winded, her hands resting on top of her knees as she caught her breath. “There. . .there are people on the other side. They will be able to see right through me. What if they just kill me?”

Desire frowned for a second before shaking its head. “So? Is Death really the worst option here? You, Outsider, have flown in metal birds across the skies, have kept people from dying with your hands, have controlled small devices that can show you other worlds! You have powers even I can’t give you.” For a second, it looked like the light between her horns became a pure white. It flickered back to its neutral magenta tone while the demon sighed. “You have to try. Come on, you’re almost there.”

She slowly nodded, eyes taking a moment to leave the place where the holy light had been shining between her horns. They took off at a run and already the Pride demon came in their sights. It wasn’t focused on them, however. She now smelled of the Fade and the demons were waiting at the rift with a too eager smile on their lips. Desire put a hand out in front of them as they came within walking distance of the rift, its eyes examining the area.

Then the world around them shook and they fell to the ground. The rift burned brighter, brighter than any sun she could think of before ripping open to the other side. Victoria saw the burned edges of the area where the rift was. She saw archers on the higher ground and saw the future Inquisitor, her Herald she created standing with her right hand at her side while she thrust her left hand into the sky to open the rift.
Almost as if the Herald commanded it herself, the demon group jumped through the rift. The battle was breaking out below them, the sound of swords clashing and spells bursting filling her head. Victoria watched with an awe-struck gaze. It all was so real now. Goodness. It was real now! The chill from their icy spells made her shudder even from her place on the other side of the rift. Desire grasped her shoulders and did something she didn’t expect.

The demon hugged her.

As she pulled away a bright light was taking over the demon. It had started as a small flame in between her horns and expanded over the demon’s whole body. Victoria went to speak but the demon put a finger over her mouth. “It’s going to be okay, Victoria! You have such strength. I am excited to watch your journeys!”

And before she could respond in turn she felt the pull from the rift. It was being sucked closed and her body was going with it. To help in the process Desire pushed her through the portal. Victoria reached out to her friend as the rift closed behind her, her body unceremoniously falling from the sky to the ground in front of what would soon be the Inquisition.

The impact was a crushing blow against her body. She landed on her legs and crumbled down, her head hitting the cold stone ground below. Darkness finally swallowed her mind after days of traveling through the Fade without a moment of sleep. Before she succumbed to the injuries, she heard a familiar voice in her head:

“Chuckles, we’re in luck! Beautiful women keep falling from the sky!”
Victoria woke from a dreamless sleep with a gasp, instantly shooting up from bed. She regretted that. Her head felt like it was splitting and her breath was caught in her throat. A pained groan left her lips, somebody coming to her side and soothing her. “Easy, easy there!” She looked to her caretaker, eyes instantly acknowledging the facial hair and familiar gruff voice. He pushed her down into the bed, not so gently she might add, and brought a potion to her lips. “Drink this then get up.”

She came to a slightly elevated position on her elbow to drink the red potion. It tasted of cinnamon and acid, not a pleasant combination. The taste burned her tongue and she made a face but eventually swallowed it all. It didn’t take long, but the tingly feeling on her tongue spread through her body. Already it became easier to breathe and the blood in her hair dried. She let out a sigh of relief, her gaze returning to the local apothecary. He patted the tops of his knees before rising from the chair. “Well good, you’re finally up. The Herald just left but you need to meet with the Seeker as well. Get dressed. We had to burn your old stuff, man did that stink! Were you rolling around in a nug’s den before you fell from the sky? Maker help me.” He continued to whine and rant on even as the door shut behind him.

With a surprising amount of pep, she rose from the bed and looked down at herself. They hadn’t taken her sports bra, thank goodness. That would be something she couldn’t find in this world. She was covered in simple linen undergarments that were a shade off of white. In the chest next to the bed were a pair of black boots, sturdy brown pants, a jacket, and a simple shirt. She put it on to find it fit surprisingly well. Adan might have looked a little too hard at her before choosing her clothing options. She sighed, looking to the door and knowing exactly where it leaded.

She would have to confront Cassandra, Leliana, Josephine, and Cullen.

*What would she say?!*

Panic filled her body, her heart beating within what felt like her head but with a few easy breaths she calmed herself down. *Be honest but not too forthcoming.* Telling them that she knew the future would get her instantly turned into a Tranquil, or worse, tortured by Leliana for details. Victoria was too proper of a name here as well. Plus she knew it would be the name of the next Divine so that would be awkward. Biting her bottom lip, she looked to the skies for inspiration and thought. What would be a name foreign to them? Even in her cabin the light of the Breach came in through the window and she could see it under her eyelids.

It looked smaller in the Fade for some reason. She walked to the edge of the cabin and looked up through the window. The Breach ate the entire sky. The green colors looked so alien and abnormal here. It put an odd feeling in her stomach, it churning and tightening within her abdomen. The
sensation almost brought her to her knees but then she realized: she hadn’t eaten in days. Victoria - no – Athena - sure, that sounds good for now - sighed and rubbed a hand nonchalantly over her stomach. Better get this over with.

Athena timidly opened the door and looked out and sure enough the line of villagers still stood there. However, they were all eagerly looking at her like she was the Herald. “Um...” Before she could even speak voices began to ring out all throughout the crowd of survivors.

“Look! It’s the girl who fell!”

“She fell from the rift!”

“It’s the Fade-Walker!”

She tried not to smile at the title even though hearing it made her queasy. It was something Desire had come up with for her during their short time together. She made a mental note to not bring up the demon quite yet. Solas might understand but even then he would be angry for her speaking with demons without any sort of protection or preparation. Varric would probably think it was some weird story and be friendly but guarded towards the whole thing.

The others, well they were more militaristic and wouldn’t be so open minded. She would have to wait for the rest of the companions to be recruited. Oh what would the Herald be like? Rathein in her game was sarcastic but loving. She had shaved sides and a Mohawk style down the middle with tattoos around her left eye. Athena had a feeling they would get along but hopefully nothing changed in this strange world she was in.

With bravery summoned within her heart, she walked through the only path allowed by the villagers to the Chantry. With help she opened the heavy ass wooden doors. The candles lit the area but the inside of the church was gorgeous. Her gaze found its way looked around the building, her body spinning around to get a 360 view of the place. It simply captivated her. She would have to spend more time in here, especially with all of the books! Codex aside, it would be completely different having the information in her hands.

Perhaps she was taking her time because she knew what might come or because everything was so beautiful - but it took a minute or two for her to reach the council room. Her fist gingerly hesitated over the door. Did she knock? Did she simply enter? Oh Maker help her. Oh no. She was already thinking in terms of the Maker.
Even in her normal world she wasn’t so much a religious person. For her, it was hard to dismiss the ideas of energy and the like while also dismissing science. Working in the field she did, it was nearly impossible to not believe in science, evolution, and its common topics. How would she describe that in Thedas? Dorian claimed to be Andrastian but he did not like the Chantry. Perhaps they would talk of that. . .if she made it that far.

The fear of dying caused her to panic and quickly knock. Why did I do that? She screamed at herself while footsteps approached the door. Athena took in a sharp gasp while taking a step back. Did one bow to a Seeker? What was the appropriate response? Instead her eyes widened in a mixture of fear and astonishment. Cassandra, on the other hand, seemed to stand up straighter and say: “Ah. You’re awake.” She gestured her inside of the room and she saw that the Herald was there. The large book was already on the table so the Inquisition had been formed.

Damn she missed the speech.

Cassandra grabbed her by her arm and put her next to the Herald. The Nevarran woman was simply gorgeous, even in the grime of war and fighting. The armor fit her perfectly and there was a natural power she held that could not be communicated in the game. “Herald. Before you find Mother Giselle, there is also the matter of this woman.”

Rathein turned towards Athena, giving her a soft smile. Athena visibly relaxed, walking to her side while looking to the Right and Left Hands of the former Divine. The Herald spoke: “What do you want me to do? You barely just started trusting me.”

Leliana took a step forward, her gaze slicing daggers through Athena’s skin. She bristled, her barrier coming up in a subtle way on her skin. Both Rathein and Cassandra noticed. The Seeker made a noise of disappointment. “A mage at that. She could be an abomination.”

Athena shook her head, placing her hands up in a defensive position. “I am not an abomination. I swear it!”

The Seeker took a step closer to her, forcing Athena’s backside to be pressed against the war table. “You arrive with magic but no staff? Our healer examined you once you exited the Fade. You do not have the Maker’s mark and with foreign garments. How did you learn magic, Fade-Walker?”

The title was like an insult coming from Cassandra’s lips. Leliana gracefully glided across the room to stand at the Seeker’s side, in between where Athena was standing and the door. She let her arms fall to her side, eyes going to the floor. “I . . .taught myself.”
Leliana’s face did not change but Cassandra was obviously unimpressed. “Taught yourself? You fell from the Fade! Do you remember nothing? How did you find a way out?”

Athena answered without thinking, the pressure of both of their gazes breaking her. “Someone helped me!”

Chancellor Roderick then decided to chime in, the sliminess of his voice bringing a disgusted shiver down the woman’s spine. “I agree! How do we know this someone wasn’t a demon! Bring the Commander in here. We need to remove the demon from her.”

Rathein motioned to speak but was cut off by Cassandra. “I agree. It is the only way to know for sure.” The Herald gave a look of disappointment before looking to her, pity in her eyes. She bent over and looked Athena with a sympathetic expression on her face. Somehow she was the only accepting and friendly face in this place and she had just been put through the same ringer that she had. Already the Herald was a braver woman than she. The Herald was looking for something, something to prove her innocence. But there was nothing. With a defeated nod of her head Cassandra poked her head out of the room and ordered: “Fetch the Commander and Solas.”
Shit the Commander was intimidating.

He entered with anger and confusion fueling his heels, his trained Templar eyes looking her over once before nodding. “I’ve been briefed. You really think she is. . . “

Cassandra interjected with a nod, turning to him and whispering not soft enough. “She came from the fade and states *someone* helped her learn spells. She knows magic and taught herself. . . Cullen. We can’t afford an abomination in our Inquisition camp this early.”

Athena swallowed down a lump of fear, her head being held in her hands. Oh yeah there was a wound on her head. She felt the healed scar underneath the caked blood. It had to have been a hematoma, subdural? Who had healed the majority? She could tell the potion only healed the superficial wound left, but somebody had to do the dirty work to take pressure off of her brain.

The answer walked through the door and she was too busy looking at the floor with an air of self-pity to notice. The three leaders of the Inquisition came to a decision when Rathein spoke up, her voice full of confidence but lined with sympathy. “If we do this, if she is clean, there are to be no more questions. She is with us. I will take personal responsibility for her. Can you promise me this?”

Cullen groaned and went to answer when Rathein cut him off. Good girl. “You all thought poorly of me until you found out I was useful to you. Perhaps she could be too!” Athena saw the Herald look at her with a small glance of hope as she looked up from the floor. The potion must have worn off because her headache came back, it taking over her whole head. She realized it was probably a caffeine headache as well. Damnit. She would need to find a glass of tea when this was all over and some food. That is if she survived their interrogation or whatever first impression this was.

The Commander cleared his throat and spoke when the Herald was finished. “Fine.” He looked to a messenger at the door. “Go get some lyrium and chains. She is going to need to be kept still.”

A hum of disapproval to the side brought both ease and worry into the pit of her stomach, it clenching her throat in a moment of panic. She looked to her left and saw the elf for the first time. Oh this was not going to be easy. A blush rose to her cheeks and flushed her chest, which was thankfully covered by the high-necked shirt and jacket. There was something more striking about him in real life as compared to on her television screen. The subtle freckles on his cheek stood out against his pale skin and cheekbones. He was taller than she expected, standing shoulder to shoulder with the Commander. The wolf bone necklace hung where she expected and to keep from
staring at his features she looked to the Herald.

Cassandra spoke this time. “Solas, we need to assess her for demonic possession.” He glanced in her direction, his gaze cold and weighted with judgment. The blush instantly drained from her cheeks and she placed both hands on the table behind her to steady herself. His voice rang out and it was entrancing, bouncing along the syllables and bringing a strange sense of calm over her mind. She could feel him too, in a way. There was a cold presence in the room and with a look in his direction she realized it was his aura. It was faint to see on other people since she was new, but it was like a blue fire around his body. “I will monitor her while you do so.” He spoke simply in response.

He was obviously on guard so the flames were small but he just had a general hue and outline of blue. Her magic flared against his in defense, it following her mind. Every nerve was on edge because she had a faint idea of what was coming but didn’t know what to fully expect. In the games, she entered the fade with the Warden to save Connor. She knew Cassandra could light the lyrium in someone’s blood aflame, but she didn’t exactly know how Templars tested someone for possession. The messenger arrived with a small bottle of lyrium and some rope. He winced when the Commander chastised him for not bringing chains but it would suffice.

Cullen did not hesitate to pull her from the war table and put her to the side, firmly wrapping the ropes around her arms behind her back. She thought she felt them get really tight and he did not speak to her while doing it. Did he think of her less just because she was a mage? It was amazing how quick they moved to intervention when they hadn’t even gotten her name! It was good to see that they took threats to the Inquisition seriously but there were some already obvious flaws in their leadership. Solas stood by the side with his arms crossed. She felt his aura reach out towards her, an icy brush against her skin. He showed no hint of it though, his face neutral as he looked from her to the war table. It looked like he was taking mental inventory of the markers on the map.

Dread wolf.

Athena thought in her mind, pulsing her aura as a gesture to get away. In that moment she felt her aura flare hot as a flame against his, the result causing her aura to vibrate in the air before returning safely to her skin. He retrieved his aura within himself and she thought she saw the corner of one eye twitch in response. Even though she wasn’t well trained she would be damned if he was going to crack her open like an egg, hah, and learn her secrets. Not today anyways.

The former Templar took the vial and ripped off the cork, getting ready to drink its contents. That’s when realization hit her. Cullen was quitting lyrium. He quit it before he joined the Inquisition. This would set him back and he had already made so much progress! “Wait!” She cried, the party freezing to look at her. Athena paused for a moment, eyes looking from the ground to the side before looking to Cassandra. “Someone else.”
Cullen obviously confused looked to her and spoke through gritted teeth. “What.”

She sat up more from her kneeling position, eyes filling with pseudo-confidence while looking to the Herald. “Lysette. There is a Templar that came from the Conclave, outside of the gates. I want her.”

Cullen bristled once more, taking steps towards her while looking down at her. His body, furred in all of its glory, shadowed over her while he spoke again, venom dripping with every letter of every word. “Why would we do that?”

Athena didn’t flinch, somehow, but stayed in her position. “No offense, Commander, but you already don’t seem to like me. I would like an unbiased person doing...whatever it is you’re going to do because I have a feeling it won’t be pleasant, even more so if it is by your hand.” Cullen rose to apparently argue back at her when Rathein and Solas nodded in agreement, their mage status apparently already ringing in to balance the conversation.

Solas spoke up first, looking to Cullen with a raised brow. “It would not hurt. You would still get the desired effect and you could supervise.”

The Commander backed off for a moment, closing his eyes in a poor attempt to contain himself. In a firm motion he shoved the cork back into the lyrium bottle and stated: “Fine. But I will observe. Go get her.” The messenger ran off with agility in his step as they were all left to the awkwardly empty room. Athena fell back on her heels and sighed, her head hanging in obvious relief. An accented voice spoke first, the sound cutting through the room.

“How did you know about Lysette? Didn’t you just wake?”

Fuck. Athena controlled her body and took a deep breath, putting up a mental barrier to try and gain some sort of self-resolve. Leliana was controller of the spies and ravens of the Inquisition. She would kill a person just for breathing the wrong way at her, at least she would in the hardened state she was in. She made a mental note to help Rathein change that somehow. The nug-loving Nightingale was one of her favorite quirks of the game and she would be damned if she didn’t get there somehow. “I saw her when I walked from the cabin to the Chantry. The gate opened and she was standing with the group of people staring at me.”

Partial lie but it earned a small nod from the Spy-Master. Thank the Heavens.
Lysette arrived with a confused look on her face but the moment she saw Athena in bindings she clicked her tongue and simply went “Ah. I see.” Almost as if she was programmed to do it she removed her sword from its sheath and drank the contents of the lyrium. The potion hummed to her, she could feel its magic even from her position on the floor. Lysette bent on one knee, placing her blade down into the ground while mumbling a prayer to herself. “Maker grant me the strength to vanquish villainy and promote peace in your name.” It was short, but it did the job apparently because she stood up from her position and walked to Athena. The room grew very silent and she saw Rathein look away. Solas, however, kept his trained eye on her, hands clasped behind his back in an academic looking fashion.

“Brace yourself, mage.” Lysette warned, her own bit of an aura flaring up before it plunged into Athena’s unprepared body. A wordless cry ripped itself from her throat as her body bent backwards and her mind went white.

The pain was indescribable. It coursed through her veins like liquid fire and left her with no voice, no words, no thoughts. The only thing she could do was scream into the room at the people in the room and fuck it, even the Maker. Every nerve was lit flame as she felt Lysette’s lyrium fueled magic push through her barriers. It was searching for something but there was nothing to be found. Desire had pushed her out of the rift and was left in the fade. No other creature approached her and she was alone.

Oh how utterly alone she was. The realization mixed in with the pain of the ritual, hot tears streaming down her face until her jacket was wet to the skin with them. She thought she even felt blood dripping from her ears and mouth. Fuck that wasn’t good. Her body wouldn’t last much longer, she could tell. Her breaths were shorter, her pulse was bounding, and darkness was threatening to overtake her mind. With one last scream she fell limp in front of the Templar, her body shaking while blood dripped from her lips and nose to the ground. The room was so silent a feather could have dropped and they all would have heard it like deafening thunder. She suspected the entire town of Haven was silenced after hearing her screaming because the bustling in the Chantry even ceased.

Through panted breaths Athena sobbed, her shoulders aching while they were bound tightly against the confines of her rope. There was a quick set of footsteps and Rathein was at her back, slicing her robes with a knife she apparently took from Cassandra’s side. The Herald released her hands and wrapped her arms around the back of her, keeping her close to her body while stroking her blood soaked hair. “It’s done. It’s done. You’re alright.”

Athena couldn’t answer, the only thing she could do was helplessly weep against the only person who had shown her an ounce of kindness in this town. The leaders of the Inquisition gave a grim nod. She could see through a tear-soaked gaze that even Cullen had pity within his gaze, a hand running through his thick golden curls. Lysette gave a look that screamed with apology before exiting through the door. Cassandra and Leliana went to speak but the bold-hearted Herald spoke...
first.

“You. Promised.”

The Seeker closed her mouth and nodded, turning with Leliana, Cullen, and the Chancellor towards the door to leave before Athena bellowed out. “ATHENA.”

They paused, acting like they were visibly hurt by the word she shouted. Solas was actually the one to answer, his voice measured and calm, edged with curiosity. “What?”

She spat blood on the ground under the war table before looking up to all of them ignoring his gaze because he would hear her clearly enough. “You never even asked my fucking name. It’s Athena.”
The group stilled from her announcement, Chancellor Roderick scoffing as he exited the room. Bastard. With sweat, blood, and tears dripping from her body she glared at the top three members of the Inquisition. Hate fueled her breaths, each one resonating with pain from Lysette’s little procedure. She felt absolutely drained, like the very will to breathe was drawn from her body. Athena rose to continue telling off the triad before her body fought against it. She barely had time to put one hand on the table before her body fell forwards. It was caught by Rathein and Solas. Rathein had her waist and Solas put a calming hand on her shoulder, his cool healing magic rushing over her in a wave. She could also feel that it was trying to make her sleepy, relaxed. The fire within her fought it off.

“No.”

He paused, head tilting in confusion. “No?”

She stammered, her jaw shaking and chattering against her teeth from weakness and exhaustion. Rathein pulled her to a standing position, her own trained eyes looking the woman over while her hands tenderly examined her, lifting her chin and looking at the old head wound. Athena leaned against the table, feeling slowly better as Solas’s healing magic filled in the cracks that were in her will and energy level. “I don’t want to sleep. . .I am not ready to go back there yet.”

The realization hit him, his eyes almost becoming slightly wider as he nodded. Although Desire had been a great friend and protector in the Fade, she didn’t like the way the whole place made her skin crawl. She didn’t like the way the other demons had looked in real life compared to in the game. They all had claws dripping with ichor and fangs sharpened to points. They each had an aura of pure malice and it intensified when they looked at her. How her Warden was able to make it through the Fade in the Circle blew her mind. Maker knew how Cullen was able to make it through that experience without shattering. It didn’t surprise her why he was so guarded but it was different to experience it first-hand.

They both helped her walk, their hands slowly coming off of her as she regained her balance and posture. Before she could even leave the door a very flustered Josephine walked in. “Herald! Oh-“ Her voice was cut off at the sight of Athena, it breaking through her trained Antivan face and posture. Her eyes widened in surprise, a hand coming to her mouth in apparent fright. It was hard to see with just the candle illuminating her face but the shock was there. She must have looked terrible for Josephine to react this way. She had to look better than she felt. The flustered Orlesian regained her composure before saying in a soft voice. “I’ll have a bath drawn, Herald, Athena.” There was a smile to her face when she said her name.

That was the thing that broke her again. Athena fell to her knees, tears silently streaming down her
face while her body shook in quiet sobs. Rathein cracked her knuckles before lifting Athena and putting an arm around her shoulder, supporting most of her weight on her built form. The mage had been one of her stronger built characters she created in the past. She reminded her of Korra and she thanked past self for making her this way. The Herald carried her through the Chantry and ignored all of the stares she was getting.

Many of the sisters and volunteers had cleared out. Apparently the sound was too inconvenient for them. Poor them. Athena couldn’t help but get a rush of anger at the thought of others leaving to get away from her screaming. They should hear it. They should hear and stay in support of her, even in silence. She is an unknown, a survivor, like them trying to make it in this hellhole. She ground her teeth in between soft cries as she hobbled outside.

Suddenly the light appeared much brighter than before. She had to raise a hand to block it while Rathein led her towards where she slept in one of the cabins off to the side. Athena already had an idea of where she would shack up once this phase had passed but that concern was in the far corners of her mind. Pain shot through her muscles with every movement, every thought, every breath. They were little reminders of what she was in this world: an untrained apostate. Thankfully a clean of demons untrained apostate, but an unwelcome person nonetheless.

A chipper voice cut through the silence that had conquered Haven, it almost being jarring to her. She weakly turned her head to the left before looking down, Varric waving at them with a crooked smile. “Morning, Herald, Chuckles. Anything I can get you?”

Solas began to speak: “No, thank you Master Tethr-“

“Food.” Athena spoke weakly, her voice apparently convincing enough for Varric to laugh and nod, turning towards the tavern with a wave.

“I’ll get you something Flissa cooked up. I think it has potatoes in it but you can’t be too sure of tavern food. I’ll bring it to you.” He left and the small group for a few moments, the pauses stretching before Rathein chuckled while dragging her along.

“Come on, Fallen. We’re almost there. Maker I thought Herald was interesting but Fallen? Psh. They won’t get over you for weeks.”

Athena tried not to smile but a small smirk twitched at her lips, even that action bringing a wince of pain after it. The attendant drawing the bath left with the final empty pail of hot water. The steam rose from the empty vessel in small spirals and already her muscles ached for a good soak. Pushing herself from Rathein’s grip and Solas’s icy aura she burst through the door and nearly collapsed on
the sides of the tub. The water had been oiled with something smelling of lavender and rosemary. Thank goodness for Josephine and her fancy oils.

The tears ran dry on her face as she paused, looking back to her two helpers. Solas opened his mouth, before shutting it, looking to both of the women while giving then a simple polite wave before turning. “I will give you space. I think there is a potion I have that might rejuvenate you and your mana supply. I will return. Rathein, Athena.”

The Herald shut the door after he left and she broke the silence with a smile. “Isn’t he so serious? Good thing Varric likes to laugh because I think being stuck with him and Cassandra would drive me insane!” Athena couldn’t help but giggle. If only the Herald knew what would come before her. A sense of dread crept into the back of her mind, washing over her head like the headache she had earlier. Oh no. Haven! Haven wasn’t safe. Everybody that had looked in awe at her this morning was in danger. She nearly fell on the side of the tub and Rathein took no time in quickly undressing the battered mage.

With a great deal of strength, she ripped through the bottom layers of linen and paused above her black sports bra and underwear. “What is this?” Athena waved her off, weakly defending while showing she knew what to do. She unclasped it from the back and threw it to the ground while climbing into the almost too hot confines of her sanctuary. The water stung at every open wound and slice but the heat was oh so relaxing. She placed her arms on the side of the tub to keep from sliding down in the depths. Rathein sat on the tub side, looking down at her but she wasn’t even shy about her nudity. Her parents had raised her in a house where they frequently walked around in their underwear when Dad wasn’t around. He didn’t like that they did it but as long as he didn’t see he couldn’t argue.

The thought of her family brought tears she didn’t realize to her eyes. The sound of them dropping into the tub caused her to shake from her daze and look to the Herald. “Well, Athena. I’ve taken responsibility for you, so I think I get to have a little bit of an explanation right?” Athena must have frowned because she instantly shook her head and waved her hands in front of her. “Oh no! Don’t worry it stays between us! Trust me. I understand the way they’re treating you, in more ways than one.”

Athena bristled in the water, using a stone she found on the side of the tub to scrub away at the dried blood and dirt on her skin. Apparently the process had opened some wounds on her arms and legs. They were small slivers that looked like they were cut with a small blade. Thankfully they were healed due to Solas’s healing spell but they left behind a myriad of scars. It had barely been a day in Thedas and she was starting to look like a seasoned warrior. Oh how her mom would fret now. “Oh those scars look hideous! Can’t you cover them up with some long pants?” Clearing her throat she raised her brown eyes to meet Rathein’s friendly yet piercing icy blue ones.

“Fine, fine. I was in the Fade at the same time as you at first.” Before Rathein could ask any
questions she raised a hand to stop her. “All I saw you do is escape. That was it. I was stuck in the
day after that until you came to open that rift. I found out in the Fade that I had magic. I had . . .
some help.” The Herald’s eyes leveled with hers and there was a look of concern in her gaze.

“From who?”

Athena could only laugh because the answer was going to seem hilarious considering she had just
been exorcised with the purpose of taking any demon out of her. The laugh was broken and eerie,
the hurt apparently breaking through because Rathein’s put her hand on top of her exposed knee
popping up from the water. “Believe it or not, a demon.” Her hand stayed and her gaze stayed.
Good, she wasn’t bothered too much, outwardly at least.

“We had a deal. I would tell it of my past and it would protect me and give me magic.”

Rathein drew her hand back and turned around to pick some dry under garment linens for her.
“Why would it want to know that? It didn’t try to possess you?”

Athena looked to the water, her hands clenching into fists as she felt her aura slightly return to her
body. “Honestly? I think it felt sorry for me. It said I had a ‘different song’ than most mages it had
met. It was curious and wanted something from me instead of the other way around. In the end. . .it
was the one who pushed me through the rift.”

Knock knock.

A rapping at the door cut off her story, her body instinctively going under the now murky water for
cover. The voice of the healer rang through, the inflection and tone showing no signs that he just
heard their conversation. Athena knew he wouldn’t be that easy and let it show. He was crafty. He
was literally a God. And she knew that. . . which put her in a special predicament. “I brought the
potion and Master Tethras said he got caught up in the tavern and to meet him there. . . when you
are feeling up to it.” He opened the door a crack and Rathein fetched the potion from him, quickly
shutting it to give them back their privacy. She put her ear to the door and waited until she heard
the sound of his footsteps dissipate into the snow.

She handed the strange looking purple potion to Athena then stated: “Come on! Let’s get you
dressed and get you to meet people. You’ll like Varric. He was nice to me before he even learned
my name.”
Athena dipped her head under, making one last pass through her hair with her fingers. The blood was now in water, thankfully, instead of her hair. “Didn’t you just wake up too? How can you be so hopeful?”

Rathein shrugged while looking out the window towards the tavern. “Because I’m not alone.”
Food, Glorious Food!

Boy did a bath make her feel better!

Athena bent over in front of a mirror propped against a chair in the Herald’s room, analyzing what the Fade and the ritual did to her. Already she could tell she had lost weight? 5? 10 pounds? Perhaps she was in the Fade longer than she thought but she hadn’t had an ounce of food or water, save for the potion Adan gave her. The taste of cinnamon on her tongue was long gone and instead replaced with dried blood. She had tried swishing her mouth out with water at the beginning of her bath but it only cleared so much. Instead, she grabbed the linen from her ripped underclothes Rathein had removed and wiped her teeth until the white underneath shown through. Her teeth would probably appear abnormal here but she was thankful for that in a way.

Her parents insisted on braces and she still had a permanent retainer lining her bottom teeth. Hopefully nobody would be fishing around in her mouth anytime soon so she had a feeling they wouldn’t notice anyways. She straightened out her jacket before looking to Rathein with a genuine, albeit tired, smile. The Herald opened the door with a deep sarcastic bow, eyes twinkling in excitement. “Shall we go to the tavern, Lady Fallen?”

Athena nearly pushed her over with a quick shove, her head shaking back and forth. “Oh stop it.” She bounded out of the cabin with some real energy in her movements. Solas’s potion had brought the flame back to her heart, a barrier sparkling within her as she came down the steps and fell into rhythm with the Herald’s gait. People had returned to their normal duties and all of them paid the pair a cautious eye. Lysette was sitting on a bench near the gate while cleaning her sword. Her gaze did not rise from the task at hand and she couldn’t help but feel that was on purpose. The taste of bile rose in her throat at the sight of the Templar, her body tensing up in response.

It was almost like she noticed but the Herald put her arm around Athena’s shoulder and guided her towards the tavern. The bustling and roar of the building hit her instantly, the warmth melting off any bit of frost that had formed on her wet hair between the cabin and the tavern. Varric had a table with two extra bowls of stew on a table in the back. Surprisingly, Solas was sitting across from him. The pair walked over to them and Athena chose to sit next to the dwarf, a sincere smile coming to his lips as he patted her back gently. “Good to see you! I don’t think we were officially introduced. I’m Varric Tethras – occasional storyteller.”

Athena was too excited sitting next to him to let him finish. “I know who you are! I. . .”

Her voice went soft and Varric chuckled under his breath. “A fan, eh? Good to know. That makes things easier. Here, eat up!” He pushed the bowl in front of her. As she picked up her spoon the other member of the table spoke, his voice calm and steady through all of the conversations in the tavern.
“And if there are to be introductions, I am Solas. I…” He paused, at a loss of words for a moment. Athena cherished the second where he didn’t know what to say; they were rare in the game from what she knew. “I apologize for what happened earlier. I am sure the others will not because they felt it necessary. I am a self-taught apostate myself.”

Rathein shuffled in her chair, taking a breath from the stew she had started devouring. She spoke with a bite of food still in her mouth. “Isn’t every mage an apostate now?” He looked to her mouth then nodded, his lips a thin line. Even still, looking at him brought a sensation of anxiety to her stomach so she turned to her stew.

_Tavern made her ass!_ It tasted like home cooked beef stew. She didn’t realize the hunger that was settled in the bottom of her stomach until the first taste of food hit her tongue. She ate so quickly Varric pushed a mug of warm ale towards her. “Here, don’t choke!”

Without even thinking she took it, swallowing the bitter and hoppy taste down with her current mouthful of food. “Oh, Varric, you undersold this soup.” She leaned back in her bar stool, her eyes closed in utter bliss as the food rested warmly in her stomach. Oh! She hadn’t introduced herself back yet. Sitting with a proper posture she looked to Varric and then Solas, her normal warmth and friendliness returning to her voice and gesticulations. “I’m so sorry that was rude of me. My name is-“

The dwarf cut her off with a smirk that somehow was somber. “Athena. Trust me…we heard.”

“Oh… I… didn’t realize.” Blood rushed to her cheeks and in an attempt to hide her embarrassment she continued eating her stew. Solas looked down at his current cup of some brandy-smelling drink and Rathein touched her foot to hers underneath the table, a small act of comfort that brought a thankful glance up from the starving woman.

Varric leaned in and smoke lowly so that only they could hear. “Hey, Are you okay, Walker?”

_Texas-Ranger_ was the next thing that came in her head, which brought an odd smile to the conversation. She nodded, gesturing to the two across the table. “Thankfully they were there to drag me home.” It then became apparent that the whole bar was quiet and looking at them, hoping for some explanation for the screaming coming from the Chantry. This would be her chance to either tell the truth or ease some worries, so she chose the latter.

Thankfully before she spoke The Herald nudged her elbow into a rather stiff-looking Solas while
winking towards Varric. “That Commander Cullen though! Woof. No wonder he had her screaming I almost joined her!”

The bar patrons around them laughed and raised their mugs in cheers to their Herald. Athena could only blush and nod at her in thanks and Solas took the time to scoot his bar stool just the right distance to put some space between him and the apparently touchy woman. He cleared his throat and looked to Rathein, trying to obviously change the subject because Athena swore she saw the lightest hue of pink in her ears. “The Chosen of Andraste. A blessed hero sent to save us all.”

Without missing a beat, the Herald lifted her mug to her lips and drank, slamming it down upon completion and grinning at him. “Am I to be flying in on a gryphon while the sun rises in the east?”

He chuckled, finally breaking the grim and fatalistic face that he always wore. “Posturing is necessary, I am sure you are aware we travel to the Hinterlands soon, yes?”

Athena perked up from her meal, looking to them. “How soon?”

Varric groaned while stretching his back in the bar-stool. In the middle of his stretch he answered with a not-so-happy tone. “In a few days.”

Shit that was soon.

She put her head in her hands and looked into the now empty soup bowl. The food was turning over in her stomach and Rathein prodded her with the end of her fork. “Hey! What’s wrong? You could use some fresh air.”

She looked up to the ever-persistent Herald and groaned like a kid that was being woken up by their parents. Solas smirked at this and took a sip of his drink, looking over at all of the bar patrons. Varric slapped her on the back, now harder than the first time. “What’s a matter? Don’t like traveling?”

She shook her head, looking into her hands that tingled with potential magic. “I only know two spells and have never fought before. I would just be slowing you guys down, surely.” Rathein pursed her lips and patted Solas on the shoulder, who threw an uncomfortable glance toward her hand on his shoulder. Varric broke out laughing at the sight of his face, gesturing to the barkeep for another drink. Athena couldn’t help but smile as well. The touchy Herald was so friendly it was hard not to like her, but apparently Solas still had his walls and personal bubble up. That would be
broken, in time. She wouldn’t though; she couldn’t be allowed to. She knew what was coming for this world and everyone in it and somehow she had to help them all with the limited skills she had.

“It’s a good thing you know two mages who would love to give you a crash course! Isn’t that right, Solas?” Rathein looked to the elf with a confident wink and he rolled his eyes, nodding in agreement.

“If that is what you need, Athena. Yes, I could assist in teaching you the fundamentals of magic.”

Well that was a relief but Rathein gave her no time to consider it. She grabbed her hand while tapping Solas on the shirt. “Come on, let’s see what you got!”

“Herald! She has not recovered from the ritual! Surely you cannot expect her to showcase her magic for you!”

“Oh come on! Have some faith!”
A Different Song

Chapter Notes

For those that were wondering, I use Ruby Rose as a kind of model for Rathein, but taller with a little more muscle.

Athena found herself being dragged outside the gates and towards the forest. Rathein herself hadn’t been there yet but she apparently had the good instincts to take a novice mage outside of the village. In the thick of the woods, she released Athena's arm, panting from the small excursion. Solas had simply twisterd open the veil to fade step to their side, his gaze piqued in curiosity towards the brash actions of the Herald. “Like I had stated previously, she is not strong enough yet. Give her time.”

For some reason this felt like a challenge from the Dread Wolf and her pride would not let it go unanswered. She searched for that spark within her chest and it quickly responded, flexing to the movement of her hands as she pulled her palms out from her belly until they were a foot from her chest. A red barrier flared out from her skin, forcing the two to step back and keep their distance. It flickered in the light the larger she made it, so she compromised on keeping its height in between them and her. Sweat formed at her brow and trickled down the side of her cheek.

“’Tis a good start, Athena. Do you know any offensive spells?”

Rathein was beaming with pride, her arms crossed across her chest while she bumped her hip into the elf next to her as a “Seeee I told you so!” He accepted the gesture without moving further away from her. He was obviously irritated with her childlike energy level but it reminded Athena of her own sister so she smiled, bringing the barrier back within herself.

“Only one. My friend in the Fade didn’t have much time to help me out.”

The words left her lips before she realized she wasn’t alone with Rathein anymore. Solas’s blue gaze broke for a moment but then leveled out into one of concern and confusion. “Your what in the Fade? You had a friend help you while you were physically in the Fade? Was it a spirit? A demon?” His voice almost turned to anger at the mention of demons, this causing a protective reaction from her.

She twisted her right hand from its flaccid position to where it was palm up and firm. A fireball swirled within her grasp and thankfully she had remembered to coat her hand and forearm in a
barrier. “I met things in the Fade, yes. I thought you would be a little more considering. . . “

He crossed his arms, his tone growing agitated while the tempo and volume remained the same. “Considering what? That I am an apostate as well? An elf?”

She rolled her eyes, the fireball disappearing from her grasp while she tried to think of a way to cover for her slip up. Just be honest, Solas! You are the one who walks in dreams! A man with one foot in the real world and another in the fade! Having to choose her words was proving to be exhausting but thankfully Varric showed up to save her. “Come now, Chuckles, everyone at the bar talks about how you can talk to spirits and stuff. They aren’t a quiet bunch either, right, Athena?”

She nodded confidently in response with her fists at her sides. “I don’t care whether you’re an elf either. Elf, dwarf, Qunari, human, it makes no difference to me. There is a giant hole in the sky; we have bigger things to worry about than where someone comes from.”

Solas simply responded with a nod, tersely replying: “Apologies, Athena.”

Gods hearing him say her name brought small insects to her stomach but that feeling would have to be pushed down, waaaay down until the flame in her magic ate it away. With the ringing of the Chantry bells dusk was upon them. The three of them turned to go back towards Haven while Athena looked over her shoulder towards the forest. She knew of a cabin there where she would find the notes Adan needed for a potion. There was a logging stand there and ample elf root for her to try and brew basic healing potions. Varric turned to her: “Come on, Walker, aren’t you coming?”

She shook her head. “I’m staying out here. I don’t think it’s good for me to stay with them tonight after what happened this morning.”

They all paused, looking to one another before nodding. Varric was the one to speak first. “I can’t and don’t want to imagine what you’re going through. I’ll see you at the tavern for breakfast.” He waved over his shoulder before turning back towards Haven, his heavy footsteps crunching in the snow. Rathein was quick to follow but before leaving she ran to give her a hug while quickly whispering into her ear: We’ll both make it through this. Sleep easy tonight. She ran to catch up with Varric and left just Solas, who was giving her an uneasy gaze. Fuck it all.

“Don’t you have some words of encouragement before you head back to your cabin?” Athena jested, getting a mere twitch of his lips before he gestured forward.
“I assume you will need wards if you are going to sleep out here. Unless your friend in the Fade taught you those as well?” He asked, his eyes searching for any sort of tell from her reactions or expressions.

Nu-uh. Not today. Especially because she was now too tired to argue or have any sort of reaction. “You’re right in your assumption. Come, I have a gut feeling there’s a woodsman cabin out here.” She didn’t even look to see his reaction, she felt it. There was a small decrease in the temperature around them and that told her everything she needed to know. Sure enough, just like the game, the cabin stood in the forest with wood on the side of the house to burn. She could hear Solas pause behind her, a hum of acknowledgement coming from him as he began to set up wards around the house. His magic sent a chill down her spine. It took her breath away. The way his aura clashed against hers was nearly violent in the way that they were so opposed. Rathein’s aura was playful, almost like a puppy. In shades of green and purple it intertwined with hers and didn’t have a care in the world, much like the Herald.

Athena walked inside the cabin and saw that it was indeed deserted. The healer’s notes were on the desk and there was a chill in the cabin that suggested the door had been open for some time. Paw prints of snow trailed around the cabin. She huffed. Wolves. They were her favorite animal in the real world but she had a feeling they wouldn’t be so friendly to her here, particularly the ones in the Hinterlands. She looked and took stock of everything in the cabin: bed, chamber pot, desk, fireplace with no embers, a rug, Solas. Wait, Solas?

While she was inspecting her new lodgings he had walked into the door frame and leaned against the side, his arms clasped behind him in that cold, calculated manner. When he spoke next his voice was low and it nearly had the tone of a growl. “A different song, hm?”

The color drained from her cheeks but she stood her ground. He was still trying to press into her but she took a step forward and flared out with her aura. It felt like it warmed the inside of the cabin and he smirked for a moment. “I am just curious, Fade-Walker. Forgive my intrusion; it is only natural. You claimed this demon said you had a different song? How did you escape it?”

She tilted her head to the side and gave her best sarcastic smile with a raised brow. “I never expected you to be the kind to eavesdrop outside of a woman’s bath, Solas.” Color rushed to his ears and he looked towards the fireplace with as straight of a face that he could manage. With a flick of his wrist he summoned a small fire within the hovel and the heat felt like a comfort immediately. Athena looked to the elf and sighed, rubbing the back of her neck. “Like I told Rathein, it seemed to pity me somehow. Just said my song was different. I don’t know what that means, you speak spirit so maybe you do.”

He gave a small nod, reaching a hand out to her. “If you would allow me to do a simple examination then. I do not wish to enter your mind; I just need to touch to get a closer read on you.”
Hesitantly, she agreed stepping forward and giving him her hand. Immediately she regretted it because his aura washed over her in a tidal wave of cold. It sent a chill down her spine but she felt frozen to the spot, her eyes glued on his face as he closed his eyes to “read” her. The icy chill of his magic ran along her skin, intermingling with her own aura before withdrawing into his hands once more. He nodded, letting her hand drop the front of her body. There was a lingering tingling on her skin and she wasn’t sure if it was from his magic or from the fact that she just had contact with a very cute man for the first time in a long time. “It was right. There is a difference in your magic compared to other mages. I cannot pin it down. What is your origin, Athena?”

Her mouth felt dry and her hands were shaky so she shoved them in the pockets of her jacket. When she spoke it came out heavy and shaky. Damn thing. So he touched your hand, big deal? That is first base for elementary school children. Still, it was the only significant touch besides the ritual performed by Lysette and a hug from Rathein. “It’s hard to explain. Perhaps another time?” It was the kind of answer he would give and it looked to satiate his curiosity for now. As he turned from the cabin he rested his hand on the door frame while looking over his shoulder. “Be wary of the wolves, Fade-Walker.”

Athena looked to him with a confident smile. “Wolves do not frighten me, Solas. They are loyal animals who rely on their pack as a unit and are masters of the forest. I’m more frightened of the giant tear in the heavens, aren’t you?”

He gave a shadow of a smile before walking back towards Haven in the dark of night. She closed the door when he was out of sight and pressed her back to it. A breath she didn’t know she was holding shakily left her mouth, her hand clutching her chest as her aura pulsed with her heartbeat. It would be difficult to survive here, let alone thrive here. How much time did she have before Haven was attacked? How much time until Val Royeaux? All of the events of the Inquisition flashed through her mind. The pain of it brought her to her butt on the ground in the cabin, tears stinging her eyes while threatening to slide down her face.

She would not succumb. She had to be stronger than this. For some reason that damned wolf brought her here, whether he realized it or not. Her eyes fell to a chair leaned against the side of the wall, a lute resting against it. Hm. That could pass the time.

She stood up from her defeated position on the floor and grabbed the lute from the ground. Its wood was tinted green and dust hadn’t even had time to form on the wood and strings. She plucked the strings and winced at the out of tune sound they made. There were no things to adjust the tone of the string so she would have to improvise. Guitar was not an instrument she knew but there were plenty of people she knew who played by ear, her father being one of them.

Athena took the lute to the rather firm bed no doubt made from hay and other “soft” plants. It had a
little bit of give which gave her hopes for the night. She leaned against the pillow and plucked the strings, trying to memorize their pitch and where her fingers lay when she made the sound. This continued on for an hour before sleep overcame her and she surrendered to exhaustion.
Unfortunately for Athena, she did not have a Fade-less sleep that night.

_Come on, Fade-Walker._

_You opened up for Desire!_

_What do you want? What do you want? WHAT DO YOU WANT?_

The demons were endless and this time the Fade looked different. It was fields of never ending grass that came up to her knees. She was unsure of why she was brought to this place, the only thing that resembled it were the fairgrounds during the off-season in her childhood. This was faulted, something was off about the whole picture and she could not run fast enough.

Like a gazelle she burst through the grass, her arms and legs pumping in rhythmic motions to bring her farther and farther away from the demons. They were close on her heel, their claws digging and tearing at the environment around them to gain some advantage. They twisted the Fade to their making, the images flickering at the edge of her vision as she ran. One of the Despair demons gave up its lead to take in a deep breath and exhale a stream of frost at the Fade-Walker. Athena jumped, pushing with her hands out and forming her fiery barrier while turning heel to face them. Sweat felt like it was pouring down her back and her breath came in shallow pants. The demons clawed against her barrier, teeth trying to grab some sort of purchase and tear it away from her.

Her back was against a sharp wall suddenly, probably due to the demons’ wishes, the protruding rocks attempting to cut through her skin like a blade against paper. The flare of her barrier pushed out with every breath, flames lashing out towards the demons as she gave one last burst with her hands. It was able to catch the robes of two desire demons, the flames quickly disintegrating their frost magic and leaving them as a pile of rags. The others, greater and lessor terrors, used their claws to dig in and tear at the barrier. It exploded in a burst but soon it was just Athena backed into a corner like prey staring down the demons. There were no tears in her eyes, no pathetic cries of help, there was only crippling fear. The game could never animate or describe how awful these things were in real life. They fed off of all negative emotion and enjoyed their pursuits through the
The Breach had scared off anything good and Desire was nowhere to be found. When she first had appeared in the dream-like world she had called for her friend, cupping her hands around her mouth to increase the volume. Her voice had carried for what seemed like a minute with echoes until she heard a response. It was the roar of a terror and it paralyzed her where she stood. Goosebumps exploded on her skin, eyes widening while her gaze searched for the source of the sound. The roar echoed again and from the ground itself came the demons. That was when she ran and it felt like she had been running for hours.

Exhausted, Athena shouted towards the demon and summoned a fireball in her right hand. It was the size of a baseball and the color was a weak orange. It struggled to maintain its shape but she willed it long enough to throw it at one of the lessor terrors. It stood back from the group to deal with its burns while the others took slow, agonizing steps towards her. Their eyes nearly glowed with greed and blood lust, their fangs dripping with blood from Maker knows where. She whispered a soft apology to her family as she felt the breath of the Greater Terror upon her face.

An explosion rocked the Fade, all demons turning around but instead were frozen in their place. A spontaneous blizzard tore through the area, knocking away the environment and leaving Athena in an empty field once more. She fell to her knees and covered her head to avoid any damage but she barely had time before a hand wrapped around her wrist and yanked her to her feet.

Solas stared down at her with determined eyes, a growl twitching the corner of his lips in what she assumed was a snarl. He then looked to the demons, snapping his fingers and exploding the ice on impact to leave the creatures in a pile of frozen rubble. With a wave of his hand he took control of the Fade and brought her to a peaceful glen of a forest. It didn’t look familiar to her so it must have been a construct of his mind. He released her wrist in a violent motion before stalking over to the other side of the clearing. This put a healthy space between them and she could only fall down to her hands and knees, breaths heaving in large shaky movements.

The tears finally came but they froze in her eyes when he turned to chastise her: “What were you thinking!”

His jaw was clenched as he narrowed his eyes at her, body leaning over her even though they were so far apart. She felt small, she felt weak, and she felt alone in all of this. She shook her head back and forth, tears streaming down her face while she tried to keep her teeth clenched. Don’t snap. Don’t snap.

“You should not have explored the Fade. The wards I put up would of sufficed if you were smart about it.” He tapped his forehead then gestured it into the air and that was a universal motion she recognized. Slowly she looked up from the ground at him, eyes full of embarrassment and hurt.
There were no words to describe how she felt. The first time she had been in the Fade she had been in her physical form. She had luckily attracted the help of a nice demon and was able to find her escape learning magic practically by herself. Did this mean she was suddenly a master of the Fade in her dreams? All she knew was what she had learned from playing the game but that paled in comparison to actually feeling helpless and trapped in your own dreams. Her dreams at home were full of super-powers and random scenarios that would never come to pass.

“That was fool-hardy. No wonder they suspected you of possession when you were flaunting about with demons and the like!”

Fwoosh! The fireball launched from her hand before she even realized it, her right hand raised from the ground in his direction. He effortlessly brought up a barrier but she had made her point. The blast forced him to back up a few steps and she took this time to dig deep, find that spark within her mind that was her body and pull it forward.

Athena gasped and rose from her sleep, hands clutched to her chest while her breaths came in heavy and pained heaves. There was a dried path of tears down both of her cheeks and they felt raw. Had she been crying all night in her sleep? She needed to scrub any trace of her dream from last night before she ran into the crew at the tavern for breakfast. With a huff of determination, she grabbed an empty pail and took down to the lake, smashing the ice with the bucket until she could push the bucket down to grab some of the frozen water. Thankfully her fire was still burning when she got back so she put the water over the flame while she stripped down to her underwear.

There were small straps of cloth on the healer’s desk so once the water was not freezing cold she soaked the strips in the water and washed her face, scrubbed her arms, legs, and torso. She pulled her air up into a messy bun using a piece of corded rope and put on the clothes from the day before. The sun was just beginning to peak up over the mountains so the wolves would be asleep by now. She pulled her jacket snug and shoved her hands into her armpits and ran from the cabin to the main gates.

Lysette had just come from her tent. She was stretching in the morning and Athena had to slow to not run into her. “Oh, I’m sorry!” The Templar stated, finally catching sight of who she was talking to. She took a step back, eyes not full of fear but guilt. Athena stopped and dropped her hands from the comfort of the warmth and looked her in the eyes. Her heart was racing and she wanted her run. Her body was not ready to forget what had happened to her but she understood to a point. They hadn’t even asked her name before they started. She was just a mage.

So they stood in silence, looking at one another.
The Templar opened her mouth but Athena didn’t give her time to spit out some fake apology. She turned on her heel and walked towards the tavern, puffs of steam hovering in the air as she huffed out frustrated breaths. Tears stung her eyes as she burst into the refreshing warmth that the tavern provided. Rathein and Varric were already talking over their empty plates with a cup of warm wine in their hands. She walked up and got a plate from the bar before sitting down next to the Herald, her head resting against her arms as she bent over and rested on the table. Varric nudged her arm with his hand, giving him a lopsided yet friendly smile. “Sleep well?”

She let out a sigh before looking up at him. It was hard to be in a bad mood when he was around. He just exuded happiness and it was obvious he just wanted everyone to get along. He had seen his fair shares of tragedy and knew what happened when there was infighting. He had been betrayed just like Hawke when Anders had blown up the Chantry. Maybe that is why he was one of the first people to try and be nice to her.

She quickly told them about her dream and what happened in the fade. At some point in the story Rathein put her hand on her forearm in comfort but at the end Varric gave a long whistle. “Demons man. I’m sorry, Walker.”

She shrugged, the door of the tavern opening but she didn’t look to see who was coming. She didn’t need to, she could feel the cold presence brushing up against her mind but she was too busy looking to Rathein to fight back. The Herald gave her hope when she smiled and tilted her head. “Don’t worry. I’ll teach you in lessons today. You ready to go?”

Athena quickly nibbled on some hot bread and drank a cup of hot water when his voice froze her in his tracks. “Are we to begin lessons today?” He pulled up a bar stool against Varric and gave her a cool gaze. There was no hint of anger or any hint that he was upset about last night in his face. He was probably pushing it down somewhere, just like her.

The ever-peppy Herald gave a nod while shooing Athena out of the tavern. “We’ll meet you up by her cabin. Get some breakfast first!”

As they were running out of the tavern Athena whispered a quick “thank you” under her breath, Rathein pulling her in for a sideways hug before continuing up towards the clearing by her cabin.
I'm a Real Mage Now!

Chapter Notes

I went through and edited some of the first chapters I posted. Boy you guys are champs for reading through some of those errors. I guess that's the side effect of writing through the night. I am still grateful and blown away by your continued support. <3

“Again.”

Athena raised her barrier to block the Herald’s lightning bolt, her hands merely twitching now to accomplish the act. Barriers were getting easier. As long as she kept them to a consistent size, she could raise over a dozen before needing to take a sip of a lyrium potion. It tasted odd, like it was effervescent with some sort of medication for the flu. The moment it hit her stomach it felt like bubbles burst through her veins, bringing her back to a normal state of being with a side of pep.

She didn’t raise her barrier to block a fireball but instead covered her hands in a barrier and caught it like a football, turning her body and using the momentum to fire it back towards Rathein. Solas leaned against a tree and watched the lessons, interjecting when he felt the Herald wasn’t giving a good enough technical breakdown of the spell. For him, foundations and understanding were important in knowing the magic. For Rathein it simply happened. Which was ironic because when Solas cast spells the magic moved through him like air, following his very movements and will without hesitating. The perks of being elvhen she guessed.

It was obvious Rathein was trained in a circle. Her staff movements were crisp, precise, and repeated over and over again. Her magic was strong and the Mark definitely helped, but she was the product of a Circle and its teachings. They decided to take a small break to catch their breath. Athena pulled a wooden chair out of her cabin and scooted it over towards Solas. He curtly shook his head then gestured to offer it back to her. Well he missed out. She plopped her body down into the chair and stretched back until she could look at the sky. The Breach was large, terrifying but beautiful. The way the vortex swirled and the way she felt it swirl with her aura almost put her in a trance.

“You really think we can close it, Solas?” Athena called out to him, flicking her eyes over to where he stood only to find him looking at it as well. He nodded, his hands clasped behind his back while he thought.

“Yes, but we are going to need immensely more power for the Herald to be able to accomplish the
feat. The mages are supposed to be in Redcliffe from what I have heard. Perhaps we could go to them when we travel to the Hinterlands?”

He looked over to Rathein who simply shrugged. “We need to find this Chantry sister first, then I will worry about the mages.”

They all gave a hum of acknowledgement before sitting in the silence. The wind whistled through the trees and blew harshly against their cheeks but none of them seemed to notice. For just a moment, the peace brought them a way to clear their minds of the mages, the Templars, the Breach, and the ever forming Inquisition.

“Have you given thought to what you want to specialize in, Athena?” Solas asked, his voice kind of far off as they looked towards the Breach.

She shuddered, crossing her arms across her chest while leaning the chair back until it was on its hind legs. For some reason when he spoke her name it sparked the flame that was her aura. It instinctively went to protect herself when she looked at him. It had been a while since he had openly tried to pry into her mind, but she had to be on guard around him. What they both knew could change this world but they had to keep it secret, keep the Inquisition safe. Solas was trying to right a wrong and Athena was trying to find a way home while saving as many lives as she could along the way.

“Actually. . . I’ve thought about being a shapeshifter.”

They both stilled, Solas giving her a curious arch brow. “Shapeshifter?”

Athena nodded in response, actually grinning at the idea of becoming another animal. It was something she had always dreamed about during her normal work life. She would immerse herself in stories and games, imagining for a second that she could be a being with powers. She laughed to herself and her current situation. She never imagined the training and work that would go into being a person with superpowers. In her dreams, it all came naturally to her.

“I’ve always been connected with animals and cherished their presence. To actually be able to run with them and call for their help in battle. . . I think that would be fantastic!”

Apparently her response was adequate because they both gave her smiles. Solas’s was curious but she let it slide off of her shoulders. From the village a messenger came to Rathein’s side, informing
her that they would be leaving for the Hinterlands the next day instead of two days out. The Herald nodded and Athena cursed under her breath. “Well, let us get prepared. Solas, do you think you can teach her how to protect herself in the Fade or set up wards?” He bristled and crossed his arms across his chest but responded with a soft nod, his eyes staring through her with an icy glare.

As Rathein trotted off Athena sat forward on her chair and stood up, placing her hands on her lower back so she could stretch backwards until she heard a few satisfactory pops along her spine. Solas moved from his position against the tree and came closer to where she sat. “I think it would be best if we found you a staff. Casting without one is a good skill, having a staff just makes casting easier and it gives you an object that you can channel and strengthen your power through.” He looked to his staff then tossed it over in her direction. She caught it with a small yelp of surprise, her eyes examining the smooth wood and intertwining creatures that protected the orb at the top.

“Do you feel it humming in your grasp? Can you hear the enchantments sing beneath the wood? Focus on it, channel your energy into it.”

She closed her eyes and tightened her grip around it. Her aura pulsed from her fingertips into the staff and it instantly sparked to life within her hands. She could feel her energy shoot and then expand within the staff. It felt like a sword within her hand crafted from her own essence. It echoed the spark of her heart and made her feel oddly whole. The flame of her aura lit the orb atop a bright blue color. She used it to push herself to a standing position, eyes finally opening and looking to him for guidance. He made a small sound of approval, walking around the cabin while looking like he was calculating something in his head. “Follow my lead, feel with your own magic what mine is doing and try to replicate it.”

Athena nodded and stood a few paces behind him, stretching her aura out until she could feel the extension of his forming a dome over the cabin. With every flare of his magic it felt like a puzzle piece snapping into place in the world around them. He would set up small barriers and fixate them with a flash of magic, attaching them one by one until they encompassed the entire area. Every few pieces he would gesture for her to do the same. Their magic fought against one another, the fire and ice struggling to fit together as they constructed the barrier. Sweat dripped down the side of her face as they put the final pieces together. He nodded then looked to her with a small smirk.

*Hey it’s a start!* She returned the smile, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand while looking towards the direction of Haven. “I guess I should go show my face to them. I haven’t really walked around since. . .well. You know.” He nodded and returned his academic and guarded stance, posture shoulder width apart with his arms clasped behind his back. She began to walk towards the village but then stopped, turning towards him and tossing his staff back into his hands. “Thank you. Hopefully I won’t be needing your help tonight.” Before he could respond she walked down towards where she knew Cassandra and Cullen would be.
The Knight Commander acknowledged her with a glance, nodding his head to her. His greeting was terse, short and borderline rude. “Athena.” His tone brought up her guard, eyes stern while she walked past him.

“Commander.” It would take them a while before they were on a first-name basis, but at least he knew hers now. She had a feeling that nobody would forget her name after she screamed it at the top of her lungs, but she made her point. They couldn’t go around treating people like mage or Templar or apostate. People were people, yeah? Shit. Now she was thinking like Sera. Perhaps they would get along now more than she did in her play-throughs of the game. Typically, the Red Jenny wasn’t a member of her party, but now she was seeking the comfort of normal people more than anything.

She turned the corner to see Cassandra going through her practice routine, beating up on a training dummy. There was a fierce determination in her eyes, eyes shining with the thrill of battle as she came down with an overhead strike with her sword arm. The Seeker looked to her, continuing her training. “Can I help you?” She spoke almost between gritted teeth. This elicited an uncontrollable eye-roll from Athena as she shifted some of her weight to one hip.

“Forgive me, Seeker. I heard we were heading to the Hinterlands tomorrow. I was wondering if there anything I needed to be briefed on before I prepare for our venture?” She tried to sound as formal as possible, even with her sarcastic stance and exhausted “I’m sick of the way you’re treating me’’ voice. Cassandra paused, her eyes knitting together in thought as she pointed over to the blacksmith with her sword. “You’ll probably need a staff to defend yourself with. There are reports from Leliana about rogue Templars and mages battling in the Crossroads. You would be wise to arm yourself and be prepared.”

Athena nodded and turned on her heel go towards the blacksmith’s area. She made a mental acknowledgement of the tents where Bull and his Charger’s would be staying in a few weeks’ time. As she came up to the blacksmith a gruff voice hollered over the sounds of the workers around him. Harritt cupped a hand to the side of his voice and called her name, waving her over. “You, Fade-Walker. Seeker said she would need some gear. Look in that chest over there, should find what you need. Let me know if anything needs fixin’.”

Almost like a child on Christmas morning she ran to one of the larger chests, finding a basic equipment and brown apprentice mail that looked to be exactly her size. She smiled and gave the blacksmith a nod of thanks and he nodded in response before slamming his hammer down on a piece of red-hot metal. She walked out to the side where Blackwall would eventually hold up, throwing the armor on over her cotton underclothes. It fit like a glove and boy did it make her feel official. The staff had a large metal hook at the top with twisted brown wood coming down to a white wooden bottom. It looked like a fire mage’s staff, which only caused her smile to beam with delight. She sheathed the staff into a small holder on her back and walked towards where Varric would be camped.
He was already starting to pack up when she gestured towards the tavern. “Want to grab a drink and some dinner?” The dwarf looked up with a surprised and curious smile. “Someone is feeling better. Sure, why not. You coming, Sparky?” Rathein came bumbling down the stairs and perked her head to the side. “What are we doing?”

Athena bounced on the balls of her heels. “Dinner!”

The Herald rubbed her eyes then looked her up and down. “Look at you finally looking like a mage. Come on, gang. Dinner to celebrate!”
“Okay, how does this game two truths and a lie work, Walker?”

They were already through their meals and onto their second pints of ale. A gloss had already come over the Herald’s eyes - lightweight- and Varric was just starting to get warmed up into the conversation. Athena had somehow convinced them to get into a drinking game with her and they were more than eager to join.

“You state three things about yourself. Two of them are truth, one of them is a lie. You have to guess which one is the lie. If you’re wrong, you drink. If you’re right, you’re safe and the other person has to drink for not thinking of something clever enough. It’s an icebreaker game and I figured we could learn a little bit about each other before we are on the road tomorrow.”

They both looked to each other with nervous glances before shrugging and lifting their mugs. Rathein spoke first: “Alright I’m game! But you have to go first to show us how it is done.”

Athena cleared her throat, thinking of something off of the top of her head that would be an easy start to the game. “I used to have a pet cat named Coco, I used to be a healer, and I’m married to a Prince of Starkhaven.”

Rathein and Varric scoffed while saying “Starkhaven” in unison. Athena then raised her mug to them and took a drink. “Okay, Herald, your turn.”

She looked down at her mug, scratching the right side of her head where it looked like it had been recently cut short. “Hm. My favorite color is green, I hate animals, and I had a lover in the Templar Circle.”


Athena stared her in the eyes until she got a smile. Once she did, she nodded and responded simply: “Green.”
The Herald grumbled and took a drink, slamming the mug on the table. “How could you tell!??” Athena crossed her arms across her chest proudly, flashing her a smile.

“You blushed when you spoke of the lover. Haven’t you ever played cards? You can’t show your tells, Rathein. Your turn, Varric.”

He rubbed his chin with a gloved hand, clicking his tongue against the top of his mouth while he did so. He then snapped his fingers and gave them a grin that showed he would surely win this round. “I am in the Merchant’s Guild.” Throwaway. “I sleep with a stuffed nug at night. I really don’t know where Hawke is.” Athena didn’t even hesitate before pointing a finger at him accusingly. “Two lies isn’t fair, Varric.”

She knew he knew where Hawke was, so why throw in the nug? He didn’t seem like the soft and cuddly type. Apparently her accusation was right when a blush flushed his cheeks and he scratched at his protruding gold lucks on his chest. “Fine fine you got me. I’ll drink.”

They went back and forth for what seemed like an hour. They learned little things that could be explained in this world about Athena. That she didn’t have children, had never been married, but used to sleep with her baby blanket until she was 25 years old. The blanket thankfully didn’t make it in the trip or she would have had to show it to them. At one point during the game Solas walked into the tavern, his eyes searching the crowd until he found them. When he did find them, they were roaringly drunk. There were a few empty mugs at the end of the table and they were all laughing because Rathein had tried to convince them that she hasn’t kissed a girl behind a wardrobe in the Circle. Again, Her blush was an easy tell.

“What game is this?” The elf looked to them with a curious eye, a small smirk at the corner of his lips. Varric leaned over and pointed to the two girls, giving them a playful glare. “These two girls are liars. The both of them.”

Athena waved her hands in front of her to try and shoo the accusation away. “No, no nooooo.” Her voice slurring and heavy with ale. Rathein unsuccessfully tried to stifle a laugh and ended up making a small snorting sound instead. What time was it? The sun had been down for hours and exhaustion was pulling at the edges of her mind. This game couldn’t go on any longer so the Fade-Walker gave them all a wicked green before leaning her elbows on the table to support herself. “I have flown through the sky. I can see the future. I know what Cullen sleeps in at night.” For the last comment she gave a naughty eyebrow wiggle to the Herald who nearly fell out of her chair laughing.

Varric shook his head, standing from the bar stool. “Those are all too ridiculous. I think that’s a sign we better turn in for the night. Early morning, right?”
All of the table but Solas groaned. He seemed to smirk at their displeasure in the thought. Athena stood up from her position and realized she did it *waaahay* too fast. She gripped the end of the table and let out a shaky breath before stabilizing herself with her staff. This thing did come in handy! They all headed out towards the cold air. It took a few seconds but she realized Solas was at her heel. He was giving her a watchful eye as they walked towards her cabin. “Yes, Solas? Can I help you?” She asked with sarcasm dripping from her voice, eyes glazed over as she shot him a somewhat happy glance. Good Heavens he was attractive. The cadence in his voice, the curve of his cheeks, and those *thighs!* She forced her gaze to stay unnecessarily glued on the path ahead so her drunkenness wouldn’t take over.

“You are in no state to put up wards tonight. Surely that is obvious?” His following smirk was almost snide. She made a sound that she thought resembled a growl low in her throat while walking ahead of him to the cabin. Thankfully she was able to snap her fingers and produce a small spark to start the fire in her fireplace. It picked up on the kindling she had gathered earlier that morning and soon defrosted the bits that had grown cold in their trek from the tavern to her cabin. She let out a sigh, rolling her neck around while she began to remove her armor and set it on the chair next to her bed.

Solas cleared his throat by the door, eyes averting her while she was undressing. She didn’t stop. During marching band sixty sweaty kids changed in front of each other so there was hardly any modesty in what she was doing, especially because their forms of underclothes covered so much of her skin compared to what she normally wore in her world. Here she was able to wear a linen top that resembled a tank top with white cotton bottoms that extended to her knees. “I placed the wards. You should be safe for the night. Both here and in the Fade... just don’t explore. Good night, Athena.” He shut the door and left without another word or chance to respond. It was easy to see the blush in his cheeks and ears from where she was standing but her main focus and goal was sleep.

The moment her head hit the bed she fell into a deep Fade-less sleep, thankfully.

The next morning was not so kind.

They rose with the sun and were on horseback by time sunrise had finished. Varric, Rathein, and Athena were all groaning on their horses at every unexpected bump or neigh. It had been almost twenty years since Athena had last rode a horse. She occasionally did the mechanical bulls at the local country bar but that was temporary. Riding a horse long-term was not going to be friendly to her thighs.

Almost with a mockingly perky trot Solas pulled his beige horse up to the three, tossing them each a small three-ounce vial of a peculiar purple liquid. It smelled similar to what Athena had
consumed after the Templar purging ritual. “I figured you would all be needing help this morning.”

“Chuckles, you’re a life saver.” Varric was the first to flick the cork off the top of his vial with his thumb and swallow the contents. Already he seemed to sit a little straighter on his horse and the general pallor had faded. He raised the empty vial in thanks to Solas who nodded in return, watching the two women each drink their potions. Athena had a coughing fit after hers. She was still not used to drinking their magical potions ground from roots, herbs, and other things. Even as a child she disliked drinking medicine unless it was drowned in grape flavor. She knew she would not get that kindness here but it didn’t make the experience any less pleasurable.

Wiping the back of her mouth with her now gloved hand, she nodded to him with a weak smile. “Thank you. I really don’t know if I could have made the trip this morning without it. It’s been so long since I was on horseback. All this is going to be so new for me.”

Cassandra looked over her shoulder from her position at the front of the group. She was slightly less perky than Solas that morning but still fared better than the rest of them. “Our destination is a few days’ ride. You’ll have time to adjust.” Athena paused. Was the Seeker just nice to her, kind of? Her mouth hung slightly open in surprise and then made a low whistling sound. Good to know they were all warming up to each other somewhat.

Rathein rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands before stretching upwards towards the sky. She was obviously a skilled ride since she used her thighs to direct the horse when her hands weren’t on the reigns. “You don’t ride? What did you do before all of this? You said you were a healer of some sort?”

Athena nodded, rubbing the back of her neck sheepishly while she thought of an appropriate answer that wouldn’t be too telling. Boy this was going to be difficult. “Yes. I worked in a very large - er - clinic and assisted with wounds, infections and the like. We normally got the sicker people that were basically in the hands of the Maker already.”

The Herald tilted her head, much like a pup would at an odd noise, and retorted: “Why did you stop?”

Wasn’t that the question of the year? She had already been considering switching up professions, or at least job locations, back in her previous life. There had just been a stagnation that was bringing her down. Every day was repetitive and the monotony was bringing her only unhappiness. “I no longer got joy from it.”

This caught Cassandra’s attention. The Seeker slowed her large, black mare and came back to
where it was closer to Athena’s side. “You didn’t get joy from helping people? That almost sounds crass.”

Athena shook her head before looking down to her saddle, hands wringing at the reigns. “I’m sure you’re aware, Seeker. Death is a heavy weight on somebody’s mind. When there’s too much of it, you have to stop and wonder how many people you’re actually helping. Even if you feel like you’re doing the right thing, there’s always that doubt.”

The group was silent in what she could assume was agreement. She could have sworn she saw Solas tighten his grip on his own reigns but there was no other cue that he had heard what she said. She took the silence as an opportunity to pat her mount’s side. He was a basic steed with a brown coat and black mane. She could only assume he had been used for labor of some kind. His trot was steady and paced like he had done it a thousand times before. In that moment of shared monotony Athena sympathized with him. They would need to shake things up a little for him then.

Chapter End Notes

I had Varric try to cheat at first because he's a self admitted pathological liar. As friendly as he is, I didn't think he would be the one to open up first.
Perhaps it wasn’t possible to animate exactly how beautiful the Hinterlands were, but Athena’s breath was taken away by the unrealistic landscape set before them at the Crossroads camp. Sweeping snow-peaked mountains thick with trees that rivaled to touch the sky. Bits and pieces of castles and ruins scattered across her vision, eyes nearly shimmering with delight. The rest of the crew was groaning while unpacking their mounts and tying them near the tents. They were exhausted from the ride but seeing their destination had awoken a new excitement within her. This was all actually real!

Athena began making a list in her head of what to expect from this area. Mages, Templars, bears, oh my! She made a mental note to write down everything that was vital to remember so she would have ample time to prepare and help out in some subtle way. Whether it be setting up glyphs in front of the trebuchets to push away enemies or by putting pillows in the mine shaft where the Herald would fall, she had to do something that would help... but not give her away.

Rathein had just finished receiving report from Scout Harding and looked to the rest of the group with a new look of determination. She was all fun and games but knew how to get serious when it counted. “It sounds like we’re going to meet some resistance when we’re down there. Are you all ready to go?” The Herald looked to each of them to get a gesture or nod of acknowledgement. Once she had them all she turned on her heel and turned down the hill to get to the Crossroads. Athena fell into step behind her, her staff sitting loosely in her hand parallel to the ground. Already she could feel her energy humming within the object, the hook blade at the top catching the sun’s light perfectly.

A shrill scream cut the silence between them and she could hear Cassandra unsheathing her shield while running forward, commanding them with her unquestionable authority. “Hurry! They need help!” The group took off behind her and Athena realized her pulse was already within her throat. The scene they came upon was chaotic. Inquisition members fought aside the villagers against mercenaries, swords clashing against one another while blood sprayed upon the ground. Blood didn’t make her squeamish, but the looks of anguish did. She had cleaned enough corpses to be comfortable with the dead, but it was the suffering that really made her uncomfortable.

“Rebel mages!” Solas called out, pointing his staff to the side where they were coming. He tried to reassure them that they weren’t Templars but Cassandra was quick to point out how little they cared. With a sweep of her hand, Athena raised a barrier in front of Cassandra and Varric as they chose the closer targets to work with. Her eyes looked for an opponent, her hand shaking with her staff in its grip. An ice mage fade stepped in a blur of black between the Seeker and Varric, a book levitating by his side as he mumbled a spell and aimed his palm towards Athena.
Without even thinking she pushed her staff’s end into the ground and flicked it up at him, a fireball forming at her will and launching into him. The force of the attack broke through his barrier and pushed him to the ground, the flames eating through his robes. His screams curdled her blood, a sick feeling coming to her stomach as she stepped over him. The flames ate at his skin, his hands scratching at his face in an attempt to stop them. The flames must have inflamed his throat to where he couldn’t breathe because it didn’t take long for him to be silenced. Athena felt her body go numb, face as cold as a soldier’s as she detached herself to continue on the battle.

The mages were taken care of when the Templars arrived, Cassandra trying to reason with them but it fell on deaf ears. One of the chargers with a body-sized shield stormed through Rathein’s barrier and knocked her over. Athena was quick to reach towards her and throw her barrier own onto the Herald. This left her vulnerable to a smaller shield bash that knocked her on her back. For a moment she saw stars but was drawn out of it by the sight of a sword coming down at her.

She raised her staff to defend it, the wood thankfully stopping the blade from hitting her face. With a feral scream she pushed her staff upwards to knock him back, the blade of her staff hitting the templar’s face. He staggered back, hand coming from his cheek soaked with blood. He roared, stabbing his sword into the ground while quickly chugging a vial of lyrium. Athena’s blood ran cold, her mouth ajar as she stepped back from him. *No, no, no, no! NOT AGAIN.*

Anxiety clutched her stomach and her body stiffened, pupils constricting to their smallest point while she took a defensive step back. The Templar then raised a hand towards her and without thinking she screamed, thrusting both hands towards him and unleashing whatever her body would allow. Lightning rained on the soldier from her fingertips, it accelerating its process thanks to his armor and ending his life within a moment. She thought she could hear the slow decline of his pulse as it faded into nothingness. While she had dealt with her own enemies the rest of the party had cleared the field, their breath coming in pants and sweat on their brows.

The Crossroads were now littered with bodies, some of the enemies still struggling for their last breath. Varric was retrieving arrows and ending the lives of those that still clung on, a blank expression on his face as he did so. Rathein was drinking down a healing potion while nursing a small cut on her left arm. Cassandra wiped her brow, sheathing her sword while giving a nod of approval. “That should be all of them. Is everybody alright?” There were noises of reply in the area but Athena was still too stunned to speak. She looked to the Templar and the mage that she had managed to *murder.* Did they have families? Were there people worrying about them? Were they forced into this fight?

While the group was reforming and talking about future plans, she heard from the side: “Please help me! My wife needs help!” She knew that quest; she knew that voice and it would provide a momentary escape from the sense of death permeating the area. With an almost zombie like gait she walked towards the home of the Dalish couple and peeked her head inside. “Did somebody call for help?” Her voice was hollow but sincere, her gaze looking for the husband who was probably fretting over his wife.
Sure enough he was, his hands shaking above her face as she lay on the bed with ragged breathing. “Yes my wife. She has breathing problems. Our son normally has a tonic but he has gone off and joined some cult in the mountains.”

Athena nodded, rolling her arms up while she walked over to the window and slammed it shut. There was an empty pail by the door and she grasped it to go outside where the water wheel was. After filling it to the brim she came back to the home of the sick elf and hung the pail over the water. Before the husband could ask questions she looked up to him with a soft smile. “We will go and get the potion. In the meantime, keep this water boiling. This mountain air is too dry and your wife needs to not work so hard when she breathes. The steam from the water will help thicken the air of the room. It should make her more comfortable while we go look for your son. Try to keep the window and door shut as much as possible so you don’t lose any of the steam.”

“Ma serannas, stranger.”

She walked out of the cabin and took a deep breath of the cold air. Helping them gave her mind a moment to get over the fight. She could feel that the color had returned to her cheeks, thank goodness. Rathein ran up to her with a worried expression. “Where did you go! We thought you had been hurt!” Athena shook her head, giving the Herald a quick embrace.

“You have that little faith in me? These people need a potion from the mountains. There’s a cult stationed there. We’ll come across it soon.”

The Herald sighed at the embrace, looking to villagers as they burned the dead and attempted to return to their normal lives. Cassandra hailed them over with a gesture and they followed. She spoke of Corporal Vale and Horsemaster Dennet and what we needed to do with both of them. Already Athena wasn’t looking forward to trekking across the Hinterlands for every little thing, especially that stubborn Druffalo that never liked to come down the river with her. Before Rathein decided which quest to choose first, Athena grabbed her shoulder, spun her around, and pointed up to the outdoors infirmary where Mother Giselle was tending to a wounded man.

“You might want to go talk to her first. It’s one of the reasons we came here, right?”

Rathein sighed and playfully punched her shoulder. “How did you even know?”

Athena winked back at her. “Gut instinct. Go on, talk to her. We’ll wait here.”
The Herald walked up towards Mother Giselle to talk of the Chantry and Val Royeaux. When she was out of earshot, Cassandra walked up to Athena’s side. There was an air of sympathy about her as the Seeker put a hand on her shoulder. Athena did her best to not twitch away from the touch. “Was that... your first kill?”

She stilled, biting her bottom lip while nodding. “I... have ended the suffering of some patients with... “What was an old word for medication? “Tonics to take away the pain. Their family was normally at the bedside to say good bye. That was peaceful and provided comfort. This... was different.”

The brunette warrior nodded, giving her shoulder a small squeeze before releasing her. Cassandra spoke with such certainty it was inspiring. “It gets easier. You did... good, Athena. Was that lightning I saw?”

She knows of my capabilities? Damnit, Leliana. She nodded, a genuine smile creeping to her lips. “I didn’t mean to. It just kind of came to me.”

Varric approached them while sheathing Bianca onto his back. “In just the nick of time it looked like. I turned to cover you but you seemed to have it handled. Give yourself some credit, Walker.”

He slapped the middle of her back and knocked the breath out of her before sitting on a nearby rock to tighten his boots and gloves. Solas placed his staff in the sheath on his back, giving her a nod of acknowledgement with a slight smile. “Indeed, it was impressive. You are getting a grasp of your magic. Well done, Athena.” If she was elven, she had a feeling he would of called her da'len in that sentence and it irritated her in a way. She was not a child. She was a full-fledged adult with a boatload of experience under her belt. What good that does me here.

Rathein returned to them soon and explained what would need to happen. The Chantry was meeting in Val Royeaux and it was their job to go there and woo them somehow with their Inquisition magic and charm. The woman was certainly hopeful, even with the sarcasm dripping from her mouth as she explained their task. “What should we do first? It seems like there is so much.” Athena nodded and looked over to where the hunter was sitting next to a fire. He would want some rams.

She spoke up, pointing over in his direction. “I overheard he is looking for someone to hunt for meat for the village. They are running low with all of the attacks. We’re in the mountains so rams should be close, right? It shouldn’t take long with all five of us looking.”
Ram hunting was just as miserable then as it was in the game. With an easy flick of her staff she killed a ram with one shot, its body falling lifeless to the side. Solas was staying close to her while she hunted and it wasn’t often she would get a chance to ruffle his feathers without anybody else being close by. She began to hum the first notes of a song she remembered, her fingers drumming on the shaft of her staff while her eyes searched for another ram.

“I’ve got to be honest. I think you know. We’re covered in lies and that’s OK.”

He gave her a curious glance but kept to himself. He brought down a fennec and put the stilled creature in his pack while climbing up the side of the mountain.

“There’s somewhere beyond this I know. But I hope I can find the words to say.”

Her voice wasn’t strong or blatantly skilled. She had musical training but it was in instruments, not singing. She was able to find the pitch but it was soft enough so that only the two of them could hear.

“Never again. No-oo-oo. No never again. Cause you’re a God.”

Solas stopped in his walk, hand gripping his staff. She took this opportunity to walk in front of him and she could feel his gaze piercing her back. The air around them grew a few degrees cooler while he did so. This only brought a smile out of her while she finished the part she wanted to sing.

“And I am not. And I just thought that you would know.”

Chapter End Notes

I had a lot of fun with the end of this because I listen to a certain playlist when I write. This song came up and I was like OH THATS SO SOLAS. Plus he deserves it because he's always kind of a cold withdrawn person in the beginning of the game.

The song is You're a God - Vertical Horizon if you want to listen to it.
They were able to close the rift at the cultist’s lair, give the potion to the thankful husband, complete the horse races, return a stolen wedding band to the widow, find the Templar and mage lairs, and yes, return the damn druffalo. They were now on the way to the wolf cave. It pained her to bring so many of them down, but their eyes glowed with corruption and their actions were not their own. Athena brought her staff down into a wolf to end its life, its neck snapping to the side with a final whine. She ground her teeth and snapped her staff to the side to get the excess blood from the bottom. They were on the outside of the cave and soon a demon would be inside to face them. The last time she had fought a terror was in the fade so preemptively she shielded the group with a barrier. . .which apparently they found odd.

Cassandra wrinkled her nose and walked forward, making sure to stay within the confines of the barrier. “What is this for?”

Athena brought her staff in front of her, keeping it in a shielding position. “Bad feeling. Be wary.”

The rest of the group paused for a moment but nodded, bringing their respective weapons out. Rathein headed the group this time, causing her own barrier to expand on her friend’s. The purple and red auras blended together to strengthen the barrier already in place. Within the first few paces of the cave a small batch of wolves caught their scent and howled. Instead of attacking they retreated further into the cave. Shit, they’re going to protect their alpha. Athena picked up the pace and walked in front of Rathein. The Herald tried to reach out and pull her back but it was too late.

She ran into the center of the cave and came face to the face with the terror and its pack of wolves that were there. The terror clenched its claws and bellowed a warning into her face, the wolves growling at her simultaneously. Instead of focusing on the furred creatures her eyes looked to the terror with a possessive rage that said: You’re mine.

In a sweeping motion she brought the bottom of her staff from the ground and pointed it towards the demon. A stream of flames followed and pushed the demon back but unfortunately this gave the wolves the cue to attack. They lunged at her and gnawed against her barrier. Arrows flew by and struck a few of them between the eyes, their falling cries bringing a pained expression to her face as she tried to expand on her new trick. Tucking her staff under her arm, she rubbed her hands together then separated them, mirroring a certain Sailor Scout she knew while summoning
lightning between her palms.

The storm magic raged within her hands until it was impossible to contain. The moment before it broke free she launched it at the demon. It paralyzed the creature mid-scream and suddenly it was even further paralyzed by a layer of frost. Solas came to her side, standing so close she could touch, with a look of determination and- was that pity towards the wolves? Cassandra brought her sword down on the demon while Rathein unleashed a barrage of energy attacks towards it. The demon was brought down quickly, the wolves suddenly being free of its grasp.

Athena couldn’t help herself. She stood in front of them, making a shooing motion with her staff and even putting off some pulses of force to get them to flee. “Go on, you’re free now. Get out of here.” The wolves, however, were already blinded by blood-lust. They bared their fangs at her and growled, slowly encroaching upon her as if she were prey. She shook her head, refusing to launch any more spells at them. Why are they still attacking! They are no longer under the demons control.

Solas sighed, obviously picking up on her frustration. “The demons affects appear to be lingering.” He cast his arm out and covered the ground and their paws in frost. It made them easy pickings for Varric, Cassandra, and Rathein. She backed up until her back was flesh with a rock wall, tears in her eyes as she looked upon the fallen bodies of half a dozen wolves. Their final cries echoed through her mind until they dissolved into a soft whine. The whine continued while she found her breath and it took her a moment to realize it wasn’t in her mind. . . and the others couldn’t hear it yet.

She gave them a quick glance before following the sound of the creature. It was young, the pitch was high, and it sounded scared. She picked up her pace and found herself in the corner of the cave and hiding behind a pile of rocks was a puppy. A wolf puppy with pitch black fur and innocent blue eyes. She smiled, bending down to her knees and holding a hand out to the pup. Its whine ceased, its ears pressed back to its skull while it came out with its tail between its legs. “Ssshh shhh it is alright, little one. Come here.” The pup was resistant but it came out to sniff her hand, its wet little nose pressing against her index finger.

Before it could run she picked it up and pressed it against her chest. Its fur was cold and it was shaking. Doing a quick check, she tucked it, well he after the check, into the vest of her armor and made her way back to the group. They had just finished looting what they needed from the wolves (teeth, meat, and some furs) when she arrived with a beaming smile on her face. Cassandra predictably drew her sword, voice strained and judgmental as she asked: “What is that?”

Athena gave her a look that screamed “Seriously?” before responding with a deadpan voice, eyes meeting the Seeker’s in challenge. “It’s. A. Puppy.”
Varric and Rathein laughed, Solas giving an approving smile while approaching her, hand outstretched. “May I?” She nodded, opening up her vest so he could scratch the small pup behind his ears. The pup was leery of the new strangers but he nuzzled in closer to the heat that Athena’s body provided. “He seems to like you, Athena. Where did you find him?”

She jerked her head back towards the corner of the cave. “Back there. I think it was the last one left. I think one of these wolves was its mother.” There was a ghost of a frown in her eyes but she shook her head and nuzzled her nose against the wolf’s pup. “I think I’ll call him. . .Kain. He looks like a Kain, what do you guys think?”

Rathein nearly skipped over to her, pressing her curious face right at the level of Athena’s chest. “Oh look he is so cute! Can we keep him, Cassandra? Please?” It was like asking a parent. Cassandra caught the tone in which she asked and scoffed, rolling her eyes while sheathing her sword.

“Athena, you are responsible for the creature. I will not wake up to wolf droppings in my bedroll.”

Athena could not contain her glee. They left the cave and returned to the farm, alerting Dennet’s wife of the wolves’ demise. Rathein had been smart and delegated the watchtowers to Inquisition agent’s at the camp near the farm and they were able to get started on them. That progress was enough for the stubborn horse master since he finally agreed to give his horses and come along with them. The last part took some convincing from Cassandra, pulling on his beliefs in the Chantry. It was funny how even religious guilt carried between worlds.

Finally, they returned to their camp and she couldn’t wait to set up a small bed of fabric scraps and some of the wolf furs they collected. Morbid as it may be, Kain seemed comfortable within the wolf furs. He instantly fell asleep when they set up camp, his little whines coming with each breath while he slept. She walked out and set on the benches surrounding a campfire. The group seemed tired, but excited. Solas spoke first: “I think we have attracted the attention of the Chantry now. Should we head to Val Royeaux?”

Rathein gave out an over-dramatic sigh before nodding, throwing a piece of wood into the fire. “I guess that would be the next logical step. The templar and mage threat are handled here and we have the horses the Inquisition will need. Can you think of anything else, Cassandra?” The Seeker shook her head, tucking in the braid that fell across the front of her face. “No, I think whatever remains can be given to some of our agents. Not every mission requires your attention, Herald.”

“Varric?”
He shook his head and leaned back in his chair while rubbing a polishing cloth over Bianca’s side. “No I think a little trip to Orlais would be a nice break from all of this outdoorsy stuff. Walker?”

Athena looked up from the flames and nodded. The city of Val Royeux would be her first experience with Orlesian civilization here. The Great Game! The masks! The fashion! They had earned a small amount of coin by performing their missions and selling what trinkets and equipment they did not need. Perhaps it would be enough to buy a book on shape shifting, if such a thing existed considering it was a rather taboo specialization.

The dwarf looked up with a smile that could only mean trouble. “What’s that game we played last week, Walker? Two truths and a lie? I don’t think Chuckles or the Seeker ever got a chance to play.”

Solas leaned over and rested his elbows on top of his knees. “No, you were all at the end of your evenings by the time I arrived. I think I understand the premise if I may start?”

There was no objection from the group but Athena raised a single brow in curiosity. He sat up in his posture, eyes to the sky while he thought of options. They must have come because he gave a small smirk. “I am from a small town north of here. I have vallaslin you just can’t see them.” This brought a curious hum from Cassandra while he finished. “And I am looking forward to going to Val Royeux because of the frilly cakes they sell.”

Rathein slapped her knee with determination, pointing a confident finger at him while almost shouting: “Cakes! You almost eat like a bird. It’s amazing you have any energy to cast spells! There isn’t a chance in the Black City that you eat those things.” Varric and Cassandra smiled and nodded in agreement. Solas gave a soft laugh before looking to Cassandra. It looked like they were about to move onto the next person when Athena’s voice cut through the roar of the fire. “Vallaslin.”

They all froze, eyes slowly turning to Solas as he grew pink in the cheeks with a smirk on his lips. “How did yo-“

She shrugged with a confident smile. “Everyone has tells, Solas. Yours is just harder than theirs.” She pointed her thumb in the direction of the other three. It took a moment to settle in but when it did Rathein’s laugh soon echoed through the hills. “NO. WAY.” Solas rubbed the top of his head while shooting a playful glare in Athena’s direction. She winked back at the elf, suddenly feeling a warmth spread to her chest and cheeks. He was becoming friendlier with her. She noticed in the past couple of days there had been fewer pokes from his aura. To keep him from seeing the blush she looked up to the moon and leaned back, faking a yawn while stretching. “We have time to play this on the road tomorrow. Let’s hit the hay.”
She luckily shared a tent with Rathein so it wasn’t long before they were sleeping in their bed rolls. Kain had wondered over and nuzzled his body up against Athena’s side, his breaths syncing with hers while her mind drifted from consciousness... and entered the Fade.

The greens were brighter here, happier almost since they had put some distance between themselves and the Breach. It was still large but it wasn’t as threatening from the Hinterlands. The landscape was empty, open for her to sculpt as she suspected. Before she could even have time to explore a familiar voice caught her attention.

“You seek to be a shapeshifter? I can help.”

She whipped around to see the face of Wisdom smiling at her, hands clasped behind her back in an oh so Solas fashion. Without even thinking about it she ran forward and threw her arms around the ethereal elven spirit. The spirit didn’t even hesitate to hug her back, a hand coming up to stroke her back. Athena looked up into her yellow eyes. “I was so worried! Oh!”

Wisdom looked at her with lips slightly pursed while she waited for what was to come next.

“You can’t tell him. You can’t tell him anything of what you saw in my past... please.”

She remembered that when they first met Wisdom had looked into her mind to answer her own questions. She trusted the spirit. In the game Solas had spoken about how they were close friends. Perhaps she could trust her with her own secrets? Wisdom chuckled under her breath and stepped back from the embrace. “Of course, Victo- I mean Athena. I heard you want to learn shapeshifting. I can teach you what it will take to do so, it is up to you to put in the practice.”

Without hesitation she nodded, eyes nearly glowing with a smile. The spirit nodded and placed a hand on top of her head. There was a warm feeling that flowed through her body. Her mind whispered of connections with animals, how to call on them, and how to finally shift her shape into one of them. Shapeshifting required a lot of energy and focus that she didn’t have yet, but she grew stronger each day.

Wisdom stepped back with a satisfied nod before looking over her shoulder. “I must go. I am being called for, but before I go someone was actually looking for you.”

Athena pointed to the center of her own chest. “Me? Why me?”
Before dissipating the elven spirit answered with a laugh in her voice. “I will let them explain for themselves.”

“Oh-wait! What do you mean?”

It had hardly been five seconds before Athena was tackled to the ground from behind. She rolled to her back and brought a fireball to her palm but was greeted by another spirit, not a demon. It wore a large brimmed hat and a floor-length sundress. Its smile was contagious and she couldn’t help but give a nervous smile in return. “Um. Hi. Who are you?”

The spirit stood up and smoothed out the fabric of its long, billowing dress. It then made a “ta-da” motion while giving its most genuine smile. Athena stood up slowly while never taking her eyes off of the spirit. Something was familiar, pulling at her memories. It was the eyes. . .the smile. The answer fell from her lips in a surprised whisper. “Desire.”

The spirit jumped off the ground in child-like excitement, clapping her hands together before correcting its friend. “No-no-no. I’m Inspiration now. And it’s all thanks to you!”
“I heard you found a lute! Ooh, let me teach you how to play!”

Inspiration swirled her hand and summoned a two stools and two lutes. She picked up her own instrument, fingers delicately strumming the strings as if she had mastered the art years ago. She looked with such intensity at the instrument, blonde curls falling over her shoulder while she tried to recreate the song Athena had been singing under her breath days earlier.

“You’re a God and – Oh that’s funny. Do you think he got it?”

Athena slowly sat down on the bench and looked to the lute, a bright blush creeping up from her chest to her neck. “I... I don’t know. You can hear me down there?

The spirit thought for a second then nodded, her fingers effortlessly recreating the song on the lute. “I have to focus really hard but yes. Everything that happens down there ends up here - It’s like an echo in the Fade.”

She looked down to her own unattended lute, gingerly grasping it while looking to her now spirit friend. “How... how did you change, Inspiration? Last time I saw you, you pushed me into the Rift.”

The spirit looked up from her lute with a grin. “It was all because of you. Your story, your past, your experiences! They inspired me so much to learn more about you and of the world I changed. The Breach pushed me away at first but thankfully you're far enough away from it to hear me now.”

Athena gave a small nod and smile in acceptance of her answer, her own unpracticed fingers trying to find the best spot on her instrument. Inspiration nearly bounced in her seat in excitement. The energy coming from her was infectious. It seeped into the Fade Walker’s pores and made her want to continue playing the lute, which was strange considering she had maybe learned two or three notes in her cabin before going to sleep.

Right as they were about to play she felt an odd pressure in her head. It vibrated and hummed, the feeling sending goosebumps down her skin. “What was that?” She flicked her gaze to her friend,
the spirit looked past Athena with her mouth scrunched to the side.

“Someone is trying to find you, enter your dream. They’re not dangerous; I think it is your dream walker friend.”

That made her nearly bolt out of her seat. Dropping her lute to the ground, she jumped up to look for a door to slam when she realized there was no such thing. They were in the Fade which was accessible to everyone. He, lucky for him, was a master of it and could find other people in its depths. She whipped on her heel and put a finger to her lips. “Not a single word, Inspiration, of what you know. My life literally might depend on it.”

The spirit wrinkled her nose and stuck her tongue out at her. “Wisdom may keep everyone’s secrets but you were my friend first. You helped me so I’ll help you above anyone else. Let him in, you’ll be fine, friend. This is your area.”

With a nervous smile Athena closed her eyes and felt that pressure within her head, trying to figure out how to allow him in. She shrugged to herself and simply thought out into the void as if she were at her house: Come in?

“What do you mean you cannot tell me?”

Solas was standing arms crossed in front of his companion, Wisdom. There had been little pieces of conversations, little snippits that he could not get past. Athena had something to hide and he wanted to figure it out. Her magic was something he had never felt before; it did not flux or obey the same laws as other mages. Whether she knew that or not, that was to be determined, but it was only restricted by the beating of her heart and her imagination. It was a dangerous power indeed but he was no closer to figuring out how she had come about it.

Wisdom stood confidently in front of him, arms by her side in a defensive position. She would not yield to him. Normally she would illuminate his path and discuss things in great length, but on this she would not speak. “You are not the only person who requires Wisdom, lethallan. Others call me and require my guidance and it would be against my nature to betray that trust.”
He scowled at her, anger etched into his features. She was his friend first, as petty as it was. They had been friends for the millennia in which he was trapped in the uthenera. They had their disagreements in the past but this was truly a first for the pair. He snapped his right hand in the air, turning his back to her as he started to walk away. “Fine. I will seek her out myself. She cannot hide from me forever.”

“Solas.”

The tone in her voice gave him paused. He let out an angered and heavy sigh, turning quickly to look over his shoulder at her. Wisdom let out a soft sigh of her own, a friendly smile coming to her face as she unclenched the fists at her side. “Why do you think she seeks out the company of spirits? Do you really think you are the only person who has lost everything and is alone?”

His hardened gaze broke, doubt setting into his features as he looked to the ground. It was partially in shame. It was unworthy of him to speak to his friend in such a manner. But... could she be right? Athena never spoke of what happened before the Fade. Perhaps she too had experiences her own tragedies. Is that why she was so closed off, with a barrier constantly up? With a softened smile he looked to Wisdom, speaking softly and with guilt in his voice. “Lethallin...”

She stopped him by putting her hand up. “I know.”

He chuckled and shook his head, turning around and disappearing into the vastness of the Fade.

He melted into view in Athena’s barren area of the Fade. Inspiration gave a small wave from her stool while strumming away at her lute, playing the same song Athena had sung to tease the both of them. He didn’t act like he noticed, which Athena was grateful for. She took a step back, clearing her throat before talking with as confident of a voice as she could muster: “Uh, hey, Solas.”

He smiled, actually smiled, while shaking his head back and forth. “I see you have made another friend.”

She shook her head and gave him a smug smile, turning her body to the side and gesturing back towards the spirit. “Actually... this was Desire. Apparently... she changed.” His gaze flicked back and forth between the spirit and her, the action drying her throat and quickening her pulse. The icy blue of his eyes stirred something within her. There was an intensity that she was afraid of,
memories of those eyes glowing with the powers of a deity flashing through her mind. The flames of her aura licked against the inside of her stomach, pulsing outwards with every breath and thought. His gaze was so deep, she assumed it was because of his “divine” nature of just because he, like her, was shielding so much.

“That is intriguing. You changed a demon’s nature. I am impressed, Athena. Not many people would be so open minded about the nature of spirits and demons. The lines between them are so blurred but the Circle will never see them as anything other than black and white ideas that can never coexist.” He gestured with his hands while he spoke, his left hand being demons while his right was spirits. Athena was too busy trying to get over the fact that he was here, in her dreams and interacting with her in a friendly manner. “Forgive me, I’m lecturing, aren’t I?”

Holy Hera he’s self-aware when he does it. Athena laughed, rubbing the back of her neck while shaking her head. “No, I understand. In a world where things are so black and white it must be refreshing to find someone that can see in color.” She looked up to him sheepishly, her posture slowly relaxing since he wasn’t giving her his normal cool and unreadable stare.

He nodded, swirling his hand to summon up his own stool. “You keep saying worlds. Aren’t you from this one?”

“The Fade? Thedas? You’ll have to be more specific but that doesn’t mean I’ll answer.”

He sat down on the stool, relaxing back into his posture while giving her a look that spoke really?

She shrugged in response, walking over to the stool and picking up her lute. She felt Inspiration within her head, whispering thoughts into her mind without moving her lips. You have so many songs in your head! Can I learn some? I’ll teach them to you in return! She thought back a weak yes before crossing a leg over the other to face her body towards Solas. The spirit began to play nonchalantly in the background, eyes focused on the strings instead of them. “I was dragged into the Fade from my home. My family and my friends are still there. They probably don’t know where I am.” Her voice trailed off, tears subconsciously forming at the corners of her eyes.

Thinking back today would be Sunday. Mom and Dad would be going on their morning walks then calling her on the drive home. Even though it wasn’t safe, they liked to fill the silence of their drives with family talk. She would be starting the first day of a stretch of days off. The first day mostly consisted of lazing around and cleaning, taking a small nap around one. When she woke up, she would go grocery shopping and be so tired after it all she would order something out for dinner. Thinking back, her current predicament was much more exciting, but it wasn’t home. The only person who had been completely accepting of her was Rathein. Varric acted outwardly kind, but she knew the dwarf probably had his doubts.
He was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, hands clasped into a fist with his head resting on top. She recognized it as an active listening position but it put him closer than before. Her body wanted to lean back in defense but she squelched the urge and instead settled for an awkward twist of her back to crack her spine before returning to a normal posture. “Do you know how to get home?”

Athena couldn’t help but laugh. It started out as a mocking, almost cheery laugh but it eventually fell into one where her loneliness that she didn’t even know existed melted in. It was a harsh sound, one that even caused Inspiration to look up from her playing. “If I did . . . do you think I would remain?”

He seemed taken aback by this, his face turning to a frown as he sat up into a straight posture. Before he went to speak, she uncrossed her legs put her head in her hands, looking down at the green swirls of the ground. “You saw what happened to me when I first came here. First, I was stuck in a world of demons and then I felt like I was being burned alive from the inside out. I screamed and it did nothing.” Tears fell and hit the ground below. The droplets disappeared into the ground of the fade. “Every day has been a fight since I have been here. A fight against demons, a fight against Templars, a fight against creatures, a fight against you.” Something about the Fade made her incredibly honest and the words left her lips before she had a thought to stop them.

“Me?”

Still, she refused to look up. Perhaps it was the Fade or Inspiration pouring energy into her, but she felt more vulnerable, like she could talk about these things without any fear of retaliation. “Yes you. I can feel how guarded you are, how hard you are keeping everything to yourself. I can also feel how you’re trying to figure me out. Even as you try, your aura is so powerful. It isn’t subtle, Solas, or maybe it isn’t with me.” Because I know you! When she finally looked up to him she saw he was averting her gaze, his eyes now a sort of clouded blue as he rested his chin in one hand, the other hand supporting his arm.

He spoke, his voice almost pained but still restrained. “I am sorry, Athena. I should have stopped them from doing that to you. I should ha-“

She shook her head and sighed. “You know that wouldn’t have done anything. You were just cleared of being an apostate yourself, right? They would have easily turned you away. Unfortunately, we were both helpless and at their mercy.”

He nodded grimly, stroking his index finger along his cheek while maintaining his grip on his chin. He then relaxed his hand, bringing his arms into a guarded position across his abdomen. He
raised his gaze to hers and the breath was stolen from her lungs as he did so. “I should not pry. You have your secrets and I have mine. I can see we are both...”

Athena answered for him, a smile slowly forming on her lips. “Complicated?”

Solas twitched his lips into a ghost of a smirk. “Yes. Complicated.”
For all of you wondering the song Inspiration is playing in the background is "Such Great Heights" by Iron and Wine. Subtle yet moving background music.

Art commissioned from the amazing destinyapostasy on Tumblr. <3
The next morning when she woke, Kain was twitching in his sleep beside her, his little paws flicking while he accompanied the movement with a gurgled whine. Athena bent down and placed a kiss on top of his head, wrapping him in the wolf fur while she quickly got dressed back into her linens and armor. She tucked the midnight furred wolf pup into her vest after packing up her bedroll. He stayed content in his sleep, nuzzling further down into the fur so he wouldn’t be disturbed by the outside cold. She giggled and thought to him: *You are safe little pup.* Somehow, she felt like he believed it. He opened his eyes and met her gaze, the innocence shining through but he nodded and immediately returned to his sleep.

_Did he just nod at me? No, that’s impossible. He couldn’t of heard me._

As she threw her potato-sack feeling bedroll onto her back she remembered that Wisdom had given her a blessing in regards to the abilities of a shapeshifter. The information trickled in now. She knew she could learn how to commune with animals, how to call on them in battle, and eventually how to become one of them herself. The idea was invigorating and it gave her the boost she needed to lift up the tent flap and greet the outdoors. Cassandra and Varric were already packed up, Rathein trudging a few steps behind them. Sleep hung heavy on the Herald’s eyes, crust still sleeping in the corners. Her hair was put into a type of feaux-hawk from the apparent tossing and turning she did in her sleep.

Solas exited his tent as she did but his horse appeared to be packed already. He shut the tent behind him while glancing over towards her, a small smile coming to his lips as he nodded in her direction. “Good morning.”

She returned the gesture, meeting his gaze for a moment before blushing and turning towards Rathein. The brown-haired woman gave the show that she was ready to go, seeing as she hopped on her horse and looked to the others. “My my, somebody is not a morning person.” Athena chided at her, walking up to her side and patting her hand on her friend’s thigh.

Rathein groaned in response, playfully kicking her foot at her. “Val Royeaux is a long way and it would be wise to stop in Haven first and update the council. I would also like to sleep in an actual
bed for once. Somebody snores.” The short-haired woman made an obvious turn towards Varric, eyes narrowing into daggers in his general direction.

The dwarf shooed the insult away, pulling himself up to his own horse with ease. Bianca was secured into what looked like a special harness on the side of the saddle. Athena quickly grabbed her bedroll and tucked it in with rope on the side of her saddle, pulling at the ties to make sure they would fit. Before mounting her horse, she slid her staff onto the back of her armor, keeping Kain tucked into her vest at all times. He didn’t seem to mind the movement much.

Cassandra rode to the front of the party and with a signal of approval to their arrangement began the journey back to Haven. The horses started off at a simple trot which allowed Athena the chance to grab her lute off of the side of her saddle and test out what Inspiration had taught her last night. Previously unskilled fingers now just seemed rusty as she was able to find notes and play a few bars of the melody before losing her spot again. At least it’s not out of tune. This one is for you, friend! She echoed the song that Inspiration was playing in the background of her and Solas’s conversation last night. The notes flowed over the party and brought a satisfied sound from Solas in the back of the group. When it was finished Varric clapped in appreciation before asking: “Are you a bard too, Walker? You don’t look Orlesian to me.”

Athena shook her head, patting the lute on the side for doing a good job before putting it back in its simple holster on the side of the saddle. “Actually a friend in the Fade is giving me lessons. Never played a day in my life before this whole thing.”

The dwarf gave her a look that was uneasiness mixed with being impressed. “Well I guess I should thank the Stone I don’t dream like that because it sounds freaky and complicated. You and Chuckles can keep the spirits to yourself.”

She looked over her shoulder to meet Solas’s gaze. He seemed to be expecting it, smiling and raising his chin slightly in return. It was as if he was saying to her: We’ll keep the Fade to ourselves. She turned her head back towards the trail, the very thought causing her thighs to clench together in nerves and her stomach to turn over on its end. Later in the game the Fade was a very interesting place if you were an elven woman. That probably meant...it was impossible. He aspired to save his entire race from his past mistakes and there she was: a mistake that didn’t belong there.

The thought suddenly turned the hope and joy in her mouth to ash, a frown lingering at the edge of her lips as she squeezed her thighs and urged her horse to break into a run. Cassandra called out to her, reaching a hand like she was going to try and grab the reigns to stop the horse. “Wait, where are you going?”

Athena called out without even turning her head, urging the faithful steed underneath her with her
movements. “I just need to wake up a little. I won’t go too far.” As if he was listening to her, the horse let out a determined cry before breaking into a full sprint. She leaned her body against the horse’s back, keeping a protective hand over Kain as he slept. The bracing cold wind sliced at her cheeks, remnants of the morning drew flying through the air as the powerhouse underneath her kicked it up with his hooves. He sensed her need for freedom, for a place to think. He did not stop until the sadness had left her face completely. Their ragged breaths came in sync, the horse falling victim to a shudder that started at his head and ended with a large flick of his black tail.

She quickly dismounted and leaned against the closest tree, her hand keeping her from falling over as she caught her breath. The ride was exhilarating! There was a moment where she felt absolutely connected to her mount and they needed the same thing: escape, adventure! She turned to share her appreciation but found the horse already right behind her. His eyes were bright, thankful almost. She pressed her forehead to his and stroked the side of his face. He pressed back into her and for a quiet minute they simply breathed together in unison. Then, like a whisper, a thought came into her mind.

Prince.

Somehow she knew that was the answer to a question she meant to ask. She held his head in her hand’s, leaning back to get a good look at his eyes while asking out loud: “Is Prince your name?”

The horse let out a grunt of approval, pressing his head into hers once more before backing up. He now had a youth like glow to him, the sun warming his brown coat as he shook it out proudly. The sound of hooves and people talking brought both of them to look over to the main trail. “I guess they caught up with us. Should we head back?” Kain sneezed within the inside of his vest, burying his head back within the safe confines of her chest. “Yeah, I guess so, huh? Alright, Prince.” She smoothly slid onto the saddle and grabbed the reigns. Like instinct, he began to move towards the trail, obviously following her train of thought of where to go. There was no more resistance against the reigns in her hand, no rebellious jerks of his head or sounds of restraint. After a few moments of silence, Athena tentatively dropped the reigns in front of her and flinched preemptively, waiting for him to take off in a sign of anarchy.

But he followed the course, pulling up besides Solas at the rear of the party. He gave her a look full of concern, leaning over to speak so low that nobody else could hear him. “Are you alright?”

His concern for her put a warmth in her chest, it rising up like bubbles and bringing a smile to her face. She nodded, leaning forward to pat Prince on his neck. “Just needed a minute to breathe is all. Did you sleep well, Solas?”

He shut his eyes and shook his head back and forth, a knowing smile brightening his features as he succumbed to a nod. “Yes. Thank you. And you?”
Athena nodded in response rubbing a hand nonchalantly on the top of Kain’s head as he slept. Solas’s gaze drifted to the wolf, eyes knitting in confusion. “Are you familiar with wolves in the Dalish history?”

She lied, shaking her head while looking to him. “I’ve heard some of the elves around Haven say things like “Dread Wolf take you” when being frustrated with someone but that is my only exposure.”

He rubbed the bridge of his nose with one hand, keeping the other on the reign of his own mount. “Wolves are normally considered a bad omen. One of their Gods was known as the Dread Wolf and they put up shrines to appease him, hoping he will not catch their scent and pray on their clan.”

She scoffed while looking down at Kain. “I am not elvish; I do not fear the wolf. Besides, he’s too cute to be ferocious right now. I think I’m going to train him to hunt and fight with us like a Mabari. What about you, Solas? You aren’t Dalish. . .but do you believe in this Dread Wolf?”

She heard him laugh, the dark tone of his laughter sliding over her mind like a fog. It sent a shiver down her spine of both fear and excitement, her stomach tightening in response. He then looked to her with an almost wolfish grin before clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “No, I suppose not.”
The trip back to Haven seemed quicker than the trek out to the Hinterlands. They came into the village with the sun at its highest point in the sky. Already Athena could hear the soldiers practicing their drills outside and the loud clamoring of the blacksmith’s workers. Prince was exhausted from the journey, his trots growing heavier as she led him into the stables and placed him in front of a water trough. She removed his saddle and took the bit from his mouth, tossing it to the side on the rest of his equipment. Dennet called for her from the other side, his face twisted up in frustration. “Hey! Tie that one up!” She waved him away with a gesture, patting Prince’s side while she stretched down in a poor attempt to touch her toes.

“He’ll be fine!” She responded with a strained voice, snapping back up to her full posture while looking to her riding companion. He let out a sound that almost sounded like a laugh, his tail flicking around to try and smack her as she left.

Kain had grown in size and confidence on the journey back. He walked in time with her steps and didn’t venture too far away unless there was a creature close by that he could chase. Athena led the pup to her cabin, setting down the wolf furs and scraps of blanket at the end of her bed for him to sleep on with a chair pulled up next to it so he could have a halfway mark to jump to. He wiggled his butt in determination before bounding up to the bed. While he was romping about she took the time to wash her face since the last river wash had been a few days prior. Not having a constant stream of running water readily available was slowly killing her, but she knew she would have to adjust.

The battle and traveling was changing her body, that much was obvious. There was a leaner look about her, the muscles of her arms gaining more definition as each day went on. There were subtle changes but overall she was happy with them. It took so much motivation to work out back home. Here, she didn’t really have an option. It was battle, travel, or literally die. She used a softer bathing rock by the basin to scrub the dead skin off of her face and neck before rinsing off with frigid water. She picked up the least foul smelling cloth and dried her face before down-dressing into her basic linens and jacket.

As she walked out towards Haven the pup did not stray far from her heel, acting as her shadow while they went through the town. By the time they reached the Chantry, Rathein had already come upon the mages and Templars fighting. There was still some bickering going on. Athena gave some shoulder-pats of solidarity to the mages as she walked by. They look to her with startled glances but then acknowledged her and smiled in thanks. The Templars seemed to nearly steam with anger towards them, but she knew her perception of them was biased from her experiences.

Commander Cullen had his arms crossed while trying to back the greasy-feeling Chancellor down. “Order will never be restored as long as this rebellion is allowed.” The Chantry member gawked, his words dripping with false-purpose. The Herald rolled her eyes and made a small comment
towards Cullen about hoping Val Royeaux wasn’t full of people like the Chancellor. Athena walked up to her side and put her body in between Rathein’s and Roderick’s. “Rebellion such as yours, Chancellor?”

He tried his best to keep in control of his “power” stance. Nobody in the group of mages and templars was listening to him anymore so it was the perfect opportunity to strike him down. “Rebellion like mine? Whatever do you mean?”

She scoffed while flicking her hand in the air, eyes narrowed in anger towards his blindness. “All you are doing is stirring the minds of the people of Haven. They are all victims here and have suffered a great loss. The Divine’s death is felt by everyone but you are so quick to forget her memory and put another person on the Sunburst Throne before it has even grown cold!”

Cullen gave a small “mmmm-hmmm!” noise behind her and it fueled her to know they were agreeing on something. Rathein nudged subtly into Athena’s side as a push for her to keep going, the smile of peace on her friends face now edged with wickedness. “The faith of the people is shaken, Chancellor. Can you not feel it? They need time to be grounded in their beliefs again before they put their trust in another Divine. For now, let them put their faith in the Inquisition because we can give them something tangible here and now to believe in. We are trying to close the whole in the sky that threatens the world. What are you doing to help?”

The Chancellor opened his mouth to argue back but was actually speechless. Shame flushes his cheeks, his eyes and their messy, thick eyebrows furrowing in blind anger. Rathein took this as a cue to head into the Chantry, tapping her on the shoulder while jerking her head towards the large building. The Herald went through the doors and she took this as her opportunity to leave. “Another time, Commander.” As she walked by him, her shoulder brushed up against his armor and he quickly murmured: “thank you” under his breath as she did. He turned on his heel and followed the two women into the war council room where everyone was gathered and waiting.

Josephine started, “Having the Herald address the clerics is not a terrible idea. . . “

Cullen raised his lips in a snarl, looking at the Ambassador with an almost disgusted stare. “You can’t be serious.”

She continued, appearing unaffected by the Commander’s comment. Go get him, Josie. “Mother Giselle isn’t wrong. At the moment the Chantry’s only strength is that they are united in opinion.” Cullen rubbed the bridge of his nose while shaking her head. Athena couldn’t tell if it was because of Josephine’s response or if he was starting to get the lyrium headaches.
Leliana chimed in. “And we should ignore the danger to the Herald?”

Rathein shrugged, crossing her arms confidently across her chest. “They’re just words. What can they do?”

The Nightingale shook her head but then Cassandra strode up to the Herald’s side. It looked like her armor had been quickly polished and her hair had been washed. At least someone got the time to take a proper bath. Athena couldn’t even imagine what her hair looked like pulled up into some unidentifiable up-do after days of sweaty travel. The Seeker spoke, “I will go with her.” Athena nodded, stepping close enough to the Herald to bump her hip into hers. “So will I. I’m sure Solas and Varric will accompany as well. The Herald will be protected.”

They all made a motion of agreement before returning to their duties. Cassandra looked to both of them and actually gave them a kind smirk. “We will leave at dawn. Take this day to relax and recover. Val Royeaux may not have the wolves and demons, but their politics are just as vicious, if not worse.” Rathein shooed the Seeker’s concerns away and left, which left the Seeker and Athena in the council room last.

“Seeker, do you have a moment?”

Cassandra almost seemed surprised. She looked Athena up and down before nodding, evidence of a smirk still haunting her lips. “Yes, Athena, what can I help you with?”

She rubbed the back of her neck, looking up towards the ceiling before coming down to meet her gaze. “I was wondering if you could run me through some training exercises. I see you out there torturing that poor dummy and I know I need to polish up my battle techniques. If I am ever out of mana and am pinned against a wall, I would like the ability to fight someone off with my weapon.”

The Seeker approved of this, her lips twitching into a smile while she gestured for them to move outside. “That, I could do. Meet me in a bit by my normal camp. I can run you through a few drills and the Commander might be able to assist.”

Athena patted the brunette on the pauldron before exiting the Chantry. She made a mental note of where Vivienne would soon be lurking and smiled to herself. The First Enchantress was an absolute beast at the Game and a cold-hearted bitch, but it was something she loved about her. She would be the perfect person to recruit to bring in Orlais’s trust.
She took a moment to retrieve her staff and give Kain some jerky to nibble on from the make-shift kitchens. The pair walked down to the training quarters where Cassandra hailed her over with a gesture. She had her own sword unsheathed and Athena instantly cursed herself for not bringing a practice wooden sword for the Seeker to use on her instead. *This is going to hurt.*

She brought her staff from her back and held it in a diagonal position in front of her, the blade of the staff catching the sun’s rays and almost glowing. The Seeker looked at the staff then tossed her sword into her dominant hand, acting like the weapon was weightless. “Alright, I will just throw a few simple attacks your way. Try to block them, okay? I’ll progress into more difficult moves and throws as your skills improve.”

Athena nodded, regret and doubt suddenly pitting in her stomach like a rock. Without hesitation, Cassandra came in with an overhanded swing of her blade. Out of instinct she raised her staff to block the blade but the Seeker countered with a soft blow to her stomach with her open non-dominant fist. The move knocked the air out of her, it being sucked out of her lungs in a sharp movement while her face scrunched into a frown.

The Seeker chuckled while returning to her starting stance, tilting her head in hesitation. “Maybe we should start simpler.”

The pair went back and forth and with every punch or fall to the ground Athena improved. As the day went on, Rathein and Varric brought their meals to the side and began to watch them. They didn’t speak, but their eyes followed the movement of the battle. There as the occasional “ooh!” or laugh when Athena was foiled but they showed their support with silence. By the time dusk was settling on the horizon, she was able to go toe to toe with Cassandra for almost a full minute of back and forth attacks. In a push of strength, the Seeker thrust forward with her blade and she side-stepped it, quickly kicking up the bottom of her staff to strike against the warrior’s open abdomen.

“Oh!” The attack brought a wince to the short-haired woman’s face, Athena taking the moment to raise her hands and shout in victory. It had been the first successful attack she had made against the Seeker and *damn* did it take long enough. While she was celebrating her progress, Cassandra sheathed her sword and rubbed her stomach where the attack had landed. “Good job, Athena. I think we should retire for the evening. It is a shorter distance and easier journey to Val Royeaux but you will need your rest.”

Athena gave her a smile and shook her hand in thanks while using the opposite hand to sheath her staff on her back. “Thank you, Seeker. I truly appreciate it.” She then turned to see Rathein and Varric giving her a slow golfer’s clap. The Herald stood from her spot and slapped her hand down hard on a spot on her arm where Cassandra had gotten a good hit in, and the devilish woman knew it. “Good job, Fallen. Maybe you’ll be able to actually hold your own in battle now.”
Before she could protect Rathein gave her a playful wink. “I’m kidding, you do fine. I had a bath drawn up for you. You should get to bed.” Athena could not argue with a good bath. The mint oils already floating in the water felt like they drew the inflammation out of her muscles and joints. Already a myriad of bruises was blossoming on her arms and legs thanks to the dutiful training of the Seeker. She groaned while scrubbing over them with a stone, using some of the oils to wash the dirt and grime from her hair. Once finished, she used a thick piece of fabric to tie her hair up into a bun while she walked back to her cabin.

The sleep that came was deep, Inspiration keeping her entertained by teaching her new songs on the lute from Athena’s past and providing good company.
Oh fuck did she hurt the next morning.

Even with a great night with Inspiration in the fade nothing could have prepared her for the aching that followed after her drills with Cassandra. Kain was pulling at her ear, trying to get her out of the bed but she was groaning in return at him, pulling the covers over her head. He then pounced, pushing his front two paws into her shoulder. With sudden movement she shot up and whispered “Boo” at the wolf pup. He yelped and jumped back into a playful position, backside high in the air while his tail wagged back and forth. She gathered him up and attacked his head with kisses before gently putting him on the ground so she could get dressed.

Since they were traveling to Val Royeux, Josephine had made certain their linens and clothes were clean before they went to sleep the night before. Athena was thankful. The wilderness did not do her body, or its natural odors, any good. She had stolen a small vial of vanilla oil she found on side of the bath to rub on the back of her neck and wrists before getting dressed. It was her favorite scent to wear. The smell reminded her of fresh baked cookies and gave her a sense of being warm and comforted. The oil acted as a little piece of home for now. Prince was already waiting outside of her cabin when she woke. He was chewing on some of the elf root that had grown on the side of the lodging. He gave a small flick of his tail in greeting before continuing his meal.

She quietly grabbed her pack and loaded him up, putting a heavy blanket over his back before leading him to the stables with a soft and gentle touch on his side. Kain entertained himself by running in between the horse’s legs while he trotted along. Thank the Maker they get along. The rest of the group was getting their own mount’s ready by the stables; Rathein sporting her not-a-morning-person scowl. The rest of the party looked fresh-faced and clean for the trip to Orlais. Athena could have even sworn Varric’s chest-hair was somehow manicured and combed. Perish the thought, does he do that? It took a moment for her to gather her pack and load it onto the horse and when she did Dennet walked around the corner, giving the horse a stern look. “How did you do it, girl?”

Athena turned around, arching a brow while leaning her upper body against Prince’s side. “Excuse me?”

The horse-master continued. “He used to be the most stubborn thing I had ever met. Sure enough one trip with you to the hills and he is acting like your pup there. How did you do it?”

She smiled, patting her horse on the side before picking up Kain to put him in her bag that rested on the side of the saddle. She then threw her leg over it and lifted herself in a surprisingly graceful fashion onto his back, even though every muscle in her body screamed in protest. “I don’t know. We just click, that’s all. Is it that uncommon?”
Apparently so because the man grunted before returning to tend the other horses he had brought from his farm. They all looked to each other and with glances of agreement and took off on the trail to Val Royeaux. When they were out of earshot of the horse master, Varric steered his horse close to hers, having to use a firm guidance of the reigns to do so. “He’s right, you know. You and those animals act like you almost speak to each other. Last time I heard of something like that was Anders and his damn cat he never stopped talking about.”

She giggled to herself, remembering Ser Pounce-a-lot quite fondly from her play-throughs of the game. “We just bonded, that’s all. Prince was stubborn at first but he’s taken a liking to me. I caught him snacking on some herbs outside of my cabin this morning.” Perhaps it was why the steed had a particularly peppy spring in his trot. The crew fell back into silence and munched on their morning meals.

Rathein finally perked up from her morning time grumpy facade, rolling her gaze over to the Seeker who was looking at a map. “What should we expect in Val Royeux, Cassandra?”

The warrior paused, rolling up the map before answering. “The Chantry is looking for answers, someone to blame. We probably won’t be welcomed warmly there so be prepared.”

And wasn’t that the understatement of the century.

Upon arrival in Val Royeaux something felt off. The messenger said the Templars were there to protect the Chantry from the Inquisition. Both Cassandra and Rathein nearly snarled at the thought, Athena slowly drawing her staff from its place on her back. They walked through the city and barely had any time to gawk at its beauty. She noted the old architecture and the nearly glowingly clean streets. Culture oozed from every pore and crack in the walls. They rounded around the market to see the platform where the Chantry sister had gathered the large crowd.

“Oh shit it starts. Athena looked to the others in her party and slowly willed her magic to swarm within her body. The blow to the head looked painful and concussive in the game; it would be a shame if that were to still happen while she was here. She couldn’t outright attack the templars, so maybe a barrier?
“Together we mourn the Divine. Her naïve and beautiful heart silenced by treachery! You wonder what will become of her murderer. Well, wonder no more! Behold. The so-called Herald of Andraste! Claiming to rise where our beloved fell.”

In person, she was amazed at the white robed red-hooded woman’s confidence. Grief and desperation caused people to do crazy things, she had seen that in her job at the hospital. Lost in her thoughts, she didn’t hear Rathein’s reply to the Chantry but she assumed it was nothing short of sarcastic. Cassandra added her voice to the cry but it wouldn’t be heard. Athena curled her lips in a snarl, eyes darting to the side as the Templars began their ascent up the stairs.

In a subtle gesture she flicked her hand out and then immediately scratched the top of her head. The barrier shot like a stream and then coated the Chantry Sister with no time to spare before the Templar punched her in the head. The resounding crack against the barrier sounded worse than it actually was but the force of the blow still sent the Sister to the ground.

She could feel Solas’s curiosity peering at her but she rolled her shoulders back and cleared her throat.

“Still yourself. She is beneath us.”

*Quite literally no thanks to you, Lord Seeker.*

Athena could not hide the glare she shot at the man. The Lord Seeker was obviously an intimidating presence. His body language demanded respect and obedience. The Envy demon had done a great job at impersonating him. Even with her little training, something felt off about him. It was the same vibe that she had initially got from Desire when she spoke to her in the Fade. It was a discomfort that settled in the back of her mind, festering like a bad memory.

While Cassandra tried to reason with the man she thought she knew, Athena moved to the side of the fallen Chantry sister.

“Creating a heretical movement, raising up a puppet as Andraste’s Puppet, harboring abominations from the Fade, you should be ashamed.”

*Oh shit what?*
With a shocked gaze, she snapped her head to the Lord Seeker, well demon-thing, staring her down as well. Abomination? He could only mean her. How did he know about her? Did that mean there was a Templar spy within the Inquisition? Anger boiled and fueled the spark within her stomach as she pulled it forward and kept it skin tight. She had sheathed her staff before the market to not draw attention but this was too much.

“The only destiny that demands respect is mine.”

She couldn’t stop herself. “Bastard!” She spat out, body urging to launch forward but was stopped by Solas’s firm grip on her shoulder. He didn’t even meet her eyes but he pulled her to his side until he knew she wouldn’t attack the Lord Seeker. Her aura snapped against his, slapping against his hand and she caught sight of it leaving a red mark against his skin. She turned back towards the Chantry Sister, her face softening as she saw the pathetic woman trying to get up from the ground.

She used a soft touch to bring her to a sitting position. “Are you alright?” Somehow her voice managed to be sympathetic even with all of the raw anger boiling beneath the surface. The Sister put a hand to her head and nodded. “I feel. . . I could have been much worse off. Tell me. Do you really think she was sent by Andraste?” The fallen sister looked to Rathein who was trying to help Cassandra recover from the Lord Seeker’s off-putting appearance.

“Honestly. .. I don’t know.”

The sister smiled. “That is more comforting than you think.”

Athena patted her shoulder before returning to the group, Solas intercepting her motions by putting his body between hers and the Herald. His recently friendly stare had hardened back into one of frustration, eyes knit while he put a hand to her shoulder to keep her from moving forward. This time she did not fight it off but met his gaze with confidence. “What.”

“That was foolhardy. Do you wish to openly declare war against the templars? Here?”

She growled and pushed herself closer to him, his arm dropping from her while she nearly met him chest to chest. “Do you want an honest answer, Solas? I am not a child. I do not need supervision.”

He did not falter, staring her down. She could feel the cool presence of his aura trickling down her
skin, challenging her, provoking her. Her flame rose in response and for a moment she thought she could see physical sparks igniting between their gazes. He was stubborn but she was more so, especially knowing what she did about him and his future. In the end he sighed, stepping to the side so she could go to Rathein’s side. The Herald gave her a look of “what was that?”

Athena shook her head and then began to walk towards the side of the market, her body subconsciously stepping to the side when a rogue arrow came from the sky. Cassandra cried out: “What’s that? An arrow with a message?”

The Herald read the note, Athena already storming towards where she knew a café was because Gods she needed a drink. Rathein’s voice came out soft, and for a second scared. “You. . .you dodged that arrow like it was nothing.”

Her body froze and became instantly rigid. She spat a silent curse to the side while barely giving the Herald a glance over her shoulder. “What can I say? Gut instinct.” She turned on her heel and went towards the outdoor, stepping into a shop to satisfy her sweet tooth before sitting outside with a glass of mulled wine in her hand. She knew that Rathein still needed to meet with Fiona, the leader of the mage rebellion, in the courtyard so she had some time to herself. She sat back in the shadows of the area, her head resting against the wall while she tried to fight the tears that wanted to burst.

Being around Templars was simply terrifying. She could feel the lyrium singing at their hips in vials and the thought of their abilities shook her to her core. Every time her eyes fell on the emblem on their armor her heart felt like it was going to burst from her chest. Her body had not forgotten the sheer blinding pain of Lysette’s magic coursing through her. It acted like a ravenous monster in a city, kicking down whoever and whatever it wanted. She had shattered every defense in Athena's mind in a heartbeat and left her barren, beaten, and blinded by suffering.

She would not let Rathein even consider allying with them. Not with what they could do.
Hedonism At Its Finest

It took three glasses of wine for the Herald to find her. Eyes closed, head still leaning against the wall, Athena was meditating, pulling her aura in and flaring it out with her breaths in a poor attempt to stabilize herself. The wine didn’t help. It brought her back to realizing how physically close she was to Solas. At the time she had been focusing on winning in the silent duel of confidence but looking back... They were almost close enough for his wolf-jaw necklace to brush against her. His cheeks were flushed with frustration towards her and his gaze was tormenting, as if he were a teacher scolding a student. But it still caught her breath in her throat and caused her stomach to tighten.

She was brought from these thoughts with a sudden slap on her thigh. She gasped, head snapping up to look at her attacker. Instead Rathein sat across from her, leaning her forearms on her knees and looking at her with concern. She didn’t say anything but simply waited for Athena to talk. How did I deserve such a friend? She sat in silence though, letting out a heavy sigh while wiping her eyes with the palm of her open hand.

“These gut instincts you have... you ever going to tell me how you get them?”

The wine had dulled her sense of shock because she didn’t even freeze. A soft brown gaze looked up to the Herald. She shrugged. “I can’t just be that good? It’s...hard to explain.”

That answer was enough for the Herald because she wiped her hands together in a motion that said “okay, that’s that.” She then stood up and pulled on Athena’s shirt, getting her to rise with her. A swirl of dizziness made the ascent difficult but after swaying side to side she finally stabilized with her hand around Rathein’s shoulders, ensuring her staff was on her back and her bag with some dessert goodies was on her side. The short-haired woman giggled and nuzzled her nose into Athena’s ear, blowing hot hair like a parent would a child. How on earth did she create something so friendly and accepting in her game?

“Come on. We’re shopping and then Varric used his connections to get us some suites for the night. You ever been to a bathhouse?”

Athena shook her head. Did a hot tub in the back of a Super 8 count? It wasn’t the most glamorous thing but she was able to soak with her band mates after a sweaty excursion on the football field. She imagined the elaborate bath houses of Val Royeaux would be better. The Herald helped her sober up by taking her from shop to shop. They looked at all sorts of pendants, belts, and rings together. A sterling silver ring caught her eye. It was shaped like a rose and she could not take her eyes off of it.
She found herself asking the masked shop-keep: “How much is it?”

They took the ring out of the case and rolled it in their hands, examining it with a careful eye. “It is a ring of enhanced barriers. Basic enchantment but should serve you well, especially if you’re a novice mage.” She saw a glance towards her beginner’s staff and she fought off the blush that was threatening to color her cheeks pink. The corseted shopkeep put the ring on the counter in front of them. “5 gold.”

Athena took out her coin purse, thankfully having enough from selling some ram and fennec skins to a local tradesman in the Crossroads. She slid the ring onto her ring finger on the right hand, smiling at the natural hum of its magic. Sure enough the subtle barrier on her skin spiked in energy, coming off her in wisps instead of a static cling. Rathein beamed at her, linking arms with her before taking her in the direction of a hostel on the side. The bottom floor was a tavern but there were suites and rooms the higher up it went. It was one of the larger buildings in the city, which caused Athena to nearly fall back in awe trying to get all of it in one glance.

It didn’t compare to the skyscrapers of New York City, but this wasn’t Arlathan either. It had been the most glorious building they had seen in their travels so far so the bit of luxury was appreciated. The Herald and her shared a room. It was covered in luscious drapes of gold and royal blue, rugs accented to make the colors pop. The two beds looked like they were made from the softest feathers in the country and she nearly fell into a coma falling against it. The wine was settling in her stomach, which normally made her very sleepy or very touchy at parties.

Rathein had grabbed two of the silk robes that were left for them. She had begun stripping down without a second though. Athena sat up on one elbow for support while glancing at the woman with a curious eye. The Herald was curvy but strong, much like Cassandra. She suspected she would be a Knight Enchanter at some point because she simply had the build of a warrior. She already said she had a Templar lover in the past, perhaps they had trained together? “Come on now, you’re making me bashful.”

Athena shook her head then laughed, standing up to follow suit and get into a robe. It was soft against her skin, a nice contrast to all of the thicker and firmer materials they had been wearing. Leather armor was great for battles but it did nothing for comfort. “Okay, where are these baths? I think I need to wash today off.”

The Herald nodded in agreement leading her down a hall and a staircase until they came to a large room that had rune-heated pools. Where apparently Solas, Varric, and Cassandra were already lounging. Varric looked like he lived for this kind of relaxation, his arms supporting him on the edge of the bath with a hot cloth over his eyes. There was a screened area for people to disrobe before entering the dark waters for privacy. In a childish motion Athena kicked some water at her friend, who playfully scowled back. She used magic to power her response, the water knocking the now nude Athena into the water.
“Hey keep it down over there.” Varric shouted, flinging the rag from his face with a mock-angry look. His sarcastic smirk brought a giggle from Athena while she waded over to where he was, the water level rising above her chest and just below her shoulders. “You feeling better from earlier, Walker? Where did you head off to?”

She dunked down under the surface until her hair was saturated by perfume and oil tinted water. When she came up she haphazardly tied her hair up on top of her head with a piece of string. “I just needed to cool off. That whole thing with the Lord Seeker got under my skin. How are you feeling, Cassandra? You said you knew him well?”

The Seeker was on the side with her arms crossed, eyes closed in a moment of peace. She responded without opening her gaze but there was a somber tone in her voice as she spoke. “Yes, I’m still trying to think what could have happened to him. I sent a messenger to Therinfal Rebout so hopefully we will have some kind of answer when we return to Haven. I am . . . troubled by what we saw today.” She then opened one eye in some kind of amusement. “Did I see you try and go after the Lord Seeker today?”

Varric then was fully involved in the conversation, an echoing laugh ringing through the bathhouse. “I thought Athena was going to try and clobber him right there. Boom. War started. You certainly just made this chapter in my book interesting, Walker.”

Solas arched a brow without looking from his own book, casually turning a page like nothing interesting was happening in the conversation. “Did you cast a barrier on the sister before she was struck? The attack came as a surprise to us all. . .how did you know and react with such speed?”

Athena fought the heat that rose to her face and instead waded to the side to grab some of the oils and rub her arms with them as a distraction. The scents and heat of the water was wonderful but it was so difficult to stay in a constant state of lying all of the time. Still. . . if she told them and somehow altered the future she would be helpless. Doing this, helping out where she could, it would take the burden off of all of them. It was what she hoped anyways. It looked like they were all waiting for an answer so she shot them a surprised glance. “You really didn’t feel the anger coming off that guy? He might as well have pounded on his chest like a giant ape and roared.”

This drew a chuckle from everyone but Solas. Of course. *I thought we were just starting to get along.* She lamented to herself, giving Rathein a playful sideways glance. The Herald had gone over to Varric and was discussing Tales of the Champion, prying into some of her favorite chapters like the Wyvern Caves and “Daisy”.

A soft hiss from the side drew her attention, Cassandra groaning while rubbing the back of her
neck and shoulder. “Seeker, are you alright?”

She huffed, shaking her head. “My armor pinched and now I can’t get this cramp out. I don’t want my shield arm to get stiff.” Athena walked over towards her and made a “may I?” gesture with her hands. Cassandra gave her a leery gaze, looking from her hands to her eyes in a few motions. After a few seconds of deliberation, she gave her a defeated nod. Athena leaned over to the side of the bath, grabbing some oils in her hand that smelled of mint before walking back to Cassandra’s side.

“Try and take deep breaths, Seeker, and relax.”

She almost made a disgusted noise. “I am relaxed!”

Varric cut her off with a small splash of water. “Seeker, if I had a lump of coal... oh never mind.”

The Seeker scowled at him but was surprised when Athena moved behind her and started kneading her fingers into her back and neck. At one point during college she had volunteered for a group whose sole purpose was to provide backrubs for the stressed. They were trained by a professional message therapist and checked off in their skills so they would be giving the ultimate 5 minute massage. She started at the short-haired woman’s neck, moving her thumbs in long, hard strokes up towards the ridge at the base of the skull. When her fingers put pressure there, she felt Cassandra relax in front of her, her head dipping forward slightly.

“You hold your stress here. I would recommend some stretches and breathing exercises at night.”

There was no response so she moved her hands to the shoulders, pushing her foot against the bottom of the bath to gain leverage while she pushed the palm of her hand into the affected shoulder. She used the motion to stretch the muscle out and then repeated it until it felt softer underneath her hand. To keep things balanced she did it to the other side. At this point the Seeker was taking deep long breaths and when Athena stepped away she rose and rolled her neck around. “Thank you, Athena.” The Nevarran turned and smiled, her eyes tired but the sincerity was there.

She gave a head nod in response, washing the oil off of her hands in the water. Bells began to ring outside and they all perked their heads up. Rathein cursed under her breath before looking to Athena with a wicked gaze. “I guess we should get ready for the party we have been invited to, oh Madam Fade-Walker.”

Athena paled, hands balling up in fists at her side. “You made no mention of this earlier, Rathein.”
The Herald laughed, walking over and retrieving her robe before exiting the pool. “We have been formally invited to the party hosted by a certain Madame de Fer. I would get ready if I were you. You wouldn’t want to be late and make a poor example of the Inquisition.”
Madame de Fer

Rathein had chosen to wear her formal attire jacket, pants, and knee-high boots. Her hair had been freshly styled and there was a layer of black eyeliner to bring out the blue in her eyes. For Athena, they had decided to do her up. She wore a corset made from wyvern bone and it was so tight she thought she would pass out. The rest of the gown was a mixture of silvers and blues, the theme of the party it seemed and of Madame de Fer. She refused to wear a mask but instead allowed her hair to fall in front of her shoulder in small waves. With the limited makeup provided she added a dab of gold dust to her eyelids and smeared a natural blush to her lips. When she was finished, she almost dropped the brush in her hand. It was the most... normal she had looked in almost two. Between their travels to the Hinterlands to Haven and finally to Val Royeaux, all she had relied on was a flowing stream to keep clean.

Now with her hair washed and brushed and her makeup done even slightly, she glowed. Rathein clapped her hands on her shoulders and approached her from behind, her reflection showing up in the mirror’s vanity. Both of them were grinning from ear-to-ear even though they were dreading going to the party itself. A knock on the door signaled that their carriage arrived and both of the girls rushed off, their laughs echoing through the halls as they did so.

The mansion was simply perfection. They arrived and were announced as they walked in, the sudden formality of their names taking her by surprise.

“Now arriving Lady Trevelyan of Ostwick, representing the Inquisition, and Lady Athena.”

Athena did her best curtsy while Rathein bowed, the Herald taking her arm and leading her up the stairs. They were instantly handed a glass of bubbling liquor, the smell reminding her of peaches and apples. She hesitantly took a sip and hummed in delight when the drink hit her tongue. It was sweet wine! Thank the Maker. She had learned to tolerate the ale and mulled wine but this drink actually had taste! The pair walked with linked arms up to the curious couple standing at the bottom of the stairs.

“What a pleasure to meet you, my ladies. Seeing the same faces at every event becomes so tiresome. So you must be a guest of Madame de Fer. Or are you here for Duke Bastien?”

The woman beside him, whose curiosity could not be kept quiet, stepped forth and adjusted the brim of her large purple hat adorned with flowers. “Or are you here on business? I have heard the most curious tales of you both. I cannot imagine half of them are true?”

Rathein arched a brow, releasing Athena’s arm to cross her own over her chest. It was already
obvious she did not appreciate the Orlesian parties and the Great Game. All Athena remembered was that asking questions was normally the right thing to do and stirring intrigue while being evasive of the answers was considered smart. She placed a gentle hand on the Herald’s elbow, leaning in close to the couple to speak softly. “Everything you heard? All true and then some. Oh the stories we could tell. . . .”

The couple absolutely reeled, the female standing up straighter. “Better and better!.” Athena would of sworn that she was smiling except for the obnoxiously high-necked shirt, mask, and hat. Orlais cheated by having so many accessories to hide their true intentions. No wonder there was a civil war. The whole country was fueled by lies and deception. But alas, when in Rome.

From the side a voice rang out and it caused the hairs on the back of her neck to stand in annoyance. Rathein dropped her arms to her side, sliding more of her weight onto one hip so she could give him a true look of displeasure. The man continued, alcohol ruining his breath while he managed to make it down the stairs. “The Inquisition. What a load of pig shit. Washed up sisters and crazed Seekers. Nobody can take them seriously. Everyone knows it’s just an excuse for political outcasts to grab power.”

She knew of a good response but the Herald, who almost matched her in spontaneous hot-headedness, snapped forward and flicked her hand in a gesture towards the sky, and beyond that, the Breach. “We are working to restore peace and order to Thedas.”

The man did not falter, walking until he was on the opposite side of the Herald. “Here comes the outsider, restoring peace with an army. We know what your Inquisition truly is.” He stepped close enough for Rathein to curl her lips in a snarl, hands clenched into fists by her side while she stared him down. He then peered over her, his words low and challenging. “Why don’t we go outside right now so you can answer for the charges.”

Something about his threat made her skin crawl. She knew what was coming so she stepped forward to put her hand on Rathein’s shoulder, giving her a soft smile. He’s an idiot.

He was now a well frosted idiot, thanks to the appearance of Vivienne.

The First Enchantress silenced the room with a snap of her fingers, frost covering the man instantly from head to toe. He was frozen with his hand reaching behind his back, presumably to grab whatever pathetic blade he had hidden there.

“My dear Marquis. How unkind of you to use such language in my house. . . to my guests.”
Her voice cut through the air like an icy spell. It even sent chills down Athena’s spine but she was trying not to hide the grin that wanted to come to her face.

“You know such rudeness is . . . intolerable.”

The Marquis tried to stumble out some sort of apology but the First Enchantress was already shaking her head, unimpressed with the display. “Whatever am I going to do with you, my dear?” She then turned to the Herald, much to Rathein’s surprise. “My lady you’re the wounded party in this unfortunate affair. What would you have me do with this foolish man?” Athena could feel the anger bristling on Rathein’s skin, her icy blue gaze piercing the man as he stood trapped by the spell. The Herald took a sharp inhale before she came up from the side and did a polite curtsy in Vivienne’s direction.

“Madame Vivienne. We would not dare pass judgment on a man who has insulted your house, your guests. Please, do with him as you wish.” Her eyes stayed on the floor until she spoke the last words, rising up to meet Vivienne’s gaze. It was sharp and judgmental, her own eyes looking Athena up and down before she gave a small nod of acknowledgement.

“Poor Marquis, issuing challenges like a Ferelden dog lord.”

Athena pulled Rathein back to her side, the Herald mouthing “thank you” to her while her cheeks flushed in embarrassment at her poor temper. She shook her head in response, jerking her chin towards the execution that was about to be verbally carried out by Madame de Fer.

“And all dressed up in your Aunt Solange’s doublet. Didn’t she give you that to wear to the grant tourney? To think, all of the brave chevaliers who will be competing left for Markham this morning. . .and you’re still here.”

_Drag him, Vivienne._

She watched on with almost a predator-like glee, a wolfish gaze peering at the man who hung his head in shame. When he did, a spark of guilt fired in her stomach and she frowned, cursing herself for having a bleeding heart. Vivienne took Rathein off to the side to speak to her of joining the Inquisition. Athena downed the rest of her wine to gain some liquid courage before picking her dress off of the ground and walking to the door with an attempted graceful speed. “Marquis!”
He was about to leave, his head still hanging low but his fist was clenched at his side. He didn’t speak, silenced by his shame, but didn’t move as an open invitation for her to speak.

“Pardon my intrusion. I know it may sound like a jesting offer but I am absolutely serious.” Her voice was breathy as panic clenched around her throat but she continued, trying to take in as deep of a breath as she could within the prisons of her corset. “If you do wish to do something to change your fate and reputation in Orlais, why not join the Inquisition?”

He scoffed under his mask, turning towards the door to greet the moonlight. She continued, placing a hand on his shoulder and turning him to look back at her. It was bold and probably uncalled for but he didn’t fight the action. “If you are so good with a blade, prove it. We could always use a good swordsman within the Inquisition and it would be a great show of faith in your attempt at a redemption. Please, just think on it.”

He paused, shoving her hand off of his shoulder before throwing the door open with his body. Just before the door slammed in her face she heard a whisper come through the door. *I will think on your offer, Lady Athena.*

Athena let out a shaky sigh while putting a hand to her stomach, breath ragged while she smiled at somewhat of a victory. If he actually showed up, she would need to buy him a drink at the bar. . . even if he was a disgusting man. It would take a great deal of bravery to show up at the Inquisition. He would certainly look like a Ferelden dog lord with his tail between his legs, but even old dogs could learn new tricks. She turned back to the party, an elven attendant showing up with another glass of wine. She took the glass but then frowned, giving a sincere thank you to the helper. They seemed to be startled, running off with the tray to the next guest who acted as if the tray was floating on its own accord.

She bounced back and forth between nobles while Rathein and Vivienne spoke. She had heard of different sides of the civil war and how people felt things were coming to a peak. The tension in their words was so thick it could be cut with a blade. The people of Orlais knew something was going to happen and Athena knew in the back of her mind Halamshiral was not that far off.

On her fourth flute of wine Rathein came down the stairs and tapped her shoulder, signaling for them to leave. Athena turned around and smiled at her friend, taking her arm again and walking to the carriage. On the ride back, The Herald told her of how the First Enchantress was joining the Inquisition. She giggled, alcohol flushing her cheeks while she leaned against the window of the carriage. “She does know our lodgings won’t . . . quite compare to hers, right?”

Rathein nodded while looking out the window at Val Royeux. Somehow the city still seemed to light up in contrast to the sky. They both took a moment to relax, taking in the city one last time before they would have to leave for Haven in the morning. Athena sighed, allowing her head to
unceremoniously thunk against the side of the window. “Are you ready, Rathein?”

The Herald stirred from her gazing, eyebrows furrowed in concern. “That sounds ominous. Ready for what?”

She paused for a beat, a hand running up the length of her back looking for a release for the damn corset. “It sounds like you’re going to need to pick between the mages or the templars. The mages are in rebellion and the Templars literally just punched the Chantry. That’s going to be tough.”

Rathein was silent, her eyes examining the mark on her hand. It glowed green in the darkness as they pulled up to the bathhouse. For a moment, she looked concerned, but then her face cracked into a smile, her gaze looking up to meet Athena’s. “That’s why I have you to help, right?”

Well. Shit.
“Oh wait - what about this Red Jenny note we found yesterday?”

Rathein was looking at the red-colored objects in her hand over breakfast the next morning. Cassandra, already dressed in her Seeker armor with the large eye on the polished chest piece, nodded and took the note from the Herald’s hand. “Yes, it seems like they give us the location of a meeting place. Should we go? We need to return to Haven as quick as we can.”

Athena, who was nursing quite a hangover from the sweet wine the night before, swallowed the piece of fruit in her mouth and nodded to both of the women. “It wouldn’t hurt. Who knows, it could be another ally like Lady Vivienne. At this point we’re too young of an organization to turn away people, right?” The table seemed to be silent in thought but then slowly showed their agreement. Cassandra’s accented voice came in between bites of whatever light meal she had. It seemed like she always ate the least and that was saying something considering Solas ate like an elven bird with his fruits and breads. “We also don’t want to appear desperate. That would attract unwanted negative attention from potential allies.”

It was Athena who nodded this time, finishing off the cucumber-water that the bathhouse had provided. It left a crisp cool taste on her tongue as she pushed back from the table and stood. Varric looked up from his porridge and letters, a curious expression on his face. “Where do you think you’re going? Off day-drinking again?”

A blush came quickly to her cheeks while she tucked a loose piece of hair behind her ear. “I had a rough day, yeah? I missed a chance to go to a book shop yesterday and wanted to see if they had anything that could help me in my teachings.”

Solas and Rathein both looked up from their meals. The Herald, always the energetic one, spoke first. “Well we should really help you. Do you even know what you’re looking for?”

She sheepishly shook her head, rubbing one hand up the other arm in a gesture of anxiety. The two mages caught that and stood from their seats, Solas wiping his mouth with a napkin before turning towards his room. “I’ll meet you at the front of the building in a few moments then?” Athena hummed and waved in reply as he left, a small blush coming up to her cheeks as he did. He was so hot and cold to her it was nauseating. In the game he said things were always easier in the Fade. Perhaps that’s why he was so nice to her there while cold and calculated outside of it.

She was torn from her thoughts by a smack on the back from Rathein. “Come on, now. Let’s go grab your coin purse and get going!” The two girls stopped by their suite and met the elf at the
front of the building. She quickly sidestepped from them and ran to Prince’s side, giving him head butt while stroking the side of his face. He stirred from a nap, opening one eye at her. He gave a satisfied head butt in response before returning to his snooze. Kain had decided to come with her from the suite. It was obvious he was anxious to get outside. His tail was a nonstop almost propeller behind him. He weaved in between her feet as she walked, teeth occasionally nipping at the bottom of her boots.

When she returned to the pair they both looked down at her pup with nervous glances. Solas spoke, his voice calm, steady, but obviously lined with trepidation. “Do you think he will behave in the market?”

Kain acted like he heard him, standing in a confident position and growling at the elf. This brought a cheerful laugh from Athena who picked up the pup and nuzzled his nose with hers. “I think he’ll be fine. I’ll take responsibility for him, I swear.”

He actually stayed within her shadow, almost acting like a guard. He sniffed every person who walked by and came closer to her legs when there was someone with a noticeably dark aura. The creature had great insight and was somehow inherently linked with Athena as they walked into the book store. The air was full of dust and the smell of old books. The leather bindings on the books were wrinkled from use and there was a serene feeling in the air which brought a pleasant hum from her lips. It reminded her of an old library.

Upon entering the store, she stopped and took in a deep breath, wanting to spin around in glee but keeping it to herself. Rathein pinched her arm, gesturing with her head to follow Solas through the store. He seemed to know what he was looking for, a hand sliding over the tops of a few books before going “ah” and picking one up. The book was titled “Mythology of the Shapeshifter” and the author was unnamed. The book appeared older than the rest and untouched for some reason. It had an earthy smell to it and the cover was a forest green, dyed and crafted from some animal pelt. The pages were hand written in a cursive writing, like they were almost a journal. While she was slowly browsing through the pages he dropped another one on top of it, obviously not looking paying attention but focused on his own list.

“Hey!” She nearly dropped the second book which was “Glyphs and Runes: Volume 1” by a Magister Quilius. Rathein took the books from her hand and gave her a small shrug with a “what can you do” look on her face. She was more drawn to the section she knew Cassandra would like. It was filled with tales of romance, the colors of red and maroon popping up on the shelves. Athena tapped Solas on the shoulder to let him know she was following the Herald before stopping in front of the first chapter of “Swords and Shields” ...written by Varric Tethras himself.

“No way.” She took the book off the shelf and flicked through some of the pages. Instantly a blush came to her cheeks at some of the chapters, eyes still glued to the parchment as Rathein came to her side. “Oh!” There was no hesitation when she stole the book from her hands, her own blue eyes
attached to the words as she began reading the first lines of the first chapter.

Solas approached them from behind with a few books of his own in his hand. He quickly glanced at the cover then made a tisking sound with his tongue, turning to go towards the shop keep to pay for his goods. Athena called out for him in a jesting manner, “Oh come now, Solas, not everyone can be so lucky to get their entertainment from the fade.” She gave him a playful wink which only made him shake his head and give the shop keep coin before leaving.

Athena whispered under her breath to the Herald, “Don’t waste your money, I’m sure Varric has a copy we can read. Or someone else might read it too that we know, who knows?” She knew that Cassandra had read every chapter and probably had the books hidden in a chest somewhere in her lodgings back at Haven. They both checked out with the shop keep before meeting up with Solas outside. He looked down and gave them a nod, his eyes suddenly glued on her hand.

“Yes? Do I have something on my hand?” She lifted it up and saw he was looking at the barrier ring she bought yesterday. The silver caught the light and nearly glowed, it bringing a warm sensation to her hand. He reached out with his own hand, a smile teasing the corner of his eyes. “May I?”

She nodded, her breath and words stuck in her throat while her heartbeat pounded in her head. He took her hand gingerly examining the ring with a careful eye. “Barrier ring?” In response to his question she flared her barrier, the now enforced flames dancing along her skin in unison with her breaths. He looked up at her and nodded before dropping her hand. “Wise choice for a novice mage. Let us return to our lodgings and prepare to meet this mysterious ‘Red Jenny’.”

They all returned and while they were walking Rathein gave her an elbow in the shoulder. When Athena looked over the Herald was wiggling her eyebrows and motioning towards Solas, whose back was facing them. She instantly made a face that neared disgust, shaking her head in response while waving a hand between them. The short-haired mage arched a brow as if to press further but then scoffed and looked down while shaking her head. This drew a look over the shoulder from Solas, which only caused them to give each other awkward glances while looking at something really interesting on the ground to avoid his gaze.

By nightfall they arrived at the location marked on the papers and Athena was already on guard, her staff drawn in front of it with mana charged in it. Her eyes were looking for the archer that would appear up top so none of her party members would be surprised from the attacks.
Already ready to battle her gaze found the archer and she snapped her staff in front of her, launching a small burst of fire towards the archer. He was knocked a step back but still had his arrow drawn, looking for the prime target as the party spread out. Her barrage of small attacks continued, her staff and body taking in the rhythm that the other mages possessed. *Snap, snap, snap, stab into the ground.* It took one round of attacks for the archer to fall, her eyes moving to the next target.

Cassandra gave her a small gesture of thanks while taking down the mercenary in front of them. They made quick work of the group and as they walked through the gate Athena cast a barrier upon them all. It was just in time for the noble on the other side to attempt to launch fire at them. While the noble gloated his ego and tried to make himself seem bigger than he was she looked around the area, keeping an eye out for Sera. Sure enough the dirty-blonde short haired archer came from the side, her voice breaking through the grandstanding. She had her bow up and an arrow drawn back to her cheek, the string taught and ready to fire.

“Just say: What?”

The noble turned, repeating the exact word that would bring his life to an end. Sera chuckled madly, walking over to the body to pull the arrow from it. Athena giggled to herself, receiving a disapproving gaze from Solas. As the group approached the new elven archer, Athena looked to her and smile: “You did warn him. We all heard it.”

Sera gave a crooked grin in return, “Yeah, right? Well good to see you followed the notes.” Her gaze flicked to Rathein and down to her left hand where the green mark of the Rift glowed. “You glow, yeah? You’re the Herald thingy?”

Rathein gave an uneasy step back while ungloving her hand to show her. “Yeaaaah why?”

The red-clothed archer smiled while pointing to some boxes to their left. “Name’s Sera. This is cover, get around it. For the reinforcements. Don’t worry, someone tipped me on their equipment shed.”

The soldiers broke in from the other side of the courtyard and Athena couldn’t help herself from laughing as they did. As intimidating as they were on the top half, they were pants-less on the bottom. Their pale thighs nearly glowed in the moonlight as they ran towards them swords drawn. She reinforced her barrier and kept her staff parallel to the ground, her eyes seeking out the best target. There! A man ran towards her with a one handed sword and shield.
Using one of the glyphs she had seen in her newly purchased book, she drew the symbol quickly and sloppily upon the floor then flicked it a few feet in front of him. He ran over it with a war cry but then was instantly covered in flame. It burst like throwing flour on top of a small fire. His body fell to the ground without any further fight.

“No breeches!” Sera yelled from atop the crate she was standing on, firing her arrows and finding their true mark effortlessly.

It didn’t take long for them to finish off their pants-less enemies. Athena started to actually feel bad for them. *What a way to go out.* Sera then approached them while sheathing her bow and quiver on her back. “So, Herald of Andraste. You’re a strange one. I’d like to join.”

Rathein almost scoffed but rubbed her chin in consideration. Almost like it was habit she looked to the rest of her party members before focusing on Athena. Athena looked to Sera with a giddy smile, knowing how foolish and lighthearted the rogue was, before nodding. “Wouldn’t hurt to have more people out there.”

Sera tilted her head to the side before asking, “Wait, who are you?”

Athena took a step forward and extended a hand to shake. “Athena, friend of the Herald’s. I don’t glow so don’t worry. I’m just people people.” The familiar phrase seemed to ease Sera’s mind as she shook her hand in return. The group seemed tense but accepting of the new Inquisition and handshakes going around. There was an odd stillness between Solas and Sera as they were introduced, Sera taking a look at his ears and making a disgusted noise. He rolled his eyes before turning back and leading the group from the manor.

Sera and Athena fell into step with one another, the elven archer leaning over and whispering not so softly to her: “He’s *soooo* elfy. How do ya’ stand it?”

She smirked, sheathing her staff on the back of her armor before shrugging. “Ah he’s not so bad. It’s this one you gotta worry about.” She jested, pointing an accusatory thumb towards the Herald who laughed and pushed the pair over. They were an odd bunch heading back to their lodgings but somehow the Inquisition began to feel more complete and almost like home.
They had given the directions to Haven to Sera and Vivienne and let them get there on their own time. The main party took off in the morning, reluctantly leaving the rooms and nights of luxury behind. Athena felt good in her clean clothes with her new books in her pack. Kain was finding a way to balance himself on Prince’s back but eventually pawed at her to let him sleep back in the basket that she had fashioned for him. It sat behind her on the saddle and was stabilized with ropes. He was able to curl up perfectly in there to tolerate the travels. When they arrived back at Haven, it was apparent that Lelianna knew of their hold up with the Lord Seeker. The red-haired Spymaster gave Athena a knowing stare, which caused her to blush and focus on the marvelous horse underneath her to save herself from further embarrassment. While Rathein went to speak to Lelianna and Cassandra in the war room, Athena took the chance to revisit her cabin and unpack.

Prince waited outside of her cabin while she unloaded everything, the steed peeking his head inside every once in a while, only to be shooed out. She placed the books on her nightstand and moved the chair at the end of her bed closer to the door. Kain was growing at what seemed like an accelerated rate since he didn’t need the chair to jump on the bed, or time was going by faster than she realized. Athena paused, her gaze freezing on her staff as she went to lean it against the wall. Shit. How long had she been here already? A month? Two? The time had flown by so she really hadn’t had time to think about what had happened. Was this all a terrible dream and she was just stuck in her body? If more than a few weeks had gone by... she had made very clear wishes with her family on what she wanted to happen in that scenario.

She swallowed the rock of nerves in her throat, tears suddenly stinging her eyes. Regardless of the situation, she was here now and it was time for her to start being useful. They were going to discuss the mages and the Templars today and that meant Haven would be attacked in the near future. She had been thinking of small things to do to help that would save more lives without changing their future entirely.

With Kain at her side, she walked down to the training area where Cullen was looking after the soldiers. With a stiff posture she came to his side, bowing her head in respect. “Commander! A word?”

He looked up from a clipboard a messenger had handed him, giving her a small nod. His face broke from the Commander to a softer, almost sympathetic tone. He stepped closer and spoke under his breath. “Are you alright?”

Oh yeah, the crying. She rolled her eyes playfully and nodded, wiping her eyes with the palm of her hand. “We were away from these plants for so long in Val Royeaux. I’m readjusting. I meant to come speak with you, can you follow me for a moment?” He backed up from her, face returning to the hardened leader of the soldiers with a curt nod. She led them away from the training area and up towards where one of the trebuchets were located. In her head, she knew it was where the
Herald would confront Corypheus. It was also where she would fall down a mine shaft and be injured.

It was just one of the unnecessary things that could be avoided.

The pair walked to the area with Cullen looking around with his arms crossed over his chest. “What did you need to show me?”

Athena looked over her shoulder and chided him, trying to get some sort of reaction out of him. “Ever the impatient one, Commander. Look over here. Kain sniffed it out before we left for Val Royeaux.” She walked to the side and stomped her foot on top of the fallen mine doors, the broken and splintered wood falling to the depths below. Kain stayed faithfully between her legs but sniffed the old cave air that came up through. “I think we have a mine right under us. It might benefit us to try and mine the ore out of here if we can. Threnn said something about needing more swords for the recruits.”

Cullen arched a single brow without changing his expression, walking over directly to her side while looking down. The red and black fur that came around his neck brushed against her shoulder and she could tell that he had been drinking tea not so long ago from the smell of his breath. Athena looked down at Kain with a curious look but the pup was already busy smelling his boots. The Commander gave a curious hum while rubbing the back of his neck.

“This would take probably a week to clear out and I don’t know if we have the men for it. We’ve been running drills day and night and we’re getting new recruits every day.”

It felt like he was about to continue on until she stopped him so she put a hand on his pauldron while smiling, stepping away from the mine shaft to reduce the threat of them falling in. “Commander, if they can wield a pickaxe with the same skill as you have taught them to do with a sword I think they will be fine. Plus I think we’re needing to head back to the Hinterlands so you will have some time.”

At the compliment he cleared his throat and looked towards the mine, failing to hide the blush that was creeping up his neck. “I – ah - thank you. Perhaps I could spare a few men. I’ll get started on it later today.” She turned with her wolven companion to walk away when he turned and caught her by the sleeve of her jacket.

Athena paused, looking at his hand then to him slowly. He instantly dropped his hand and gaze to the snow, a shy smile coming to his lips. “Uh, thank you again Lady Athena. This will be a great asset. I take it you’re adjusting now? You seem . . . more at ease.”
She fully turned to him with a dark smirk at the corner of her lips, a slight bitterness edging her voice. “Had a bit of a rough start as you know but things are looking up. I have a dog now!”

Cullen initially seemed excited by the idea of a dog but when his eyes fell to Kain his lips twitched into a frown. “That’s not a dog, that’s a beast.”

Athena smiled, waving him off while walking back to Haven. Surely Rathein would be done speaking to Cassandra and Lelianna by now and they could continue on planning their next step. “That’s your opinion, Commander. Enjoy your day.”

As she approached the Chantry she saw a familiar looking man standing outside the building with short brown hair and a tall posture. He leaned against the front of the Chantry, trying to catch people’s attention as they left but they simply waved him off like he was a beggar. He kicked the Chantry wall in frustration before Athena walked up behind him with a genuine smile. “Can I help you?”

Rathein came out from the Chantry at the same time so the man started. “Been waiting but am having a hard time getting anyone to talk to me. I’ve got a message?”

Athena quickly grabbed the Herald ungracefully by the arm, elbowing her in the chest while motioning for her to pay attention to the man in front of them, who Athena knew was Krem...which meant they were one step closer to recruiting the Iron Bull. A mixture of fear and excitement settled into her gut. He was Ben Hasserath, a spy, and could pick up on the smallest cues. If she thought Solas and Cassandra had been wary of her, he would be a whole ‘nother level because he could pretend that he liked you and make you feel good about it while also plotting your demise. While she was caught in her thoughts Rathein elbowed her back and asked: “Well?”

She then realized both Cremisius Aclassi, aka Krem, and the Herald were looking at her waiting for input. “Oh- oh! Sorry, we just came off a long travel. Of course we’ll come and check you out. I think we need the day to relax but we’ll probably hit the road by sunrise. Right, Rathein?”

She looked back to her friend whose gaze was lingering on the male soldier in front of them. A blush decorated her cheeks while she stuttered. “Y-yeah. We’ll come see you.”

He nodded to them both and took off, it leaving them both in a state of shock for a second. Of
course Rathein was the first to speak up. “Well. He’s cute.”

Athena rolled her shoulders back and tried to assume an official posture. “Is that a requirement of the Inquisition now?”

The short-haired woman laughed and shook her head. “No, ’spose not. Leliana said something about there potentially being a Warden in the Hinterlands. We can stop through there on the way back.”

She groaned, visibly slumping over in an over-dramatic fashion. “We just got baaaaack.”

Rathein slapped her on the back with a soft smile. “Come on. Let’s go grab a meal with everyone. Sera’s at the tavern but Vivienne is keeping to herself in the Chantry for the evening. I’m sure a hot meal would do you good.”

Athena shook her head while pointing in the direction of her cabin. “I actually had something to work on believe it or not. I’ll meet you in the morning. Try and get some rest tonight, okay?”

The Herald looked hesitant but nodded, giving her a quick embrace before heading back into the Chantry. Athena walked through the village and noticed that the amount of angry and confused looks she got was on the decline. Now she got the occasional nod or even a “hello” from some of the newer members. It was nice to feel like part of the community, even if it was only somewhat.

Once she got back to her cabin she grabbed her book on shapeshifting and took to the thicker parts of the woods away from the village. There had been a section on commanding the attention of animals that caught her eye. It was one of the first things she thought she would be able to do that Wisdom had shown her in the Fade. It was simply using your magic and will to call on animal allies in battle but it took practice. It also suggested being “close to nature” which meant she would need to wait for the cover of night fall.

The sun was setting and already the sounds of the night were weaving through the trees. Far off howls rang true and it caused Kain to look up from his position and whine back. Athena, who was covering herself with a large bear skin while shivering in the snow, walked with her staff into what seemed to be a good part of the forest away from most of the members of the Inquisition. Underneath the bear skin, she only wore her sports bra and then her underwear and boots. One with nature. . . I’m going to get frost bite out here! Better make this quick.
She opened up the book and set it on the ground, laying down the bear skin for her to stand on. Darkness now consumed the forest, it creeping into every corner and stealing light from the world.

*Step one: Push your will into nature.*

Athena stood with her feet shoulder width apart with her staff firmly held straight up and down in front of her chest. The hooked blade caught the moonlight and provided an eerie illumination to the whole ordeal. Kain suddenly grew quiet, his eyes trained on the forest and whatever noise came with it. She centered herself, focusing on her breathing and what she wanted to try and do. The thought, no command, rang in her mind until it was ready to burst from her lips.

At that moment, she plunged her staff into the ground and sent the command with her aura into the surrounding environment. *Come.* The sound boomed like a drum, the word echoing through the trees and through the forest. Kain already was at her side but something about him snapped to, his eyes glazing over with knowing while he looked to her. He then leaned his head back and howled, the high pitched young sound mixing in with the sound of the spell as it spread through the forest like fog.

For a few moments, nothing happened. Athena crouched and kept her staff low to the ground, eyes looking out for any dangers. There was nothing, silence.

The air stilled around them and the trees began to creak, their trunks and branches dancing in the howling winds.

Both Athena and Kain’s breaths hung in the air, their breathing in unison as they were crouched side by side waiting for something, *anything.*

And then it happened.

At first it was just a fox, sniffing the ground and coming towards them with the same glazed look Kain had given her. It wasn’t hypnotized or bewitched, no, there was just a sense of understanding between them all. Her companion, being the puppy he was, instantly ran to inspect the fox, sniffing every inch of its small body before returning to Athena’s side.

The fox sat content, its ears twitching as it turned around to see what followed next. It drew the breath from Athena’s throat, her eyes wide with wonder as half a dozen wolves came into view. They did not attack the fox like they would in nature, they simply awaited another command, eyes
glued to Athena out of respect and curiosity.

While she waited for something to say, the largest wolf stood tall in its posture, assessing the mage in front of him before exhaling a deep breath through his nose. A thought entered her mind, and its voice was not her own. The thought warmed her, tears coming to her eyes as she reached towards her new allies with open hands.

*Friend.*
Meet Iron Bull

Before they left the next day, Athena bent down and brought Kain up in a tight embrace, tears running down her face. “We’re going to be gone for a long time this time. I want you to be safe. You have a pack here now; they will take care of you until I’m back, okay?”

In understanding the pup began to lick every inch of her face, soft whines interrupting his shows of affection. He managed to lick the tears that were falling down her cheeks off, a soft laugh coming from her as she set the pup down and motioned him towards the large grey alpha that waited on the edges of the forest. The six wolves from the day before were waiting in the shadows, their postures and eyes filled with pride. The group had bonded all through the night. Athena had joined them in a hunt and almost fell asleep resting on one of their sides. It was probably the reason she had pieces of grass and elfroot within her hair.

As Kain ran to the pack, she called out to them: “Stay to the woods! Don’t go near Haven; they’re not like me.”

The alpha yelped a sharp bark towards her, nipping Kain on the back of the neck before disappearing into the forest. To keep from breaking down and sobbing, she grabbed her staff and quickly mounted Prince, making sure to keep Kain’s basket outside of the cabin in case he needed to smell something familiar. The pair entered Haven and caught up with the Herald who laughed at her appearance, trying to pick some of the grass from her hair while on her own horse. “Goodness, Athena, did you sleep in the woods last night?”

She laughed, pushing her friend away while stabilizing herself on Prince’s back with her thighs. “Actually, kind of. You would never believe what happened—”

A sharp voice interrupted them, “Ugh! Don’t you look all elfy with the grass in your hair lookin’ like you slept in the trees.”

The two looked back to Sera who was coming up on her own smaller horse, a curious look on her face while she looked Athena up and down. Solas came up behind her with an annoyed look on his features and posture. The two elves must have been getting better acquainted. Athena nearly snorted at the look of them, responding back with a playful jest. “I don’t think I’m that elfy. I got more hair than the two of you combined so something must not be right.”

Sera threw the rest of the bread she was eating at the back of her head while she galloped off behind the Seeker, who was already leading the party out on the long trail towards the Storm Coast.
And boy was *that* terrain not welcoming.

The biting winds and rain affected all of them. Before as they were riding through the plains and mountains they had somewhat cheery demeanors and were continuing to get to know each other. Once they neared the seas and the violent storms appeared to never end, they all became short-tempered people. Sera cursed the heavens every chance she could and Cassandra seemed to withdraw into herself with every hoof step.

“Shit, how much longer?!?” Sera screeched, her hands throwing up in the air while she let out an unattractive groan of frustration. Cassandra looked over her shoulder with a scowl, pointing up towards the coastline.

“I think our camp is up there!” The Seeker shouted back, her words being devoured by the storm and roaring waves off to the side.

Athena whispered soothing words to Prince while they rode, her hands stroking his mane while he bravely kept on without faltering. Thankfully the rest of the trip was short and they were soon receiving report from Scout Harding, the lovely dwarf who seemed to be able to brave any conditions. They were informed of the Blades of Hessarian, an almost cult type group that had been doing activity in the area. They came for the Chargers and Rathein decided that would be their focus at the moment.

In the distance there was the sound of fighting, a rather loud war cry catching Athena’s attention. It sounded like *The Bull*. “I think we found the Tevinter group Aclassi was talking about.” She poked the Herald’s shoulder then pointed down the hill where the sound continued to grow louder. They barely had time to unpack before Athena was running down the side of the rocky slope with her staff drawn.

Sera followed her with her bow and arrows at the ready. “Man you don’t like to wait, yeah?” She asked with a giggle while she followed Athena down the slope.

The elf then stopped in her tracks, eyes widening and a singular sound coming from her lips. “*Woof.*”

The Iron Bull was in front of them, looking like he was eight some odd feet tall with two large horns coming from his head. He was *big* in the game but the amount of raw strength he had in his muscles was majorly downplayed. He brought his great axe down on a Tevinter mage, a satisfied
grin coming to his face as he turned to the next enemy and screamed to get their attention off of the mage in the back. There were roughly a dozen enemies left, Athena looking around to see where she could cut in.

Krem, the Tevinter man who had come to Haven to recruit them, was battling his own Tevinter when a rogue came up behind with a dagger drawn. Athena snapped her staff to the side, screaming: “ACLASSI.” From the tip of her staff came a bolt of lightning that paralyzed the attacker just in time for the mercenary to turn around with a curious look on his face before shoving his sword deep into the rogue’s chest. He then gave a curt nod towards Athena before moving on to the next person.

Rathein, Cassandra, and Solas arrived as the group was finishing up. Iron Bull put his axe in the last one before realizing the fight was over with his final kill of the group. His voice carried out over all of them, its volume rivaling the large waves that crashed against the rocks nearby. “Chargers! Stand down!”

The mercenary group seemed to relax, smiles coming over their faces as they realized they came out of the fight without any casualties on their side. Cremisius came up to her, extending his hand to shake hers. “Thanks for that back there. You have a good eye.”

Athena smiled at him, squeezing his hand in return while looking at the remains of the battlefield. “Aclassi-“

“Krem. Please.”

She let go of his hand, nodding before sheathing her staff on her back. “Krem. You guys did quick work of that group. I’m impressed.” Rathein echoed her thought with a satisfied hum but her eyes were glued to the Iron Bull, an almost permanent blush in her cheeks as she looked, no, gawked at his large arm and chest muscles that were covered in tattoos.

He noticed, adjusting his eye patch with a cocky grin before calling to his lieutenant. “Krem! How did we do?”

The warrior straightened up his posture, quickly surveying the area before reporting. “Five or six wounded. No dead.”

Iron Bull smiled and nodded, obviously satisfied with the results. He turned towards Rathein and
gestured for them all to sit down. “So, you’re with the Inquisition? Glad you could make it. Have a seat, drinks are coming.”

The Herald was frozen in her place. So much that Athena had to come up and push her from behind, quickly whispering in her ear: “Work first. Gawk later.”

Rathein’s flush quickly faded as she walked towards the large Qunari mercenary leader. “Iron Bull, I presume?”

He sat down and smirked. “Yeah, the horns usually give it away.”

The two began discussing the contract for the Inquisition. The rest of the party stood within ear shot but observed as the Chargers finished slitting the throats of their enemies for security. Sera made a disgusted face while running off to retrieve some of the arrows she skillfully fired during the whole endeavor. Cassandra sheathed her sword while shielding her eyes to look through the rain back at camp. “Do we have to camp out in this weather tonight?” Her voice was filled with disdain and it made Athena chuckle while Solas smirked, his own clothes drenched to the bone from the rain.

Athena pointed up past their camp to some nearby rock formations. “There should be a cave back there. I think if we clear it out we can stay there for the night. I’ll take first guard if you like?”

The warrior obviously relaxed, a soft smile coming to her face as she nodded. Somehow, even with all of the rain and wind, the braid that intertwined through her short hair was perfect. It wasn’t fair. Luckily for Athena in their long venture from Haven all of the twigs and grass came from her hair and left her looking somewhat normal especially if she was being compared to a drowned rat. When Cassandra walked back towards the camp, Solas stepped closer to her, raising his voice to speak over the storm.

“The night before we left Haven I heard wolves in the air. Have you been looking into your shapeshifting studies?” He asked with a curious sheen to his eyes, a shadow of a smirk at the corner of his lips. She almost bounced in excitement when responding, her hands clapping together.

“Yes! I was able to recruit a small pack of wolves!” He went to inquire further but Rathein’s voice cut through their conversation.

“A spy?”
“Yeah, Ben Hasserath. Like I said.” Iron Bull responded simply.

Athena rolled her eyes playfully, quickly shouting to Solas as a roar of thunder echoed through the skies. “Another time!” She then walked over to Rathein and gestured to sit down next to her, the Herald approving with a nod before they both turned back to the Bull. She was the first to respond, allowing Rathein some time to process what she heard. “I’m sure it’s a ‘you help me I help you’ situation, right? You know you’ll be working with the former Left Hand of the Divine, right?” The smile she gave him was a warning because Leliana could be brutal with those she didn’t trust.

He smiled at her. “Red? Yeah I know of her. Look we’re expensive but we’re worth it. And you don’t only get the Chargers, you get me, like I was telling her here. You need a front line bodyguard. Demons? Dragons?” His voice seemed to get excited at the prospect of fighting the large winged creatures but he continued. “The bigger the better. What do you say?” He looked to Rathein but then gave Athena a sideways glance. She could almost feel him sizing her up but she didn’t flinch, instead she held his gaze for a moment before looking over to her friend.

Without hesitation the Herald nodded, extending a hand for him to shake in a contract. “The Chargers seem like an excellent company.”

Athena looked to the dark clouds, trying to determine where the sun was in the sky. It felt like it would be close to dusk so clearing out the cave would need to be sooner rather than later. She nudged the Herald while including the Bull in the conversation as well. “While you guys finish up I’ll take Solas to those caves back there. We’ll fire a spark when it’s clear.” Rathein nodded, a blush returning to her cheeks when she realized she would be left alone with the largely impressive mercenary leader.

She stood from the bench and tapped Solas on the shoulder, motioning with her head to follow her while she walked along the coast. He fell into step with her and she could feel his gaze on her back. They reached the mouth of the cave and both of them hesitated. There was a deep darkness and the sounds of something crawling around and knocking rocks over. Athena went to swallow a lump of nerves but she realized her mouth and throat were parched, despite the heavy rainfall. Her voice came out quiet but she managed to curve it with sarcasm. “Five gold says spiders.”

Solas hummed in amusement, crossing his arms across his chest while assessing the darkness. He even went so far as to sniff the air. “Hm. Deep stalkers perhaps?” There was a slight smile in his eyes that said: “Wager accepted. You’re on.”

Taking that as a cue to enter she lit a flame in her hand and threw it into the cave. The fireball burst, illuminating the cave and the giant spiders that lived within it. As they were crawling down the
walls and heading towards them, Athena pumped a fist into the air: “Pay up, Solas!”
They were able to dispense of the spiders quickly and in no time the Inquisition camp, the Chargers, and all of their mounts were in the cave shielded from the storm. Iron Bull had broken open the casks for the group to celebrate their contract and as promised Athena watched guard at the only mouth of the cave. The storm raged outside even as darkness set in, which made it more difficult to see things moving in the distance. It was strange, but it felt like ever since she was looking into shapeshifting magic her senses were somehow becoming more heightened. She could smell the salt of the sea and there was a slight mixture of blood in the air from the earlier Tevinter battle. There was even a remnant of Kain on her cotton underclothes from where he cuddled up to her at night.

She pulled her knees up to her chest, her staff to the side facing the darkness while her lute lay on her left. The wind was bracing against her skin but somehow it still felt nice, comforting. The storms reminded her of where she went to college. The rain would go on for days but life still went on unaffected. Her and her friends would find little landmarks of dry spots in between buildings and make a game out of it, the loser always being the one in the puddle. . . What were they doing now? Had her coworkers all gone on without her? It was probably best that way, she thought to herself, tears stinging the corners of her eyes in an overwhelming moment of self-pity. It had been months now, surely they had all moved on in their lives and she was just an afterthought. Unfortunately for her everyday put her farther from her past life. She was beginning to forget the little things that made up her past like the locker combination at work, how exactly her bedroom was set up, and the name of the new intern at work she had wanted to ask out. They were all starting to blur into nothingness as she thought back on them. The tears mixed in with the mist from the rain thankfully, which made it easier to cover up when Solas approached her from the side with two cups of whatever Bull had in the cask. He gestured with the cups, asking permission before sitting. She gave him a soft nod, not even looking from the outside to acknowledge him.

He handed her the drink and took a sip of his own, his eyebrows knitting in what she could assume was disgust before moving it to the side. “You look lost.”

This caught her attention, reddened eyes looking towards him. “Lost?”

He nodded, pointing to the air above her. “Your aura has a tendency to move like a wave when you’re deep in thought instead of flaring like when you are speaking.” Suddenly she felt very vulnerable, her barrier reigning in her aura straight to her skin. It warmed her body and brought a twitch of a frown to his lips. “I did not mean to-- I am sorry, just an observation.”
She took a sip of the strong ale they had served up, downing it in one large gulp before resting her head on her knees. “I’m sorry. I’m just thinking of home, I guess. It’s been a . . . long time.”

He hummed in acknowledgement while leaning on the cave wall next to her. “You are not at home in the Inquisition?”

Athena nearly scoffed at him, jerking her head in Rathein’s direction while quoting something from his book. “I’m a self-taught apostate mage that lives in a cabin on the edge of town that fell from the Fade. Except I don’t have a mark that can save the world. I’m just . . . me.” Irrelevant. Replaceable. The words rang true in her mind, the tears never drying in her eyes while she looked back outside. Lightning struck out on the seas and briefly illuminated the area in front of them. When she deemed it was clear of enemies she stretched out her legs and sighed, resting her head against the cave wall.

He clasped his hands in his lap, eyes still focused on her while he tried to catch her gaze. She wouldn’t allow it. When he looked at her it was always searching and it brought a feeling of uneasiness to her stomach. His voice tried to calm her, it steady and somewhat hopeful. “The Inquisition is still in its youth, surely you will find your purpose within it.”

She rewarded his kind comment with a glance, accompanying it with a shrug while relaxing her posture a little more. Her hands grasped her lute. She wanted to play but there was just a general sense of apathy that had conquered her mind. The struggle was apparently written on her face, a small chuckle coming from his lips. “I think your friend might be able to help you there.”

Before she could turn to respond he waved a hand over her face, a spell casting darkness over her mind and putting her in a deep sleep.

When she opened her eyes she was in the Fade. It swirled around her, its horizons blank like a canvas for her to shape with her mind. Athena pushed herself up from the ground with a small growl, the realization setting in. “Damnit, Solas!” The bastard put me to sleep! She kicked the ground and ethereal dirt went flying at her gesture.

Soon a bright figure appeared beside her, placing her gentle hands around her body. Athena took in a deep breath and was suddenly calmed by the feeling of Inspiration giving her a hug. When she spoke her voice was broken, cracking at almost every syllable while threatening to break into a sob. “How . . . did you know?”
The spirit turned her to face her head on, burying her face into her shoulder while smiling against her skin. “Your sadness is really palpable here. I got here before all the demons did so you’ll be okay.”

Athena froze in her place, hands suddenly rigid with fear. “Am I really attracting that much attention?”

The spirit stepped back and nodded, her normal free-flowing curls braided into a fishtail braid coming down the side of her face and chest. “You have since I first met you. Your song, it’s loud and different. Entrancing almost.”

She looked to her hands and sighed, rubbing one of them on the back of her neck while silent tears fell down her face. “I guess you’re right. I’ve just been missing home recently and am realizing I may never see them again. I’m starting to forget. Their names, their faces, they are all shadows now.”

Inspiration frowned while snapping her fingers together in an idea. “I know! What is something that used to cheer you up at home?”

She paused for a second, sitting down while a chair formed underneath her without having to summon it. “Music. Music was... is absolutely my escape and when I was feeling sad I would listen to music and sing along. Sometimes dance!”

The spirit bounced, gesturing in the area around them. “Take me to your world then! You and I can do that together! Come on, you need a happy song, or at least something upbeat.”

Athena closed her eyes, trying to imagine her room in her home world. Slowly things started to snap into existence. Her queen-sized bed with navy sheets, her coat rack with an assortment of hats and scarfs, the pile of unsorted mail on her computer chair, it all was coming into place. Inspiration ran from one end of the room to the other, picking up unfamiliar items and making sounds of excitement. She then walked over to where her computer was, or used to be. It was difficult to form the foreign objects in the Fade so there was an empty spot that her fingers slid over. Already the beat for a song began to play in her head, a coy smirk coming to her face.

Somehow it moved through her mind into the Fade, the song acting like it was blasting into the room through a set of speakers. The spirit formed her mouth into an “o” in surprise before bobbing her head along to the beat while she tried to figure out what to do with her hands. The music flowed
through Athena, wiping her mind clear of worries and the negative emotions that came with them. She thought that was probably due to Inspiration’s influence but still, she was in no place to fight.

Her body bopped a little, eyes closed as the music began to swell. It was all coming back to her now, the choreographed moves from her childhood with her sister, the notes, the nostalgia –

*Everybody!* 

Her eyes snapped open, a genuine grin on her face as she pointed to Inspiration and mouthed the words with the song.

*Rock your body!*

The spirit listened intently, hands wringing in excitement as she watched her friend finally unravel from the sadness she had come into the dream with. Athena allowed her hands to fall to her sides while the song continued to play, the familiar beats creating a tempo within her body.

*Everybody! Rock your body right.*

In a burst of movement, she ran and jumped on her old bed, the Fade supplying her with enough bounce to jump in the air and begin to scream the lyrics. Relief poured from her pores while the song continued, her body fluidly moving along to the words. She rolled her shoulders in time with the music, biting her lips while swinging her hips and falling into a hypnosis from the song. Inspiration allowed her magic to flow, picking up on Athena’s dancing and doing it herself next to the bed.

*Am I sex-u-al?*

The song played, Athena dropped down to her knees while rising up in a sensual motion, arching her back and rolling her body with the tempo. Inspiration joined her up on the bed, their bodies back to back while they danced and allowed the tempo to dictate their movements.

They went all night, going song through song until it felt like the morning was about to come. The room had faded into her one at Haven but the music still played, Athena now just sitting in a chair and singing along to it, the remnants of a grin on her face. Happiness lit up her features, her eyes no longer red and inflamed from the tears. Inspiration had laid down on her bed, eyes looking up at
the ceiling while listening to Athena sing and play the lute to her favorite songs. The notes came easier now, her fingers effortlessly gliding up and down the strings.

I can feel the sun whenever you're near. Every time you touch me I just melt away.

She sang with her eyes closed, hands strumming along on the lute while she felt a familiar pressure in the back of her mind. She assumed it was Inspiration wanting to learn a new song and opened her mind to it, not noticing the elf that was leaning against her doorway with his arms crossed over his chest. Inspiration shot up on the bed, shooting Athena a panicked look while throwing a pillow towards Solas, which hit him not so delicately in the chest. He caught it and then opened his mouth to speak but the spirit put a finger to her lips, throwing the thought into his mind of She needs this! Hush! He frowned while looking from the spirit to Athena. He observed her for a moment, watching as she was so blissfully unaware of his presence. He then cleared his throat with a small smirk on his lips, quickly throwing the pillow back at Inspiration.

“Baby it’s you! You’re the one I lo-” Athena’s eyes shot open, looking over towards the mage giving her an almost wolfish grin as he caught her in her musical escape. Shock filled her features, it paralyzing every bone in her body as she just looked at him. Even in the Fade he wore his wolf-jaw necklace which hung down in the middle of his chest.

“I see the sleep helped.”

She then scowled, remembering that he was the one who put her to sleep in the first place. She rose from her chair to scold him for it but then reminisced at how happy she had just been for the entire night. Inspiration was the accumulation of all of her friends from home shoved into one. They fed off one another, filling each other to the brim with happiness until it felt like they were going to burst. She blinked away her anger and looked towards the spirit who was sitting cross-legged on the bed. “I... I suppose it did. Thank you. Wait, where did you put me once I fell asleep?”

He rubbed a hand over his head, relaxing his posture in the doorway. “I put you on a bedroll next to the Herald. I assumed it is where you would have been anyway?”

“And my guard duty?”

“Do not fret, I took your place.”

Athena nodded, kicking her feet on the ground while working her gaze up from the ground to his
without a blush coming to her cheeks. Her voice became almost formal, business-like to hide the embarrassment that was fighting to overthrow her tone. “I assume there were no troubles?”

His smile decreased but he nodded, hands coming to a clasped position behind his back, almost like he picked up on her change of tone. *Shit, Athena.* “We are safe, but I think it about time we woke up and began our travels to the Hinterlands to find this Grey Warden.” His words dripped with disdain at the title, a flash of anger coming to his eyes but she ignored it, giving him a nod.

She closed her eyes to find the pull to her earthly tether, her body and its sleeping place. Instead she heard an “Allow me” come from the fellow mage, his hand sliding over the top of her head to slowly bring her from the Fade.

Chapter End Notes

Songs they were singing through the chapter:

- Backstreet Boys - Everybody (Backstreet's Back)
- Beyoncé - Love On Top
The journey to the Hinterlands was a much needed reprieve. They sent Cassandra with the the Chargers to Haven so she could inform the rest of the village on their progress. The Seeker seemed excited to get out of the Storm Plains and not have to go through another trek through the plains and the mountains. They arrived at the camp at the edge of the lake, close to the location where Leliana marked that this rumored Grey Warden was. She allowed Prince to roam free and he immediately took off into the water, splashing around in it like he was a young foal. Athena shook her head and rejoined the party: Iron Bull, Solas, Rathein, and Sera.

The Herald was briefing all of them on the plan, a map on the table in front of her as she explained. “This is supposed to be where he was sighted by Leliana’s scouts. He’s supposed to be alone but we can’t be too careful. Leliana mentioned that the Wardens have all but gone missing in Ferelden and Orlais. It sounds suspicious.” Athena nodded in response, looking up towards the lake. They all paused for a moment before ascending the hill and walking across rickety wooden bridges that intertwined and brought them to a woodman’s hut on the side of the lake.

The scene they came upon was identical to the game, three plainly dressed soldiers being instructed by a burly man with a large black beard who was in full armor. “Remember how to carry your shields. Remember you’re not hiding, you’re holding.” Athena tried not to roll her eyes as she watched the soldiers absorb every word like it was scripture, their swords holding firm in their hands.

Rathein walked into view, calling out to the leader of the group. “Blackwall. Warden Blackwall?”

He turned on his heel, surprise filling each feature. “How do you know my name? Who sent-“ Before he could lift a shield Athena glanced over her shoulder and brought a barrier up to deflect the arrow that was aimed near the Herald.

She gave a growl of frustration before turning to their attackers while Blackwall shouted to them: “That’s it. Help or get out. We’re dealing with these idiots first.” He rallied his small troop of three soldiers and went into the fray with the bandits, the rest of the party bursting into action. Sera jumped on top of a crate and fired her arrows with ease while Solas and Athena protected the rest of the group with barriers. The bandits were disbanded with a swing of Blackwall’s sword. He turned to speak what Athena knew to be a rousing speech to his “conscripts”. She turned to the water and rinsed some of the dirt off of her staff and boots.

Rathein and Blackwall spoke, the Herald informing him of how they were investigating whether the Grey Wardens were involved with the Divine. Blackwall was shocked and Athena had to hide a sneer, washing her hands in the lake before drying them on her pants. She then helped Sera retrieve her arrows and wipe their bloody tips off on clean parts of the corpses. Iron Bull was looking at the
bandits for anything valuable but with a disappointed grunt he turned back towards Rathein.

“Grey Wardens can inspire... Make you better than you think you are.”

This brought a unison but soft groan of disapproval from both Solas and Athena, their brows perking up when their gazes met. He looked at her, his features questioning what problem she had with the Wardens. Instead of answering she merely chuckled under her breath, walking past them and on the wooden bridges. She could feel a few questioning gazes on her back as she wandered but it would be safer to look uninterested than it would be to show her leery gazes of mistrust towards Blackwall.

Like with all of the others, she knew their pasts and what secrets they would eventually reveal to the Herald. She understood having secrets, shit she obviously had her own, but faking to be a Warden? It was something that had always gotten underneath her skin. The Wardens she knew in Origins were honorable, willing to lay their life on the line to end the Blight. Blackwall would have to earn her trust as well as the others in the game and she would see through all of his lies and hollow explanations.

A sound similar to a grunt brought her attention up from the ground, her eyes scanning the trees. It came again, this time louder and followed by a growl. Shit. Bear country. Her brown gaze slowly panned over until she saw the origin of the sound about a dozen paces away. Its breath came out in growls and grunts, steam coming from its mouth in the cold mountain air. Athena instantly brought her staff forward and put a pulse of magic through the air with the thought of Still! Her aura reached out towards the bear, trying to subdue its anger and naturally aggressive instincts.

It fought it off, shaking its head while raking its claws through the dirt. For a moment, it stilled, its breaths coming in whines while it looked up at her with a glazed look. But then within a second it broke and the bear was charging her, a claw out and swiping down at her.

She blocked the claw attack with her staff but the force of the blow knocked her on her back. A cry of pain escaped her lips as she landed on a fallen tree, the sharp ridges of the branches putting sharp pressure through her jacket. The bear’s body was now over hers, its jaw opening wide as it bellowed a roar in her face.

“Athena!” Cried Rathein from the side, the group apparently finding her body trapped under that of a bear.

Without even thinking she screamed back at them, “I got this!” while keeping the bear’s jaws off of her. The bear suddenly fell down on its, stomach, the earth-shattering crack of Bull’s axe dealing a
heavy blow onto it. Unfortunately, this also put the bear right on top of her, its weight pinning her legs while it looked her right in the eyes with blood lust fueling its growl.

She didn’t even have time to react, all she could do was put her hand out to cast a spell and the bear took it into its mouth. Teeth and fangs bit down into the middle of her forearm, a wordless cry ripping from her throat. The pain instantly shot up her arm and she could feel the bones breaking underneath. Blood burst from the bear’s mouth as it tried to pull back, it thankfully giving her legs a break so she could scramble to all fours. This allowed the group to get a perfect view of what was happening: the bear attempting to drag her away while her arm was caught in its mouth and halfway down its throat.

Solas’s cool barrier wrapped around her body, and it took everything in her not to give him a sarcastic glare. So fucking helpful. Instead, she screamed again as the bear readjusted its grip, using the heightened anxiety from the wound and pushing it towards her injured hand. Flames burst forth from her hand into the bear’s mouth, it instantly letting her go and falling to the side as she overheated its brain. Athena fell back with a small cry, her right hand gripping her left while she assessed the damage.

Luckily it was still attached but boy was it mangled. Her mind couldn’t even process the extent of the damage before Solas dropped to his knees beside her, gingerly taking her arm into his hands while his gaze quickly looked at the worst points of the wound. Every small motion caused her to cry out and it took everything in her not to jerk her arm from his hand. He looked to Rathein, giving a quick order with a grim-featured face: “Hold her.”

“Wait, what?” She gasped as Rathein dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around her chest while helping to support her upper arm. Suddenly she felt trapped. Her vision went white and her breaths were shallow and fast, her pulse racing which only caused more blood to flow from her wound.

Solas closed his eyes and mumbled an apology before quickly snapping her arm back into place. She screamed, Rathein’s arm covering her mouth for her to scream into while he worked his healing magic quickly into the bone and tendons. Hot tears streamed down her face into her friend’s sleeve, the Herald whispering soft apologies into the back of her hair. It felt like she was crying as well since the back of her hair was wet. Solas placed both hands around her forearm and pulsed more magic into it, the cool, crisp sensation of his magic innately fighting against her fire that lashed out at him. He winced with a hiss, her aura apparently really putting up a fight against the healer.

Rathein cursed into her ear, ordering a command while squeezing her torso tighter. “Gods, Athena, let him help you!” She slammed her eyes shut and focused on her breathing, trying to slow it while withdrawing her aura into her body. His magic was then able to take effect, the skin closing with a circular scar of teeth marks around her arm. The Herald fell backwards and released her, Athena
falling forward with a sigh and half a sob. The pain was slowly fading as blood flow returned to her arm. She wiggled her fingers, touching the tips of every finger to her thumb while assessing sensation. Everything worked, thank the Maker.

She looked up and met Solas’s gaze, ignoring the typical feelings of anxiety and light-headedness that came with it while giving him a weak smile. “Sorry I’m such a terrible patient.”

He smirked in return, taking a sip of a lyrium potion while handing her a healing potion. “Drink this. You’re pale.”

“No shit?” Athena retorted back at him with an arched brow, downing the acidic potion with a wince on her face. Sera came up besides Blackwall, her eyes looking from the bear back to her. “What’d you run off for?”

She paused, closing her eyes while knowing her response was being heavily monitored. Sarcasm ended up winning as the response, a sly grin coming to her face while she looked back at the archer. “Sera, you know. I just looked at Bull and thought: *Shit. I could really use some bad ass scars like those.*”

The elven girl cackled, holding her hands to her belly while she bent over laughing. Iron Bull gave a small bark of a laugh while he put his axe on his back. Rathein kicked her in the back for the sarcastic response, this reminding Athena that she was probably bruised to hell from the tree she landed on. Solas was already standing, offering a hand for her to use to get up. Luckily she didn’t have an excess supply of blood for blushing so she took his hand, feeling a jolt of his cold energy shoot down her arm as she did so, and pulled herself to a standing position. Blackwall was over by the bear, his armored boot kicking its side. “What are we to do with this?”

Athena pointed with her scarred arm towards him, an almost happy malice curving her lips into a smile. “That bastard’s pelt is mine. Think Harrit can make that into a cowl and robe for me?”

Rathein smirked and nodded, resting her elbow on Athena’s shoulder while looking at the bear with an impressed gaze. Iron Bull glanced over at her arm, raising his brows while nodding while gradually smiling. “You know, that scar is pretty bad ass.”

This brought a genuine laugh from her while she took out a dagger that Cassandra had given her from her thigh and began skinning the bear. At the end, she kept its head and the rest of its coat, lugging the thing over her shoulder to take back to the camp. Rathein decided Sera would take back the next day’s ride home with supplies, the bear pelt, and another update for the Inquisition, letting them know that the Herald and her party were going to Redcliffe to meet with the rebel mages and
their leader, Fiona.
“Bad feeling. Odd.” Athena stated to the group through gritted teeth as they approached Redcliffe, her staff clutched tightly in her hands. The air around them felt thick, like they were having to push harder to get through it and it weighed their bodies down with every step. The odd sensation sent a chill down her spine and made her feel generally uneasy. The others seemed unaffected, except for Solas who occasionally knit his brows in frustration when they walked through a rough patch. Up ahead was the gate that led to the village, and unfortunately standing in front of it was a Fade Rift. They had been closing a few here and there throughout the Hinterlands, Athena expertly leading them away from one by the farmlands due to its intense nature in the game. But this Rift... just felt wrong.

Rathein jumped into action by launching her storm magic at the nearest wisps, Athena looking on the ground for areas of time distortion, seeing where a shade was moving at a particularly accelerated rate. She ran to meet it, her body moving through what felt like a film before striking at the demon with her staff, flames following every movement until the shades was dissipated into a pile of rags. She then turned on her heel to assess the situation. They had dispersed the first wave of demons but a second appeared, the ground cracking and giving way for the terrors and wisps as they burst from the veil of the Fade.

Athena continued her assault, flames and lightning moving through her body with each snap of her staff. At one-point Iron Bull gave her a curious look and she knew why it was warranted. The place where she was standing had been distorted so that she was moving faster than everyone else. She knew from playing the games that time magic was involved and it was infecting the area around them. So because of where she stood, time warped around her and allowed her to move faster than her party mates. She used this to her advantage, throwing spells and barriers at accelerated rates until Rathein was able to close the Rift.

Once the Rift was closed though the exhaustion of firing so many spells hit her, sweat beading on her brow as her breath came in pants. She gave a deep sigh, resting her hands on her knees to catch her breath. Rathein walked over, her voice impressed but cautious. “How were you able to do that?”

Athena, still out of breath, motioned to the areas around. “Did you... not feel... that? Something... is off here.” She was able to stand without her sides killing her, placing her hands on her back.
The Herald bit her bottom lip while shaking her head, placing her staff on the back. The Redcliffe soldiers opened the gates with cries of “Thank the Maker!” An Inquisition soldier that had been sent ahead ran to the Herald, worry setting into his features. He saluted Rathein, his posture straight and tall. Just like Cullen taught him. Athena smirked with a soft blush in her cheeks while she thought back on the Commander. He was warming up to her as well. They all were, which fueled her even harder to try and help them without completely altering their destiny. Chaos was what Corypheus wanted; it was what kept him and his nightmares alive. She would do everything within her power to stop his plans while helping the Inquisition.

“Wait, nobody is expecting us? Not even Grand Enchanter Fiona?” Rathein responded, her voice shrill with shock and confusion. The messenger shook his head, pointing back towards the Chantry. “If she was, she didn’t tell anyone. We’ve arranged to use the tavern for a place for negotiations.” He then bowed before taking off towards the tavern. The group stilled, all eyes on the Herald while waiting for their next command. Rathein was still in a small state of shock, her hands balling into fists at her side.

Athena tightened her gloves on her hands while walking to her side. “Like I said: Odd. Let’s go meet up with them.”

Before they stepped into the gate, an elf mage ran up to them, a sense of entitlement fueling his step. “Agents of the Inquisition? My apologies. Magister Alexius is in charge now, but hasn’t yet arrived. He’s expected shortly. You can speak with the Former Grand Enchanter in the meantime.”

When he left the entire group let out similar sounds of frustration and anger, Bull cursing to himself: “Fucking Vints.”

The group made a unison sound of agreement. Athena could feel Solas’s aura bristling, it flicking against her skin almost like electricity. With an arched brow, she used her aura to flick his shoulder to catch his attention. He looked at her, anger flaring from his features through every pore. She raised her hands in defense, walking to his side making a small tisking noise under her breath. “And I thought I was the unleashed one.” She gave him a playful wink, trying to lighten the mood even though they had just been told a Tevinter Magister was running the town. It was probably inappropriate, no she knew it was inappropriate, but even in the darkest times at the hospital she was the one cracking jokes just to see her coworkers smile. There was a time for grief and sadness but if there was nobody there to puncture the dread they would all succumb to it. But her thoughts turned back to Alexius, a frown twitching at the corner of her lips while she looked around the area for any of his spies. He was a Magister, whose culture was known for using blood-magic and owning slaves. It was the worst scenario they could have seen themselves walking into.
Rathein moved forward, anger obviously fueling her steps as they marched through the town. Redcliffe was cloaked in fear. The streets were full of children pleading their nightmares of demons and magic to their parents. Unfortunately, the parents turned a blind eye, not wanting their children to be involved in the mage rebellion or anything that came with it. Athena growled under her breath, shooting a particular parent a glare as they literally turned their nose up in the air to their child’s worries. If they didn’t address their child’s growing magic they would soon have an abomination on their hands. A mage child was better than a dead one.

They walked through the town and before they reached the tavern Athena felt an odd pressure on the inside of her mind. She stopped in her tracks, looking down the stairs and towards a shack that was near the water’s edge. Rathein gestured for the group to pause, her eyes trying to follow her friend’s stare. “What’s a’ matter, Athena?”

She took a step forward, the pressure turning into something like whispers within her mind. It made her skin crawl but there was an urgency to the whispers she could not deny. “There’s something wrong here. Something’s calling out. Don’t you hear it?” She followed the whispers, it leading her down the stairs and at the door where a sense of dread washed over her. She remembered what was on the other side. The discovery that in the game chilled her blood to the bone and made her want to burn the whole thing down. Well. Here she could, or at least lay down some havoc.

The party fell into step behind her and she knew they were questioning her intentions. She was terrified to open the door, her hands hesitating over the handle. Solas, thankfully, spoke up and eased her mind that she was the only one who could feel it. “Death has permeated this place. The veil is freshly thin.” With that she tried to open the door, only to find it was locked. In frustration she jiggled the door and then kicked it, letting out a small cry of frustration. Bull grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back, silently accepting the task of knocking down the door since he was the most capable from sheer size and strength alone.

He took a deep breath in, raising his leg before quickly slamming the bottom of his massive, booted foot through the door handle. The door burst and barely hung on its hinges, allowing Athena to slide past and enter the cabin. Then the whispering voices grew louder until they were near screaming in her head, begging for some release and telling her of their plights. She fell to her knees, hands gripping her hair while she fell forward. The rest of the party fell in behind her, Rathein finally whispering and putting a hand to her own temple as the voices hit her too.

The walls were covered in skulls with dimly glowing eyes. They were the Ocularum, dreaded skulls enchanted by the Venatori. Crystals protruded from the base of the skull through their right eye and their jaws hung forever open in a scream. Solas found a letter on the desk, reading it out loud in a flat yet pained voice for all of them to hear. “There must be more Tranquil in the area— the rebels abandoned most of them when they left their Circles. Oh no.” His eyes widened in realization, the letter falling from his hands. Rathein took it from him, her eyes quickly scouring the letter. Curses in many languages fell from her lips, tears forming in the Herald’s eyes as she finished.
Athena was barely able to stand up on her own, her eyes red from her own tears. “They butchered them, for what?” Her voice came out hoarse yet determined. She stood with a burst of energy, grabbing each of the skulls and putting them on the ground. Rathein didn’t question her motives but helped in understanding, quickly placing them all in a compact circle. Blackwall cleared his throat. It was obvious the Grey Warden was uncomfortable with the amount of death and odd magic in the room. “What are you two doing?”

Rathein was quiet, focused on their task. Athena was the one to look up at him with venom dripping from every word. “They. Deserve. Peace.” Once they were all off the walls she traced a circle around them with her staff. It was a containment circle, something she had seen in her books of basic studies. Then with a flick of her hand she lit the skulls aflame. The screams in her head faded into nothingness as the skulls and crystals cracked in front of her. Rathein had moved outside, needing to get away from all of the whispers that had plagued her mind. Iron Bull and Blackwall followed, leaving only Solas and Athena in the shack with the burning skulls.

She was fuming, her aura intentionally flaring and writhing in combination with the flames in front of her. She could feel that it created a swirling air around her but she didn’t care. There was no way to contain the anger she felt for the innocent Tranquils. They were already mages who had their magic stolen from them and half of them probably lost it from the actions of a corrupt Templar ruled by fear. They had already suffered enough and then there were those who would pray on that suffering to further their own cause. She clenched her fists at her side, willing the flames in front of her to burn hotter, brighter. The voices were completely gone from her mind as the skulls turned to ash in front of her.

The tears had dried on her face but she was nearly shaking with rage. Solas approached her from behind, fists at his side as well. His hardened gaze looked upon the remnants of the skulls. When Athena spoke, her voice sounded foreign, even to her. It was dripping with malice, each word pointed with an unmistakable rage. “Alexius will pay for this.”

He nodded in response at her side but he didn’t know the half of it. Alexius would pay for altering time to steal the mages from the Inquisition. He would pay for betraying Dorian so. He would pay for aligning himself with a False God such as Corypheus. He would not live to bewitch anybody else.

The pair left the shack once they were able to contain themselves. Rathein was preparing to go into the tavern when Athena pointed towards the docks. “I think it might be best if I don’t go in there. You have to be political and represent the Inquisition in these talks. I can’t make any promises on restraining myself. I’ll stay out here, out of sight, until you guys are done.”

The Herald cracked a smile, ruffling her hair playfully. “Yeah, you little firecracker. You would
probably lunge across the table and punch him right then and there. Alright, you be safe. We’ll be back soon.” Athena waved off the party, waiting for them to get out of sight before she started exploring the dock-side markets of Redcliffe. There were plenty of mages walking about and from her conversations with them the general consensus was that none of them were happy about being allied with the Tevinter Magister, swooping in at the right time, as if by magic.

She had come across a mourning elven husband who wished for flowers to be put at his wife’s shrine. Athena put a hand to his shoulder, squeezing it while reassuring that she would tell the Herald of Andraste about the quest. He nodded and thanked her with an elven *Mas sarannas* before turning back to his family. It took roughly half an hour for her to circle the town before she tucked her body around a corner. Alexius appeared, rushing his ailing son to their home surrounded by Venatori Agents. *Felix*. The son was sick with the Blight, according to Dorian in the game he had come across some darkspawn and had been infected from exposure. Alexius, being the mother hen he was, dropped everything to ensure his safety. The intentions of a good parent were there, she realized, but they were too warped by corruption and greed. She bit her tongue to keep from making any noise, her gaze hardening with fresh anger upon seeing the Magister in person for the first time. Once he was gone, she turned her body and walked with some speed back to the tavern. Rathein and the group was waiting. They all held different expressions: frustration, confusion, and blank. The Herald had pulled through with her game face, a light smile on her lips as she hailed Athena over with a gesture.

“Oi. We need to go to the Chantry.” She opened her palm and showed the note that Felix has slipped her while faking an ailment of his illness. “It sounds like a trap, but what isn’t nowadays for us.” Athena smirked and nodded, already preparing for meeting the dashing Tevinter mage Dorian. Before she could even fully smile Rathein frowned and scratched the back of her head. “There was one other thing I found odd.”

Athena arched a brow. “Oh?”

The Herald paused before meeting her gaze. “He asked about you specifically, Fade-Walker. He thought you would have been with me.”
Athena’s blood ran cold, eyes widening as suddenly all sound faded from her ears. Sweat dripped down the side of her face and she knew that she probably looked like she had seen a ghost, or something akin to it.

Rathein waved a hand in front of her face, flicking her in the forehead. “Hey, did you hear me?”

She cleared her throat and closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose to try and gain control of her emotions that were screaming for her to run. This did not happen in the game. Alexius was not supposed to know about her. If he did, that meant he had a plan for her. Somehow, someway, Corypheus knew of her and wanted to use her. How did Corypheus know about her? She didn’t steal his mark; she didn’t get in the way of his plans.

Shit this was bad.

“I heard you, just not happy about it. What’s the next plan?”

The group started to move towards the Chantry and Rathein grabbed her shirt to drag her along. “We got a message to go to the Chantry. Come on.”

With a grunt of disapproval Athena moved with the group, a cautious gaze looking for the large church building in the middle of town. Thankfully on the inside of it was her favorite Tevinter mage who could probably match her in sarcasm. Unfortunately meeting him meant that a large series of events were about to take place and it left her with little time to do things. Little time to help. Little time to save at least one life that was lost in the games.

The moment they opened up the Chantry, they were met with the sound of spells firing, a suave dark-haired mage turning around with a smile on his mustached face. “Good. You’re here. Now help me close this, would you?”

She relaxed in her posture and smiled, spinning her staff in her hand before walking over to his side. The rest of the party was hesitant at first but jumped into the fray. The rift in the center of the Chantry was threatening to tear apart the building, demons popping up in every corner with thunderous roars. Wisps came from the rifts, floating near Dorian and Athena. In almost a unison
motion they both summoned flames and dissipated the demon into dust. He hummed in amusement giving her a glance before spinning his body and staff to where he made a flourish of attacks towards another shade.

\textit{Oh a challenge, eh?}

Already he was making her feel better, momentarily distracting her from the daunting tasks ahead of them. She turned on the ball of her foot, nearly mirroring his movement but adding a flare of lightning into her spells at the end. He rolled his eyes in a sarcastic fashion but their little dance drew a grunt of disapproval from Blackwall, who had just knocked over a terror with his shield. “Stop dancing around and focus!”

Like a child, she giggled at his bossing her around, sticking her tongue out while throwing a barrier politely over him while he charged onto the next target. Dorian murmured under his breath as he snapped a fireball towards a wisp hiding in the corner. “Oooh he’s angry.”

When Rathein closed up the rift with a smirk on her face, Dorian was suddenly in awe of her mark and how it effortlessly closed the rift. “Fascinating. How does that work exactly?” The Herald, eloquent as always, shrugged in return while rotating her hand to get a better look at the mark. This caused the new mage to laugh as he put his staff away. “You don’t even know, do you? You just wiggle your fingers and Boom! Rift closed.”

Rathein chuckled, putting her own staff away while checking the Chantry one last time for anymore enemies. “And who are you? Did you send the note?”

He nodded, giving a small bow to the party. “Dorian of House Pavus, recently of Minrathous. How do you do?” He looked to Athena and gave her a playful wink, this surprisingly drawing a frustrated “hmph” from the resident elf Fade expert behind her. While Dorian and Rathein continued to talk, she on her heel in a full 180 and crossed her arms while giving Solas a curious look, as if asking “what was that?”

He shook his head and looked off to the side, there being no indication of embarrassment on his face. “Just felt inappropriate for the current situation.”

The Tevinter caught onto this, his own face smirking in almost a smug response. “Such suspicious friends you have here.” Athena squelched the urge to elbow Solas in the chest for his reaction. She looked to Dorian with a half-smile, shrugging.
“Well since Alexius is from your land its _only_ rationale to throw every Tevinter in there with him, considering it’s the country where everything _big_ and _bad_ comes from.” Her words were emphasized with sarcasm to make her point, throwing in a wink back to him, which thankfully brought a sarcastic laugh from his lips.

“I suppose you’re right.” He cleared his throat before continuing in a more serious tone, his eyes meeting Rathein’s. “Magister Alexius was once my mentor, so my assistance should be valuable – as I’m sure you can imagine.”

The Herald nodded, crossing her arms across her chest while looking the mage up and down. “Where’s Felix? I was expecting him.” While the pair continued to talk back and forth Athena took the time to wander around the Chantry, slowly sipping on a particularly bitter lyrium potion while looking at the stained glass at the back of the hall. It showed Blessed Andraste looking like something akin to Mother Mary in her world. Athena was never a religious person in any sort, so seeing people fall so blind to a belief made her almost uncomfortable in a way. It was something she would never understand and she wasn’t sure if she wanted to. A cool draft caught her neck, sending a shiver down her spine while Solas came up to her side.

His face was still covered with a veil of uncertainty so she made a small sound of acknowledgement when he arrived. “Are you Andrastian?” He eyed her coolly, clasping his hands behind her back.

She couldn’t help but chuckle in response, shaking her head while thumbing through a book that was on the altar in front of her. “Is that a serious question?”

He responded with his own chuckle, hands relaxing at his sides. “No, I suppose not.”

A smooth voice carried through the Chantry and caught the elf’s attention: “Alexius distorted time itself.”

Solas whipped to the side, his lips twitching while his face showed features of intrigue. He retorted quickly, his voice carrying through the Chantry. “That is fascinating if true. . . and certainly dangerous.”

Dorian nodded, continuing to explain how the rifts created in this area were a result of the altered time magic. When he stated that some things were sped up and others slowed down, the group then looked knowingly at Athena, who only gave them a “see I told you” look of smugness. “The magic Alexius is using is wildly unstable, and its unraveling the world.” The silence in the room was palpable as the realization set in.
Rathein bit her bottom lip, scraping her boot on the rug while thinking it over. “You’re asking me to take a lot on faith.”

Dorian then nodded, finally confessing that he was one of the people that helped develop the time magic. The real question was why Alexius was suddenly using it now. Athena let out a soft sigh, turning her back from the conversation to hide her facial features. It was difficult acting surprised in all of this. She knew this; she had played this story line countless times and basically knew the lines by heart. Instead of listening in on the conversation, she began reading passages of the Chant of Light that was handwritten in the book before her.

Felix entered the Chantry, his voice so grim it cut through the silence with ease. “He didn’t do this magic for the extra troops.”

Dorian seemed to cheer up at his presence, prodding him with a small verbal jab. “Took you long enough.”

Felix, the son of Magister Alexius, turned towards Rathein with concern worrying into his features. “My father’s joined a cult. Tevinter supremacists. They call themselves “Venatori”. Iron Bull instantly bristled, an angry grunt coming as he cursed: “Fucking Vints” again under his breath in frustration. The Herald shot him a cold look that gestured for him to shut it before turning back to Felix. He continued on, ignoring Bull’s obvious jab towards his people. “And I can tell you one thing: whatever he’s done for them, he’s done it to get to you two.”

Athena froze, a shudder shooting up her spine while she whipped around to look at the boy. Rathein sighed, rubbing the back of her neck while taking everything in. “What does he want us for?”

Felix shrugged, looking back and forth between the two women. “They’re obsessed with you, but I don’t know why. Perhaps it’s because you survived the Temple of Sacred Ashes?” She gestured to argue that she wasn’t at the temple but then fell into a silence, her eyes glued to the blood-covered rug on the ground. The Herald finally found her voice, looking to the young man with a new determined confidence. “What are your suggestions?”

Dorian spoke up first, giving a slight smile to the situation. “Knowing you’re a target is the first step in turning it to your advantage. I can’t stay here, but whenever you want to deal with him: I’ll be there. Stay in touch!” With a flick of his hand he disappeared through the back of the Chantry, Felix leaving through the main door. With the party left all by themselves, they all let out noises and sighs of frustration.
Iron Bull spoke first, finally putting his large axe away on his back since the Tevinters were gone. “What do you want to do, Boss?”

Rathein gave him a small smile, shaking her head back and forth while muttering small curses under her breath. “This is really a shit situation. I think it’s better if we go back to Haven and discuss it with Cullen, Cassandra, and the others. We need to all agree on whatever we do next.”

The trip back had been anxiety inducing for Athena. Every day she was worrying about what plans Alexius had for her. If she was dragged into the future with Rathein, she would see the fate of all of their companions. She would see their bodies flung lifelessly to the side, red lyrium infecting every pore of their body. If she didn’t go, there was a chance she would be doomed to live the fate of the worst times of their lives, being some pawn for Alexius and Corypheus to use at their will. It left her nearly silent on the entire way home, immune to attempts from Rathein and Solas to try and cheer her up. The only solace and escape in all of this was when she went to the Fade.

Wisdom was showing her face more, discussing the future and what Athena knew. She paced back and forth in the fade, the energy moving around her in frantic pulses. “I am not prepared for this type of thing. I know every other alternative, every other ending, but this? I am at a loss. How can I help now when I don’t even know what is coming?” Her words were dry, panicked as she tried to seek console from the ever-patient friend in the Fade.

The spirit sat with her hands resting in her lap, softly glowing gaze following the anxious girl as she went back and forth. “You must trust your companions, Athena. There are few of them that trust you, have put their faith in you.”

She cried out, her magic flaring like flames from her body as she threw her hands in the air and flicked a small burst of flames from her hands like it was water. “I know that! I have betrayed that trust with my dishonesty. They are all looking up to the Herald and she is so strong, my friend.” She looked to Wisdom with weak, tired eyes, tears streaming down her face. “She has the burden of the whole world on her shoulders and I can’t help her.”

Wisdom shook her head, standing up and rubbing her hand on Athena’s back. “You are to her what we are to you, guidance. She looks to you to help her make decisions that will change the world. Unlike so many others, you can help her.” She began to sob, tightening her hands into fists while turning her face straight up into the Fade-tinted sky. Wisdom removed her touch, patting her on the shoulder. “You are much stronger than you give yourself credit for, dear. Keep that in mind in the
days to come.” The spirit vanished from her presence, probably to go speak to Solas in his own dreams. She continued to break down, her body shaking with every rack of cries. It was an uncontrollable anxiety, her breaths were coming in quick pants and her vision was becoming blurry. The overarching feeling of dread was indescribable and it was constricting every thought in her head. Logical thought was nowhere to be found but thankfully a pair of soft arms wrapped around her, a kind cheek pressing to her back.

Inspiration had followed in Wisdom’s steps, stroking her back with soothing touches and soothing words as Athena fell onto her knees in anguish. The spirit then began whispering the lyrics of a song they had sung together weeks ago, a smile coming to her lips as she did. “Keep holding on, just say strong.” Athena turned around and buried her face within her friend’s shoulder, desperately clinging onto her as the Fade turned to black.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you for the continued support! Buh-bye!
“We don’t have the manpower to take the castle! Either we find another way in, or give up this nonsense and go get the templars!”

“Now you’re calling my decision to help the mages nonsense, Commander?” Rathein responded with a defensive scowl, her gaze challenging him from across the war board. Commander Cullen placed his hands on the opposite end of the table, meeting her challenge with a cold frown of his own. When it came to his strategy he did not back down and would fight it until he heard hard facts as to why it wouldn’t work.

“In regards to the Breach the templars could suppress the magic so the Herald could close it. I know what they are capable of!”

“So. Do. I.” Athena hissed from her position next to the Herald, placing her body alongside the Rathein’s to provide support. Cullen seemed to wince at her response, knowing how charged with emotion the words were especially because her jaw was tightened and it was obviously difficult for her being in the same room where the ritual happened. He softened for a moment, his eyes falling down to the table. She continued, hoping to help him see the point from a logical point of view. “You speak of magical suppression. How is Rathein, a mage, supposed to make it through their walls and spells? It would drain her before she even reached the Rift.” She spoke with Wisdom leading her words, eyes nearly aflame with confidence.

The Commander eventually conceded, Cassandra adding in on the side: “Redcliffe is also under the command of a Tevinter Magister. That cannot stand.”

The Ambassador Josephine chimed in, swerving her body with her candle-lit clipboard in hand. “The letter from Alexius asked for the Herald of Andraste and Fade-Walker by name. It’s an obvious trap.”

Rathein and Athena looked to each other, nodding in acknowledgement before looking to the Spymaster who spoke next. “Even with this looming threat, some of us are okay with doing nothing.”

Cullen scoffed, moving his hands to rest on the top of his sword. “Redcliffe Castle is one of the most defensible fortresses in Ferelden. It has repelled thousands of assaults.” He looked to the two women who were the targets of said trap. “If you go in there, you’ll die. And we’ll lose the only means we have of closing these rifts and – “ His gaze flicked to Athena before he sighed and hardened his gaze. “I won’t allow it.”
The three council members argued back and forth on until they finally agreed. “The Magister has outplayed us.”

They all stopped, going back and forth for a moment more. Athena looked to the Spymaster, her gaze pleading for some sort of realization. Lelianna had used a secret path before, something that was only accessible with a family member’s ring in the Origins game. It would just take a second. . . Ding! The Spymaster then made a face of surprise and turned to the others. “Wait. There is a secret passage into the castle. An escape route for the family. We can send a few of my best through the narrow passages.”

Cullen shook his head, a frown on the corner of his lips. “Too risky.”

Leliana continued, obviously not affected by the Commander’s lack of support. “That’s why we need a distraction. Perhaps the envoy Alexius wants to badly?”

The Commander thought on it, mumbling under his breath “It could work. . . .But it is a huge risk.”

Athena spoke up, placing her hand on the war table in front of Rathein. “That we are willing to take. Somebody has to.”

The door slammed open and the familiar suave voice of the Tevinter mage rolled through. “Fortunately, you’ll have help.” Dorian walked in with a confident swagger, giving both the Herald and her a wink.

“Your spies will never get past Alexius’s magic without my help. So, if you’re going after him, I’m coming along.”

Rathein was nearly beaming with a smile, nodding while ordering: “We’ll leave at sunrise. Everyone prepare for the march on Redcliffe.”

The Herald had picked Iron Bull to go as muscle and Solas to go as another magical opinion on
whatever was happening. They entered the front of Redcliffe castle only to be greeted by a servant of Alexius’s. Athena took note of the soldiers on guard in front of the gate, their sharp hoods and horned masks concealing their identities and sending an eerie chill down her spine. They were the first of many Venatori that would fall by their hand, but it didn’t make their presence any less unsettling. The four arrived, Rathein’s face cold and expecting while she looked to the messenger. “Announce us.”

The messenger sneered, giving ugly and hard looks to Solas and Bull. “The Magister’s invitation was for Lady Trevelyan and Lady Athena only. The others must wait here.”

Iron bull crossed his arms across his chest with a smirk while Solas stared the messenger down with a hard stare. The Herald kept her cool, responding simply. “If my friends can’t come, I’m not coming either.”

The smug messenger scoffed before turning on his heel with a nod to follow him. As the group fell into step with him, Athena looked over her shoulder to see the Venatori agents following them close by with weapons on their sides. They entered the throne room to see Alexius sitting in front of a roaring fire, hands clenching the armrests of the throne with Felix standing behind him. The messenger cleared his throat before announcing the group: “My Lord Magister, the agents of the Inquisition have arrived.”

The overly confident Magister stood, extending his arms to the group. “My friend! It is good to see you again. I see you brought Lady Athena as well. . . and your associates of course.” His voice darkened, his gaze flicking to his servant in a look of disapproval. “I’m sure we can work out some arrangement that is equitable to all parties.”

Lady Fiona, the elven leader of the mage rebellion who had fallen victim to Alexius’s treachery, walked in from the side, disgust settling into every feature of her face. “Are we mages to have no voice in deciding our fate?”

Athena cut off the Magister before he could respond, smiling to Fiona. “I think it would benefit our negotiations if she were able to speak for the mages.”

Rathein echoed her sentiments, gesturing for the woman to come in closer to their group. “We welcome her as a guest of the Inquisition in these talks.”

Alexius frowned but then nodded, sauntering back slowly to his throne before settling in comfortably. “You need my mages to close the Breach. What shall you offer in exchange?”
The Herald thought it over, looking to each member of her party before announcing with a genuine smile that only she could manage in the face of a Tevinter Magister: “Cut the bullshit, Alexius. I know you invited us here to kill us.”

Felix cut in, looking to the side at the throne. “They know everything, Father.”

The Magister reacted shocked at first but then angry, his brows furrowing as he pierced his son with the daggers of his gaze. “Felix, what have you done?”

The Herald scoffed, giving a playful shrug. “We managed to have your traps disarmed before we came in. Sorry to disappoint.”

Alexius bristled in rage, rising from his throne while his gaze never left the Herald. “You walk into my stronghold with your stolen mark - a gift you do not even understand – and the Fade-Walker and you think you’re in control?” Athena silently thanked him for not being more descriptive of his titles, her hands itching at her side to throw a barrier up around her skin. The Magister continued, hatred fueling his words and dripping from each syllable. “You’re nothing but a mistake.”

Rathein shifted her weight onto one hip, resting one hand on her hip to assume a nonchalant pose. “And tell me, oh Magister, what does this mark do?”

He sneered at her and Athena could feel his own magic fuming beneath his skin. It slid like an oil within his veins and it sung an eerie song. He opened his mouth to speak but thankfully Felix stepped in: “Father! Do you know what you sound like?”

Dorian entered in from the side, staff at his back, while he looked to his former mentor. “He sounds like the sort of villainous cliché everyone expects us to be.”

The Magister fumed, narrowing his eyes at the newly arrived mage with a scowl. “Dorian. I invited you to be a part of this, but you refused.” He then opened his arms and gestured to the whole room, his voice raising in volume as he grew more confident. “The Elder One has power you would not believe. He will raise the Imperium from its own ashes. The mages will rule once more!”

Fiona interjected, her own aura flaring from her body. “You cannot involve my people in this!”
Felix pleaded, trying to reason with his father. “Stop it, please, give up the Venatori. Let the southern mages fight the Breach and let’s go home.”

Alexius shook his head, whispering under his breath but loud enough so they all could hear. “He said. . . if I could only undo the mistakes at the temple.” He then whipped on his heel, waving his arm over the whole courtroom with a booming voice. “Seize them, Venatori! The Elder One demands the mistake’s life and her alive!”

Athena raised her barrier in response but it was not necessary. Lelianna’s agents had made it through the trench, their blades quickly slicing the throats of the Venatori agents that were about to attack them. One by one their bodies fell to the ground, Rathein’s confidence only growing with each corpse falling as she approached the throne. “Your men are dead, Alexius.”

As Alexius brought out a gnarled talisman and began to channel his magic through it, Athena panicked, her hands reaching out for the Herald. “Be strong, Rathein!” The green magic of the amulet expanded, growing in size in a swirling sort of vortex. Dorian shouted “No!” while throwing his own counter attack of the spell. The talisman distorted, it creating a portal that sucked Dorian and the Herald into its depth. It then disappeared with an audible pop, it leaving the rest of the party alone in the room with Alexius. He smiled, feeling victorious in getting rid of the Herald and his former student. He turned towards the remaining three, his hands summoning a dark magic that filled Athena’s stomach with dread. “You see, the Elder One’s will must be followed. He will not be undone. His plans will succeed. And that is where you come in, Fade-Walker. . . “

She backed up towards Bull and Solas, fear setting in on her features while she was somehow entranced within the Magister’s gaze. How long did it take for Rathein to come back? In the game this part took about half an hour, hour most, to complete. Did that mean they had to wait that long for the portal to reopen? Alexius’ spell fired, her barrier shattering in the air as she struck back at him with flames. “I don’t give a fuck what your Elder One wants, but I’m not going anywhere with you!”

He prepared another spell, the inky blackness of his magic dripping from his hands like ichor. He was not fazed by her flames, he acted as if they tickled against his Tevinter robes. “That is where you’re wrong. You may have gotten my guards but I have rid the world of the pest that is your Herald. If I have you. . .” The sound of lightning cracking erupted at his side, his gaze suddenly jerking towards the source while snarling in anger.

The portal that had just disappeared reopened, Rathein and Dorian walking through it like they had never left. The Herald had a veil of anguish on her face, but was able to push it down before looking to the Magister with a smug grin. “Is that all you had, Alexius?”

The Venatori leader, now stricken with shock at the sudden failure of his plans, fell to his knees.
Defeated slumped his posture forward as members of the Inquisition captured him and took him outside. Dorian commented “Glad that is over with!” as a slew of new soldiers marched into the castle, holding their formation as a familiar figure walked into the castle in between them.

Instantly Athena dropped to one knee, bowing in respect as King Alistair entered. She hid a frown at the absence of her character, Queen Rose Cousland. From the hints given in the game, she was somewhere in Thedas researching a cure for the Call of the Grey Wardens. Alistair walked with such an obvious authority that the rest of the party followed her example in bowing or nodding their heads, except Rathein. He ignored her at first, his face furious as he turned towards Fiona. “We are here to discuss your abuse of our hospitality, Fiona. When we offered the mages sanctuary, we did not give you the right to drive them from their homes!” Fiona pleaded with them but it wasn’t enough. It broke Athena’s heart to see it, considering the hidden relationship between the elf leader of the mage rebellion and the King of Ferelden. Fiona was an accomplished enough of a woman she personally didn’t see the downside in exposing her relation to the now King, but politics were beyond her scope of practice.

The sentence from Ferelden? Exile. Athena flinched in her kneeling position, pushing up to slowly stand and walk next to the Herald as she offered to form an alliance with the mages. The relief at such a suggestion was felt around the room, Fiona smiling and nodding in thanks to the Herald. For a moment, things felt right. Rathein and Dorian had survived and thankfully Alexius wasn’t able to complete his plan with either of them. She was lost in her thoughts, ignoring the King as they left with his party. It did her heart good enough to see him healthy, happy despite the current situation. Hopefully he and her first character wouldn’t get dragged into the whole thing. The Inquisition soldiers moved to follow behind them when Rathein spoke up: “Can you all give us the room? I need to speak with the Fade-Walker privately.”

She used my title? Athena looked to her with an arched brow but her friend wouldn’t even flinch. The soldiers all left, Bull and Solas giving them soft smiles of victory before shutting the doors behind them. Moments passed by, the silence spreading thick between them. She could feel that her pulse was beginning to race, her voice shaky with nerves as she asked: “What happened, Rathein?”

Crack.

The punch came unexpected, striking her across the right eye as it whipped her head to the side enough to cause her body began to fall. The Herald caught her with a fistful of the front of her robes and shirt, holding her up with one arm while screaming in her face, hurt soaking her words. “You knew! How the fuck did you know what would happen?!”
Confession

The punch left her dizzy.

She stammered, trying to find words, but the next punch caught her opposite jaw. Blood spurted from her mouth onto the floor on the side, a small groan coming from her lips as she tried to catch an ounce of air. She rolled her neck towards her friend... who was crying while holding her, her hand raised in preparation to strike again. “You knew!”

Athena stilled, her mouth dry yet soaked in blood while she thought of how to respond. “What?” This time it was a slap to her opposite cheek, it stinging like a shock against her face. The Herald must have started using magic in her strikes since she could see evidence of small sparks dancing across the skin of her fingers.

“I do you know where that portal took me? The future. A horrid, dark, gruesome future where this Elder One-!” She screamed, raising her fist and punching Athena again. She was now helpless to respond, her hands falling lax at her sides. Rathein sobbed, her face a mixture of rage and absolute sorrow. Her grip on her shirt stayed tight but it was shaking in time with her sobs. “You were dead.”

She tried to roll her neck to look at her but felt dizzy doing so, blood dripping down her face from the first assault. Her friend continued, her words heavy with the recent memory. “Solas... he killed you. He said you asked him to, begged him to because of what you knew.” Rathein shook her so that their gazes would meet. Athena could already feel her eyes swelling but she fought, meeting the icy blue gaze of the Herald of Andraste. “He said you knew our fates. Prove it to me.”

Athena remained silent so Rathein shook her by the front of her clothes. “Prove it to me, damnit! You owe me that much.”

She held their gaze, tears forming in her eyes as well as she released a deep sigh. It caused her body to slump in her friend’s grasp, the burden of her knowledge finally unwinding her. “Empress Celene will be murdered.”

*Slap.*

Her head whipped to the side but she continued, her voice breaking with every syllable. “There was a demon army.”
Slap.

“They gave their lives for you.”

The Herald fell to her knees, bringing Athena down with her while she did it. Tears flowed down both of their eyes but Rathein bristled, sending a shock of lighting into her body. “Why didn’t you say anything? How could you remain silent as I went through that? Stay strong, you said... right before I disappeared. How. Did. You. Know.”

Athena was finally released from her grasp, falling forward onto her knees, head rolling around like a doll’s. It was difficult to find her words as darkness threatened to consume her at the edges of her vision. “I... was pulled into the Fade from my home. I’m not from this world. Not Thedas, not the Fade, not this. I come from a land with no magic, no dragons... She raked her hands on the magnificent rug below, trying to find some purchase to clutch onto while she continued, her voice slowly raising in volume. “I knew of this world. I... could watch it from where I was. I have seen things happen but never in my wildest dreams did I think I would be sucked into it.”

They sat in silence for a moment, both of their breaths ragged as the information buzzed between them. Rathein sucked in a gasp her eyes widening in realization, lightning bouncing from her fingertips to the surrounding area. “You have flown through the sky... you see the future...” When Rathein went to strike her again Athena drew her staff to block the spell, her brown eyes suddenly bright with her own magic that was ready to burst under the surface.

“How could you lie to us like that? To me?”

They both stood in front of one another. Athena wavered in her posture but held her staff in front of her. At her will a barrier rose skin-tight and with the aid of her ring, it danced along her skin to the beat of her racing heart. Rathein drew her own staff, summoning a barrier with an easy wave of her hand. “Why didn’t you say anything!” She snapped her staff forward, a bolt of lightning sparking out between them.

Athena caught it with the hooked blade of her staff, growling at the attack while taking a step back. Blood coated her face like a mask, dripping from her jawline onto the ground. “What did you expect me to say? I had just been literally dragged from my world and thrown into the Fade: a place with demons preying at me from every corner. I barely had any way to defend myself and was fighting for my life while trying to find a way out!” Her voice raised, flames coming to life at her hands while she threw a small fireball towards her friend. It was blocked effortlessly but she continued. “I am then thrust into some ritual where every cell in my body is set on fire just because they did not understand me. I had barely come to terms with my situation when Lysette purged my
mind, body, and soul with her magic. Do you know what that feels like, Rathein?"

This time she was the one to summon forth lightning, it swirling around the top and shaft of her staff. It sparked outwards in a spiral, hitting a few of the columns before finally hitting the Herald’s staff. “No, not you. Poor Lady Trevelyan, trained in a Circle that allowed her to visit Daddy on the weekends while the other mages starved in their cells!” Another fireball, this time it splintering her friend’s barrier. Blood dripped down into her mouth but she continued, her voice now a desperate scream.

“You! You have something that can actually save the world! You are surrounded by people who only wish to serve your every waking command! But me – me!” She pounded a hand against her chest, fighting to maintain Rathein’s gaze. Her friend had stopped fighting back, her face drenched with sorrow and grief. She dropped her staff to the side while walking towards Athena, who was not ready to accept her sympathy. She continued fighting.

“I have lost my family, my friends, my entire world! And you ask how could I not tell you.” Rathein pushed through her barrier, wrapping her arms around her as she collapsed into her grip. Athena allowed it, reaching up and grabbing at her own hair while turning her head to the side. “I’m so sorry.” They both broke together, tears and blood mixing together in one another’s clothes. It went for what felt like hours but soon they were facing back to back sitting on the floor taking in the silence in the middle of Redcliffe’s throne room.

Rathein offered her a healing potion so they both sipped on one, appreciating each measured bit of silence. She reached back, feeling for her friend’s hand before squeezing. “How are we going to explain this to the others?”

Athena was shocked, trying to retract from her hand but failing. “We?”

The Herald laughed, something that was a mixture of hurt and hope. “I am still your friend, Athena. We can’t go through this alone. I have your back, even with all of this shit. That is, if your stubborn ass will let me help you.” The humor brought a pained laugh from her lips, her body shaking with the motion until they were both laughing, the sound echoing from the inside of the castle.

Athena finally conceded, shrugging while sighing. “Let me worry about what to say. I am not the biggest of the worries. You have to close the Breach and then . . . a lot more to avoid that future from coming true.”

Rathein took this in, humming in acknowledgement before a sly smirk came to her lips. “Say,
Athena?"

“Yeah?”

“Do you really know what Cullen sleeps in at night? I took him for a foot-longed jammies kind of guy.”

Back in Haven the Herald had reserved the tavern for Athena to make her explanation. There had been rumors going through the party but nobody was brave enough to ask. Solas had returned to being his normal reserved self and he was nowhere to be found in the Fade when she searched for him. Dorian had joked about how the shiner she sported for a week made her look tough but that was all the prying the normal talkative mage did. The group gathered, sitting in their respective bar stools while looking up at the Herald with mixed expressions on their faces.

Rathein took a deep breath in, assuming a posture of authority before starting. “I’m sure you all have questions after the commotion we caused in the castle. I’ve briefed the Council on what I learned in my trip to the future but there is something I, well, we want to tell you.” She jerked her chin and gestured for Athena to come stand up beside her.

Athena took a deep breath in, summoning every ounce of bravery in her stomach, before walking up and standing by the Herald’s side. She fought to keep her voice from cracking, her eyes from tearing up, and her hands from shaking. Most of them were trained warriors and some of them spies. Honesty was the key here, and she needed to show enough to be convincing. “I know there have been questions of my origin. Where I come from, why I was an untrained mage, and why I tend to have a lot of gut instincts about things.” She swallowed a dry rock of nerves in her throat only to feel Rathein’s hand on her back supporting her. “The truth is... difficult. I’m not even sure if you will believe it. But I am not from here.”

Varric snorted, obviously unamused but still curious. “Oh really?”

She smirked at him for a second before her face fell back into a blank canvas, continuing. “I was torn from my world. It’s not a part of this place. Consider it a different plane and absolutely different in every way. I was coming home from work when a...” She paused, her gaze flicking to Solas momentarily before moving on. “A strange creature met me at my door. It sucked me into a portal, similar to a rift, and suddenly I was in the Fade. My world does not have magic. It does not have elves, Qunari, dwarves, any of this.” This seemed to get a reaction out of the bunch, Vivienne
turning her nose over while whispering “abomination” under her breath. Cassandra went to raise her voice in question but Rathein silenced her with a gesture. “Let her talk.”

She looked to the ground, finding her composure while trying to find a way to get through the most unbelievable point. “This world though, is still familiar to me. I know each of you, in a way. I was able to watch your stories, going back as far as the Fifth Blight. I also was able to watch what happens next, which is how I knew what the Herald saw when she went with Dorian into the future.” The Tevinter mage raised an eyebrow as he sat in the back of the group, his arms crossed over his chest. He did not frown like many of the others, he just listened and tried to process it all. Thankfully he was one of the more open minded ones but it was still nerve-wracking to feel every eye, including his, dissecting her from across the bar.

There were more questions but she shook her head. “I cannot reveal everything about your future to you. I do not want to derail your fates and send us into some sort of alternate reality that even I can’t help you in.”

There was silence among them, every eye on her. It was Cassandra that spoke up, her brashness and bravery speaking through. “Prove it.”

She looked up quickly, meeting the Seeker’s gaze with an interested stare. There was anger in her gaze, but there was also something . . . yearning? Yearning to have the right answer. Yearning to have something solid to believe in. The rest of the group seemed to agree with sounds of acceptance so with a deep breath she started. “I won’t divulge too much so I don’t reveal anything you don’t want.” Her brown gaze flicked to Cassandra first. “The Knight Captain.”

She took a step back, eyes wide in shock at realization that Athena was mentioning a favorite character of hers from a rather racy series of Varric’s but soon she fell silent, her eyes falling to the floor. She then looked to Leliana. “Marjolaine.” The Spymaster did not flinch nor falter, but there was the slightest change in the weight of her eyes that gave her the acceptance she needed to continue. Her eyes glossed over the Qunari and he made a move like he was going to talk but Rathein snapped her fingers at him and then sliced her hand across her neck, a signal to get him to shut up. He submitted with a growl, crossing his arms over his chest while sinking back into his chair. Athena then looked to Josephine, eyes sympathetic as she softly said: “Fortune.” The Ambassador shifted uncomfortably in her posture as her gaze targeted Cullen next. The words were falling from her lips softer now, pain mixing in with her words as each personal confession brought hurt to her expressions. “Headaches.” She flicked her gaze to the floor and sighed, not being able to look him in the eyes. There was only one more person she needed to convince in her mind, the others were a little kinder and more open to persuasion. Finally, she then looked to Vivienne, who seemed the most confident that she wouldn’t be broken. Before she could speak, Athena almost whispered: “Wyvern.”

The room was silent and nobody wanted to meet her gaze anymore. She looked to each of them,
and finally rested on Solas. He sat with his legs crossed, his cold gaze meeting hers in challenge. Her jaw fell slightly open as she tried to wet her lips but failed. He almost egged her on, waiting for what she had on him. Wolf. Closing her eyes, she cursed herself mentally before asking: “Does anybody else want me to continue?”

Rathein came up behind her, speaking above the small crowd. “You don’t have to. Look, I know this is a really big thing to swallow.” Dorian smirked at the potential innuendo and the Herald fought not to smile. “But she is still our ally, our Athena. She’s gone through hell with us and is willing to go through everything else, helping us out as she can. I still hold responsibility for her but I don’t have to. We all have our own baggage and secrets but she wants to help!” She took her hands off Athena, who was trying not to look defeated in front of them all.

Bull, surprisingly, looked to both women and nodded with a huff of a laugh. “I don’t have to confirm for the others, but you weren’t lying. I know liars.” She had to keep from smirking considering his Qunari name Hisrad meant liar, but she kept silent for now and allowed them to process the information.

Cassandra spoke first much to Athena’s surprise. “Fine. But . . . it will take some time to earn the trust back. I can only speak for myself. If you are truly here to help us, we cannot afford to not accept.”

The group grumbled in acceptance but then Athena smiled softly, at least meeting Dorian’s gaze since he seemed the less abrasive. “I’ll start off by buying everyone a round of drinks?”

Varric perked up, standing up from his spot while exclaiming: “Make it two and you have a deal, Walker.”

The more frigid and unaccepting members like Vivienne and Leliana left. The rest were cautious but decided they needed liquor more than anything. Cullen was on the way out as well but he pulled Athena to the side, his face pained as he asked with a hand on her shoulder. “You really knew?”

She sighed, putting a hand over his while meeting his gaze. “Cullen. Why do you think I didn’t want you to do the ritual when I first came? I knew you would need to drink lyrium and… I couldn’t do that.” He took a sharp breath in, his eyes widening in surprise. His gaze fell to the floor and it took a few moments for him to realize his hand was still on her shoulder. He withdrew it quickly a small smirk on her lips as he whispered: “Thank you” before leaving the bar and her to the rest of her companions, who were eagerly waiting for her to buy some much needed alcohol.
Trust

They drank together until darkness conquered Haven. The Herald was cozying up next to Bull, who was about five pints in to whatever ale they had in the back of the tavern. Everyone had calmed and was just asking curious questions now like what they had instead of magic in her world and if she knew anything *juicy* about the party members. Sera thought the whole thing was weird but she drank to herself and joked around with Blackwall, who completely understood somebody having secrets and didn’t pry unless spoken to. Athena and him had shared a knowing look where he thanked her for not revealing him with a nod. She smirked, taking a sip of her ale while leaning against the bar away from the group. She figured to give them their space and she needed to cool down from the whole thing. Her heart was still in her throat and it was hard to keep a sip of ale down.

They would include her every now and then in the conversation but for now she was just glad to be a part of the team. Dorian stood up from his position by the Bull and Rathein, pulling up a stool next to Athena with a smile. “Now I have to ask. How did you choose whose secrets you were going to spill?”

She finished off the rest of her drink before responding, wincing as the alcohol began to take effect. These conversations were getting harder to answer. “I went with the ones that would be hardest to convince. I figured they would need to be jarred with something really personal in order to believe me.”

The mage smirked, sipping on his brandy before softening his voice. “Whatever you had on me. . .”

Athena reached over and put her hand on his shoulder, giving him an encouraging smile. “Honestly? You’re already going to have to go through shit being a Tevinter here. It would be cruel of me to add something on that. Plus you have I have to have something to talk about, right?”

He laughed, rubbing this thumb and index finger on his mustache before leaning back in his stool. “You are right about that. I understand though, Athena. I’m the last person who can judge someone for their origins or weird magic. I helped Alexius develop the time magic. . .” His voice dropped, his smile suddenly disappearing from his mouth while he suddenly became focused on finding the perfect grip of his cup.

“Dorian. You are not responsible. Perish the thought.” Her words were beginning to slur but she meant them, reaching forward and taking one of his hands into her own.
He chuckled under his breath, looking up at her with a flirtatious wink. “Now now, Athena, people are going to get the wrong idea about us if we’re already holding hands.”

This made her suddenly feel rebellious, pulling him closer while she whispered into his ear with a grin on her face. “Oh let them talk. *I love* the gossip. I see no harm in having a bit of fun.” In a moment of bravery, she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek while pulling back into her own chair. He laughed, truly laughed while finishing down his brandy.

She felt a small touch of cold run down her spine like a drip of water but she chocked it up to it being the winter environment outside since the door opened and shut with a slam. “You must be absolutely *sloshed.* Let’s get you back to your cabin. You have a very important meeting with the Council in the morning.”

Even with her vision blurred she tried to wave him off. “No, really, I’m fine. You stay here, get to know the people. They’re not. . .all that bad.”

He paused from helping her, smirking while responding: “Even after all you’ve been through you still see the good in them? You’re a patient woman.” She smiled with a simple shrug, pushing back from her bar stool while standing with surprising ease. She waved to the rest of the people in the tavern before pushing outside into the winter cold. It bit at her skin but she was acclimated to it now. Instead of shivering and running between buildings she now found the peace in walking alone in the snow.

She walked down from the tavern, waving at the guards who opened the main gate for her. As she walked her steps became uneven, her gait staggering as she passed the last of the soldier’s tents on the outskirts of Haven. A thick branch caught her foot and she fell forward but was greeted with a warm furred back instead of ice. “What the-“ Her breath caught in her throat as she stepped back, allowing the moonlight to illuminate what was in front of her. The wolf pack had been waiting by her cabin and the large wolf that had caught her was none other than Kain.

The black-furred wolf could not contain his glee, his tail wagging back and forth at such a rapid rate it kicked up snow. He jumped up and knocked her back into the snow, covering her faces in kisses and licks while whining under his breath. Athena wrapped her arms around him, pulling her face into his neck. “Oh my dear! You are so big!” He backed up and stood proudly next to the alpha of the pack who was sitting silently in the snow. She sat up and crawled over to the alpha, giving a small bow of respect before touching her forehead to his. “Thank you, my friend. Thank you for watching over him while I was gone.”

The grey alpha pressed his freezing wet nose into her forehead before turning to the woods with the other five wolves. They didn’t go far, but they were going to allow Kain and Athena their privacy. The pair walked to the cabin when she saw the fire was already blazing on the inside, the light
shining through the windows. In a sobering moment she crouched down and cursed herself for dropping her staff off earlier. Flames flew forth into the palms of her left hand, her right hand gingerly reaching forward and pushing open the door.

The calming heat welcomed her first but then it was followed by a biting cold. It hit her like a truck, sending an instant shudder down her spine while her skin was covered in goosebumps. Solas sat in a chair in her cabin, his back to her as he faced the fire. His aura was unbridled and flowing from him, it lashing out like tendrils coming from his body. Kain stayed close to her side and started a low growl, hackles raised as they entered the cabin with a low prowl. Athena shushed him with a touch of her hand while fighting off a snarl of her own.

“Solas.”

He didn’t stir but his magic withdrew slightly, his gaze focused on the flames while he sat up straighter in the chair. “Athena. How does it feel having that burden off of your shoulders?” For some reason, it felt like an insult but she chose not to give him the satisfaction of a response. Instead she motioned for Kain to jump on the bed next to Solas while she removed her boots by the door. She smiled, seeing the head of a bear that had been fashioned into a cowl while its skin had been sewn into a robe. That wasn’t her main focus as she walked over and plopped herself on the bed, this putting her to the side of the fire and in front of his gaze.

He still didn’t look at her, obviously on purpose as his face remained neutral. She patted the bed next to her and stroked Kain’s head as he lay it protectively in her lap. “The burden of responsibility is still there. It feels nice to not have to lie anymore, but I still don’t like that I hurt my friends, my allies by withholding what I knew.” He rested his hands in his lap, a twitch of his lip grabbing his attention while he cut to the point.

“The Herald said in this future she saw... I killed you.”

She stilled, her breath catching in her throat as he suddenly looked towards her. There was a sadness about his eyes even though his face remained the same, the stormy grey and blue of his gaze pulling a sigh from her. “That... is what she told me as well.”

He shook his head, resting his head in his hands while pulling his aura completely in. “Why would you entrust me to do such a thing?”

Athena reached out for him but retracted her hand, not knowing what to do or what to say. He seemed so grief stricken by the thought it shocked her. Her heart felt as if it were in her stomach being pelted by a million butterflies, her head swirling while she pondered on her answer. “I wasn’t
in that future, Solas, I can’t possibly answer that.”

He hissed, shooting up from his position and standing from the chair in such a motion it was knocked over onto the side. He placed his back to the fire with his hands in fists at his side. “Do not lie!”

In response she rose from the bed, walking over until she was in between the door and him. There was such a subtle pain in his features, his eyes brow furrowed, body rigid with an overbearing sense of control. What about her death angered him so much? He wasn’t in that reality; he didn’t know the circumstances they were under. “Solas... You were one of the first people to not look at me with fear in your eyes when I arrived here. I trust you because you have identified yourself as kind of an outcast, like me.” She leaned her body against the wall and rubbed her hands on her upper arms, trying to restrain herself from just outright hugging him. It is what she would do with anyone else but him – he was too guarded, too shielded.

He let out a shaky breath, his features softening slightly as he looked to her. “It is not often that my... our friend Wisdom does not discuss things with me. You were the first.” In a move that brought a gasp from her lips, he put his hand above her shoulder on the wall, bringing himself in front of her keeping himself an arm’s length apart, capturing her gaze with his. “I think I understand why now. You are different than anyone I have come across here.”

She attempted to respond with humor but almost stammered, her voice raspy and catching in her throat with him so close to her for the first time. “I-I think we covered that with the whole ‘I’m not from this world’ speech.”

He chuckled in a dark tone, the sound rolling over her skin and sending another shudder down her body. “Indeed we did. Even still, I am not used to someone trusting me so outright. In this future, you entrusted me with your secret...” His voice trailed off as he looked to the side, sadness settling back into his features as his mind obviously trailed back to the awful future Rathein had discussed with them.

Athena could feel her pulse in her throat but even still she almost whispered. “I hope I can re-earn your trust one day, Solas.”

He turned back and smiled at her and for a moment they simply held each other’s gazes. She was lost within his, the coolness of his aura sliding over her skin and causing her belly to tighten. With a sigh he shook his head and stepped back, motioning back to the bed. “I see you have no more need for wards with your friends outside. I... will leave you to your sleep.”
He turned and opened the door, pausing before shooting her a shy but wolfish grin. “Perhaps I will see you in the Fade?”

She sighed and pushed him out the door, biting her bottom lip while leaning against her door frame. “Typically when I’m drunk I have a Fade-less sleep. We’ll see.”

He then disappeared into the darkness of the forest and she waited until he was gone from her sight. The moment that happened, she slammed the door and slid down the door frame while shaky hands tried to tuck her wavy locks behind her ears. There was a flush in her cheeks and chest, her breath now coming faster while she tried to find her thoughts. What was that? He seemed so open, so vulnerable. It was odd considering how early in the story it was but she was oddly thankful. There was a tightness in her lower abdomen she could not dismiss and it was something she truly hadn’t felt in months. But Gods he was so close to her.

Kain whined and tried to urge her back to bed, rolling on his back while exposing his belly to her. She laughed while looking up, licking her lips to try and wet them while getting under the blankets with her pup, the heat from her blush and the fire keeping her warm while she transitioned into a deep dreamless sleep.
The next morning, they gathered in the war room. Athena stood next to the Herald with Kain at their side. He was insistent on being her shadow and not leaving anything to chance. Josephine, Cullen, Cassandra, and Leliana stood in their usual positions across from them. The room was tense from the discussion the day before but there was an air of hope. She could help them; she could smooth out transitions and hopefully save lives in the process. The first plan was the Breach.

Cullen looked at his reports before looking up with a confident nod. “The mages have all gathered from Redcliffe and we’re receiving new people drawn to the cause daily. They are ready to help close the Breach at a moment’s notice.”

The rest of the group seemed calm but Athena’s eyes were glued to the small map of Haven. The mine she had told Cullen about had thankfully been cleaned out and now had torches lining the whole area with small caches of potions for the weary miner, or more importantly, the Herald when she would be thrown down there by an avalanche. None of them knew that quite yet, the words were difficult to form and she was having trouble spelling things out without confessing the whole event and potentially changing the larger outcome.

Lost in her thoughts, she didn’t realize the whole group was looking at her, waiting for some indication that they were going the right way. She blinked away the fog of her mind and looked up to them, focusing on Cullen for now since he was the leader of the troops and needed to prepare. Plus, holding his gaze for extended periods of time made him blush and it was fun to get that reaction out of him. “There is going to be an attack following the closing of the Breach. Allow the people to celebrate. They need hope in these trying times so alerting them all of the impending attack would make matters worse.”

Cassandra came in from the side, her hands resting clasped in front of her while she also assessed the map on the table. There surprisingly wasn’t much objection to her suggestion. Perhaps the night before had unsettled them enough to believe her. “An attack? From who?”

Athena rolled her neck and gave herself a moment to think. “They fly without banners. It is hard to say. But they will come through the mountains.”

Leliana, the Nightingale of the Orlesian court, stepped in with obsidian pieces in her hands that indicated her scout’s movements on the map. “I can send out some of my people to provide extra support there.”
Rathein bristled next to her. “They are still people, Leliana. You would basically be sending them to their deaths.”

The spy-master met the Herald’s gaze without faltering. “They know their duty.”

Athena intercepted them with a smirk, shaking her head while pointing to the mountain pass on the map. “Actually, Leliana, pull back your scouts.”

The group didn’t like that suggestion, curses and expletives being murmured under their breath while Leliana simply asked “Why?”

She beamed with a smile, looking down to Kain while ruffling him on the head. “I have my own scouts that won’t draw attention that can signal us when they’re coming close. They will blend in with the environment and can talk to each other. Howls in the night aren’t anything to be suspicious of in these woods after all.”

If she didn’t know any better she would say Leliana looked impressed, placing her pieces in a pile down on the edge of the table she was standing near. “I will call them back for reinforcements within Haven. What else?”

This time she looked to Josephine, her face softening in a silent apology for bringing up her family’s fortune the night before. The Ambassador did not seem to notice or show any offense taken, her quill at the ready to jot down whatever commands there were. “Call for local nobles to donate some goods that won’t perish quickly: salted meats and hearty breads. It won’t hurt to have a supply.” *It also won’t hurt to have good food when they’re traveling in the snow to Skyhold.*

Lastly she looked to Cassandra, earning a nod of acknowledgement from the Seeker. “Get in contact with Solas and some of the rebel mages. This Chantry is the strongest building we have. It would be wise to construct a barrier around it to provide safe Haven for the people in the coming days.” They all sat with their instructions, slowly looking to the Herald waiting for her answer. She was still the official leader after all.

Rathein was still rubbing the morning grime from her eyes, one hand palming her eye while the other looked at the map and all of their movements. “Sounds like a plan to me. We’ll leave for the Breach in a day or so. That should give everyone enough time, right?” There were hums of acknowledgement while Leliana broke off from the group to send ravens to her scouts. It left the pair of the Herald and Athena walking through the Chantry together. Vivienne shot Athena an icy
glare and she returned it with a polite smile.

“Man she does not like you.” Rathein’s voice was playful as she jabbed her elbow into Athena’s ribs.

She chuckled under her breath, tucking a stray curl behind her ear while replying. “It’s understandable. I don’t expect everyone to trust me overnight. You and I were able to hash it out.” This drew an echoing laugh from her friend while she continued. “I can’t do that with each of them. I think I would die, especially going up against Bull.”

At the mention of the mercenary leader the Herald blushed, bashfully rubbing the back of the neck. “Yeah. . . he’s something.”

This time it was Athena who laughed and shoved her to the side with a grin on her lips. “You could not be subtle if you tried.” Something just felt freeing with them finally knowing. There was no pretense, no skipping around thoughts. She still had to choose her words carefully but they at least knew what she was trying to do. And at some points her cheekbone was still sore to remind her to be honest, a scar that the Herald so kindly left her during their duel.

Her friend walked down the stairs to run drills against the Chargers while Athena veered left to talk to Solas about the barrier, and learning how to fade-step because it was a useful tool she wanted to learn. As she walked by a cabin she heard a snarky voice come from behind her. “And how are you feeling this morning?”

Before she stepped into Solas’s line of sight she turned around to see Dorian leaning against the wall of a cabin with one arm resting on his hip. He gave her a knowing smile, looking her up and down with an exaggerated gaze. “I didn’t think you were going to make it to your cabin last night, let alone to your meeting this morning. You must tell me your cure for hangovers.” Athena came up and stood in front of him, their bodies close enough so they could talk under their breath to one another. She knew it would make the people of Haven talk since she was flirting with a Tevinter, but they both knew it was for play. He always had a sarcastic smirk on his face but there was just a knowing look between them that showed she knew he wasn’t actively pursuing her. There was a small comfort in knowing you could be touchy and flirtatious with someone without there being anything deep to it. It made her feel a little bit at home.

Plus, Rathein seemed to be the only one willing to hug her around here so the extra friendly attitude was nice. She didn’t realize how much she missed the small touches from her past life, a sideways hug, a clap on the shoulder, they were little things that left her not feeling so lonely like she did here. “It’s no secret really, just a skinny dip in the lake and you’ll wake right up.”
He laughed, running a hand through his hair while meeting her gaze. “Now that would be bracing. Speaking of bracing, I don’t think he likes me too much.” Athena could feel it too, the subtle cold aura lingering in the air behind her. She had felt it last night in the tavern as well and it was when she was getting up close and personal with Dorian. Well, hmph. Solas couldn’t be interested in her; she wasn’t elvish. Being with her wouldn’t continue on the elven line and help restore his people.

She shrugged, leaning against the wall next to Dorian while giving him a knowing wink. Sure enough, the air got colder but she knew Solas wouldn’t be so obvious as to look at them both. He was probably sitting in a chair reading a book or looking out at the village from his spot outside of his cabin. “Well that’s a shame because what isn’t there to love about you?”

Dorian genuinely smiled, resting his elbow against the wall while supporting his head with his hand. “I know! I can’t believe it myself. You and the Herald are the only ones that know how good you have it with me being around.”

Athena pushed on his chest and knocked him off his balance, shaking her head at him while turning away from him. “I am thankful you’re around, Dorian. Let me know if you need anything or need a drink.”

“After last night? Not for a while. Dinner perhaps.”

She nodded while turning, finally acknowledging where Solas was sitting. He was resting in his chair, eyes closed with his head leaning back against the wall behind him. His hands were clasped in his lap and now his aura was very reserved, almost absent from the air. She assumed he was in the Fade or just pretending to ignore her. She stood in front of him, arching a brow while she looked him up and down. Instead of tapping him or kicking his feet like she wanted to, she brought her aura to her skin and pushed it outwards. In the air she could see it looked like a wall of flame, licking and igniting with every urge from her mind.

It rolled over his skin, this bringing an eye twitch of annoyance from his face. He then shook his head and treated it like it were an annoying insect, his eyes opening to inspect what was happening but seeing her instead. His lips twitched into something of a smile while he waited for her aura to withdraw. “Good morning, Athena. How can I help you?”

She drew her magic back with a wicked grin, unfolding her arms from her chest while pointing back to the Chantry. “We are setting up a barrier around the Chantry to fortify it. I asked Cassandra to recruit you and some of the mages from Redcliffe but I wanted to tell you myself.”

He hummed, nodding while unclasping his hands and resting them on top of his knees. He then
looked to where Dorian was standing with almost a sneer on his lips. “You seem to be comfortable with the Tevinter.”

Athena stood her ground, planting her heels into the snow while shoving her hands into her pockets to keep from balling them into fists. “Yes, we’re becoming friends. Is that a problem?”

He shook his head, making an aloof gesture that was almost like shooing her away. “Just curious, considering of where he comes from, who he was associated with.”

She kept on, frustration now beginning to set into her features while she looked down at him. “Rather a narrow minded view coming from an elf apostate that wasn’t accepted at first either.”

He frowned, sitting back in his chair. Even though he was sitting below her his complacent body language challenged her, made it easier for her temper to heighten. He acted as if he didn’t care but that was a lie, she knew it. She was working exceptionally hard to keep her aura skin deep and instead the flames nearly lit her irises aglow. He replied coolly, his own gaze meeting hers. “An elf apostate, hm? Is that worse than a regular apostate?”

Then the flood gates opened. She groaned and threw her hands in the air, letting them fall to her side while she rolled her eyes. “Seriously, Solas? At any point in our” She gestured back and forth between them, unsure whether to call what they had a friendship or not. “Encounters have I ever given you the impression that I am unfriendly towards elves or anyone for that matter?”

He sighed, shaking his head while looking down into his lap. She kept on him: “And even still. Dorian is from Tevinter. Yes, it is a known fact. That does not automatically make him an evil person. There are good and evil people in every country, in every race. Human, elf, dwarfs, and Qunari alike.”

Solas looked up from his lap, anger alighting his features as he rose to stand from his chair. His height had him tower above her but she did not stand down or back away. “Enlighten me then, since you seem so omnipotent.”

She gave a beat of a pause between them, her voice coming quick and to the point but heated with frustration. “In recent history? Arl Renden Howe of Denerim was a horrid man who was known as a butcher in the elven alienages. The Arishok was a Qunari that tried to start a full on war in the middle of Kirkwall. Paragon Branka of the Dwarven smith caste allowed her own people to turn into darkspawn broodmothers while she ran mad with power.” She paused, leaving elven for last while taking in a deep breath. “Enchanter Orsino became a horrid abomination made of the corpses of his fallen friends and attacked the Champion of Kirkwall. Need I go on?”
She didn’t realize until she stopped but her cheeks were flushed with anger and her breaths short, quick. He furrowed his brows at her, anger hardening his jaw while he was trying to steady his breaths. Eventually, he closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose while letting out an obviously controlled sigh. When he did this she hid her smug grin of victory, stepping back to allow him his space. “I will speak to the Seeker about this barrier. Is that all?”

For some reason his dismissal of the conversation they just had hurt, it feeling like a pang of dread within her stomach. She stepped back one more time and nodded, her hand subconsciously falling down to the top of Kain’s head since the wolf was in a defensive position with his eyes locked on the elf. “That will be all.” Before the tears of anger could form in her eyes she sharply turned on her heel and walked down the stairs. Kain remained for a moment, giving what she could assume was a warning glance with an added growl to the elf before following in her step.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all of the comments! I love having feedback and some idea of what you guys want.
Sparring Lessons Part 2

She ran past with a wave towards Varric’s direction, ignoring him as she continued out through the gates towards the soldiers’ training grounds. Cullen hailed her over with a wave, this drawing a curt and angry: “What”! He winced at her response, this instantly causing Athena to soften and put her hands up in a defensive position. “Sorry, Commander. Someone just got under my skin. That was unworthy of me.”

He sighed and shrugged towards her, motioning towards his troops. “For this upcoming event we discussed earlier...” He lowered his voice, casually glancing around to make sure there was nobody actively paying attention. “Is there anything my men need to specifically prepare for?”

Athena rubbed the back of her neck, looking to the sky for guidance while shaking her head slowly. “I don’t know what I can say without altering things completely. I’m sorry, Commander Cullen.” She looked back to his gaze with an apologetic smile, her hands flopping down and resting at her side.

He nodded, resting his hands on top of his sword while looking back at her. “Nothing to be done then. I’m sorry if I disturbed you.”

She went to turn back towards her cabin but then got a wicked idea. She patted her staff on her back while tapping him on the shoulder. “Actually, Commander?”

“Hm?” He turned back, his face now returning to that of authority and focus.

“Would you mind running some drills with me? I could really hit something right about now.”

He actually seemed surprised by this, chuckling under his breath while patting on his sword. “Let me get something wooden...”

“No no, real sword please. Cassandra trained me with her metal so I think I can take a hit.” Did you not hear how Rathein cleaned my clock in Redcliffe? There was a smile to her face but it was still edged in anger from her fight with Solas.

Kain sat obediently at her side and it took Cullen a moment to even recognize him. “Maker! He has grown. The soldiers were reporting a wolf pack in the area but I didn’t think it was him.” He then
paused, his hands falling from the top of his sword. He knelt down to one knee and looked the wolf directly in the face. A new childlike smirk came up to his face as he glanced up towards Athena. “Can I?”

The look he had and the gentle words made her nearly melt, a blush creeping up her neck while she laughed and gestured towards Kain with an open hand. “Unless you’re asking to pet me it’s not my permission you need. Ask him.”

The suggestion of petting her made him blush, the fur of his armor hiding most of it that was in his cheeks. He then cleared his voice and looked towards the wolf, giving her an eyebrow raised glance first. “Uh…”

“Kain.”

“Kain. Nice to meet you.” He then held open one gloved hand. The wolf looked up towards Athena with a look that simply screamed: “Are you kidding me right now.” It brought a small laugh from her lips while she nodded, gesturing back to Cullen. The wolf then sighed, rolling his eyes and head while walking forward and resting his chin in the Commander’s hand. It softened up both the wolf and the leader of the Inquisition’s troops as he scratched behind his ears and eventually made his way to his exposed stomach when Kain flopped on his back.

“Oh he must like you. He doesn’t do that for many people. “

He laughed, using both hands to give physical attention to her companion. “I have come across Mabari in the past that were ferocious creatures. I’ve always wanted one. Now wouldn’t be the time though.” When it felt like enough for the both of them Kain rolled over onto his side, deciding that now would be the perfect time to take a nap in the sun. Athena laughed, bending down to pat him on the side while gesturing to an open area for the Commander.

He rose and fell into step behind her, slowly unsheathing his sword. She swallowed down a new lump of nerves while pulling her staff from her back. They put enough space between each other while both assuming a defensive stance. Before he hardened into a soldier his facade broke and he looked out from behind his sword. “Are you sure? I don’t want to hurt you.”

His confidence made her laugh, spinning her staff within her hands just to show off for a second. “I’m a big girl. I can take it, Commander.”
Right as the words finished leaving her lips he allowed the playfulness to drain from his face, tightening his grip on her sword while he took a step forward and lunged. She yelped in surprise, pushing back with her feet and bringing her staff up vertically to block the sideways slash he followed up with. She then pushed off his sword, sending him back a few paces while giving her space to think.

He didn’t allow this, instantly readjusting his grip while lunging forward again bringing his sword down in a diagonal slash. She was able to side-step it, snapping her staff to the side to strike against the armor of his chest. He didn’t even give her the acknowledgement of a strike well done, turning on the ball of his foot to lunge at her again with his sword close to his body.

She did the same motion as before, bringing her staff up to block a following attack but instead of being met with a sword, his elbow struck out and knocked the breath from her lungs. Athena winced with a hiss, grinding her teeth while using the force of his blow to be pushed back in the snow. Cullen paused and gave her an apologetic smirk, taking a moment to tighten his gloves before re-assuming his position.

They went back and forth and again Rathein and Varric began to watch. They held hot bowls of soup and silently watched them repeat drill after drill. Cassandra’s training had come in handy but she was still getting knocked on her butt or hit by the flat end of his blade instead of actually cutting her. Athena silently thanked him, using the moment to memorize his stance, where he put his weight on his feet, and which direction he normally came from.

His experience showed in the fluidity of his movements. She knew why so many people looked up to him and how his training was even evident to Iron Bull. As the time went on their attacks became more genuine. He stopped babying her with soft blows and was using the actual slice of his blade in attacks. In return, she began using some of her minor spells. When she came down on his sword, flames enveloped her staff and illuminated his features as he attempted to push up with his weapon. He was almost smiling while they fought, sweat on his brow but there was an invisible focus to his movements. Eventually his physical strength overpowered hers and she was pushed back onto her backside, falling into the snow with a grunt.

Before she could regain her footing the tip of his sword was at her neck and he gave a smirk of triumph. Both of their breaths were coming in pants. She could feel sweat dripping down her neck and what was probably blood dripping down her arm. He had gotten struck on the side of the head with her staff and already a bruise was starting to form but there was a moment where she felt content. He sheathed his sword and offered an arm to help her up. She gripped onto his forearm and pulled, wincing as some of effects of his strikes became evident.

“Are you feeling better?” He asked, looking down with a smile while wiping his brow with the back of his hand. For a moment she had forgotten why she needed to fight. The disagreement with Solas felt like ages ago and the anger was no longer fueling the strikes of her staff. She nodded,
itching to give the Commander a hug but instead she shook his hand. “Thank you. I really am. Can I buy you a drink in thanks?”

He cleared his throat and looked over to his troops, frowning as he noticed some of them were forgoing their duties to watch their duel. “Another time perhaps.” He looked to her, holding her gaze for a moment before nodding and dismissing himself. She sighed in a moment of exhaustion, wincing as the cut on her arm became more and more painful.

“You owe me ten, Herald.”

She whipped her head over to not only see Varric and Rathein. . . but now Dorian, half of the Chargers, Bull, Sera, and Blackwall were leaning against the posts watching them. How did she not see them before? The fight had apparently distracted her well enough. She gave a sheepish and embarrassed wave to them with her injured arm. Dorian wiggled his fingers back at her in return, his other hand open towards the Herald. She groaned and dropped a few coins into his palm which he instantly pocketed.

Bull laughed, drinking from his mug before commenting. “You know, that wasn’t half bad for a beginner.” There was a communal hum of agreement while Athena turned a curious gaze towards the Herald.

“Wait, you bet on me? Against the Commander?”

Dorian laughed, shaking his head while gesturing towards Cullen. “Heavens no, I was betting that he would draw blood. She didn’t think he would be that mean. Nobody here thought you would actually win.”

She gave an over dramatic frown, looking to the superficial slice that bled through her jacket. Rathein jumped up from her position in between Bull and Dorian while smiling at her. “Let me get that for you.” She placed her hands over the wound and flowed her magic into the cut.

Athena felt her arm get warm, the skin stitching itself together. “I didn’t know you knew healing magic.”

The Herald shrugged, motioning towards the tavern. “We were going to grab a drink, do you want to join?”
Athena stretched up towards the sky in a stretch, wincing at her sore muscles and bruises. “Let me take a bath first then I’ll meet you there.” They all waved her off while Varric murmured about starting a game of Wicked Grace. Rathein had sent a messenger to start fetching a bath to be made. It gave Athena time to grab fresh underclothes, linens, and oils before heading to the bath area. Kain followed her dutifully, sitting by the bath whenever she shut the door behind her. She turned with two vials of oil in her hands. “Which one, boy? Mint or rosemary?” She held up the vials to his nose, allowing him time to sniff each one.

He sneezed but then pointed his nose towards the mint. “Good choice.” She dropped a few drops on the surface of the water before stirring it around. The heat dispersed the cool scent of mint in the air, it drawing a happy sigh from her lips as she disrobed and tossed her dirtied, bloodied clothes to the side. She saw where Cullen had struck at her, the bruises already turning a wonderful purple color. The wound Rathein had healed already scarred but she admired the cut proudly. Perhaps he was going easy on her, which he probably was, but she felt like she was getting better at this whole “battle strategy” thing.

She lowered herself into the water with a hiss as the scalding hot water sent an almost itchy sensation up her back. There was a combination of “oohs” and “aahs” until her bottom touched the base of the bath. Kain jumped up and put his paws on the edge of the tub, whining while looking at her. “I’m fine, sweetheart.” He licked a few drops of the water as a reward before laying down by the bath. She took a stone and began lightly scrubbing her skin. It was strange seeing hair on her legs now. She wondered if Vivienne had a tonic for hair removal or if there was a dagger she could use like the men did on their faces. The latter was probably the more probable option but damn she would need a steady hand to do that.

As she was massaging soaps into her hair she thought about what they would do in the next few days. She would slowly put pillows in the bottom of the mine shaft for Rathein to fall on after the avalanche. She would try and find the tunnel that Chancellor Roderick knew of to make sure there weren’t any leaky walls and that their structure was intact. She would continue to train with Cullen since he was a Templar and was trained under their Order. The Red Templars would put up a hell of a fight but perhaps if she knew what to expect it wouldn’t be as bad.

Athena dunked her head underwater, her hands feverishly trying to clean the soap out of it. She had a lot to do in the next few days but she didn’t expect how fast it would go by.

Three days later she woke in her bed with anxiety coursing through her veins. It was the morning of the Breach, which would eventually lead to the rise of Corypheus.
There was a stilled silence in Haven as she walked through with Kain at her side. He could sense it, his hackles raised and gaze stone cold as they met the Herald, Cassandra, and Solas by the stables before heading to the Temple of Sacred Ashes. They all greeted each other with nods of acknowledgement, Solas giving her a particularly icy stare. She rolled it off of her shoulders and looked towards the Breach, lightning striking within the clouds.

The Herald looked at the mark on her hand, fear settling into her features. Athena could only imagine what she was thinking, the burdens on her mind. In an effort to ease her worries she walked up and squeezed her shoulders with both hands, resting her chin on her shoulder as she turned the gesture into a hug from behind. “You’ll do great.”

Rathein rested her head against her friends, taking the small moment of peace before hardening herself into the future Inquisitor that people would look up to. She looked to their party, the mages, and some of the supporting troops. With a gesture of her hand, they were off and walking towards the fallen Temple.

The Breach raged above them as they arrived. It was almost like it knew its impending doom. Athena looked up at it and felt a wave of dread wash over her spine. It was months ago that she fell from that hole. The memories and emotions associated with them all rushed back: the Fade, the exorcism, everything. Her face paled as her grip on her staff tightened. Rathein had determined she should stay up with Cassandra and Solas while the mages worked behind them with their magic.

Fiona had the mages on the upper levels with their staffs drawn. They were ready for the order, their eyes focused on the large tear in the Veil above them. She looked over towards her friend with a cautious gaze and saw that the Herald had her eyes closed. She was praying, or that’s what it looked like, hands clasped in front of her with her head bowed. The mage wasn’t vocally a particularly firm believer in Andraste, but even the faithless needed extra help in times of strife.

When she opened her eyes, it was time.

Cassandra called out: “Mages.”

Solas, with a focused gaze, looked to the group and instructed: “Focus past the Herald. Let her will draw from you.”
Rathein hesitated, taking in a deep breath but she slowly started moving forward. The force of the Breach was too much, that was obvious from Athena’s point of view. It felt like they were deep undersea, the pressure pushing in on their entire bodies. It drew her breath in small gasps but she knew it had to be worse for the Herald who was literally linked to it by the Mark. Pulling her staff forward, she cast a barrier around her friend, struggling to hold its form while she pushed through the torn pieces of the Veil.

Solas glanced at her then gave the mages their cue to start. Starting with Fiona, they all slammed their staffs into the ground and directed their power into the column that led up to the Breach. The sheer amount of power blew past them all like a cutting wind. It invigorated Athena, making her breathing easier but made her nerves feel alive. It was easier to cast her barrier and she pulled on the enchantment in her ring to make it stronger. It caused Rathein to look like a burning sun before casting her Mark up into the sky.

Athena smiled. That was something that would one day be painted on a Chantry wall for future generations to bear witness to. The barrier broke but Rathein persevered, keeping her hand extended towards the heavens. The Mark burst with a bright green light, it looking like a lightning bolt as it targeted the Breach. The Rift nearly writhed in response, lighting the sky with its power. It swelled and grew before finally slamming shut with a sound of thunder roaring through the clouds.

The group was thrown back from the burst, which left her landing on a sharp jagged piece of debris. With a groan she pushed herself to a sitting position, her brown gaze taking in the epic scene before her. The Herald was crouched down, her left hand glowing with the power from the Mark. Cassandra rushed to her side, exclaiming the victory to the crowd. “You did it!”

The mages erupted into cries of happiness. They embraced one another, their eyes looking at the empty sky. Athena sat from her place on the ground and beamed with pride at her friend. She had come from being a prisoner of the Seeker and the Nightingale to being the Hero of Orlais and Ferelden. It was a task that was only capable of being accomplished by her and she stepped up to the plate. Athena hugged her knees to her chest with a grin, allowing herself to remain invisible to the crowd as they walked around her and celebrated.

It was Solas who came and found her, offering his hand to help her to a standing position. She looked up at him with a cautious look, her eyes going back and forth between his extended hand and his face. Does he not remember the other day? He sighed and then gave her a pleading look, which made her almost roll her eyes in response, grasping his forearm with her hand. He pulled her up with ease and led her over to the Herald. Athena noticed his hand stayed on her shoulder in the walk over but she was too distracted with happiness from seeing Rathein’s face to say anything.
The pair embraced each other, tears coming to their eyes. Athena nuzzled her head into the nook of her friend’s shoulder and it took a moment for her to realize that Rathein was actually crying. Strong, bold, hilarious Rathein was crying into her shoulder. She looked around and realized nobody was noticing so she rubbed her friend’s back and continued to hold her until it passed, whispering words of encouragement into their hug.

“You did it, Herald. I knew you could. You just saved so many people!”

The Herald nodded into her neck, rubbing her eyes on her shoulder before stepping back with a bright smile. Athena looked to the rest of the group and gestured towards the exit: “Let’s go home and celebrate our group victory and effort in closing the Breach!”

The mages agreed with another cheer as they began walking towards the path back to Haven. When they were out of earshot Cassandra walked to her side. “What do we do now?”

Athena’s face instantly hardened into one of focus and determination. She flicked her gaze to the Seeker. “I’ll send out my scouts. Tell Cullen’s men to quietly load the trebuchets so they’re quicker to fire when we ring the alarm. Tell everyone else to focus on having a good time. I’ll let you know when to prepare.”

They all nodded but looked grim about it. The happiness of closing the Breach was drained away and internally she cursed herself. . . but there was no way she was going to let it come as big of a surprise as it was in the game. The four of them walked towards the path to Haven where Athena unsheathed her staff and slammed it into the ground. She urged the others to continue on, stating that she needed to do some work. The summoning command pushed outwards in a burst of air, the impulse coursing through the trees and the roots beneath them. Kain was already at her side, waiting by the exit per her order, but he rose to attention and pressed his nose to her palm.

Within minutes the rest of the six wolves arrived. Their eyes were no longer glossed over by magic like they were the first time. They were friends, a pack, and came when their human alpha called. Athena bent down and touched each of their foreheads to her own, whispering small welcomes and words of gratitude. The alpha of the pack awaited orders, sitting back and looking her in the eye.

“Be discreet. Go to the mountain pass. There will be soldiers that feel odd covered in red. Do not attack, just howl out. I will be able to hear you. Once you are finished warning me, run for that mountain clearing behind Haven. I will meet you there. Do not put yourself in danger, my friends. I cannot lose a single one of you. My heart can’t handle it.”

*You’re some of my only true friends* is what she wanted to say. The pack didn’t care about her past.
They knew her heart and knew that her words rang true. The alpha pressed his nose to her forehead, paused for a second, and then turned and began running in the forests. Kain whined softly at her side and she wrapped her arms around him, watching the wolves disappear into the trees.

“They are loyal to you.”

Sneaky bastard. She didn’t turn around to acknowledge the comment, instead she kissed Kain on the side of the head and rose to a standing position before turning onto the path towards Haven. She walked and both the wolf and the other wolf fell into step behind her. The only sound that was between them was the sound of her boots crunching into the fresh snow.

“Is something wrong?”

This gave her pause, a hollow hurt sound like a barking laugh fell from her lips. She paused and turned on the ball of her foot, giving him a slight sideways profile view of her before responding: “You’re kidding, right?”

His face was blank but he arched a brow at her, which elicited an eye roll and for her to keep walking. Kain hung his head low, his eyes constantly glancing to the side at Solas. She could feel that his fur was raised and that he was fighting showing his teeth to the elf. Athena had to smirk at how well her wolf knew her and how he was able to react when she couldn’t. Right now the focus on her mind was Haven and what she needed to do to prepare for the potentially catastrophic event.

“Athena…”

There was something in his voice that gave her pause. They were almost to the outskirts of Haven and so she didn’t want to have a fight in front of the celebrating villagers. Surely Bull had opened a cask already. His Ben Hasserath training would come in handy here because him and the Chargers could have a good time with the people and give them a sense of calm while also being on alert. Taking in a deep breath, she turned towards the fellow mage fighting to keep a passive position: her face calm and her hands at her sides. “Yes, Solas?”

He seemed surprised that she turned around, his eyes widening for a moment in surprise before he returned to his hardened stare. He was reserved, she couldn’t feel his aura pressing in on her like he normally did. He opened his mouth to speak but in a move of frustration she lifted a hand to stop him. Her voice was to the point with an edge of anger. “Look, I’ve said it before. You just blow hot and cold on the turn of a coin and I can’t handle that right now, not today. Until you decide which way you want to be and how you’re going to treat me, I’m going to be focusing on my duties
for the evening. Please fortify the barrier and . . . be safe.” Her voice softened at the last part and she tried not to show the concern in her eyes.

It obviously failed because he softened as well, giving her a slight nod without any sort of verbal response. She turned back towards the village and stopped by her cabin, grabbing quilts and blankets and loading Prince with them to take to the mine entrance. When they got there she saw that Cullen had shut the doors leading to it but upon entering it was well lit and warm. There was still a drop at the bottom of the stairs so she threw the quilts and pillows down in an attempt to soften the Herald’s fall.

She slowly led Prince and Kain down the steps and through the mine. The demons weren’t present yet so she assumed they only showed up after Corypheus had arrived and his power pressed on the Veil. Thank goodness. Despair demons were her least favorite and she probably couldn’t take a few of them on her own. Once they reached the opposing mouth of the mine she tied Prince up a few feet inside of the cave where a torch was lit. Kain whined. He could feel the impending dread that was coating her mind. She licked her dry lips and sighed while hugging both of them in an embrace. “Prince, you need to wait here. Kain, once we hear the call you need to stay here too. I’ll wait with you. Protect each other. I’ll create a barrier around you and place some wards so nobody will get to you. . . but please don’t leave it.”

The animals looked to her and made sounds of agreement. Prince put his side against the cave wall and attempted to drift off into a nap. Kain and Athena stood outside the mouth of the cave, waiting in the cold bitter silence for the scouts to report. They could hear the loud comradery of Haven from where they were. They were dancing around their fires, celebrating the closing of the thing that threatened the swallow the skies. They were happy in that moment and Athena was hardened with the burden of knowing it would all end soon.

Chapter End Notes

Things are going to kind of take off after this chapter! Stay tuned ;)

Thank you still for all of the support, comments, and kudos!
Attack on Haven Pt. 1

An hour, maybe two passed, when a distant pitch caught her attention and pulled her from the trance she had entered waiting for their call. Athena pushed off of the cave wall and ran outside with Kain. A second howl called in and soon the air was singing with their warnings, the vibrations sending a chill up her spine and hitching her breath in her throat. “Stay!” She screamed to her wolf, checking Prince and adjusting that his pack with her books and supplies in it was secure before looking to the barriers and fortifying them with a pulse of her staff. Kain stayed within the barrier but barked at her as she left, his fear and sadness reaching her mind with every cry. Her feet couldn’t take her fast enough as she scrambled up the stairs and around the corner. The guards at the gate gave her a strange look as she pushed through them up the stairs to where Varric normally sat by his fire. Commander Cullen was waiting near the front and his face dropped the moment he saw her and her expression.

“Maker help us.”

She nodded to him, unaware that tears were stinging her eyes as she pointed out past the gates. “Do you hear them, Cullen? We need to start moving. Get the people inside the Chantry NOW; I need to talk with Chancellor Roderick.”

He scowled, gripping the top of his sword hilt while motioning for some of his messengers to start collecting the people. “Why him?”

Athena began her ascent up the stairs, her breath now coming in pained bursts. She didn’t have time to answer him. Every second counted now and getting the path open now could save so many lives. The people would have a safe place to hide within the fortified Chantry and its barrier. The Chancellor was at the front of the Chantry, speaking with a few of the other sisters in their last moment of merriment for what could be weeks. He sneered at her, opening his mouth in preparation for what she assumed was a backhanded lecture on the matter of things. Instead she stopped right before him, keeping her facial expressions focused and controlled while pointing to the the Chantry. “Where is the path in the back of the Chantry?”

He stirred, face contorting into one of confusion and outrage. “How did you-“

Her hands itched with the urge to slap him but instead she gripped him by the front of his robes and pulled him nose to nose with her. Her voice, now almost desperate, grabbed his attention. “No questions. We need it now, Chancellor.” She pushed him away from her then pointed to the Chantry again to reinforce her point.
He touched his fingers to his head, eyes closed while he tried to pull in the thought. “I...think I still remember. I will do as you say, Fade-Walker.”

Athena looked to the sisters he left behind. “Go with him. Make sure it is ready as soon as you can. The moment people start running in here, get them in that tunnel.” The sisters nodded hesitantly but ran after the Chancellor. She turned back and ran through the courtyard, jumping over the small rock wall that was between Threnn’s tent and Varric’s. When she arrived Cullen’s face was white as a sheet as a messenger ran to his side. Josephine, Leliana, and Cassandra had arrived with Rathein trailing from behind.

“Under what banner?” The Ambassador asked, her eyes tentatively looking towards the mountain where rows of torches were now visible.

Cullen paused, looking to Athena as he stated: “None.”

“Shit.” Athena moved past them and went to the gate, pushing the guards out of the way while throwing the doors open with adrenaline-fueled strength. In front of them was a Red Templar, raising his sword but was then stopped by a dagger tip protruding from his chest. The body fell and Athena ran up to the assassin behind him wearing a wide-brimmed hat.

Cole, a young boy with dirty-blonde, messy hair, looked her up and down before almost smiling. “Oh! You’re here to help!”

Athena nodded with a smirk, pointing in towards the Herald and the council. “Help them, Cole. We’re going to need someone to protect them as they travel. You can make yourself not seen; they need a hidden angel like you. Do good.”

He blushed at the compliment before running to the Herald, informing her that the unknown attacker was the Templars. Cole pointed up towards a mountain where Samson and Corphyeus arrived. The blighted Tevinter Magister looked more monstrous in person than the game would allow. Pieces of flesh hung off of his face like a veil, his mouth contorted and gnarled by rot. Anger fueled her, a growl forming low in her throat while she bared her teeth in a snarl. In response she did something that she wouldn’t be able to defend or explain. Just anger. She hardened and focused her gaze on the Elder One, using the mixture of fear and rage in her belly as fuel for an attack. An orb of pure blue fire swirled around her palm and with a knee-jerk reaction she threw the attack towards Corypheus and Samson. It exploded at their feet, causing the traitor Templar to stagger back with his hands raised to protect his face.

That got their attention. The self-proclaimed God walked to the edge of the cliff through the flames
unharmed and stared her down, a sickly smile coming to his face. She thought she heard his voice in her head, rolling through and sticking to her thoughts like poison: “I see you, Fade-Walker.” It gave her the spirit to run back to the Herald and Cullen, panic raising the volume of her voice. “We need to get everyone to the Chantry, now!”

The Commander nodded in agreement, the look of a war-hardened soldier coming to his eyes as he drew his sword. “If we are to survive this we must control the battle. Get out there and hit that force with everything you have.”

He ran to command the troops and she could hear him scream: “Inquisition, with the Herald! For your lives, for all of us!” His men instantly came to his call, their weapons drawn and ready. The respective groups ran to command the trebuchets while Rathein looked to the party who had gathered by the front gates. “Bull, Blackwall, Solas, with me. Everyone else. . . .” The Herald looked to Athena with a half apologetic smile, taking the three men and running to the first trebuchet.

Athena cursed her for leaving her with the rest of the delegations but it would have to do. Clapping her hands together she pointed up to the higher vantage point where Threnn’s tent was. “Varric, Sera, you guys can pick them off from up there. They have red lyrium on their side so they are going to be a beast to take down. Don’t let it touch you and use poisonous ammo if you have it. Sera: Bees.”

Varric cursed under his breath, giving Bianca a pat on the wood before taking off with Sera who was giggling with mad glee. Athena continued on, looking to Cassandra and Vivienne. “The people in the Chantry will need guidance. Help them minimize what they’re bringing and keep the Templars out. Vivienne, you worked with them side by side in the Circle, you are perhaps the only one that knows their weaknesses. Use them.”

The First Enchantress gave her a smug smile at the compliment before turning with Cassandra, who lightly touched Athena’s shoulder and met her gaze before running off with her sword drawn. That left Dorian, who was shaking his head while looking at the mountains. “Leaving me for last? I never got picked during school either.”

This brought a small laugh from her lips as she caught herself giving him a quick, tight embrace. “Come now, I didn’t want to play favorites in front of the rest of them. Guard the front of the Chantry with the other mages. Solas helped to erect a barrier and I know you can keep it going.”

He went to giggle at her use of the word erect to break the obviously growing tension but she playfully smacked him on the shoulder. “Yes, I get it, funny. Don’t die. It would ruin my day.”
He began to run towards the Chantry with a swirl of his staff, shouting back over his shoulder: “Just your day! I’m offended!”

Athena only had a second of solace between leaving her friend and turning to run and help the Herald. She wasn’t sure where she was going to fit in this whole battle but if they fired the trebuchets sooner they could save the villagers from the encroaching Templar force. As she arrived the first trebuchet had been fired, it landing a small but devastating blow to a group of Templars at the front of the assault. Athena covered Cullen’s soldiers as they ran back towards Haven. She waited until they cleared the front gates before she sprinted to catch up the main party. With a wave of her hand, she cast a barrier over the group before falling behind them in step.

Thankfully they looked unharmed but the reality of the situation was settling in. Blackwall and Bull were blatantly avoiding her gaze but Solas and Rathein gave her an appreciative nod at the barrier. The Herald spoke: “We need to get that trebuchet aimed at the mountain. It will trigger an avalanche to slow them down!” Athena nodded, running in time with them to find that the Templars had taken the next trebuchet already. They left their positions and began attacking immediately with wordless cries of battle. The red lyrium twisted their voices, giving them almost a polyphonic tone that broke through the air. A venatori mage on the side levitated his spell book and began laying frost glyphs on the ground as traps. To counteract them Athena spun with her staff and launched a set of fireballs to set off the glyphs so none of them would be harmed. The last fireball was then aimed the mage himself. It knocked him back and then he was paralyzed by a sudden column of frost. Solas was at her side, clenching his fist to will the ice to shatter the Templar's body to the ground in a pile of debris.

They both turned to the remaining Templars and threw barriers on their party members. Rathein was in the midst of it, denying the mage’s place at the outskirts of the battlefield to fight alongside Bull and Blackwall. Her storm magic made it easy to stun people in place, allowing her warriors to take advantage of their frozen state and move in for the killing blows. There were still Templar soldiers on the side and with a strange, unified deep breath Solas and Athena began to fire off their spells.

They were polar opposites in their elements: fire and ice in the air as their spells fell down upon their opponents. At some point in the battle, there was a click within the center of her chest. Time slowed around her and it became painfully obvious how in sync her and the mage next to her were. Their bodies moved with the current of the veil, their spells cracking in unison and the magic weaving through their bodies like it was only air. They were both completely aware of everything happening on the battlefield and there were no overlapping barriers or redundant glyphs. Between the two of them their teammates were protected and by the end of it the sensation left her breathless.

It was like the magic moved through her, not waiting for her command but following her will. It knew where it needed to go and like the attack towards Corypheus, was driven by the language of her emotion. The last Templar fell and Rathein began to turn the wheel to prime the trebuchet. Only this time Bull came up behind her, using his large physical strength to turn it faster and launch the
weapon into the mountains. While he was loading it up, Athena ran to the boulder loaded in the back and quickly traced a fire glyph with her fingertip onto the rock’s surface. When the rock was launched, it landed with an explosive force on the side of the mountain. The avalanche shook the ground and while the people began to cheer Athena threw her arms open and brought up a barrier behind the trebuchet and in front of her allies.

It made the blow of the dragon’s flames that much less.

Their bodies were thrown to the ground as the Blighted creature flew overhead. She could see its broken wings held together by frayed tendons and bone, its body leaving a streak of tainted magic wherever it touched. There was a sick presence about it and it brought a sense of dread into the air. Rathein rose first but then turned and punched her shoulder with actual force, lightning sparking in static on her blow while leaving Athena’s shoulder numb. “Really?! A fucking dragon!?”

She turned quick, seeing the flash of anger on her friend’s face and responding with her own. “Hey! I didn’t bring it here! How do you subtly say there’s a fucking dragon coming?!”

The Herald scoffed and began to run back towards the gate, taking down templars in her path. Rathein must have been infuriated because she was too angry to focus on spells and instead used the spike at the bottom of her blade to slice through enemies. They passed Harritt who was trying to get into his house, his fruitless kicks not even budging the crates that were barricading the door. The group slowed down but Athena screamed: “Go! I got it!” Bull gave her a nod and led the group forward while she used a blast of flames to shatter the boxes and the door off of its hinges. The blacksmith gave her a curt nod, grabbing his family blacksmith’s hammer off the desk inside and running through the gate and past the Herald.

Athena was the last one through Haven’s entrance, Cullen pushing her through while he shut the wooden gates himself. The dragon’s roar thundered overhead, the earth-shattering sound making them pause while the Commander looked to them all. He too seemed to avoid Athena’s gaze. “Most of the villagers are in the Chantry and ready to go. There are still a few stragglers but we have to distract that beast or the barrier around the Chantry won’t hold. It’s the only building that can hold it off.” He began to run up the stairs, turning on one and looking the Herald in the eye. He was focused, read to take on the challenge, but his voice also sounded defeated with the presence of Corypheus’s pet experiment. “At this point, just make them work for it.”
Cullen turned and ran towards the Chantry, sword drawn and gaze focused. Athena wanted to wish him luck as he left but instead she closed her eyes and took a deep breath in. In the game the next set of quests were all time-sensitive missions in saving the villagers. She had a sinking feeling in her gut that they would all need saving as soon as possible and they wouldn’t have a spare second to lose. She was trying to organize how to do such a thing when the Herald screamed at her: “ATHENA.”

Her eyes shot open and looked at her friend who was nearly fuming with desperation and determination. They were awaiting orders from her, weapons drawn. Without a word of command, she turned and ran to the right where she knew Lysette was under attack from the templars. They were coming over the fences like some sort of zombie hoard except their attacks were coordinated and made from a foundation of battle strategy. Lysette, the Templar who had performed the exorcism when she had first arrived, was screaming and holding her own against the red lyrium infected enemies. Athena ran to her side and blocked a sword attack, giving the overwhelmed solider a nod of confidence.

There was a silent conversation between them. Lysette looked with a panicked but thankful gaze, tears forming in the corners of her eyes as she looked to the mage who just saved her life. Athena smirked in response, nodding in a way that communicated forgiveness and acceptance. From there the two took off as a pair until the rest of the party arrived to finish up the Templars. As Lysette was running off she grabbed her shoulder, pointing to one of the houses that was on fire. “There is someone stuck in there. Climb the ladder and drop down from above. There is debris blocking the door that you will need to clear. Do you have the strength to do it?”

The Templar nodded, her eyes following Athena’s gaze. She ran off with her sword drawn to the location where Seggrit was trapped under some fallen lumber. As she faded off in the distance she looked to the other members, who were all still surprised with the amount of specific knowledge she had. Rathein was growing more and more hesitant as the battle went on; it was as if her trust was fading with every encounter, every potential life that could have been lost or saved. Athena cursed through gritted teeth while motioning them upstairs. “There will be a battle here. We need to defeat them here before we continue on and get overwhelmed.”

Sure enough, where Varric’s tent was suddenly arrived a swarm of red templars and their odd creations that had red lyrium crystals protruding from the skin. Everything felt so wrong about them. She now understood what Cole meant about the red lyrium singing something off. It was a vibration that she could feel in her mind, a sickly sweet song luring her to come closer and touch it. She was sure it was how siren’s sounded to the sailors of old making their way through the high seas. In response she cried out in frustration, throwing her hands outwards and expelling six shots of flames from her chest. The attacks bombarded a set of two templars who fell down to the ground with a quick death.
With every kill she could feel herself becoming numb to the sensation. The stench of blood and scorched flesh stained her nostrils and it put a pit in her stomach to see so many corpses. There were a few Inquisition soldiers littered on the ground with the templars and she wished she had time to identify them so she could help send letters to their families. Athena headed them to the tavern next. “Wait here and hold off the Templars! I need to go get Flissa. Bull, keep them from coming in. The foundation is really unsteady!”

The Qunari nodded, positioning his body in the doorway while she ran inside. The sound of swords clashing and spells firing put a burst under her feet as she ran into the flaming building. The flames were suffocating, putting a pressure on her skin as she ran, jumping over burning debris to find the barmaid trapped under a flaming piece of wood. The environment were already attempting to catch fire her skirts but Athena used her magic to pulse the flames away, helping the woman up. They ran just in time for the roof to collapse, waiting for Bull to finish off the last Templar before she pushed Flissa out. “Run to the Chantry. Do not let anything stop you!”

The woman couldn’t even turn around to thank her. Panic transfixed her features as her body took off into the darkness. With every villager the expressions on her companion’s faces were becoming colder. Athena was trying to fight tears but there were still three more people that needed to be saved and the next two were going to be difficult. As they ran up, she turned towards the elf on her right and commanded: “Can you cast a barrier around the pots? They’re going to burst.”

He nodded and looked to the pots, quickly throwing up his arms to try and contain the flames that were already starting to bust. Athena ran to Adan’s side, screaming at the others. “Help her!” Minaeve was crying out under the cart of pots, the flames slowly encroaching on them. Blackwall and Rathein helped her up while Bull pulled Adan to his feet with a quick and rough movement. The healers took off for the Chantry just in time for the pots to burst into flame. Solas’s barrier helped contain it but the pressure was too much; the pottery pieces flew out and a fragment sliced the side of Athena’s cheek.

She hissed in pain, putting a glove to her cheek to see it stained crimson. Her pulse was already within her throat and the sight of the blood made her head dizzy. It wasn’t just her blood; it was the accumulation of all of the blood. The stench was everything and it was exacerbated by the flames. The smoke was aggravating her throat and it felt like everything was closing in around her. Frozen by panic, she almost fell forward but put her hands on her knees instead. Rathein bent down and looked to her with brows furrowed but face blank of emotion, her voice coldly cutting through the roar of the fall of Haven. “Who. Else.”

Athena pointed forward, her words coming out like a whisper as the soot and flames irritated her vocal cords. “Threnn. Chantry.” The four took off, leaving her to recover by herself. The only person to give her a second glance was Solas but she waved him off to go help the Herald. Threnn was the last one then they would be able to regroup in the Chantry with the others and decide where to go from there. Athena stood up and looked at the destruction of the city. All of the buildings except the Chantry were lit aflame. Her eyes glanced to the Chantry; the barrier had begun flickering and it was starting to splinter and crack.
She ran with her staff in her right hand pumping past her allies and standing on the edge of the barrier. She summoned her magic to her staff and slammed it into the ground, re-enforcing the barrier with her own mana. The surge of the spell brought a wordless cry from her lips, the strength of it bringing her to her knees while she clutched her staff. She looked up and saw that the last enemy Templar fall. Chancellor Roderick came up behind her, strong in his stance and without a fatal wound that was there in the game. “Come in! The Chantry is your shelter!”

He looked to her with a grateful glance, noticing that she was keeping the barrier up. The group of four ran in behind her and she noticed one of them dropped a small lyrium vial at her feet. The residue of a cold aura in the air gave her the answer but she drank it regardless. With the burst of magic in her veins she was able to give the barrier more time, turning and walking into the Chantry breathless and empty of energy. The whole group looked the same way, their postures bent over while their faces were drained. “Herald, that dragon has stolen back any time we might have saved.”

Athena could feel the Commander’s glance on her when he said it but she chose to ignore it. The fealty of the situation had set in on her. The wounded in the Chantry, the cries of the family’s grieving over their lost loved ones, it was all too real. In the game if she couldn’t save someone she reset and loaded a new save file until she could do it right. Here, they only had the one chance and lives were on the line if they didn’t get it right. She put her head in her hands while crouched down, trying to regain her breath while taking in everything around them.

Cole spoke up, his voice soft but sure. “I’ve seen an Archdemon. I was in the Fade but it looked like that.”

Cullen snapped back, his face contorting into anger. “I don’t care what it looked like. It helped cut a path for that army! They’ll try to kill everyone in Haven.”

The young boy looked up at them. “The Elder One doesn’t care about the village. He only wants them.” He looked to Rathein and Athena and that only increased the weight of the guilt in her stomach. She was still involved in all of this. Every curse word imaginable fell silently from her lips as she cursed whatever being or power brought her into this world. She was one more liability, one more person the Herald had to keep safe.

“If he wants me and it will keep the villagers safe. . . “ Rathein’s voice was cold but compassionate, her eyes looking to her party members for more opinions. Athena sighed while standing shaking her head back and forth while looking to her friend, or she hoped she could still
call her that after the attack on Haven.

Cullen interrupted their silence with more battle strategy. “There is no way to make this whole thing survivable. The only thing that slowed them was the avalanche. We could turn the remaining trebuchets, cause one last slide.”

The Herald looked to the ground then up to Cullen. “If we bury the enemy... we bury Haven.”

The Commander didn’t falter. “The majority of Haven are in the tunnels already, waiting for the clear. Everything else is just material possessions. At least the people will be safe.”

Athena ached a brow, noticing there was slightly more hope in his voice and that the dialogue had changed. There no longer was the overarching fear of death; it was just survival. They all thought for a moment, their minds full of different strategies and options. Rathein looked to Cullen: “Will the tunnels hold until we can fire the trebuchet?”

He nodded, his lips twitching into a frown. “Yes, but what of your escape?”

They were silent, Athena holding her tongue so she wouldn’t be smug and sound like the hero saving the day. Right now that wasn’t her. The true Hero was the Herald who was the face of hope in all of this. She nodded and looked to Athena, blue eyes burning like flames in the Chantry’s light. “Let’s go. Everyone drink some potions and prepare. We will be the force to give them time and we’ll fire that trebuchet our damned selves.”

As they went to leave Chancellor Roderick reached out for them: “Herald, if you are meant for this... if the Inquisition is meant for this. I pray for you.”

Cole smiled at their side, looking to Athena who was finally beginning to give a tired smile as well. For some reason it sounded much bolder when he wasn’t on his death bed because the normally greasy Chantry member was starting to realize that perhaps the Herald had been divine-sent. Although it wasn’t inherently true in Athena’s mind, he could be a voice that turned the tide of the people. Rathein and the other three opened the doors and ran into a group of Templars while Athena took that moment to grab Cole’s shoulder.

He turned, his features curious while he read her mind. Once Solas comes back, have him and Bull collapse the tunnel. “But what about you?”
Athena grit her teeth and turned to the side. “I don’t know, but I pray that we’ll be fine. Help them, Cole. You know how!”

With staff in hand she turned on her heel and fell in step behind Solas, weaving a set of fire glyphs and flicking them out onto the battlefield for Templars to step onto. Minute by minute they cleaved their way through the forces, approaching the trebuchet that would soon lead up to their first confrontation with the Elder One.
Corypheus.

The final trebuchet was before them and Athena could barely hear anything going on around her. The roar of her heartbeat blinded her senses and sent her magic into a fury. It moved off of her like a flame, nearly uncontrolled and wild with her emotions. This came in handy for them since she was firing off spells left and right but it was beginning to lay waste to her mana supply. Even basic attacks felt like she was running a mile, her muscles growing sore and sweat beading on her brow. Rathein was desperately attempting to turn and aim the trebuchet. Athena stood watch by her, casting barriers and keeping Templars off of the stairs that led up to the trebuchet wheel. Solas stood on the other side of the battlefield, keeping in rhythm with her and filling in spaces where she missed or catching enemies that were in her blind spot.

The battle was only minutes long but it dragged on for hours. They were allowed a second reprieve, a solitary moment where they all drew a deep breath in before the Knight Captain, the mother of all monstrosities, stumbled into the area. It towered like a giant, red lyrium crystals growing from his body like a cancer. There was hardly anything human about him anymore. There were remnants of a Templar helm covering his skull that was tainted red by the blighted gem. When it roared, it sent all of her hairs on end. It raised its large hand like a club created straight from red lyrium. The warriors began attacking its legs while it turned to the next closest thing.

Athena didn’t give herself time to strategize, instead she pulled her staff back and shot her opposite palm out, directing a pulse of raw magic towards Solas to knock him out of the way of the club. He was shot back a few feet, rolling on the ground before stopping on his side, a momentary wince flashing across his face. The club came down barely a foot in front of him, his eyes going wide at the monster’s size and quick movements. It was obvious the group was getting tired. They were becoming slower to react and their stamina stores were low. She turned with a snarl towards Rathein, who was barely able to turn the wheel but kept on going to load the trebuchet. “Keep working. We’ll take this bastard down.” The Herald grunted in response, sweat dripping down the sides of her face while she winced with every turn of the wheel.

Everything was becoming harder and Athena knew the next few weeks would only be an uphill battle but this would be the worst.

The Knight Captain gestured out with part of his corrupted hand, a large wall of spikes jutting out and trapping her, Blackwall, and Bull on the inside. She cursed to herself, casting a glyph beneath the creature before going to the side of the wall. The wall seemed to have an inverted curve, and suddenly she got a clever idea. Spinning her staff in one hand, she began to run up the side of the wall, using the smaller spikes to give her feet purchase until she reached the end and the highest point. Then, she relied on her will and body to do what she did before. She clenched her fist, drawing forward an attack with the last of her mana in the center of her palm. The blue and white flame burst to life at her will, pulsing with the beat of her heart as she threw the attack directly into the face of the creature.
It burst and caused it to fall backwards, giving Iron Bull the chance to sink his great axe into its face while Blackwall cut through its chest and cleaved at its heart. The attacks were close to butchery, the creature crying out in mixed voices that sounded like something from a horror movie. Athena shuddered, setting fire to the corpse when the warriors were over.

The trebuchet was prepped and ready to fire, Athena turning and screaming at the group. “Everyone, move!”

They didn’t even hesitate to begin running, the roar of the dragon pounding down on their backs from above. Athena turned to see Rathein jumping down from the pedestal, her body obviously weakened from the battles they had fought. She’s not going to make it. She ran towards her friend, pulling her along and trying to close the space between them and their allies. The dragon’s body descended from the sky, it unloaded a breath of blighted lightning upon the ground. It splashed outwards, sending the two of them backwards and allowing for their friends to retreat.

Rathein was knocked nearly unconscious, her head reeling as she tried to rise. Athena had been able to tuck in her shoulder and roll after the impact. Since she was the quickest to recover, she put her body over the Herald’s and screamed into the flames that were spreading around the debris of the trebuchet. “You can’t have her, you bastard!”

And from the flames he came. His body was a mixture of old armor and bones. There were pieces of bone that protruded from the old protective wear, red lyrium strengthening his body as he walked from the side. His large claws hung at his side and there was a permanent sneer on his face from where his tightened skin pulled back the side of his mouth. He looked to the both of them and smirked, his eyes piercing through her spirit as there was a sudden change in the air around them. It made her sick, her body weakening and threatening to collapse into a heap.

The ground shuddered as the dragon landed and ran up from the side, its body blocking the only exit they could use. Athena stood between it and Rathein and it rose to her challenge, stomping its feet in the ground while roaring in her face. It was a good thing she had already done the brave and stupid thing by standing because the force of the roar froze her in place, as well as the vision of the multiple rows of teeth and the pieces of flesh hanging from its bones. The image of her fear must have put confidence into the dragon’s mind because it then roared to the sky, the clouds thundering at its command.

“Enough!”

The voice boomed over the dragon, both her and Rathein turning towards the creature known as the Elder One. He raised his arms and burst the air around them, dust flying in their faces and when it cleared he had walked a few steps closer to them. He looked at the Herald first, his eyes twisted with malice. “Pretender. You toy with forces beyond your ken. No. More.” Athena felt a pit
drop into her stomach, his voice simply oozed wrongdoings and blood. It was a sound that ground against her mind and brought a wince to her face when he spoke.

And to make matters worse he flicked his gaze to her. “Intruder. You are involving yourself in matters that do not pertain to you and you deny me knowledge that would allow me to ascend.”

She hissed in response, tightening her grip on her staff while digging her heels into the ground to strengthen her position. Rathein shook her head, looking to the creature while disbelief fell from her lips: “Who are you? Why are you doing this?”

He continued, eyes returning to the Herald. “Mortals beg for truth they cannot have. It is beyond what you are. What I was. Know me. Know what you have pretended to be. Exalt the Elder One, the will that is Corypheus.”

Athena snapped, her eyes blazing with a mixture of fear and fury. “Even Gods can bleed, Corypheus, and we will make sure you do!” Her emotions were high and she allowed them to control her, her staff snapping forward and sending a blazing trail of flames towards the immortal pretender.

He dismissed her spell with a wave of his hand, knocking her back until she was practically under his dragon.

Rathein cried out as she was launched back, fear slowly setting into her features as she roared back at him: “You’re forcing this fight for no reason!”

Corypheus’s voice boomed, it a slow and dreadful cadence. “You will resist. You will always resist. It matters not.” He slowly raised an orb with intricate designs in his claw, channeling his energy through it. “I am here for the Anchor. The process of removing it . . . begins now.” As the orb began to crackle and spark with energy, Rathein’s mark on her hand responded in kind. Athena reached forward to her but was pinned down by the tremendous weight of the dragon’s claw. It snapped down at her, looking back to its master as he continued.

“It is your fault, Herald. You interrupted a ritual years in the planning. And instead of dying, you stole its purpose.” The wicked energy within his free claw pulsed, pulling Rathein towards him by the will of the Mark. She tried to grip onto her wrist, trying to regain some control of the thing she was cursed with but it was to no avail. “I do not know how you survived but what marks you as ‘touched’, what you flail at rifts, I crafted to assault the very Heavens.” He flexed his hand and sent the Herald to her knees, face contorting in pain as the green mark on her hand began to pulse with red magic. The dragon moved off of Athena, leaving her gasping and clutching her chest while it
prowled on the side of the other mage, its gaze acting as if the Herald was its next meal.

“And you used the Anchor to undo my work. The gall.”

Rathein clutched her hand, looking to him with a pleading gaze. “What is this thing meant to do?!”

He smirked again, continuing to torment her with the malicious spell that was weaving in his hands. “It is meant to bring certainty where there is none. For you, the certainty that I will always come for it.” He dropped his claws to his side and approached, viciously grabbing her by the hand and pulling her skyward until her eyes were level with his. “I once breached the Fade in the name of another, to serve the old Gods of the empire in person., I found only chaos and corruption, dead whispers. For a thousand years I was confused, no more. I have gathered the will to return under no name but my own. To champion withered Tevinter and correct this Blighted world.”

Athena rose from her position with a pained gasp, slowly moving to the side away from the dragon and towards the mine entrance they would fall through. Every movement brought her pain, it being reminiscent of when she first fell from the Fade. There was certainty in her mind that the dragon probably re-fractured a few of her ribs but she dismissed the injuries with a growl. *I am not vital in this; She is!*

“Beg that I succeed. For I have seen the throne of the Gods. . . and it was empty”

Rathein’s eyes widened in shock at his words, even more so when he effortlessly threw her to the side near the trebuchet platform. The Herald cried out in pain at the impact, Athena wincing on her behalf while realizing it would be fruitless to throw a barrier over her. Corypheus’s might was greater than theirs by tenfold at this point in the game. He approached Rathein, scowling down at her. “The Anchor is permanent. You have spoilt it with your stumbling.”

Instead of remaining behind its master, the dragon now began to pace towards Athena. She held her staff in front of her, keeping eye contact with the great beast while her friend grabbed a sword that was lying in front of her. The Elder One continued on, his anger dripping into his words like poison. “So be it. I will begin again, find another way to give this world the nation and God it requires.” Rathein looked up and beyond the God and Athena knew she was looking to the sky for the signal that the villagers of Haven were safe. They couldn’t celebrate now; not with the journey they still had before them. “And you? I will not suffer even an unknowing rival. You must die.” He then flicked his hand to the side, a single claw pointing at Athena. “Take her.” The dragon nearly growled in delight, stomping over closer to while she shouted in protect.

Rathein smirked: “Your arrogance blinds you. Good to know. If we’re dying, it’s not today!” The
Herald turned and kicked the pulley and chain system operating the trebuchet, signaling its launch into the mountains. By the time it happened the dragon had its claws wrapped around Athena’s body, its tips tearing small wounds into her skin. She cried out, flames encompassing her hands while she tried to fight the creature off. Rathein began to run off towards the side, the dragon roaring after it. With a large ball of flame, she was able to free herself and run after her friend, shooting the blighted creature and its master a final glare of absolute hatred while the avalanche roared behind them.

It caught up to them both, knocking them upwards into the air. Athena looked to the closed mine doors and blasted them open with a push of her staff, both of their bodies falling through the darkness and crashing onto the ground below.
Their bodies fell with a resounding thud onto the cold mine floors. A soft layer of snow covered them as trickling remnants of the avalanche fell through the shaft door. Rathein was coughing from the hard landing, slowly raising herself up to a position on her arms. Athena was still stunned, her breaths shallow and painful, eyes watering as she was slowly starting moving each of her arms and legs. Thankfully they all worked, even if her nerves were on fire when she did it. Well this isn’t good. The Herald bent down and helped her up, groans of pain coming from them both. She wiped her eyes to adjust to the cave. Thankfully the torches that Cullen lit were still working, it providing a small amount of warmth as they adjusted to the cave.

Immediately in front of them was a chest. The short-haired mage exclaimed: “Thank the Maker!” She threw the lid open without a care and looked down at the cache of health and lyrium potions. Instantly she grabbed a health potion and downed it, suddenly looking more energized even if it was a temporary effect. Athena could barely hold herself up, her body leaning against the cave wall. She could feel it. Her face was pale and her hands couldn’t stop shaking as she tried to wrap her bear-furred robe around her. The cowl had been blown off at some point during the battles. Somewhere in the depths of her mind she was disappointed that she lost the trophy from her first hunting kill but it was not her largest concern.

Rathein offered her a health potion and she shook her head, pointing to a lyrium potion instead. “I think my magic is more drained than anything. I’ll take the lyrium ones; you need the health ones more. I don’t know what he did to you.”

The Herald stilled, looking to her “tainted” mark with a scowl. She then looked back to where they landed, her eyes suddenly widening.

“What?”

Her gaze followed her friend’s and rested upon the set of quilts and pillows. A hollow chuckle came from her throat when Rathein pushed her over into the wall, momentary rage fueling her movements. “You knew this too?! Maker damn you, Athena.”

He already has. She thought to herself grimly, giving a small shrug. “I think you got the pillow though, my back is killing me. Come on, we need to get to the end of the cave.” She then silently hoped that her companions had made it through the avalanches. Their walk went a little faster than it did in the game due to the pre-planned placement of potions throughout their walk. They then approached a large opening, where Athena knew there were demons potentially waiting for them. She still, allowing Rathein to walk forward.
The screech of the despair demons belted out like an out of tune fiddle, it causing her to clasp her hands over her ears. The Herald, almost by instinct, opened her hand to the sky, creating a small rift that sucked the demons and a wisp into it before snapping shut at her command. Rathein then looked at her hand, turning it over and down a few times before glancing to Athena, who was a few paces back against the cave wall trying to catch her breath. “What was that?”

She smirked, wincing while pushing herself from the wall. “A new gift. Use it wisely. Drink another potion, you look weak.” Her friend frowned before nodding, drinking the second of three potions while Athena sipped on a lyrium potion. Her ribs burned with every breath, constricting her movements even farther but she pushed through. They had an entire mountain to climb and it was more important that the Herald of Andraste made it to the top.

When they arrived at the end of the cave she nearly fell down to the ground in relief. Kain and Prince anxiously awaited their presence from behind a barrier. The wolf’s tail was nervously wagging back and forth, his whines coming in small barks while he waited to be released from the wards. Rathein knocked against them with her staff, the barrier bursting into small fragments of mana. The wolf instantly tackled her, laying layers upon layers of kisses and touches on her face and neck. Prince pushed his head against her friend’s shoulder, allowing her to pet his face while checking his bags for supplies and ensuring the saddle security. “You knew this too?”

She pushed up from the ground, using Kain as a crutch to lift up to a standing position. She then sighed and nodded again, rubbing the back of her neck while reaching for her staff. Instead of grasping the long shaft of wood, she felt nothing but air. “Ah shit.” Her mind flashed to a resounding crack in her back when she landed in the cave and realized it was her staff breaking underneath her.

“What’s wrong?”

“My staff broke. Definitely going to be needing these lyrium potions.”

Rathein moved to offer hers but Athena cut her off with a gesture and a shake of her head. “You ride Prince and be on the watch. I’ll keep us warm with my barrier. Kain, do we still have scouts?” She looked to her wolf, who instinctually threw his head back and howled. The sound blurred into the blizzard, it dissipating into the thick snow over the course of minutes. In the distance, six dark dots appeared and only grew bigger. The entire pack survived, much to her relief, the alpha standing proudly in the front while awaiting their command.

Athena helped her friend up to the saddle, hiding any traces of pain on her face minus the pallor and furrowed brow. Once Rathein was set she took the last swig of a lyarium potion and threw the empty vial behind her on the ground. There was one on her belt and a smaller vial in the bag with her books she bought in Val Royeux next to a small decorated box that was for later. She led the
horse out into the blizzard, instantly casting a dome-shaped barrier around them to provide heat and shelter from the storm.

The wolves made a circle formation around them, using their heightened senses to follow the trail of the villagers and the soldiers. The first part was flat, easy to follow because there was debris in the path to guide them with small fires that had recently been put out. Then they came to the base of the mountain and both of them gulped down a large bunch of nerves. “Maker that’s steep,” fretted the Herald, it drawing a dry laugh from Athena’s lips.

“Yeah, you stay up there. Prince, you alright?”

The horse paused but then she felt a calm sensation in her mind and she knew that it meant yes. The group began their ascent, staying close to the tree line to keep their navigation straight. The wolves were used to the weather, their thick fur keeping them warm and protected against the blizzard. Athena’s barrier began to flicker in and out of existence after a time, her hands shaking and teeth chattering with every step. She uncorked the last small lyrium potion and downed its contents entirely, getting somewhat queasy from the taste of Titan’s blood on her tongue and lips.

The barrier sparked back into existence, its quality small. It was no longer able to block out the storm; it only provided a gentle heat for them as they continued their ascent up the mountain. Rathein began to shiver under her robes, her eyes struggling to stay open as they trudged in the blizzard. Athena then knew the frostbite and exhaustion was beginning to set in. She felt it too. Her feet felt like they were made of lead and she lost feeling in them what felt like hours ago. Her hands were wrapped up in the bear robe, desperately trying to cling on the last bit of warmth before it coated her skin.

The night was pitch black and the air was silent when they reached the top. Prince, the champion of the evening, was near the point of collapse as they came to the last fire point. Athena looked to campsite, noticing that there were still dying embers within the pit. She fell to her knees, hands trying to absorb the final bits of warmth in the embers before they blew away in the wind. Her horse companion had halted altogether, Rathein collapsed forward on his back. Her breaths were shallow, her chest rising and then falling in shaky movements. “K-k-kain. . . “ Athena called out, her teeth chattering uncontrollably.

The wolf came to her instantly, pressing his forehead against hers. She no longer had the energy to speak but she moved her will through him. Find Cullen. He knows you. Bring him here with the others. He hesitantly backed away from her but before he did he barked to the others wolves to watch over her. The black wolf sprinted down the snowy hill and left the at the peak. Darkness was closing in on her sides, her ribs burning within her chest while a weak cough plagued her. Every moment was a struggle to keep her eyes open, the wolves occasionally coming and nipping at her arms to keep her awake. After a few minutes of their efforts failing, they all pressed their bodies to her and allowed her to share in their warmth. Eventually she fell forward and allowed herself to
succumb to the sleep, going against everything she learned in the books.

*Never fall asleep in the snow. You’ll be dead before sunrise.*

Right as she shut her eyes she heard a cry from the distance: “There they are!”

“Thank the Maker!”

She looked up to see Cassandra, Cullen, and Leliana running towards them with Kain leading them. Athena smiled as the wolf returned to her side, licking her face to try and give her some warmth. The wolves surrounded her body, sensing her wounds and protecting her from the people that looked at her with such apprehension it broke her heart. “H-h-h-help the Herald.”

Lelianna nodded and led Prince by the reigns while Cassandra and Cullen carried Rathein towards the healer’s huts. . . leaving her alone in the snow. Fitting, she thought, using the wolves around her to stand up and follow their foot steps towards the camp. She looked up and saw that they were getting some of the mages to cast their healing magic on the Herald, assessing her for wounds and ensuring that she was alive.

Good. Rathein made it to the campsite. They would all be able to sing Kumbaya and go on with their adventures without her getting into the way. Apathy filled her body with every step, a sense of calm coming to her mind at a potential end coming to be. If she was out of the equation Corpyheus couldn’t use her knowledge against her friends, could she call them that now? She knew without her they would be able to make it through the story and be victorious. She was unnecessary in the whole equation and probably got in everybody’s way.

The wolves sensed her distress, soft whines echoing from their mouths as they neared the edge of the camp. Athena walked off to the side, out of the sight of others and finally collapsed against a boulder’s edge. The wind was cool on her face, the wolves lining their body along hers to shelter her from the weather. The only one that didn’t was Kain. He stood defiant against her, barking and pushing his paws closer to her. She gave him no response; she didn’t have the energy to. Her eyelids fluttered open and close, her lips now blue as the frost set in her body. He barked one last time, growling at her before taking off towards the camp.

*Perhaps Cullen will adopt him. . . probably not. He thinks he is a beast; Cassandra too. Crystalline tears formed in her eyes and froze on her cheekbone, her body shaking in silent sobs. The pain from those movements overcame her, a gasp leaving her breathless in the snow. She was deaf to Kain’s returns, quickened footsteps following him followed by a string of elvish curses.*
“Dorian! Come over here, now!”

Solas roared into the air, looking at wolves around her, asking their permission before dropping to his knees and allowing his healing magic to keep her from fading into the Fade permanently. “Ir abelas, Athena.” He raised her chin to catch her eyes and she was finally able to awaken enough to see him.

“Solas. . . “ He shushed her instantly, looking over his shoulder at the Tevinter.

“Athena! What in the blazes-“

“Help me lift her.”

Solas helped lift her into Dorian’s arms. He put one arm behind her head and one under her legs, running with her to their campsite at the other end from where the Herald was being kept. Her body was placed in a cot while the two worked together, weaving their magics to slowly bring her body temperature back to normal. “Gods, Solas, she’s bleeding.”

They looked down to her chest and belly, realizing that the wounds torn in by the dragon’s claws were still seeping into her clothes. Solas hissed, ripping open the fabrics to get a better look at the wounds. “I need bandages, poultices, hot water. Go!”

Without so much as a sassy comment he took off to get the supplies. Solas’s hands worked gently but feverishly, his trained eyes trying to find every wound. He whispered under his breath: “Reckless, reckless, woman! What were you thinking?!“

Athena coughed weakly, blood coloring her lips. She licked it away with a frown, reaching out for his thigh since he was kneeling next to her. Her voice was weak and sounded foreign. It was so unlike her own she knew she was in trouble. “Solas. . . is she okay?”

He didn’t pause, bringing a lyrium flask from his boot before downing it and surging her body full of more healing spells. The coolness of his aura was still warmer than she felt, it giving her the sensation of being filled spiritually. His energy also made her feel safe, her mind drifting in and out of consciousness. “Solas. . . “
The healer’s lips twitched into a frown: “Of course, even with you on death’s door you are worried about her. Rest, Athena.”

The world then melted into black as she entered a Fade-less sleep.
Singing awoke her from her coma-like state. She groaned, trying to sit up in her bed before being pushed back down. “Don’t you dare.” The sarcastic yet concerned voice forced her to obey, her body willingly falling back into the cocoon of warmth and protection. Was that a fire rune in her blankets? Everyone around them was standing and walking towards the Herald, a song of faith and hope on their lips. All of the tragedies of the day had been replaced by a new faith in the Herald, the one savior who survived the trials of a Blighted God. The song was much more moving now than the game. The swells and desperation of the people truly reached her spirit, drawing tears to her eyes as she ignored Dorian’s request and sat up. She wasn’t able to see Rathein through the crowd of people but she knew that that was the moment where she truly was made Inquisitor, not in the proceedings done at Skyhold.

Solas was off to the side, leaning on his staff for support while watching the Herald, summoning her over once the song was complete and disappearing off to the side. Athena sighed, looking down at her body only to see her sports bra and bandages wrapping the entirety of her torso. A blush instantly came to her cheeks but she didn’t move to cover herself. The shock of seeing the small lines of blood across her chest and abdomen distracted her enough. “Dorian, it appears I’m no longer a maiden by your doing.”

The jest drew a snarky laugh from him. He turned to her and shook his head, bringing a jacket from a chest next to the cot and wrapping it around her. “Your other clothes were torn to shreds and bloodied. They made for terrible kindling but were burned just the same. It might be an improvement on your wardrobe. Pity about the bear skin though; I could of used it on my floors.”

She scoffed, pulling the jacket on and buttoning it up to the next to last button. Thankfully they had given her a set of heavy pants and were able to clean her boots. She slowly brought her legs to the side of a cot and fully moved into a sitting position. “You know, I hate not being invited to parties.” Athena tore off a piece of the bandages and re-wrapped the ends to fold into the lovely woven job Solas did on her abdomen. She used this to put her frost-styled hair up into a messy bun. “What party did you miss, oh my sweet Tevinter?”

He chuckled and offered her a hand to help her up, a smirk never leaving his lips. “That pity party you were throwing for yourself before. It was so droll but still, no invitation? Tsk tsk. Bad form.” She raised a hand to smack him but he caught it and pulled her into a tight embrace, his cheek resting on the top of her head while she fell into the warmth of his body. “Don’t ever scare me like that again. Things would be terribly lonely around here.” He then put her at arm’s length, handing her an empty bowl and pointing over to the line where people were getting food. “Now go get yourself some food. You could use a stretch. Your body must be starving after all the magic we poured into it. Be careful of this one, he’s been growling at anybody that even looks at you.
Kain rose from the side of her cot and pressed his side against the back of her calf, looking up at her with pleased eyes. You’re better? A deep voice whispered into her head. She nodded in response, bending down and kissing him on the nose. He responded by licking her chin and nudging her towards the food line.

The general mood of the crowd was hopeful but bitter. The corpses of Haven had barely gone cold and they were left in the snow-capped Frostback Mountains. She was one of the last ones to get soup but already people were glaring at her and whispering a single name under their breaths. Witch. She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, turning towards Flissa who was behind the serving table.

The poor woman dropped the ladle in the soup, her eyes widening not in fear but something else. Athena raised a brow at her, looking around. “What’s wrong?”

Flissa shook her head, regathering her ladle while scooping some meaty bits to put into her bowl. She spoke softly, as if she didn’t want the others to hear her praise. “Thank you for saving my life. The others... they have heard rumors but I am beyond grateful.”

She took a spoon and swallowed some broth, sighing as the heat rolled down her throat and settled in her stomach. “What rumor is that?”

The barmaid nervously tucked a hair behind her ear, looking around before whispering: “They heard you knew about Haven. That you just know things sometimes.”

Athena froze, slowly putting another spoonful of soup into her mouth. “I’m glad you’re doing better. Thanks for the heads up.” She then turned on her heel and attempted to walk back towards her cot but was stopped by a villager with a scowl on his face. She tried not to be afraid, casually putting a piece of what she assumed was pheasant into her mouth. It went down like a rock and that was due to the fact that not only the one man was standing, but a few others as well that were not drawn to the song of the Herald. She could feel the anger, the betrayal, coming off of them like auras. The man in front of her spoke through gritted teeth, the words spitting like acid upon her heart. “My son... his name was Daniel. He was one of the ones we lost and you knew.”

She shook her head, putting the bowl behind her on the table. “No-no you misunderstand.”
The punch was expected but the speed was not, it catching her cheekbone and whipping her head to the right. She stabilized herself on the table, pressing her left hand to where he punched her. There was no blood, thankfully, but before she had a chance to respond Kain snarled and cleared a space for her. He bared his fangs and raised his hackles, placing his body in between the crowd and hers. Words rang out through the small group, every insult causing her to wince like it was a wound. “Witch! Fade-Walker! That dog is cursed, it is!” A woman in the back shouted out, this bringing an angered flush to her cheeks and her hands to fists.

“I am so sorry for the loss of your family members! I tried to help everyone I could!” She cried out, tears threatening to come to her eyes but the anger of the crowd subdued them. She held one hand up in defense while the other hovered above Kain, trying to soothe him from attacking anybody. Somebody threw an empty bowl from the back and it struck the side of her face. Thankfully it was made of a light wood but it brought a reaction out of her anyways.

The anger, the flame that fueled her magic lit within her core. It brought a nearly wicked smile to her lips as she rolled her neck back to face him, stretching her shoulders to straighten after the attack. Her eyes suddenly felt hooded with blood lust as she licked the side of her mouth where the bowl had struck. The wound tasted of copper and she knew the strike was true. Mana sparked at her fingertips but someone pushed in from the side, his bravery storming with him. “That is enough!”

An unnamed soldier pushed through the crowd, placing his body in between the crowd and hers. Athena swore he looked familiar but she could only see glimpses of the side of his face and could hear the Orlesian accent on his tongue. “But ser-“

He turned, meeting eyes with the attacker and snapping: “Haven’t we lost enough today? Do you seek more bloodshed?” His words were full of hurt and remorse and his tone silenced the crowd more than his words did. Athena growled low in her throat, pushing through the crowd with Kain at her heel. She didn’t stop at the camp, ignoring Dorian as he tried to reach out for her. With a slide of her body she fit between the tents and began to run as fast as her body would take her. Some of the superficial wounds reopened but the raw emotion, the rage that sat in the back of her mind urged her to keep going. The snow kicked up behind her as she made it to a full sprint, the camp becoming a distant image behind them. Kain was in full strides beside her, his eyes focused on her as they ran. She could feel him, feel the loyalty of his spirit, the beat of his heart, the smell of the forest. The connection to him rolled over her mind, it nearly turning her eyes white as they jumped over a fallen tree. Faster her body moved, attracting the attention of the rest of the pack that was scouting on the outskirts of the camp. Their spirits were one as they all fell into a run together. Every paw, every stride, every breath, every motion was in unison.

Athena felt something within her building. It was a strange pressure, a closeness to the wolves. It was filling her like a cup and the pressure made her feel like she was going to overflow and burst
from the sensation. As they came upon a small clearing she jumped over the hill and allowed the feeling to overtake her. It was a tingling sensation that went from her crown to her feet, magic dancing along her skin and controlling her. In a smooth movement her body shifted midair and when she landed on the snow she landed on pure white-furred paws.

She panted, brown eyes looking at the ground to take in what happened. There was something heavy behind her, weighing her backside down. With a slow glance she looked over her shoulder and saw a long white tail wagging back and forth in rhythm with her heartbeat. The other wolves seemed delighted, giving small yelps of encouragement while running their bodies alongside theirs. “Friend!” They called out to her, nipping her skin with the front of their teeth to urge her to play.

Athena turned and put her front paws down, sticking her tail in the air and teasing them with a position she knew meant play. They rejoiced, taking off running back towards the camp in a game of tag. She took off after them, feeling the wind course through her fur. It was an exhilarating feeling, something that freed her from the burden that awaited her back at the camp. The logical side of her knew that this was a temporary escape, but at this moment her instincts took over and she needed to do what felt good. Kain ran at her side as her unnamed beta, his eyes constantly watching for threats while also enjoying the shared time with her.

They played for hours, the pack and her. At one point in the night they grew hungry. Athena had could barely eat a few bites of soup before the scorned family members threw their attacks. The grey alpha walked beside her, sniffing the ground before pointing his nose in the direction of a noise in the woods. It wasn’t a scurrying, so it was a larger beast. With her heightened senses, she could hear the chewing of dead grass and the crunch of snow underneath the target’s body. She growled softly in her throat, thinking to the others Ram? They all nodded in response, their bodies low to the ground as the pack began to spread out into an instinctually driven strategy. Athena, Kain, and the alpha were in a close unit at the front, their steps light and gaze hardened as they pressed forward.

In the trees in front of them was a mountain ram. It was finishing off its meal and hadn’t noticed them yet, its whole aura saying it was blissfully unaware of the fate it was about to endure. With quick movement Athena lunged forward, breaking into a sprint and triggering the rest of the pack to move. They all came in from the sides, essentially surrounding their victim who just began to realize what was happening. Athena was in front of its head and took the brunt of a butt of its horns. It pushed her back a little but by the time she returned Kain had already taken the thing to the ground and held it by his clenched jaw. The creature was still alive, its eyes wide and hooves helplessly kicking into the ground. She shook her head and walked next to Kain, somehow knowing where to bite her teeth into before breaking the creature’s neck.

The rush of blood into her mouth felt foreign. She stepped back and licked up some snow to clean out her mouth but the thrill of the hunt denied her human mind. With a slow gaze she looked back to the pack and the now dead ram. They were waiting for her, waiting for her to take the first bite so they could begin. Pride swirled within her heart because she knew of this gesture. They truly
saw her as alpha and wanted her to eat first. Athena trotted back over the ram and winced while tearing through its hide, finding a piece of thigh to rip off before using magic in her paws to cook it. The pack yelped in delight, digging into their meal with ferocious intent.

Athena then felt a call against her mind, a cold wind through her fur that sent a shudder down her spine. A whine fell from her maw, her ears perking up as she looked to the direction of the call. It was strangely familiar and somehow she could feel that the call was full of concern. She whined to the others in a series of sounds, gesturing with her nose to follow her. The pack grabbed a mouthful of food before trotting along beside he, Kain keeping his position by her side. They made a V formation through the snow, Athena sniffing for some sort of trail and following the pull within the woods.
The Call

The mysterious call led back to camp and the very sight of it caused her to growl. The memories of their hatred were fresh on her mind, it souring the taste in her mouth like acid. Her fur raised on edge as she remembered the man attacking her by the food table and the others did nothing to protect her. They all spoke words of friendship and the only ones who meant it were Dorian and Rathein. They both had been through enough judgment and hardship in their lives to understand her. Everyone else was just doing her and the Herald a lip-service, she thought. With the thoughts of betrayal pushing her steps she found the source of the call, it nearly halting her in her steps.

Solas stood on the edge of the forest with his hands by his side. He appeared to be looking out into the thick of the trees, his expression near blank while his lips twitched into a frown at the corners. The call emanated from his body like a bracing wind and the closer she got the stronger it became. The pack approached him and he did not move from his spot, his gaze simply falling from the trees to the wolves and then to her. “You’re new.” He mused, bending down on one knee in the snow, looking her over with a careful gaze before smirking in realization. “Hello, fen.”

Wolf. How creative. She rolled her eyes at him allowing the gesture to roll her head as well. This apparently drew a laugh from his lips and confirmed his suspicion. He put a hand to his forehead, shaking his head while sitting back in the snow. “My my my, this is quite impressive, Athena.”

She was taken aback by his realization, a growl lightly trickling along her throat and out of her mouth. The rest of the wolves scattered themselves among the outskirts of the camp, leaving them alone in the forest with the biting wind on their backs. He stretched out his legs and put his hands up in defense, which caused her to slowly sit down in front of him with a curious and cautious gaze. “I assume you know where we are headed?”

Athena looked up to the sky, giving a long whine of frustration and annoyance from her mouth before nodding. He clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “I thought as much. I am glad to see you have recovered from your wounds. You should not be so reckless, Athena.” He gave her a hardened stare, his voice softening and something about it was enough to jar her from her instincts. A tightness came to her stomach, her fur standing on electrified edges as she met his gaze. In a smooth motion her body shifted back and it left her on her hands and knees a few paces from him. Her jacket was torn open, sports bra bloodied but intact, the bandages on her stomach were thankfully still in place, magic be damned. She used the snow to wipe the blood from her mouth before sitting back in the snow, drawing her knees up to her chest.

“Thank you for healing me, Solas. I know I wasn’t too far from. . .” Her words faded off, her gaze falling to the ground between them. He hummed in acknowledgement, his eyes staying on her as she fought for the right words. “You say reckless. . . She might have died otherwise. If I did? You all would continue. You would all go on your quests, learn to love each other, become a family, become a mighty Inquisition with just as mighty of an Inquisitor.”
The honesty was brutal but refreshing and at this point she didn’t care. She sighed, rubbing the back of her neck while glancing up at him. He was still listening, his face blank but curious as she continued. “And me? I don’t fit anywhere in that. I don’t have a predestined role. I’m the mistake that fell from the Fade.”

He winced at the thought, pinching the bridge of his nose while shaking his head. “Athena...”

She relaxed her legs out straight in front of her while leaning back onto her hands in the snow. “No, Solas. The burden of knowing what happens is the burden of knowing I don’t fit. I’m an anomaly that nobody can explain, the Witch of the Inquisition.” She then chuckled, the sound dry and hollow as it fell from her lips. She didn’t realize it but there were tears burning in her eyes as she looked up into the starlit sky. Silence filled the space between them, time stretching on for a moment before he spoke.

“Your presence changes everything, does it not? If you were not involved in the world and events you know, can you truly say any of it is pre-destined?” He looked up into the sky with her, smirking while stating firmly. “I will stay then. Whatever this new destiny is... I will help to guide it and the Inquisition.”

Athena laughed, looking down at him with a tear-stained gaze. “Was that ever in question?”

He hummed, shrugging while looking from the skies to her. The stars seemed to still reflect within his gaze, it bringing an ethereal gloss to his blue eyes. “Perhaps not. But, we should return. Dorian was worrying about where you went and was about to send out a search party.” He patted the tops of his thighs and stood gracefully from his position, extending a hand to help her up. She took it, wincing as her stomach ached from the wounds reopening. He shook his head at her before leading her back to the camp, his hand lightly touching the small of her back for a few seconds to guide and steady her until they reached the edge of camp. He spoke softly to her, leaning in to where only she could hear him, his voice low and electrifying her skin. “I think I have made a decision.”

She stopped, turning and looking at him over her shoulder. He continued walking back to his tent, acting like her response didn’t matter. “Decided what?”

He waved a single hand over his shoulder, continuing into the camp past her fire and cot without looking back. “Good night, Athena.”

She froze, her eyes widening as a memory replayed in her mind. It felt like days ago with
everything going on but it had been less than a day, before the attack on Haven. *Until you decide which way you want to be and how you’re going to treat me...* Her breath hitched in her throat at the memory, it bringing a blush to her cheeks while she stepped back. She could feel the remnant of his hand on her back, it feeling like a cool touch even as she stood next to the fire. Dorian stumbled into the camp, his face twisting into anger. “She’s over here! Damnit, Athena!”

He stormed over and grabbed her by the shoulders, tearing her gaze from the flames to his own. “The others thought you had run away. I told them the way they treated you I would have as well! What did I say earlier?!”

Athena gave him a fake pout, crossing her arms over her chest. “Oh I’m sorry, Father, did I disobey?”

The Tevinter pushed her away with a playful scoff. Cullen and Rathein ran into the camp, their faces looking distressed as well. Seeing her play around with the mage softened their features but Cullen was still standing on guard, his left hand atop the hilt of his sword. The Herald stormed through the camp and threw her arms around her. “I was so worried about you. Why didn’t you tell me you were that hurt?”

She paused, looking to the two men before slowly wrapping her friend in an embrace. “You’re not mad at me?”

Rathein stirred, pulling back and standing next to the Commander. “I mean... in the moment, yeah. But, Commander, how were our losses?” She looked to Cullen who was still recovering.

His face was tired but there was hope illuminating his features in the fire. “We had some, but they could have been much worse if we didn’t have warning. The people are still grieving but its mostly from the loss of the town and the few lives we lost, but those of us that know... we’re thankful.”

“How you’re thankful.” Dorian added, a slight hint of anger edging his words.

Cullen dropped his gaze to the snow in shame, his grip slightly tightening atop the hilt of his sword. He looked pathetic and she couldn’t help herself. She walked over to him, standing up on her tiptoes while wrapping him in a tight embrace to soothe his worries.

She could feel the breath leave him, apparently too stunned to do anything in return. Dorian chuckled under his breath, giving Rathein a smug glance. Athena ignored them all, giving the
Commander a quick squeeze before stepping back and giving him his space. “I understand, Commander. It wasn’t easy...for anyone.” The Commander cleared his throat, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly while fighting the blush that was evident on his cheeks. Before he could respond she poked a finger in the middle of his chest and hardened her gaze to meet his. “Trust, Cullen. I’m sure you’re aware it is what keeps a squadron together? Knowing your man will be at your back, in formation?” He slowly nodded, looking down at her finger while losing the fight to the blush. It colored his cheeks but she kept on. “I have all of your backs. There hasn’t been a time here where that wasn’t evident. It’s about damn time you had mine.” He stammered, looking for some words to comfort her but in the end, he nodded, returning to his formal position as the Commander of the troops before turning and leaving the group.

He left and Rathein and Dorian slowly looked at her, their faces almost wild with mischief. “Athena...”

She caught their drift and shook her head, waving her hands back and forth in front of her in short, quick motions. “Nope! Not going to happen.”

Dorian smirked, “Sure thing. Wait – Is that blood on your mouth?”

Rathein arched a brow and closed in on her person bubble, bringing out a cloth to wipe Athena’s mouth like she was a child. She pushed the Herald away, licking her thumb and rubbing some of the blood off her chin. Her friend scoffed, showing Dorian the cloth. “That’s blood alright. What were you doing in the woods?”

Athena sighed, rolling her eyes while stuffing her hands into her pockets. Kain slowly trotted in from the patrol, blood on his maw as well, snow sticking into the thickness of his fur. She looked down at him and laughed, leaning down and scratching him behind the ears. “We all went on a hunt.” He closed his eyes and leaned into the affectionate touches, soft grunts vibrating in his throat. Rathein walked until she was in her line of sight, a look of absolute disbelief on her face.

“A hunt.”

“Uh-yeah.”

“You just got on your hands and knees and bit into something with your wolves?”

This made her laugh, it echoing from her lips in an almost bell-like tone. It hurt the wounds of her
stomach to do it but she didn’t care. The release felt good and it broke some of the tension that was building in the camp with her being around. “Heavens no. I got down on my...er...paws?”

The realization clicked in the Herald’s face, her mouth forming an “o” shape while excitement crinkled in the sides of her eyes. “Wait, you actually did it? I know you said you wanted to do shape shifting but you actually did it?!”

Dorian chimed in, looking her up and down before shaking his head, a chuckle bouncing from his mouth as he smiled. “Witch of the Inquisition indeed. I thought I would be taking the most heat for being a dreaded necromancer from Tevinter, but thanks for sharing the load with me. My neck couldn’t take that burden for much longer.”

She grinned at him, giving him a thumbs up while winking. “Anytime, friend. You know, I’m starting to like that nickname. Ooooh fear me, the dreaded Witch of the North!” She gestured towards her friends with her hands like she was casting some dastardly spell, wiggling her eyebrows until she brought a laugh from them both. She then looked to the rest of the camp, noting that the fires were beginning to burn low and people were tucking in for the night. With a smirk, she pointed towards her own cot, motioning for Kain to come lay down next to her. “I think I’m going to head to sleep for the evening. It’s been...a long day.”

The other two nodded, giving her quick touches on the shoulder before heading to their respective areas. Athena removed her jacket and placed it at the edge of her cot, bringing the quilts on her bed over her body and up past her shoulders. She wiggled down into the warmth of the cocoon, groaning as Kain rose to lick the sides of her face. *Good night.* The kisses said to her in all their sloppy goodness.

She pushed him off and laughed, giving him a quick kiss in between his eyes before rolling onto her side and succumbing to a good night’s rest.
It had been a few painful days since she had could transition into the Fade. That night, it felt like the moment she closed her eyes her body simply shifted and she blinked her eyes open to be gazing at the new world. The energy used to be erratic, on edge, and scarred because of the presence of the Breach. It was a foreign attack in a world that had become sacred for spirits; it had to be. They once walked the earth and lived with the people, helping them side by side while they went about their lives. Now that they were separated by the Veil, this was their land and their home. It had been freed now that the Breach was closed by the Herald. Even though her experiences within the spiritual plane aired on the side of fiction, it felt like she could breathe easier. The magic flowed through her body in a rhythmic wave that synced with her spirit. Athena smiled upon entering the Fade, the tops of her bare feet dragging across the ground as she slowly walked, nay, prowled in the feeling of the cleansed domain.

“You came back!”

She turned with a gaze that was drunk on the feeling of magic coursing through her body, her smile crooked while she opened her arms for Inspiration to run into. The spirit quickly gave her a peppy embrace, her smile evident as the being’s face pressed against her shoulder. She then stepped back and frowned for a second, looking around like there was someone else there. Athena felt it too suddenly, it coming in a hot wave of air against the skin on the back of her neck. A voice rumbled through her mind, it bringing the drunken feeling to a peak. “You called for me.”

Inspiration grabbed her friend’s shoulders and tried to pull her away but Athena was nearly intoxicated by the sound, her body slowly turning with a sway in her hips towards the creature in front of her. It looked down upon her, its body towering over hers while heat burst from every pore on its body. The feeling was comforting to her, it matching her own aura and intensity. “You called for me. You know my name.” The growl was carnal, feral sounding like a growl coming from its depths. The creature in front of her appeared to be made of magma but the more she looked at it, the more she understood it, it began to take shape. The amorphous figure of the demon began to tighten, compress down into something more pleasing to her eye. The aura it gave off was borderline erotic, it drawing on her natural emotions and feeding from them.

Athena’s voice trembled as she stood her ground, her eyes looking deep into the demon’s body where its face should be. White fire lit up within her and filled her like a cup, each drop bringing a shallow breath from her lips. “Who are you?” She whispered, already knowing the answer but wanting to hear it for herself.

The demon rumbled with laughter, its form finally condensing into the stereotypical demon that
was portrayed in her world; here it resembled some sort of Qunari half breed. The demon was a tall shirtless male, over exaggerated muscles indented into its skin while two black, gnarled horns rose from his skull. A long tail dragged on the ground behind him as he approached her with a predatory stalk in his gait. “I am the stranger who knows you too well. I am your Rage.”

She wasn’t surprised, her body standing confidently still as he walked a circle around her. Inspiration stood in a protective stance, her hands at her sides in fists while there was a yellow, sparkling energy moving around her. Athena smirked in response, shaking her head to rid herself of the fog that was attempting to settle over her mind. It was his influence, no doubt, his magic pulling on the threads that made up her emotions and drinking them down like an ambrosia. “I did not call you, demon. Now begone.” She fluttered her eyelashes while looking up at the creature with a game-winning smile, turning on her heel while extending her hand for Inspiration to grab onto.

The spirit didn’t hesitate, intertwining her fingers with hers while Athena crafted a calming scene in front of them into the Fade. It was from her childhood camp, something that would always remain being a rose-tinted veil of nostalgia. The lake was serene, the sky’s beauty and clouds reflected in the undisturbed mirror that was the water. On the edge of the aging dock were canoes flipped upside down to dry in the sun’s glow. The pair of women approached the large, bright, green stretch of grass that led up the lake. Athena stretched her arms to the sky, smiling as the sun’s rays kissed her skin and warmed her enough to nearly glow.

Rage was frozen in shock at the utter denial a few paces back from them, his face contorting into anger. Flames summoned above his horns and around his tail, scorch marks trailing his steps as he stomped through the grass towards them. “You called for me! In the village when the people denied you, refused you! It was my rage that fueled your steps into the snow, my magic that allowed you to become the beast that you truly are!” His words rang partially true, drawing a pouted scowl from her face while she closed her eyes. Music began to play in the background of her environment, it bringing an upbeat and almost sensual tempo as she gestured for Inspiration to follow her movements. She started by bending over and stretching to touch her toes, feeling the strain and stretch in the muscles of her lower back, her thighs, and her calves.

Inspiration followed easily, not bound by the same physical constraints as mortals simply visiting in their dreams. “What is this?” She asked, her voice not faltering as they acted like the demon was not even there.

Athena groaned at the tightness in her back, rising and raising her hand to the skies. “We call it yoga in my land, but I really just like stretching with music playing in the background. It calms me and makes it easier for me to relax.”

She got a body like an hourglass but I can give it to you all the time.
She incorporated small dance moves, more like subtle twitches with the beat or rolls of her hips into her stretches. A ghost of a smile twitched at her lips as she brought the flat of her right foot onto the inside of her left thigh. She brought her hands together above her head and stretched up towards the sky, lengthening her core and taking a deep breath.

*See anybody can be good for you, you need a bad girl to blow your mind!*

She rolled her neck and shoulders while smiling with the song, slowly lowering her leg and switching positions to the other, stretching back up towards the sun. Rage sauntered over in front of her, trying a new boost of confidence to way her mind. “I am you! I am flame and I am fire! I am the first thing you beckon when you’re upset, why do you hide from me?” She appeared unfazed, her eyes staying closed while the sun crafted by the Fade beat down on her skin. A cold feeling rushed over her skin, an insistent wordless question rising goosebumps on her flesh even as she lowered her legs and bent down into a plank position, resting on her elbows while taking deep breaths in through her nose and out through her mouth. Her aura coated her like a warm blanket during a nap, it the perfect temperature as it slid along her skin like a soft kitten nuzzling it with its cheek.

With a soft sigh, she nodded in response to the question within her head, and audible pop sounding off to the side as both Solas and Wisdom walked into focus. He instantly took note of the demon, raising a hand to dispel him. Athena slowly lowered her body flat to the ground, pushing up with her front hands to curl her body upwards and stretch out her belly and chest. “Don’t, Solas.”

He stopped, jerking his gaze to her, eyes furrowed and twisted in confusion. “Don’t? You are just allowing a demon of Rage to . . . remain in your dream?”

She flicked a look of annoyance towards him, shortly explaining. “Just as I am allowing you.” The demon was on his knees in front of her, his flaming rubies of eyes drawing her in from looking over at Solas. He grabbed her chin with one hand almost like a lover would, a charming smile playing on his lips. She remained in her stretch but sighed, arching a brow. “What?”

The demon chuckled, the rumbling growl rolling over her mind and skin like a soft vibration. “You won’t leave me behind. Let me show you why you need me, Victoria.”

The old name brought a flare of anger to her belly and the demon used that fire as an invitation, putting his hands on the side of her face and bringing memories up in front of her. They played on the surface of the water for the others but were reflected on her eyelids as she gasped and closed her eyes. It all came back to her, the emotions and hurt that nearly controlled her when she was first dragged to the Fade and into Thedas. She saw herself tied in the corner of the war room, being treated like a criminal when her only mistake was falling from the sky. The emotions resurfaced through her as she re-witnessed being exorcised by Lysette, everyone’s mistrust, Rathein’s fight
after Redcliffe, and even her recent argument with Solas back at Haven. The rage bubbled underneath her skin but taking a deep breath in she dispersed it through her whole body, using it as fuel to bring a barrier forth and push the demon back.

Rage was sliding on the earth from her when she did this, his feet leaving a trail of embers in the earth. Athena opened her eyes and rolled her neck to stretch, almost writhing in the feeling of being in control and being able to use it to fuel her magic. The demon was less than pleased, looking at his palms and flexing his claws like something was wrong with his abilities. “You did not let me in?”

She shook her head, bringing her chest down to the ground before pushing herself back to where she was sitting on her haunches with her hands resting on top of her thighs. “I don’t need to.” The creature snarled, almost raising a hand to her but she tilted her head down and glared at him, almost daring him to even try attacking her in her dream when Solas, Wisdom, and Inspiration were there. As enticing as the demon was, this was her realm. He was merely a visitor.

She closed her eyes for a moment to focus on her breathing, quelling the flames within her and allowing her barrier to dissipate. The magic dispersed itself through her body, it bringing every nerve alive and sending a tingling sensation up her spine. Athena shuddered then opened her eyes and looked over to the side of the clearing where Rage was suddenly leaning up against a tree with his arms crossed over his chest. It was almost as if he were pouting. The flames around his tail had dulled down and there was some sort of emotion glossing over his eyes, regret? A feeling of being lost? It put a lump of pity within her throat as she looked at the demon, somehow feeling responsible for his well-being if it was truly her unbridled and raw rage towards the villagers that brought him here. Athena rose from her place on the grass, walking over towards the tree where the demon was brooding in his emotions. She copied his stance, looking him up and down while giving him a small gesture to speak his mind.

“Other mortals are far more impressionable than you. They cannot wait to throw their rage into me, to accept me into their lives and allow it to take over. You. . .. you acknowledge me? Almost treat me as kin?” His voice had lost the demonic rumble that came earlier, true trepidation and doubt edging into his voice. She looked at him closer and noticed that his body was trembling, hands desperately clinging to his upper arms to contain whatever amount of fortitude he had.

Athena sighed, allowing her hands to fall to her sides, resting upon the now foreign feeling of knee-length yoga pants on her legs. “Yes I acknowledge you. I know you. Rage and emotion has been with me all of my life; this. . .. is nothing new. It was no surprise that the flame called to me first or that I nearly attacked the Lord Seeker in Val Royeaux.”

She heard a “hmph” of agreement from Solas who was standing and watching with a cautious gaze with his spiritual friend near Inspiration, who bless her heart was still going through the stretches singing the lyrics of the next song that was playing through her mind: Take me to church! Athena
had to wonder how she had gathered such an odd group of people within her mind, but at this point they were part of the escape that the Fade provided. It was a secret place; a place where she could go and literally dance her cares away at times. Inspiration had brought music back into her life and had given her the drive to go forward from the Fade. Perhaps Rage could help her transition into another part of her journey.

Chapter End Notes

Forgive my Fade interludes but sometimes when the plot gets so heavy I like adding in lighter toned things.

Songs:

Bang, Bang - Jessie J, Ariana Grande, Nicki Minaj
Take Me to Church - Hozier
The demon in front of her spit something that resembled ichor to the side, frustration rooting in his features. She shrugged while stepping back from him, gesturing to the camp environment around them. “Where I’m from, we don’t have demons or spirits like you, at least when we do they’re not like this. There is a huge doubt that anything paranormal even exists.” He looked puzzled, fangs biting into his lower lip while he anxiously chewed away. *Good he’s doubting.* “We have our own personal demons but they carry your names. Fear, desire, rage, pride, they are things we face on a day to day basis and they were enemies I had to conquer by myself. These demons lived harmoniously within me next to compassion, inspiration, intellect. I would beckon them to call whenever I needed but even when they weren’t at the forefront of my mind, even when I wasn’t using one to fuel my words, they were there sleeping within me.”

She glanced over at Solas who had leaned against a tree of his own, watching the interaction with an air of curiosity and intrigue. “I accepted you long ago but not in this form. You cannot have my mind because it belongs to nobody other than me. If I allowed Rage to lead my life, I would have no room for others things like compassion, love, and curiosity. All those things are vital to me, even you.” The electric, synthesized notes from one of her favorite childhood songs began to play and as it did a phantom version of her as a child ran from the grass onto the dock, effortlessly jumping into the lake before disappearing into the memory. She held a hand out to the demon, beckoning for him to come forward into the sunlight with her and Inspiration.

*I got myself a notion, and one I know that you'll understand.*

The demon hesitantly reached out to her, allowing his clawed hand to rest in her palm while she brought him next to Inspiration, who had a sly grin on her face since she had learned a dance to the song before on a previous encounter to the Fade. The song continued, Athena urging the lyrics and melody to play from her mind and pump her spirit full of life. *We set the world in motion, by reaching out for each other’s hand. Maybe we’ll discover what we should have known all along.*

Inspiration was trying to teach him the basic dance moves to the chorus that was rapidly approaching but the demon’s body did not behave. He shot her a scowl and backed up while Athena giggled, looking up to Solas with an almost proud grin. *One way or another, together is where we both belong.* She ignored the fact that he was watching, turning to her ethereal friend with a childlike glee and jumping into the choreographed moves that they had practiced. With their stances wide, they directed their moves at each other and blocked out the world while their bodies took over the movements they knew by heart. The song played on and she let the rhythm and beat guide her body like a maestro over an orchestra, her body following along helplessly to its call.
If you’re ever lonely, stop, you don’t have to be!

The two balanced on one leg, pointing outwards with one hand while the other balanced on their hip.

After all its only, a beat away from you to me.

Rage, or the demon formerly known as it, timidly walked back up the group, his body silently asking to form a triangle between them. Athena instantly opened her body to him, dropping her foot down to prepare for the next move. She noted the little changes in him, a smile playing on her lips as she did so. His horns were now coated in gold and were shaped like a ram’s, curling up towards his head in a proud fashion. He no longer had rows of fangs for teeth but instead just two sharpened canines, their size smaller than a vampire’s but enough to show his past self. He now wore a basic white tunic with tan colored pants but it was obvious there was still muscle tone in his arms and chest. Inspiration did the same movement and opened their group, feeling the crescendo up to the key change and final chorus within their cores.

If we listen to each other’s heart, we’ll find we’re never too far apart. The two of them no longer moved in perfect choreographed moves but they certainly moved in time with each other, each of their minds connected and flowing with the weave of music that required no explanation. The male creature didn’t dance persay, but he smirked at them both and tapped his fingers on his crossed arms to the beat. And maybe love is the reason why, for the first time ever we’re seeing it eye to eye.

Athena threw back her head and laughed, happy tears forming in her eyes as she danced with spirits that were becoming a vital part of her life. In the woken world, she would be a shoulder to carry the burdens of the Inquisition. She would take as many things from Rathein’s plate as she could to avoid losing her to the trials of responsibility. They would be shaped by their decisions within the world and how others judged them for it. But here, within the Fade, she could slowly start accepting the parts of herself that she had long since pushed aside.

At first it was her Desire to see something more within the world, to break free of the monotony that Victoria had found herself shackled to. Now, it was Rage that had helped her accept this new part of her life in Thedas. The male spirit next to her was now being egged on to dance in Harmony with Inspiration, a genuine smile coming to his fanged mouth as he was pulled by her.

While the two spirits bickered, she walked up towards Solas and Wisdom, summoning up a light sports jacket to slip over her arms and zip up the front. She was going to use up every opportunity to feel at home in the Fade, and that included wearing some comfortable items from home. The elf mage looked her up and down, an almost sarcastic smile on his lips. “Victoria, hm? Did I not say to avoid being reckless? And here you are with a Rage demon.”
Athena scoffed, rolling her eyes while mocking him in his own tongue from the little she knew of it. “Ir abelas, hahren. I did not realize that was a command to be followed. And, Athena, please. It was the name I chose upon entering this world. My former name is foreign to me now. . .but let’s keep it between us?”

He laughed, genuinely laughed while clasping his hands behind his back and looking down at her. “If you truly saw me as hahren, you would respect the opinion of an elder, dahlen.” The word was drawn from his lips with sarcasm soaking every syllable. She bristled before blowing a stray piece of hair out of her face.

“Ma nuvenin, Solas.” The language came from her memory of the games, it rolling from her tongue like a foreign language would but doing enough respect to it to earn a nod of appreciation from him.

He relaxed his arms by his sides, looking to Wisdom with a smirk still on his lips. The elvish spirit moved forward, giving Athena a smile while nodding to her in acknowledgement. “You have grown since I have last seen you. It is good to see my blessing aided you in your travels, lethal’lan.”

She thought back to when she shifted, how the knowledge she had about the turn was almost instinct and it allowed her body to surrender itself to the change. It probably wouldn’t have happened as easily if Wisdom hadn’t taught her the basics of the specialization. “I thank you. You were the first spirit I met here. . .you gave my hope when there was none. I don’t know what would have happened if you were not there to greet me first.”

The spirit shrugged, coming forward and putting her hands on her shoulders. “You have such strength within you, Athena. Feel free to call on me whenever you need Wisdom.” Athena nodded, watching the spirit fade away into the weave of magic around them. There was a moment of awkward silence as she looked up to Solas, whose gaze was now taking in the environment around them. He hummed with a soft smile, looking down to her. “This is your world?”

She could feel her chest flutter but she tried to shake it off by turning and placing her back against the tree next to him, putting her flushing skin out of view of his gaze. “A small part of it. I would come here during my summers as a child. This was always my favorite place to be though. There was just something about it that put me at peace.”

He nodded while pointing up in the sky, giving her a curious glance. “The music?”
Athena nodded again, realizing that the songs had kept playing. *She grabs the yellow bottle, she likes the way it hits her lips.* She looked down at the grass and realized that Inspiration was trying to show their new friend how to do the stretches they were doing earlier. At first his body protested but he was slowly bending down to touch his toes, his balance now thrown off because he didn’t have a tail anymore to stabilize him. She laughed, bringing her hands up to rest behind her neck while she stretched back into the bark of the tree. “Music was my escape. We used to have these small devices, amplifiers of a sort that could carry music around. When I wasn’t talking to people I would be lost within it. I’m really glad I can do that here; it’s like a piece of home.”

He smiled, looking down to the ground before looking over at her. “If you allow it, I think I would like to see more of your world.”

She closed her eyes, relaxing in the soft heat of the sun while smirking. “Oh? Why’s that?”

Solas chuckled, looking back to the lake while explaining: “I enjoy exploring the Fade to learn new things, see old and new places. . . you do not think I would want to see your world too?”

Athena couldn’t help but smile, opening her eyes to look out at the horizon. The sun was setting in her dream which meant it was probably going to be time for them to wake up. “I suppose not. Hah, perhaps I’ll even show you a movie!”

He paused, trying to repeat the word to himself before finally asking, “What is a movie?”

She chuckled under her breath, trying to think of a way to explain in terms that a person from Thedas could understand. She put her arms out in front of her and created a rectangle shape with her hands, both hands forming an L shape and expanding out to make the picture. “Imagine if you could capture a play, a story, and cast it out in light. It was a form of entertainment you could enjoy from your own home.”

He leaned in to look, trying to wrap his mind around it and she was trying to wrap hers around the fact that him leaning had their shoulders touching. “That is certainly fascinating. This type of thing is common in your world?”

She nodded, bringing her hands down and shifting herself just shy enough so that they were no longer touching. Was he always this friendly even with a human Inquisitor in her playthroughs? The flirtation and touching seemed to always be reserved for an elven Inquisitor, and even then, it was reserved. The unknown of the situation put a flutter of anxiety in her stomach while she rested her arms crossed over her abdomen. “Very much so. You have magic, dragons, and different races. . . we have technology. To be honest I much prefer this world though.”
He hummed in question, arching a brow at her while she stepped forward from the tree. She felt 
the pull of daytime arriving, the light peaking in through the Fade dream and shining down on all 
of them in an overbearing light even as her dream approached Darkness. She felt his gaze on her 
back, his cool aura accompanying it while bringing the hairs on the back of her neck on end. “Mm-
mmm. I craved adventure in my old world, and now I have it.” Solas nodded while rubbing his 
hands together; she assumed summoning the energy to bring them from the Fade into the waking 
world. The air around them grew cold and she could already feel Kain’s nose sniffing around her 
cheeks. 

Before she left, she snapped her fingers in remembrance, turning to Solas before quickly saying: 
“Remind me when we wake: I have something for you!”
Chapter End Notes

Songs:

I2I - Goofy Movie
Lovestoned - Justin Timberlake

Okay! Silly Fade chapters done for now :)

Art Commission created by the amazing destinyapostasy on Tumblr. :)
Inquisition: Move Out!

The next morning Athena woke to Kain sniffing around her face, soft whines pulling her from the Fade trance she had just been in. There was a soft smile on her face while she scratched the backs of his ears, sitting up from the bed and looking down at her abdomen. The scratches there were pretty much healed thanks to the healing and rest she had received the day before. She removed the dirty bandages and tossed them into the smoldering remains of the campfire before pulling a cotton undershirt on and then a thicker jacket. It was odd-fitting; she assumed it had come from the pile of generic clothes for the rest of the survivors. No matter, it was warm and there wasn’t much that could keep her down in spirits that morning.

With Kain at her side she quickly made her way to the breakfast line where people were getting small portions of a porridge-like material. Her brown gaze quickly glossed over the crowd, looking for any companion or familiar face but there was none. Instead she received the leery and still angry looks of the people. Athena did her best to not give a sarcastic smile and wave in return. Instead, she waited for the line to die down. She put her dominant foot up on a bench and tightened the laces of her boots all the way up to her knee. As she was finishing, somebody was nudging her shoulder with small but hard shoves. “Hey, what the-“

She turned to curse at the person but saw a man holding her out a bowl of porridge. There was something familiar about him; he looked like the man from the day before who had stepped in between the angry villagers and her. She stood up straight and looked at the bowl then back to his face. Her eyes followed the curve of his jaw, and the crooked frown that was on his lips. When she realized who it was her breath sucked in as a gasp, her eyes widening as she took the bowl from his hands. “Marquis!” His title fell from her lips in a whisper, her tongue still too stunned to form words. He raised a hand at her, a smirk twitching the corner of his lips while he scratched the stubble that was growing on his face. He was without a mask but sure enough this was the bastard who was attempting to throw the name of the Inquisition in the dirt. . . and now he was here.

He spoke, the Orlesian accent giving his identity away even though he no longer wore a mask to conceal his features. “I took up your offer, Lady Athena. Commander Cullen is a hard yet fine leader of the troops. It did me honor to help the people during the attack on Haven.”

She nodded, taking the bowl from his hands while finally succumbing to a smile. “Yes – thank you for your service! Uh. . .And for yesterday.” She bashfully looked down the bowl, her thoughts running a thousand miles a minute within her mind. She looked up to see Varric walking by with Bianca already on his back; he shot her a good morning nod with a small smirk attached. Once he left she looked back to the Marquis, raising the bowl. “Thank you for breakfast.”

The Marquis gave her a small bow before walking over to where some of the other soldiers were sitting. He seemed to fit in with them, regardless of his previous status and attitude. Athena knew from her limited knowledge of the military that traumatic events had a way of bringing people
together. It was something she saw in her nursing units at the hospital. Even if she was working with a terrible crew, they all came together and acted as a single unit when somebody was in trouble. It was like there was a connecting thread running through all of them that caused their hearts to beat in unison and for there to be understanding. The thoughts put a ghost of a smile on her lips as she sat by herself on the bench, slowly eating on some of the lukewarm porridge.

Once she was done she cleaned it out with snow and put it in her bag of belongings. Since she had been camping through the Hinterlands it didn’t take long for her to pack up her bedroll, throw it over her shoulder with her bag, and go off to find Prince. He, thankfully, had healed up as well. His coat held almost a brown shimmer in the morning dew as he awaited her arrival. When he caught sight of her, he stamped his hooves into the ground and let out a neigh of happiness. She dropped her bedroll into the snow and wrapped her arms around his neck, nuzzling her face into the front while he brought his chin down and rested it against her back. They sat like that for a moment, taking in each other’s heats while feeling their chests rise and fall in unison.

The sound of someone clearing their throat distracted her. She turned on her heel to see her partner from the Fade standing with an almost expectant look on his face. Athena furrowed her brows, trying to figure out what he could want when she had just woken up. Then it hit her, the realization bringing a light to her features as she quickly dug her hands through her bag and brought out a small decorated box. With a casual gesture she tossed it to him and he caught it with one hand, his fingers able to curl around its edges since it was roughly the size of his palm. “What is this?”

Athena chuckled under her breath, taking the moment to strap her bedroll onto Prince’s back and prepare him for the day’s journey. “I got it in Val Royeux. There hasn’t been a good time to give it to you. When I was reading on glyphs and ruins I came across a preservation spell. Hopefully it worked, if not, it’s the thought that counts, right?” She glanced over him quickly with a smile while strapping her bag to the side of the saddle. Everything was ready on her end; she just needed instructions from the Inner Council and a word with her personal scouts.

The elf turned the package over with one hand before slowly cracking open the box. The preservation spell burst with a small spray of a glitter-like mana, the scent of the Orlesian pastry flowing from the package. He laughed before shutting the box, sliding it into his pack while turning to Athena with a pleased expression on his face. “Of all the things to bring from Haven, you brought this?”

She shrugged while giving Prince a rub on the side of his neck while patting her own thigh for Kain to come close. “I suppose I had more time to prepare than everyone else. If you don’t like it, I know Bull would probably eat it. . . “ Her voice trailed off, leaving him bait in the conversation to pick up.

Thankfully he did, shaking his head while securing the box within his bag. His hand rested over it for a moment while their gazes met. “No, thank you, Athena. You were kind to think of me.”
Her cheeks instantly flushed pink and she used this opportunity to bring Kain’s face into her hands while running her thumbs over his cheekbones. “Don’t mention it. I need to speak to the pack so excuse me for a moment.”

Her and Kain rose in a single motion, walking through the camp to its edge. The other wolves weren’t within her line of sight, the snow settling and covering their tracks from the night before. Athena took in a deep breath of cold mountain air before letting out a sigh, rubbing her hands together before bringing them apart and clapping them together in a powerful, singular motion. With the sound of the clap went the call, the summoning of the pack through the forest. They must not have been far off because within moments the six of them arrived, fresh blood on their maws from their breakfast. She shook her head at them, bringing Kain within their ranks while speaking softly but at a normal volume so the villagers wouldn’t get suspicious from her whispering. “I need you to scout the best possible path for us. We are going up north into the mountains for a few days and you can be our eyes. This might shave some time off for us if we know what the best track is. Can you all do this?”

The alpha nodded without hesitation, turning to his pack with a bark before taking off. Kain stayed by her side as the messenger, his tail wagging back and forth in excitement. She used this opportunity to find Rathein and the council standing in a circle at the front of the growing caravan that was forming. The Herald was working through her morning exhaustion, crust visible at the corner of her eyes but it felt like every morning she was getting better at putting on a fresh face for the people that needed it. Cassandra held a map of the mountains in her hands and they all gathered around it to try and plan out the best way.

When Athena approached the Herald almost slumped over in relief, pulling her in while resting her head on her shoulder and wrapping her arms around her from behind. “Okay, future-teller, where are we going?”

She almost barked a laugh, patting her friend on the head while trying to remember where Skyhold fell on the map. “To be honest I only know what the end destination looks like, not necessarily how to get there. I’ve already sent my wolves on a scouting path to clear the way for us so if we follow them we should be safe.”

There was a visible sigh through the whole group while Cullen frowned. “I don’t like how vulnerable this leaves us. With that dragon, what if he were to come from above?”

She shook her head and looked up to the sky, biting on the inside of her cheek while thinking. “We struck a heavy blow against the number of his forces. I would think they’re probably regrouping.”
He rose to a full posture, his frown not disappearing while he asked: “You think so or you know so?”

Athena snapped back, wanting to pull forward towards him but Rathein knowingly tightened her grip around her waist. “Hey. Not fair. What did I tell you last night?” Her words spat like fire through the air, her gaze rising to the Commander’s insult.

He held it for a moment but then shook his head, his shoulders relaxing while he muttered: “Apologies. I’ll get the people on foot started.” He turned on his heel and left the inner council, leaving Athena to let out a sharp breath through her nose.

Rathein removed herself and motioned over to her horses. “Come on, let’s mount up. You and I need to be at the front.”

The pair walked and quickly jumped onto their horses. Athena was still bristling from Cullen’s morning attitude, wondering how long it would take him or the rest of the group to trust her. He was a military man and needed to know straight facts. It probably unnerved him that there were things she knew that she could not disclose. Considering he was a man of many backgrounds, it wouldn’t be a far-off accusation to assume that the rest of the people felt the same way. She ran her hands through her long, wavy light-brown hair with a groan growling from her lips.

“Frustration. When will they accept me? I only want to help.”

She paused, slowly dropping her hands down to Prince’s back while she looked to the young man standing next to her. Cole looked up at her with his blank stare, eyes perking up slightly when she looked down at him. “Are you walking, Cole?”

He shrugged, looking around to the others under the shade of his large-brimmed hat and dirty blonde hair. “They need horses more than me. I make them forget I’m here so they won’t worry about me.”

Athena shook her head, patting on the back of the saddle behind her. “Nonsense. Get on up here. You deserve to rest your legs as well. I know how much you helped yesterday.” He smiled at her, hesitantly grabbing onto her extended hand and pulling himself up behind her. Since he was small-framed they fit well on Prince’s back. The horse rolled his joints to accommodate for the new weight before looking up behind them, meeting Athena’s gaze. Friend? He asked into her mind, his eyes looking the young man up and down. Athena nodded while running her hands through his mane. “Yes, Prince. He’s good. He helps.”
The spirit of Compassion stilled behind her, his voice soft while he whispered: “You know me.”

She looked over her shoulder at him, patting him on top of the thigh while answering. “I know of you, but I would like to get to know you if that’s okay?” He paused for a second, really considering the option before he nodded.

A voice boomed out from the group, the Herald at the front while Cassandra and Cullen flanked behind them and Josephine and Leliana behind them. “Inquisition! Move out.”
Kain led the caravan, leading the Herald in the direction that the wolf pack had scouted out for them. As the day went on, Athena found her and Prince falling more back into the group with the villagers. At one point she jumped off of her horse and was having people take turns riding. When an injured woman was lifted onto her mount’s back, she felt a small pull from her pants leg. She looked down and saw a young boy, perhaps about ten years old, looking up at her with such large, curious, blue eyes. “Oh hello there. What is your name?” The boy giggled himself into silence as the other villagers around them still gave her leery looks. They would pull their shawls tighter around their shoulders as they walked past her, venom flinging itself at her every time they shot her a hateful glance. At this point she became so used to it they slid right off of her and she was able to focus on the boy.

He then walked up and stood on his tiptoes, grabbing her shoulder to balance so he could whisper in her ear. “Tobi.”

Athena nodded, standing up and patting Prince on his flank so he would take off with the soldier on his back. This left her and the child alone in the group of the survivors trudging through the snow. “Where are your parents, sweetheart?” Her face remained friendly, hopeful as she spoke to the young boy. She extended a hand towards him to hold while they walked through the snow and he took it gingerly. His little gloved hand fit within hers and they walked, their boots crunching in the freshly fallen snow. His head dropped and he tried to sniffle some dribble away from his nose. She went to ask the question again but she saw there was a look of utter sadness on his face. It was then that a voice came from behind them. “They were lost at the Temple, Lady Athena.”

She looked over her shoulder to see Mother Gisellele walking with a small group of children and teenagers. They were all bundled within their jackets and throws, small windows of air showing their adorable faces as they walked together. The Chantry sister had created a rope out of spare cloth and had them all hold it so they wouldn’t be lost. She nearly sighed with sympathy, her gaze taking in the dozen or so children that walked with her. Their ages appeared to range from five to their teenage years but they all held a unison air of grief. “I understand,” she sighed, looking to the Chantry leader with a smile while rolling up her sleeves to give them some air.

That action brought a gasp from Tobi’s lips, his eyes widening as he took in the sight of her scars on her left arm. “What happened?” His voice was still a whisper but there was a confident tone of curiosity laced within it. The other kids looked over at the scar, their eyes widening as well and some of the older ones smiled at the sight of it. Athena looked at them all and took this as an opportunity for entertainment, grinning while leaning in close to them while speaking under her
“I fought off a bear!” They all gasped, their voices coming out from hiding to ask all kinds of questions. How big was it? Did it hurt? How did you kill it? Did it have lots of teeth?

Their questions brought a chuckle from her lips and she shrugged, looking to Mother Giselle who was giving her an approving nod. “I tell you what. Tonight, after dinner, I will tell you the story of the bear around the campfire before bed, okay?” They all nodded, their steps no longer dragging through the snow as they ran off, hoping that their speed brought help bring the night along. The other villagers continued to avoid her like she was carrying a plague, which brought a small twitch to their lips.

“They are still grieving, Lady Athena. They are grieving the lost, the future, and their lives.”

Mother Giselle’s voice was somehow still full of Wisdom even though they were trenching through the deep snow, her face soft and her tone pleasant. Athena used her free hand to rub the back of her neck, ensuring that her left hand stayed clutched around Tobi’s. “Give them time. You are . . . a mystery to them, much like the Herald. What role you shall play is unknown, but the world’s eyes are on both of you.”

She flinched in surprise, looking over to the faithful woman with a shocked look. “Me? Why me? I don’t have the Mark; I didn’t close the Breach.” The Mother took in a deep breath through her nose and looked to the sky, a smile coming to her lips as she bathed in the light of the Maker.

“You, like the Herald, fell from the sky at a time when the world was grieving. You have been influential in shaping the Inquisition and you have the trust of the Inner Council. There are now rumors that you are from another world entirely, Lady Athena.”

Of course Mother Giselle with her rumors. Athena shook her head and looked to the sky as well, being thankful for the small amount of sun that beat down upon them. “It’s complicated to explain; I’m not sure how to put it into words for everyone without scaring them off.”

The sister then chuckled, clasping her hands in front of her while nodding with a small hum. “Trust them, Athena, and in turn they will trust you.” The words rang within her mind and brought a smirk of a twitch to her lips, her hand squeezing around the child’s next to her.

“I suppose you’re right.”
The night came and all of the children were anxiously waiting around the fire, waiting for Athena to arrive. She had been prepping her own bedroll for a night’s sleep, trying to figure out the words for a story to tell them. They needed a distraction from the grief, a distraction from the chaos that surrounded them. Hopefully she could do just that. She walked to the campfire with Kain at her side and the moment she came into view the children stopped their conversations. All eyes were expectantly on her but it was Tobi that broke the silence first. “Tell us of the bear!” His voice was filled to the brim with excitement, his eyes sparkling underneath the hood of his wrap.

She put a finger to her lips to silence them all, lowering her hands to be hovering above the ground palm down out to her sides. When she spoke, her voice was low and ominous. Kain was at her side, his mind and spirit linked with hers and ready to take cues to electrify the story. “So there we were, exploring the Hinterlands to find one of the legendary heroes of the Blight: a Grey Warden!” The kids all oohed and leaned in closer as she picked up a stick to use as an imaginary staff. “The Great Warden Blackwall and the Herald of Andraste were talking of alliances, the future, you know, adult stuff.” The kids wrinkled their noses in disgust while she continued. “I didn’t want any of that so I decided to go on a walk.”

Athena walked with a slight bounce in her step around the campfire, Kain obediently waiting on the other side of the campfire for his cue. “While I was talking to myself and picking some spindleweed, I heard a very strange noise.”

Kain looked up and began to growl, the sound soft and low in his throat. The children all fell silent, their eyes looking to the new beast in her tale. She stopped as well, eyes widening while she held her “staff” out towards her side. “It was soft at first. I could barely hear it but it made the forest shake!” By this point the pair was in front of the fire with it at their sides, the children even further from the fire. They sat on their edges in anticipation, Tobi poking his head out from the safety of his hood.

Her wolven companion growled again, this time is growing louder while he raised from his position and approached her. “By the time I knew what the sound was, the beast was upon me!” She looked to the wolf and made a mock sound of surprise, raising the stick to block as he playfully jumped on top of her and pinned her to the ground. The children all raised from their seats, screaming “No!” as she fell down. Tobi even went so far as to throw a snowball at the “bear” in an attempt to protect her, breaking from his usual grief-stricken shyness.

Athena put the back of her hand to her forehead, melodramatically looking off to the side. “I thought it was over, this had to be it. How could I defend myself against such a beast?” There was silence between the group, the fire roaring behind her and providing warmth as she was laying in the snow.
A small girl, eight at the most, peeked over from behind one of her friends and asked: “What did you do?”

She gave her a wicked smile, winking while putting her hand against Kain’s snout. He was still holding character, his teeth bared and wrapped around the stick in her hand. “I fought! First I tried to push him off but he was too heavy!” The black-pelted wolf persisted and put his paws on her shoulders, pushing her further down into the snow while she attempted to fight him off. “I thought I was making some progress but then a large warrior approached! The Iron Bull himself, leader of the Bull’s Chargers, stormed in with a roar and CRACK! He brought his giant axe down upon the beast’s back!”

Kain gave out a pathetic howl of pain, flopping onto his stomach on Athena but keeping his teeth around the stick. She looked to the kids and shrugged. “Unfortunately. This did not help in getting the bear off of me.”

The children giggled and the sound was accompanied by a pair of passing villagers laughing at her story as well. With a quick glance she noticed that there were a few people who were slowed by her story on their path to their bedrolls. Most of the people continued on their walk, but somehow she had caught the attention of a few. Mother Giselle nodded from her position in the middle of the children, giving her a soft smile to continue on.

“The bear was upon me and it gave a large roar! Its mouth was so close to me I could smell the stench of dead rabbit caught between its teeth!”

The wolf snarled at her and was almost convincing enough that Athena gave him an eyebrow raise to cool it. He took her coaching and brought the volume down and brought his lips back over his teeth, giving her a wolfish grin. “So I did what I had to. My staff could not be used so all I had left was this hand.”

She raised her left hand into the air, acting as if it were some weapon sent down from the heavens. The flames illuminated the scar, bringing it more into their focus as did her best to raise her voice so everyone could hear. “I thrust my hand forward, hoping to bring forth a spell to dispel the beast! But he was simply too fast!”

Athena sat up from her position and pushed her left palm out. Kain paused for a moment, looking in her eyes for what to do. She urged the thought into his mind and he quickly, but gingerly opened his mouth and allowed his teeth to rest against her arm, the curves of his canines falling into the grooves of her scar. He was very tender, not wanting to hurt her, but he then strengthened his position on top of her legs and furrowed his brow, a growl trickling from her throat. The children
screamed at the motion and the sight of seeing her hand within the mouth of the beast. Tobi turned his head into Mother Giselle’s robes to shield himself from the sight of bloodshed.

“Did it hurt?”

She couldn’t help but laugh, looking to them with a genuine grin. “Of course it did! A bear was attempting to take my arm for dinner. But I said, no! You will go to bed without supper tonight! He tried to pull me away to his cave, dragging me by my arm in front of my comrades.”

Kain pulled back slowly until they were in the same position she was that day. She was on her hands and knees with her left arm outstretched and in his mouth and he was gently tugging on her arm like they were playing tug of war with a rope. His brown eyes nearly glittered in the firelight and she felt that he was enjoying the playtime. “Since my hand was already in my mouth, I thought to myself, how can I vanquish this foe?” Her voice was melodramatically pained but it still did its effect on the children.

“Did you stab it?”

“Did you eat it?!”

“DID YOU DIE?!”

The adults surrounding the fire laughed at the thought and then lowered their voices to keep their identities hidden. It was almost like they were trying to keep it secret that they were associated or being entertained by the Witch of the Inquisition. Athena looked to the kids, focusing her gaze particularly on Tobi who held an expression of genuine fear. “No. I prevailed with fire!”

Kain fell backwards with an extended and low howl, his body helplessly playing dead in front of the children. She waited until his mouth was off of her arm but when her palm hit the cold air she brought forth a flame into her grasp. It danced confidently in the moonlight, it acting like the shining victor of the entire story as it encompassed her hand and went halfway down her forearm. The children clapped but Tobi still looked petrified. “H-h-h-how did you fix your arm?”

Her face fell, eyes wincing as the pain shot down her arm at recollection of the memory. Rathein’s grip was so tight around her, her sobs being silenced in her back by Athena’s wordless screams into her arm. Solas had such a grim look on his face while he did it, like it was hurting him too. To be fair, her aura did attempt to light him on fire but that wasn’t the pain she saw in his features. There
was something more. . . and the thought of it brought a blush to her cheeks but she looked to the children anyways, an air of mystery bringing a sparkle to her eyes. “Magic!”

She closed her hand with a snap and the fire disappeared, concluding the story. Kain scrambled from his position on his back and stood next to her, strengthening his posture so she could use him to pull herself to a standing position. The children cheered, a few of them rising to run to her but their eyes widened at the sight of the large wolf. One of them reached their hand out slowly, allowing for the creature to sniff it while their wide eyes looked towards Athena. She crouched back down, rubbing Kain’s head in explanation. “It’s okay, he’s a sweet puppy. All of my wolves are.”

“All of them?”

“Mmm-hmmm.” The children slowly began to pat him, their bodies surrounding him while they poured their affection onto him. She stood up and brushed the snow off of her pants while she heard the equivalence of a golfer’s clap behind her. Varric pulled his gloves on tighter while smirking, looking up at her while the fire’s light danced on his kin. “Good story, Walker. You might have a knack for this kind of thing. Now how did I miss you getting attacked by a bear?”

She chuckled, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear while shrugging. “I’m sure there will be other adventures for you to jump in on. Who knows, maybe we can go dragon hunting?”

The dwarf shook his head and scratched at his chest, a flash of uncertainty going through his eyes while he groaned. “Naaah, I’m good. You can leave that for the Bull. He’s been itching to get his “blood grooves” dirty.” He continued walking past and waved over his shoulder at her, murmuring a farewell of “See ya in the morning, Walker.”

Chapter End Notes

<3 Hope you are all having a wonderful day!
Thankfully the exhaustion from the night before had driven her straight into a dream-state of sleep. Her mind melded into the Fade and it didn’t take long until Inspiration showed up, dragging a particularly hesitant horned friend behind her. Athena smiled, taking the first spirit into an embrace before looking to the other. “I don’t think you and I have officially been reintroduced.”

The other spirit rolled his eyes while stretching his arms above his head, yawning with his mouth wide open to show off his smaller fangs while answering: “Haaaarmony.” She nodded as he confirmed her theories from before, looking to them both with a small smile on her lips.

“What do you guys want to do tonight?”

The female spirit instantly jumped off the ground, an idea coming to her face as she clapped her hands together. “What was that thing you were talking about? With the stored plays and the screen?” Inspiration then reattempted to create the box with her fingers, aiming the center over her friend’s face while scrunching up her face tight in a focused expression.

Athena smirked. “Movies? You want to watch a movie?”

Inspiration’s mouth moved, trying to master the sound of the foreign word before nodding in excitement. “Yes. Absolutely. I want to see the arts from your world!” She then nudged Harmony in the side who gave her a frown before shrugging.

“I don’t see why not.” He added while looking to the surrounding area, a familiar chill settling into the area. Athena did not do well in hiding her smile as she tucked a stray hair behind her ear, containing her blush before accepting the other presence into her portion of the Fade.

Solas strode in from the side in a casual walk, gaze soft and friendly. She instantly took notice that Wisdom wasn’t there, her eyes looking to the side before she scrunched her lips in a look of confusion. “Where’s Wisdom?”

The elf chuckled, shrugging while making a gesture out into the open area. “We are not the only people who require her knowledge. I am sure she is with some other dreamer or spirit discussing philosophy and the like. What are you doing?” He looked around, taking note of the empty canvas
of the Fade with a small hum. “You have not explored yet...”

She shook her head before turning away from him, closing her eyes and trying to craft a comfortable environment for them to watch something in. The memory of a couch formed with pillows on the ground. They were brought into one of her living rooms from childhood. She was still having trouble bringing electronics and their functions into this world, so instead she simply created a white wall in front of them for her to project her memories onto. When she opened her eyes hesitantly, she sighed in relief before walking around and plopping herself down on the couch. It threatened to consume her, just as she remembered it. She looked to the side and smiled as her favorite blanket materialized into view. The feeling was pure nostalgia as she brought it over her lap and curled it up to her shoulder. Athena smiled, rubbing the fabric against her cheek while letting out a soft sigh that was tinted with sadness.

Solas sat on the couch at the other end from her, giving her a look up and down. “Something wrong?”

Athena shrugged, looking to him with a gleam over her eyes that showed she was close to tears for a moment. “This just makes me miss home. I know this is a dream, a recollection of my memories, but everything just feels the same. The smells, the furniture...” Her voice trailed off, her eyes landing on the two spirits that had sat themselves on the floor in front of them between the couch and the wall while using pillows to prop themselves up. Inspiration looked over her shoulder expectantly, jerking her head towards the wall in anticipation for what was about to happen. Her companion on the couch pressed on while leaning back and resting his left foot on top of his right knee in a relaxed position. “This whole experience sounds trying for you.” There was a genuine sincerity to his words and that brought a half laugh and a half sob from her lips. It was the understatement of her lifetime, but it was the reality she was dealt. Thankfully she had friends like Dorian and Rathein...and then the ever changing enigma that was Solas. She looked to the wall while running a hand through her hair and stretching into her position. Her legs were curled up next to her on the side, allowing him his own personal space on his side.

For some reason the words were difficult to form so instead she sighed, rubbing her forehead. “What type of story would you like?”

Inspiration did not hesitate, turning around and shooting her a glowing smile. “Something with music. I love your music from your world. It gives me so much energy, so much life!”

A musical? She thought back on her favorite movies, something she could call to memory with ease. The answer brought a chuckle from her lips, causing her to nod while gesturing to the wall. “As you wish, my friend. If there are any errors, forgive me. I’m still new to this whole Fade dreamer thing.” Harmony scoffed while sitting back on his pillow, making sure to keep an obvious
space between him and his spiritual companion. Athena rolled her eyes before shutting them, imaging the opening lines to a classic in her world.

*The Phantom of the Opera.*

The images flickered to life on the wall in front of them, it bringing a satisfied hum from Solas while Inspiration smiled in happiness. She then laid on her stomach and hugged the pillow to her chest, obtaining one of Athena’s favorite positions to watch a movie in. Did her personality somehow meld with the spirits when she helped her form? Or was the spirit always this kind and compassionate? It was a curious thought; one she would have to ask Wisdom later. For the moment, she turned and watched the movie while leaning her head against her hand on the arm rest of the couch.

This movie was always something to special to her. Its music was moving, the characters were relatable, and it had such a story that made you pity the villain it was astounding. It was also a steady date movie whenever she wanted to set a romantic scene. *Fuck.* Her eyes widened in a moment of panic, quickly resisting the urge to look over at Solas. A blush filled her cheeks and she pulled the blanket up to her shoulders and curled into the couch as if to become one with the fabric. “What is troubling you?”

His voice cut through her embarrassment like a knife and pulled a twisting feeling of anxiety into her belly. “Solas, there are, uh, memories attached to this particular production. Any tips on keeping those separate so you three don’t get dragged into the feelings that come with this?” He chuckled under his breath, shaking his head back and forth while trying to keep his eyes on what was happening on the wall.

The main theme was beginning to play and his lips twitched into a smile at the large fanfares and swells within the music. “It is difficult to offer suggestions when I learned to master that so long ago.”

It was Harmony who stood up and walked behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders while leaning down and speaking into her ear. “I think this is where I come in. You’ve been using your emotions as a fuel during your magic, yes?” He spoke low to avoid drawing attention away from the movie but he kept his gaze on it, the lights from the wall reflecting in his golden horns. She nodded in response, slowly feeling that pressure in her stomach resolve. He continued on, resting his head on his crossed arms while leaning on the back of the couch. “Use your emotions as a shield, an armor that nobody can penetrate. You are a being that is very in tune with yours. Other mages have been taught to contain themselves, control themselves to avoid drawing attention. You burn like fire within the Fade.”

It was something she had been told before but the way he said it suddenly make sense. She wasn’t
from here. She was not raised in the same environments, the same schoolings as other mages. She was still a novice barely learning battle strategy, let alone being somebody who was completely in control of her emotions. “I don’t want to suppress anything though, Harmony. I like wearing my heart on my sleeve. It’s an honest trait I’m proud of.” She could feel Solas glance over at her for a second before returning his gaze to the wall, a ghost of a smile twitching at the corner of his lips. The spirit behind her shook his head, placing a hand on her shoulder to help sync her energy with his.

“I never said suppress, simply master. Learn your triggers, learn how your feelings move through you like magic. Keep them flowing but keep them from spreading out. Your emotions are yours alone. They drive you and give you guidance. Express them, yes, but only by your choice. You choose how to react to things, Athena. Keep them skin-tight. You know how.”

He then patted her on the shoulder and returned to his seat with Inspiration, sitting a hair noticeably closer to her, almost allowing for their thighs to touch while they sat on the floor. Athena sighed and rested her head within her hand again, paying close attention to her breaths as they came in and out. She then focused on how the swells of the music resonated within her. Even if they brought a tear to her eye, she kept the responding swell of emotion within her. It felt like a turbulent wind within her body but it didn’t spread farther than that. After the rousing romantic ballad of the opera, which normally brought her to tears especially with the Phantom’s heartbreak afterwards, Harmony looked over his shoulder and nodded while stating: “Better.”

The movie continued and when glanced at Solas barely responded, physically at least, to the things happening on the wall. Inspiration, however, reacted like Athena would have acted if she wasn’t practicing her guard. She cried, laughed, and sighed during most of the scenes. She allowed her influence to be moved by the movie and in a way Athena was jealous. It felt like she was finally getting the hang of this new skill when a rather emotionally charged song began to play through her mind. It was one of the final songs, the buildup of the entire movie where the main female character was being used as bait for the Phantom.

Until now Athena had never realized how sexually charged the whole scene was. Their voices were near raspy, their gazes never breaking as they prowled in movements around each other like hunters. The colors of red and black flashed across the scene and she could feel her breath catching in her throat. The music sent a chill down her spine, Harmony looking over his shoulder and arching a brow. She cursed under her breath, giving him a guilty half smile. “Am I leaking?”

He chuckled and nodded at her, nestling in his position with Inspiration that had transformed into her resting her head against his shoulder with his arm around her. “You were doing good, keep trying.”

*When will the flames at last, consume us?*
She tried to swallow but found her mouth was dry, her eyes taking in every dance move, every lingering gaze that the Phantom gave his victim. They were advancing on each other now and Athena pulled the blanket up to her chin to hide the flush that was spreading over her chest. It was difficult but she kept her aura from spreading, keeping all the awkward tensions contained within her spirit. Her mouth moved with the lyrics since she knew them from heart. She thought she was going to burst and fail when the song had a sudden change in theme. It brought tears to her eyes and they silently fell down her cheeks. *Say you’ll share with me one love, one lifetime.*

It was the Phantom’s broken voice in his plea that undid her, her aura trickling out with her emotions following it. Harmony sighed and shook his head, mumbling something like “You’ll learn” from under his breath. Solas looked over to her with a look of confusion, his voice soft while he asked: “You pity this character?”

Athena nodded, using the corner of the blanket to wipe the tears from her face. “It’s the beauty of this particular show. He is an awful person, has committed horrid crimes, but he just desires companionship. It’s tragically beautiful and heartbreaking.” He thought on this for a moment, his gaze tearing from hers while looking over to the wall.

He answered in a voice that was almost a whisper and for a second she could feel his cool aura sliding over hers. “You think he deserves it after all he has done?”

The weight of his words brought a sigh from her lips, tears coming to her eyes again. Thankfully she could lie if need be and say it was the movie, but truly it broke her heart if he felt he was unworthy of love due to his own actions. He crafted the Veil and in that doomed the fate of his people. The Dread Wolf walked a lonely path even though his largest fear was dying alone. She answered with a hum while nodding, turning her gaze back with a smile. “Everybody deserves love, Solas. Nobody should die alone.” His eyes widened and he tore his gaze from hers while keeping his face neutral. She could feel his aura slap back to his skin like a whip. She wanted to reach out to him, comfort him and give him some sort of peace. His body language screamed otherwise so she resigned herself to her corner of the couch with a soft sigh.

They finished the rest of the movie in silence, Inspiration nearly sobbing as the final notes echoed through the Fade. The wall returned to its blank canvas and the group sat for a moment in stunned silence. “That was so beautiful, Athena!” The emotional spirit cried out, turning her tear-stained face to her friend. Athena only chuckled while standing and folding the blanket up on the couch.

The moment it left her grasp the piece of fabric dissipated into the surrounding Fade. “I’m glad you enjoyed it.”
She continued to walk past the couch when Solas stood from his spot and followed in her step. “Where are you going?” His voice was heavy, sad almost but there was still concern in his tone as he followed her.

It was exhausting to keep her emotions bottled up so she rolled back her shoulders and allowed them to flow. “Honestly that training exercise left me exhausted. I was going to wake up early and hunt with the pack while seeing how much travel time we have left. I suspect it isn’t long now.” She didn’t turn to meet his gaze but stilled when she felt his hand on her shoulder.

“Athena.” She could feel her pulse racing but she steeled her will and turned to look at him, trying to keep a respectable distance between their bodies. He smiled at her, nodding while saying: “Thank you for sharing that with me. I would still like to see more of your world, if possible.”

Athena sighed and placed her hand on his, feeling the small spark between the collision of their auras while smirking at him. “Of course, Solas. Another time perhaps. I suppose I will see you when you wake.”

He nodded with a hum, holding her gaze for a few seconds longer before dropping his hand from her shoulder. There was a soft tint of pink at the tips of his ears but he nodded towards her before walking away. “Good night, Athena.”

She then pulled on the tether connecting her to her body and groaned in her bedroll, turning over to find tears on her face. Kain was immediately there to lick them away, soft whines accompanying the kisses to soothe her. “I’m alright, boy. Come on, let’s go get the others.”

Chapter End Notes

I felt so silly writing this chapter but was really inspired while doing it at the same time. Hope you all enjoy!
Athena met with the wolves on the edge of the camp, touching each of their heads to hers and taking in their scent with a smile. They beckoned for her to come with them, their bodies moving sideways to try and get her to run with them. With a smile, she shrugged out of her jacket and hung it on a tree branch. She bent down on her knees and searched for that feeling, searched for that absolute instinctual magic that took over her body when she was running with them days before. It lingered within her chest, a shadow of what it formerly was, but it never rose past that: a flicker. She winced at the rejection and sat back on her butt in the snow, defeat taking over her features while Kain walked up and pressed his nose into the side of his neck. “You all go ahead without me. I’ll catch up later.” The alpha gave a small bark of confirmation and order before turning the other six to his side. Her own companion hesitated for a moment, giving her a final kiss on her cheek before running off to his duties.

She returned to the camp defeated, her head low and her shoulders slumped. She quickly picked up Prince with her belongings before grabbing a single piece of bread for breakfast. Failure had filled her stomach and left her wanting more than food. Was shifting a onetime thing? Was it the rush of anger from the villager hitting her? Was Rage truly fueling her magic in that moment to give her escape? These were the thoughts running through her mind when she stormed on the edges of camp and collided with a rather large member of the Inquisition Party.

Bull turned around with a curious hum, a single eyebrow raised until he set his gaze on her. She rubbed her head where she ran into him and looked up apologetically. He looked her up and down before simply stating: “You look like shit.”

She couldn’t help but laugh, scratching her scalp while untangling her hair with her nails. “Thanks for the sensitivity, Bull.”

The Qunari looked out through the camp and motioned with his horns out towards the forest. “Walk with me, will you?”

With his size and power alone she felt like she wasn’t in a place to refuse. At they walked she tore off small pieces of the hard bread and nibbled on it until they were assumingly out of earshot. Once they hit the trees he turned to her with a curious gaze. She looked up to him, mouth full of bread, while making a motion signaling for him to continue. “What?”

He chuckled under his breath and patted the tops of his thighs while leaning against a large tree. “How are you holding up?”
She stilled, swallowing down the hard and dry lump of bread while meeting his gaze. Surprisingly, it wasn’t judgmental, but open. His entire body language was nonthreatening even with his size and battle scars. It was slightly jarring as she raised her brows in return. “Why?”

He shook his head and shrugged, giving her a soft smile. “Ben Hasserath. You tend to notice things.”

The blatant observation brought a rush of heat to her cheeks, her gaze dropping to the snow. She couldn’t help but kick some of the fresh powder that was at her boot while she chewed the inside of her cheek. “Why do you care?”

He ruffled her hair to get her to break the self-pitying body language, smiling when she shot him a scowl. “It took a lot of guts to tell everyone what was really going on. I was wondering when you were going to do it.”

She rolled her eyes and shifted some of her weight onto one hip. “Okay, I’ll bite. When did you know?”

He thought back for a moment, lips thinning into a line before he nodded. “You were really reserved with people, went off on your own, had a certain intuition about things. They already ruled you out for possession or I would have suggested it myself.” The suggestion made her wince, eyes slowly moving from the ground up to meet his gaze. Still, it was friendly. He groaned, messing with his eye patch while continuing. “Look everyone’s going to be weird for a while but it will pass. I was hired on so they’re stuck with me. You on, the other hand, you’re stuck with them. You don’t really have anywhere else to go since we’re all you know.”

The more he talked, the heavier her mind felt. She crossed her arms over her abdomen and bit her lower lip, nodding along with everything he was saying. “But look... Just be honest in the future, okay? Especially with me. I can tell if you’re lying.”

Athena broke for a second and nodded again, tilting her head to one side while shrugging. “I’ll do my best, Bull. But you know there are certain things I won’t be able to share with you guys. It’s not personal; I just don’t know what will happen.”

He clapped his hands together and rubbed them together, a smile spreading across his face. “Good! Now that that’s settled. What do you need?”
Instantly she froze, shaking her head and waving her hands in front of her. “Nu-uh. Nope. I know what kind of services you offer and I’m not buying.” She took a step back from him but he laughed, the sound echoing from the forests.

“I mean, yeah, I think you need that too but I’m not the one to give it to you. Unless you want.” Athena quickly shook her head with a hard blush on her cheeks. “Do you need anything?”

Athena paused for a moment, continually shifting her weight back and forth until she smirked. “Actually, can I have a hug?” He stepped forward and reached down, wrapping his arms around her while lifting her off the ground. She froze, her arms firm while her eyes were wide open. He didn’t move at all, holding her like she weighed nothing at all. One hand started to rub her back and it was that motion that forced her to relax within his grip. She rested her head on his shoulder and submitted to the hug, tears forming in her eyes while he did it. She whispered to him, voice nearly breaking under the weight of the emotions pressing forward on her mind. “This is a good hug.”

He hummed, giving her a pat on the back before setting her down slowly. “I see how touchy you are with the boss and how she is with you. You’re that way with the Vint too, but that’s it. Are people like you in your world?”

She nodded, rubbing her eyes with the backs of her hands. “Yeah. I’m just a hugger I guess.”

He touched her shoulder and gestured for them to walk back to camp. As they were about halfway he cleared his throat and smirked. “Say, Athena, what exactly did you have on me?”

She laughed, thinking back to her game experiences while looking to the sky. “You’re actually an open book already, Bull, so it is difficult to pinpoint something.”

He groaned and threw his hands into the air. “Oh come on that’s not fair!” She thought for a moment, grasping her chin between her thumb and index finger. When something hit her mind, she snapped her fingers and turned on her heel, meeting his gaze with hers. She smiled a wicked grin while biting off the final piece of bread, wiping her hand off on her pants while responding.

“Katoh.”

His eyes widened and he whistled, the sound tapering off into silence. “You know that?” She nodded and turned back to walk to the village, leaving him chuckling to himself while he finished
“Oh come on I’m not *that* bad!”

The group laughed, Varric slapping his thigh while looking to her. “Look, Walker, we get it. You’re new here, you’re just learning magic. But those things are really obvious in battle.” The rest of the group that had fought with her chuckled in agreement. She looked to anyone for some words of doubt, saying no she was a good fighter, but there was none. Athena leaned back on Prince and groaned, allowing her hands to rest at her sides off of the saddle while she allowed her body to sulk in exasperation.

“Thanks, guys. Really.” Rathein pulled up on her own horse, a mocking smile on her face while she leaned to the side so she could extend her leg and try to kick Athena from her horse. Prince would not allow her be unmounted. He moved his body to help her catch her balance, the horse shooting the Herald a glance while a frustrated grunt came from his throat. Her friend raised her hands in defense, showing the mount that she meant no harm. He almost nodded back at her, returning to his steady trot while Athena pulled herself up to a straight posture.

“I’ll say though, Athena. You really have a thing with animals.”

The rest of the group nodded in agreement and then she saw Sera scrunch her face up in a look that almost resembled disgust. “I heard ya’ could get all furry and stuff, run with your friends there. Weird.” Athena looked over and sighed, looking out at the distance to where she could feel her pack scouting for her. She hadn’t heard any howls of discovery and Kain hadn’t rushed back to deliver messages so they weren’t quite there. She groaned while looking to Sera, giving her a shrug.

“Honestly? I did it once. It was actually . . . really great. I can’t seem to replicate the shift though.”

The elf archer snorted, nodding while stating: “Good.” The words stung like a bee, ironically enough with Sera’s affinity for the blighted creatures, and when she went to snap back at her she felt a cold call in the back of her head. With an angry clench of her jaw she spun around to see Solas slowly trotting on his own horse. His eyes were focused on a book but he glanced up at her, giving her a small smirk of warning before turning the page and continuing. It was like the look
said, “Not worth it.” He was right though and this brought a thankful smile to her face, turning back to the others.

“You guys realize this means I’ll be bugging you to teach me, right?”

The more sarcastic members groaned while Rathein nodded, using her staff to reach over and prod Athena on the shoulder. “Yeah, yeah. We know.-” She cut off, her eyes looking to the distance while the image of a true battle seasoned mage came to her face. “What was that noise?” The whole group stilled and Athena took the moment to jump off Prince, her own ears attuned to the sound more than theirs. It was a soft note, something that called to her spirit and made her head ring with recognition. Without hesitation, she took off, weaving between their horses and allowing her determination to lead her through the snow.

The howls grew louder as she ran towards them, a grin spreading to her face as she used the instinctual grace of a hunter to leap over branches and slide down paths of ice and snow. The wolves were all at the peak of a cliff, overlooking the fall at their destination. Athena skidded to a stop behind them, eyes widening as she nearly lost her breath.

The view of Skyhold was breathtaking. The sun perfectly illuminated the path ahead of them. It was gargantuan in real life; she was barely able to take it all in. The bridge connected the mountaintops and the towers rivaled the sky. The game simply not capture its size. She had to fight to keep her jaw closed but excitement lit up every feature of her face. The wolves all sat at her side as Solas and Rathein approached from behind, staffs in hand as he announced the keep: Skyhold. But Athena knew it for its true title: Tarasyl’an Te’las. The place where the sky was held back. The sheer amount of power it held was palpable even from where she stood. It pressed against her skin and called to her, urging her to enter its gates.

Rathein turned and was giving orders for the villagers to hurry up so they could in before sundown. When she left Athena finally let the words fall from her lips. “Solas. It’s breathtaking.”

He looked to her and nodded, a soft smile coming to his face while he raised a brow at her. “I cannot take credit for its craftsmanship, but yes. It will serve the Inquisition well.”

She resisted the urge to scoff at his blatant lie, instead she finally tore her eyes from the castle and looked to him. “Well since the original architect is not here I will give the credit to you for leading us here. Thank you.”

She looked to the wolves and gave them a nod, a silent command going to them. Make sure it’s safe. The alpha nodded before barking the order to the rest of them. They took off as a single unit,
making their way down the mountain and over the bridge. Almost as if Solas understood them he fell in step behind her and she could feel the smugness coming from his words. “The place is protected by an ancient magic. We should be safe there.”

Athena clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth and smiled, steadying herself on a tree before beginning the ascent down. “Oh you speak wolf now? And here I thought I was the only shifter.”

He stilled behind her and chuckled, rubbing his fingers across his brow. “Their intent was obvious. They are your scouts, are they not?” Good cover.

She smirked while looking at the path which now seemed smooth to the bridge. “You’re correct and if you’ll excuse me I can’t contain myself.”

Without waiting for a response, she took off into a breathless sprint. Her arms pumped at her side while a grin spread across her face. The wind bit at her cheeks as she crossed the bridge. It was all coming back to her now. The towers, where the companions would stay, the different staircases and where they led. She stopped in the courtyard and did a quick circle, trying to take it all in before making an excited sigh of delight. The sound of a cracking whip alerted her that he had fade-stepped to follow her. Her eyes jumped from tower to tower, taking in the differences from this and the game.

In short, this was just bigger. Much bigger.

He laughed at her enthusiasm, gesturing to the courtyard and the castle above them. “You like it?”

She nodded wordlessly, gaze still taking it all in. “Honestly? I’m trying to decide where my room is going to be. I need to it to somewhere close to the entrance so my wolves can find me without scaring all of our visitors. . . “

Her voice trailed off until she looked to a tower room that was on the battlements closer to the gates. From what she knew, it was unoccupied in the game. With a mischievous smirk, she took off up the stairs and Kain joined her at her side. The stairs and altitude took its toll but when she reached the room it was decided. This place was hers. There was a large window facing the valley, its light shining in on the old and broken floor. There were stairs up and down to lead up to a sort of loft and a dark basement area that would be perfect for a bath. The middle level also had a door going out to the battlements. The foundation was cracked and the furniture that was in there was long since broken but there was a feeling that drummed within her chest. It was an actual gut feeling and she decided to go along with it.
Solas leaned in the doorway and crossed his arms over his chest. “This is what you have chosen?” She nodded with a hum, looking to Kain who was inspecting every inch of the rather large room. With a happy smile, she turned and walked towards the doorway.

He turned to the side to allow her room and she paused in front of him, rolling her gaze from his chest to his eyes with a soft blush of excitement on her cheeks. “You’ve shown me something in your world. I’ll return the favor next time we get a chance.”
It wasn’t until the next day that everyone was settled within their respective areas and things were starting to get moving. The Inner Council was meeting in the new war room. The table from the extravagant trunk of a tree hadn’t been created yet so for the moment they had the map stretched out on some of the broken tables that were in there beforehand. The state of the Keep obviously made Josephine uncomfortable from the way she kept glancing around and making notes, so on the way in Athena leaned over and whispered: “Don’t worry; it gets better.”

The Ambassador stammered and readjusted the grip on her quill. “Oh my, was it that obvious?” She nodded slowly while leaning back against the wall, keeping her body out of the main view of the group. This was not her council; she played no substantial part. She was just here as a friend of the Inquisitor’s. Nothing more.

Leliana moved forward first, her hands clasped behind her back while she looked to a spot on the map. “A matter requires your immediate attention, Herald. A local Avvar tribe has captured some of our soldiers and there are reports of demons. The Avvar Chief’s son has challenged you specifically... and my sources can assume we will not get our soldiers back until you answer this challenge.” Rathein bristled, a groan coming from her lips while she flicked her hand out before resting it on her temple.

“We’ll leave in the morning. I’ll take Solas, Blackwall, and Sera with me.” Athena raised a brow in response, the Herald catching onto this and answering with a smile. “You, my friend, get to train while I’m gone. Use the mages here as a resource and Bull said he would run you through drills with the Chargers. I trust you’ll be up to speed by the time we return.”

She rolled her eyes and accepted her fate, not even finding the urge to fight. The Fallow Mire was an awful place to go anyways. In the game the characters always complained of the smell of death and there were just bodies floating in the water. She found it abhorrent that a requisitions officer was requesting flesh pieces from the corpses. So yes, it would probably be better for her to stay at home. It would keep her boots dry and swamp free anyhow. She turned to the side and blew a stray hair from her face, looking to Cullen who was scratching the back of his head while reading from a list. “Repairs are underway on the keep. We have plentiful access to fresh water due to the falls but we have a lot of work ahead of us.”

Josephine jotted something down while nodding to the others. “I have sent ravens to all of our contributors and am gathering resources to expedite the process. We need to look presentable if we are to be receiving dignitaries from around the world.” Rathein nodded and looked to Athena, arching a brow in question. “Anything to add, Lady Athena?”

She opened her mouth to speak but then looked to the others. Was she seen at the same level as the
other three? It was impossible. She was a novice mage who only had a few months’ experience in all of Thedas. Although she knew the outcomes of major events, it was still strange that they were looking to her with guidance. “Um. Don’t touch the water when you go to the Mire. Fight the wisps while you’re there too. They drop useful resources that we will be able to use.” The Herald smirked with a nod dismissing the council with a wave of her hand. They all exited through the door, making sure not to trip on any debris or fallen stone on their way out.

Athena playfully pushed Rathein as they were walking down the hallway. “Don’t want me to slow you down, huh?” The short-haired mage turned around with a blush in her cheeks. She fidgeted with her hands, searching for words before she was cut off. “I’m only kidding. I understand. I’ll make a small briefing of what you can expect before you leave tomorrow.”

The Herald sighed, quickly pulling her friend into an embrace while patting her on the back. “Thank you, Athena. Look, you’ll do fine here. If it helps, I’ll miss you on the road.”

She laughed, feigning a blush while turning to the side. “I didn’t realize you thought of me that way, Rathein. . . “

Rathein froze, waving her hands in front of her face. “Wait! No! That’s not- “

Athena turned back with a wink. “Kidding. I’ll miss you too, Oh Madam Herald. I’m going to have a look around. I’ll see you off in the morning.” The two separated in the main hall. Rathein went to inspect the lower dungeon area where the blacksmith and the Arcanist would eventually practice. She walked through the hall, pushing any broken wood against the wall with her foot before coming up to the fireplace. Varric already had pulled up a chair and was reading letters in front of the fire. “Fan letters?”

The dwarf groaned, rubbing his temples with one hand while throwing down a letter on the table in front of him. “Merchant Guild finally found me. Just have some catching up to do is all. I’ll see you tonight at dinner, Walker.” Without needing any further prompting she let him be, walking through the door and entering the rotunda she was so familiar with entering just out of habit in the game. Now that she was there. . . she didn’t know exactly what she needed. The walls were tall, their canvases blank waiting for Solas to paint on them. He had acquired a desk and was unpacking some of his books from the travels. When the door shut behind her he looked up from his work with a nod of acknowledgement.

She smiled in return, walking up to the desk and looking at the covers of the books he had. They were mostly related to the Fade and one was a text on ancient elven artifacts. “Heavy reading you have here, Solas.” He smirked and pushed a quill to the corner of the desk, not fully looking up to meet her gaze. She looked at him, his body language. There was something about it, nervous almost? It was a foreign thing to see on him so she stepped back from the desk, rubbing a hand up
and down one arm. “You know it’s not fair.”

This got his attention, his gaze flicking up from his papers while his lips twitching into somewhat of a frown. “What is not?”

She kept her face neutral, looking from the desk up to his gaze. “You guys keep finding out all about me, but I feel like I barely know anything about you.”

This drew an almost sarcastic laugh from him as he shook his head. “That statement is entirely false due to your origin, Athena.”

This brought a blush to her cheeks, an embarrassed chuckle bubbling from her lips. “It’s hard to explain but it’s different. Those are facts, little things but they don’t identify a person. It’s not actually getting to know someone, their quirks, their traits. I would like to learn more about you all.”

He let out a sigh of content and smiled, pushing back from the desk while looking to her with a gleam in his eye. “You continue to surprise me. . .” Athena fought the gasp at her throat, allowing her gaze to fall back to the desk while her hand continued to fidget at a piece of loose string on her upper arm. That dialogue. In the game, it was attributed to the romance. There was no way that was possible here. It didn't make sense. He walked around the desk while continuing and she could feel his aura stretch out from beyond his body. “Let’s talk, preferably someplace more interesting than here.” She opened her mouth to protest but found her world swirling black.

“Maker damn you! Couldn’t you have given me a bit of warning first?”

He laughed, the motion taking over his body while the Fade swirled around them and settled into the image he desired. The laugh was joyous, free almost. She continued, throwing her hands in the air while trying to work through the swirl of emotions currently running through her brain. “Seriously? Are we just slumped on your desk asleep?” He shook his head, leading her up the stairs in Haven. She finally looked around, looking down to see that she was in her old well-fitting clothes that she had before the attack. Athena made a mental note to get in contact with Josephine about getting her some hand-tailored clothes, or some sort of improvement.

“No, you are in your room with Kain at your side.”
She smirked and looked over to him, giving him a curious brow. “And nobody questioned you carrying me through the courtyard of Skyhold?”

He gave her a wink when she asked, shrugging nonchalantly. “I can be discreet when I need to be.”

*Ah yes, God of the Beyond. The Trickster.* Still, it made her chuckle while she continued up the stairs, gesturing to Haven. “Okay. I’ll bite, why here?”

He nodded to the direction where her cabin was, passing the Chantry. “It is familiar to us both, and it will always be important to you.” She had a feeling he meant to lead her into the room where he first saw her so she paused, a leery eye looking to the room. A sense of dread filled her stomach, the memory of her first encounter with him flashing before her eyes. He sensed this, looking back to her. When he saw her expression, his face dropped.

Athena shook her head with a sigh. “If we could avoid that room I would appreciate it. If we’re being honest, Haven just reminds me that I could have done more. If I had told everyone from the start what was happening, we might have been able to get them all out.”

He disagreed, turning his body and pointing to the cliff where Corypheus stood. “We were facing a creature who is aspiring for Godhood. It is unlikely that we would have been able to save many more from his path to power.” He paused, bringing his hand down while she thought she saw a blush come to his cheeks. When he spoke, his voice was softer, kinder. “Did you know that was not my first time seeing you? They had me assess you for damage after you fell.”

Her breath caught in her throat; she rested a hand on her chest while shaking her head slowly. “They were concerned you were marked like the Herald. You were both a mystery.” He paused, clasping his hands behind his back in a stance that was all too familiar to her. “You still are.” He turned and walked towards where his old cabin was and the nerves in her stomach began to tighten. It was playing out like the game, but what would happen? The thoughts made her head swirl and chest and fall in deep, nervous breaths. “You both were mortals that had physically been in the Fade. But you. You lived in it for days, survived, fought and clawed your way out.”

*Wait this is different.* Her eyes perked up while he stopped his walk, turning his body towards her. The way he was looking to her, the gentle and pleasant expression in his gaze, it was worse in person than in the game. It made her feel pinned, but excitedly so. “I had planned to flee but then with the arrival of the Herald. There was hope. Then you fell from the skies. . . and I felt the whole world change.”
Her eyes widened, her pulse within her throat while she tried to wet her lips. Her body fought her mind. She could tell her teeth were close to chattering and her hands wanted to shake at her side in a bundle of nerves. She now understood why her previous Lavellan’s repeated what he said. It was hard to believe and she needed to readjust her thoughts, her lips forming the words that ran across her mind. “Felt the whole world change?”

His lips twitched into a smile while he unclasped his hands and brought them to rest in front of his body. “A figure of speech.”

She could barely hear him over her own pulse roaring in her ears. Since the first time she saw him, she had refused the possibility of him being attracted to her. It didn’t match up with what she knew of Thedas and what she knew of him. He was a God after all. If this changed, what other possibilities or destinies could she alter? There was a heavy silence between them and for a moment she had the bravery to look up at him and smile, testing the waters of what she knew to be reality.

“I . . . know the metaphor, Solas. If you would allow me?”

She held her hand out to him, and it took him a moment but he understood her meaning, placing his hand in hers. The control was then hers and she closed her eyes, focusing on a location in her world that would completely blow his mind, like when she first came to Thedas. Haven dissipated from view, the colors changing until she had them inside a beige colored box with buttons on the side of the wall. The top button was illuminated and every time they ascended a floor a small bell went off above them.

He made a small noise of confusion, his eyes scanning around the elevator. “Athena-“

She squeezed his hand in a gesture to quiet him, her brows furrowing in focus. “Give me a moment.”

He kept his hand within hers and she prayed that her hands wouldn’t sweat in the Fade. Even still, the small contact between them brought her aura to bear, the heat flaring within the base of her belly while her breath was hitched in her throat. The elevator door opened and before they could exit she opened her eyes and looked to him, putting her body in the exit while catching his gaze. “Close your eyes.”

Solas arched a brow, giving her an incredulous stare with a wicked smirk on his lips. She rolled her eyes and plead silently, holding his gaze even with her blood flushing her skin. He conceded with a sigh, shutting his eyes while gesturing with his free hand that he had completed the task. Athena then pulled on his hand and led him up some stairs, ignoring the other people showing up in her
memory until they were at the final door of a staircase. The winter cold threatened on the outside, the temperature thankfully cooling the tingling that was settling into her stomach and causing her throat to tighten. “Alright, once you feel the cold, you can open your eyes.”

He hummed in response and then she burst through the door. The New York City skyline lit up before them like stars in the sky, the varying heights of the skyscrapers threatening to breach the clouds. The wind whirled around them and it brought a laugh from her lips. She reluctantly let go of his hand and she thought she heard a sound of protest while she walked to the edge of the roof of the Rockefeller building. It came up past her hips, to keep visitors from jumping off. The people in the background were mere shadows, their colors blending in with the background to fill space.

The only thing she could focus on was the memory and him. She could hear Solas’s breath catch in his throat, a shock-struck smile on his face as he slowly made his way to the edge. He placed his hands on the edge and looked over, laughing at the height from below. “Is this a kingdom on the clouds?”

She shook her head and walked over to his side, pointing down to the ground and all the smaller shadows moving on the sidewalk. “No, this is just a very tall structure. This city in particular is one of the grandest that I have seen. There are millions of people that live here and the lights look like the night sky to me.” Her voice was thin, almost being shrouded by the wind but he heard them well enough. He let out a large sigh, the smile never leaving his face. He looked out towards the other end of the skyline, the words falling from his mouth in a low tone that made her head dizzy.

“This. . . you change everything.”
Tears threatened to gloss over her eyes but she fought to hold them back, the cold biting wind of NYC in the wintertime drying her lips, throat, and eyes. She steadied herself by placing her back against the wall of the rooftop, looking to him with a mixture of shock and heat. “H-how?”

He chuckled and shook his head, coming directly to her side and placing his hands on the edge of the rail. His arm brushed against hers and remained there, her gaze falling to the point of contact while he spoke. “Never I have met someone with a spirit like yours. It burns within the Fade, attracting spirits and demons of all kind but you have the strength to return demons to their original purpose. You, who have been thrown into this world by forces unknown, put through unthinkable tragedy, and yet you still have hope.”

His words swirled within her mind and it only made her more confused. He was complimenting her, but she wasn't in the right state of mind to accept it. He was being this sincere with her? Her, who he had been so hot and cold with since day one? Before she could even catch herself, she found herself responding with a tone that was borderline defeated. “You say all these things... even though I’m not... “

Solas winced as if she had wounded him, tightening his grip on the rail with a hardened stare. “I find comfort within my own people, yes, but... also with you.” The tears finally formed in the corners of her eyes as she looked over towards him, her hands wrapping around the rail that was pushing into her back. He looked to the side and caught her gaze, the expression softening as they sat in heavy silence for a moment. There was a longing within his gaze that she was sure she matched. Now her pulse was racing and she could feel his aura, unrestricted, gliding over her skin and licking like a flame against her own heated presence. Their energy mingling drove her wild. He closed his eyes and sighed, his jaw clenched. She didn’t know what was going through his mind, but this was a moment she could not let slip.

Summoning every ounce of bravery within her stomach, she brought a hand to his chin, leaning her body over to place her lips against his cheek. His eyes shot open and his breath came in a sharp gasp. The reaction caused her to draw back and she instantly cursed herself for reading the wrong signals. She retracted her hand that was on his cheek and quickly tucked a strand of hair that was blown astray behind her ear. Her cheeks flushed hot and she was about to dismiss the whole situation when she caught a familiar and devilish look in her peripheral vision.
He shook his head with a smile, catching her gaze before moving his body in front of hers. He gripped her arms and brought her close, capturing her lips with his. She gasped against his mouth, her own hands gripping his shoulders as he brought her closer against his body. The smell of him, the feeling of his body so close to hers, it defeated her and brought a sigh of relief from her lips. He drank the sound in with his kiss, bringing her bottom lip into his mouth and running his tongue along the edge. With that motion his magic filled her, it coursing in time with what she assumed was his heartbeat. It was fast, nervous, like hers, but the feeling of his aura rubbing inside of her like it was an animal, bringing a guttural sound from her throat that resembled a moan.

He answered in kind, tightening his grip on her arms while deepening the kiss. She opened herself to him, feeling his tongue slide along hers to explore her mouth. The tightness within her belly spread to her thighs, even more so as he pressed his body up against hers and pinned her against the wall behind her. It had been so long that she had felt romantic touch she thought she would be undone. Every nerve in her body was tingling, her knees weak, and her head swimming and helpless to his touch. She moved her hands from his shoulders to the base of his head, pulling him in while stroking his cheekbones with her thumbs. She could feel him smile through the kiss, and it brought another uncontrollable sound of pleasure from her lips knowing that he was enjoying it as much as her.

He pulled back from her and she moved her hands to his chest, grabbing onto the front of his tunic for purchase. The strings of his wolf jaw necklace were caught up in it and she felt the article brush against her chest which sent a shudder into her legs. He chuckled and brought her chin up to kiss her one last time, the caress of his lips so gentle against hers she nearly sagged her body into his grip. Athena rested her head on his chest, and for the moment they took in each other’s ragged breaths. She could hear his heart pounding within his rib cage, it calling out to her like a drum of the wild. She smiled, nuzzling her cheek into his scent like one of her wolves greeting her in the morning.

_Do you hear my heart saying hi?_

“We shouldn’t...“

Even with his refusal she could feel his magic pressing into her, curling up within her body as if it were seeking residence there. It wasn’t something she had done before but it felt natural, letting her guard down and allowing her aura to slide along his like their tongues were doing only moments before. He groaned and pulled her closer to him, pressing his lips against her forehead while breathing in her scent. “Athena...“ Her name on his lips brought a wicked smile to her own. “It isn’t right, not even here.” She winced against his chest and sighed, knowing with a pit of dread in his stomach that this part was coming. He had to think things through, make sure that he was ready to commit to her.

If only for a short time.
The thought of *this* ending caused her to move her hands from his chest to his back. He sighed against her while she whispered against his clothing. “The only difference between here and there is nobody can see us here.” *I will still awake in my bed with your body fresh on my mind and your taste on my lips.*

He nodded and brought her closer in what felt like a final embrace for the evening, pressing his lips against the top of her head. “It is not often I find another dreamer like myself. You are so aware of your presence in the Fade. . .” He pulled back from her and the air bit like a chill between them. In response, she crossed her arms over her abdomen to try and contain some of the heat he left behind.

“What is right and wrong is between us, but we can speak of this in the morning.” Athena wanted to be the one to end the conversation, leave him with a feeling of tension in his belly instead of the other way around like it was in the game. She withdrew her magic from his body and used it to pull herself from the Fade. As the dream was disappearing from her mind, she placed a hand on his chest and said: “Now, it is time for us to wake up, Solas.”

And with a groan of frustration Athena rose from her bed in Skyhold, looking side to side and seeing that Josephine was quite speedy in getting some basic furnishings of the companions of the Inquisitor before finer luxuries arrived. If it was already morning that mean that Rathein would be leaving for the Fallow Mire, and Solas along with her. Kain slept loyally at the end of her bed, his head facing the door to take on any intruders that would try to enter her domain. She rose from the bed and felt a chill shoot up her legs and the cold stone floor. Her brown eyed gaze traveled across the room until she saw a pile of clothes with a note on top.

*We’re about the same size and you need something better to wear than leftovers. Sorry we burned your bear cloak. We’ll whip you up something else.* -Rathein.

Athena lifted the blue button up shirt up in the air and smirked, slowly sliding it up on her arms and buttoning up the front. It fit quite well, surprisingly enough. She then pulled on the white pants and laced up her boots, which had apparently been cleaned while she had been sleeping. Kain must have been snoozing too if somebody could sneak in and out of her room with ease. A hand mirror was hidden underneath the clothes and she used the opportunity to run her fingers through her wavy locks and sort out the morning frizz.

As she was wiping away the morning grime her fingers brushed over her lips and it gave her pause. The memories of the night before came flooding back and a pleasant laugh escaped her. It was
probably a good thing Solas was going to the swamp. It would give him time to think and it would give her time to consult with Wisdom and make sure that this was even the best decision for her. It was heartbreaking enough playing a Lavellan character and watching them go through the ordeal. If she invested in this, it would have to be different.

Before leaving her room, she scrambled through her bag until she found a small piece of parchment and a quill. She jotted down a few notes for Rathein and her companions for when they went into the Fallow Mire. No water. Wisp. Kill terrors first, corpses later. Avvar’s son is an ass. She opened the door and quickly skipped down the stairs of the battlements, arriving at the gate where the party was starting to pack up before their venture. The Herald smiled and raised her hand for a high five, Athena happily returning it. Rathein’s hand followed forward and clapped her on the back. “I see you saw the note. You must have been really tired from the journey because the wind slamming the door didn’t wake you.” Solas cracked a smile from the side of his horse, his hands tightening the straps of the saddle while he adjusted his bag.

She flicked her gaze over to his and smirked in return, shifting the weight in her hips while looking back to her friend. “I suppose I was. Oh, here are some of the notes for you. I hope they help.”

Athena brought out the piece of parchment and handed it to the Herald who instantly put it into her bag for later. “Dorian said to meet him near the barn when you wake up. I’ve tasked him to helping you train since you both like to play with fire and you seem... close.” The future Inquisitor looked over her shoulder with a wink which made her truly laugh, a faux blush coming to her lips.

“Oh how did you know, Rathein? We’ll have eloped by the time you return. It will be the scandal of the century.”

Her friend pulled her into a quick hug while shaking her head back and forth. “Behave. We’ll be back soon.” She then dismissed her with a pat on the shoulder so Athena made her way over to Solas, her pulse rising within her chest and a lump of nerves forming in her throat. He seemed to be nibbling on something but it wasn’t his normal light breakfast.

Lightly colored crumbs fell to the ground and she arched a brow while leaning against his horse, who paid her no mind. “Now now, Solas. You’ll spoil your breakfast.”

He glanced over and smirked at her, packing the rest of the Orlesian treat away into his bag. “Your spell was effective in preserving its taste. You have my gratitude.” She nodded in response while trying not to hold his gaze for too long. The small glances were already forming a blush across her chest and she didn’t want it creeping up into her face before she went and spoke to Dorian. “Sleep well?” His voice was lined with a wicked tone and she almost smacked him in response. Her hands twitched within her pockets and she gave him a mock frown, putting the full of her back against his horse while shutting her eyes.
“You know when you just get torn from a really good dream?”

He chuckled under his breath, shooting a glance over his shoulder before stepping closer to her and speaking under his breath, the sound of which re-lit the flame in the base of her belly. “It . . . has been a long time. Things have always been easier for me in the Fade.”

Athena opened one eye at him and smirked, instantly jabbing back at him. “You didn’t seem rusty to me, Hahren.” The boldness of her words brought a blush to his cheeks while he placed his hands on opposite sides of the saddle. It was very reminiscent of the position they were in within the Fade before he started kissing her, she shut her eyes again and took in a deep breath of the mountain air since she was nowhere near a cold shower to douse herself in.

“I am not certain this is the best idea. It could lead to trouble.”

Athena fought the mischievous grin that so desperately wanted to come to her lips. Instead she nodded while looking to him and relaxing her arms by her side. “Perhaps it is best you are being called to the Mire. I do not want to pressure you into anything and I know there are considerations we both need to think through.”

He hummed in agreement, skillfully lifting himself onto the side of his horse while looking down at her with a smile. “Well . . .you know where to find me if you require my assistance.” She noticed the sudden change in his tone to something more formal and she changed as well, returning to the formality of the Inquisition and its duties.

“Yes, ride well. I will see you when you return.” She pressed her hand to the horse and silently thanked him for not freaking out when she was pressed against his side. The horse responded with a grunt with an added flick of his tail. The group took off and she tore her gaze from them so she wouldn’t be stuck staring at the elf like a love-struck teenager and then made her way to Dorian.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaand there we go!

:) Thanks to everyone still reading and to the new people! I am inexplicably grateful for your support, comments, and kudos.
Training Exercises

Athena used the awkwardness from her conversation with Solas to quicken her path down the stairs and towards the barn. Dorian was waiting for her and without any warning he threw a staff in her direction. “What the-“ She caught it right before it collided with her head and then looked at it. The wood was ironbark, that much she recognized from her previous experience. Instead of a hook at the peak like her old weapon, it had a smaller mace with a metal prong coming from the side. It was wrapped in leather that hummed with an enchantment and the bottom of the stave there was a layer of metal. While adjusting her grip, she spun it in front of her, to the sides, and behind her while trying to get used to the weight.

Dorian had a smug smirk on his face while he drew his own staff, expertly twirling it around with one hand before stabbing it in the ground in front of him. “I noticed yours was destroyed in the battle of Haven and figured you could use a new one. This one I found in the mage’s cache they dragged with them; they shouldn’t miss it too much.” He then gave her a wink while clearing his throat. “Now, we’re going to do a little training exercise that I played as a child. You start off with a ball of whatever element school you’re learning. For us, that’s flame.” He opened a palm and summoned a fireball within it. It swirled in an instant, rotating in his hand before he threw it towards her without a warning.

She brought her staff forward and blocked the attack with a flash of a barrier, which earned her a “tsk tsk.” He shook his head and summoned another fireball, tilting his head towards her while explaining again. “The point of the game is to catch it, add your own strength to it, and then throw it back. Like a demented game of catch where if you lose you will inevitably set yourself on fire.” Athena gave him an excited thumbs up, placing her staff on her back while digging her heels into the dirt. He started again, throwing the flame towards her and she opened her arms to catch it. She projected a barrier between her hands to use it as a kind of net to trap the attack. The fireball stretched past the barrier as if it were made of rubber before coming to settle within her grasp. His energy swirled within her palms and she added her own, slightly increasing the attack in size before throwing it back to him. Their difference in skill was obvious because it caught the minor attack with the tip of his staff before rotating it and launching it back at her. The two went back and forth for about half an hour and by that time the flame was taking up half of their body size. Dorian was using more of his energy, sweat on his brow as he launched it back towards her with a “Hah!” It collided into her and she braced herself by crossing her arms in front of her face. The flames pushed her back in the dirt but she kept her posture, the barrier blocking her guarded stance while she was moved backwards in the dirt. Her breath came in heated pants and it was getting difficult to turn the attacks around. Instead of launching it back she burst her arms forward with a scream and dispelled it instead, immediately falling forward and resting her hands on her knees. Dorian wiped his forehead with the back of his hand while walking over towards her. He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her up to a full posture with a smile.
“Not bad for a first timer. We’ll get you better before the Herald comes back. Let’s try again in the afternoon, alright?” She smiled at him and patted him on the shoulder, trying to slow her breaths and her racing heart. “Did I hear you say that you can’t shift anymore?” He asked, his voice dropping down and softening. Athena licked her lips before nodding, scratching the back of her neck with a sigh.

“Yeah. I could do it once after Haven. I’ve tried but I can’t get the same burst of magic that I did then.”

He hummed, sliding his thumb and index finger down his mustache while smirking. “You know, when I was learning my magic they used to make us do these ridiculous physical exercises paired with meditation. ‘A strong body makes a strong mind’ they would say. Perhaps try building your strength both here and then here.” He poked her in the middle of her forehead and then where her bicep was.

She arched a brow at him while giving him a coy smile. “Dorian, are you calling me fat?”

The mage laughed, running a hand through his hair. “What a thing to say. No, you’ve been getting smaller every day it seems like. Are you eating enough?”

She bit the inside of her cheek, giving him an apathetic shrug. “The others needed food more than I did, plus it’s hard for me to eat when I’m stressed. I’m still getting used to the kind of food you guys have. It’s not really like what I had at home.”

He pushed her on her arm, knocking her from her balance while he scoffed. “Stop being a martyr and eat some damn food. I’ll see you later and you better have something in your stomach. Your mana can’t refill unless you have the energy to do it.” He scolded, quickly giving her a sideways hug before walking up towards the main castle.

She paused, considering his words for a moment before Kain appeared before her. There was a look of determination in his eyes as he pulled at her jacket, motioning with his head towards the gate. Hunt? She could hear him ask in his whines, a puppy like demeanor coming over him as he was trying to get her to join him. She cocked her head to the side and bit her lip, finally succumbing with a nod. The wolf yelped while running up the stairs and she wasn’t far behind him. They reached the top of the stairs and nearly collided into Cullen and his desk. He turned on his heel while handing off something to one of his soldiers, his eyes widening in surprise while grabbing her by her shoulders so they wouldn’t crash.

“What’s the hurry? Is everything alright?”
Athena gave him a nod, straightening her posture so he could drop his hands. “Don’t worry, Cullen. I’m just going to go on a run with my scouts. Someone won’t leave me alone.” She shot an accusatory glance towards Kain, who was adamantly sniffing Cullen’s gloves. The Commander chuckled, stepping over to the table and grabbing a piece of pheasant that had been served with breakfast. The wolf eagerly took it from his hands, swallowing it down in one bite while Athena looked at them both with an incredulous stare.

“You two are like children, you are. You eating on the job and you!” Her voice raised in a false anger towards her companion. “Taking table scraps like some domesticated Ferelden mutt. What will I do with you two?”

Cullen chuckled while rubbing the grease off on his pants. “Apologies, Athena. I didn’t realize you had him on such a strict eating regimen.”

She cut him off with a wink, reaching down to pat her companion on the head while kissing the tip of his cold, wet nose. “Oh you’re fine. It is nice he has somebody else to play with around here. Should I bring back anything we catch?”

His eyes widened at the suggestion while he cleared his throat. “Uh – er. I’m sure we can use whatever resources we have until Josephine starts to set up a reliable income and trade routes.”

“Ram and fox it is then. Alert the chefs, I should be back before dusk.” With a wave over her shoulder she took off at a light jog with Kain through the courtyard and over the bridge. The altitude constricted her lungs, so Skyhold would make the perfect training location. The pack was eagerly awaiting them at the edge of the bridge, the gray alpha perking up his nose and howling at their arrival. The other wolves howled in kind, the symphony of sounds swirling within Athena’s heart and bringing a content sigh from her lips. The alpha paused and looked up to her, which resulted in her shaking her head. “This is your pack, sweetheart. You lead.” The wolf nodded in response, walking forward and pressing his nose to her open palm. Claw.

“Forgive me, Claw. On your lead, then.” He whipped around and started off at a run and she followed without question. They took to the trees and found a rabbit path. It didn’t take long for the first creature to be found and the wolves shared in the small meal together. She would need to wait until they had eaten their fill for her to begin collecting for Skyhold. They hunted through all hours of the day, Athena keeping up in speed and endurance. Although her legs were screaming and it felt like her kidneys were going to explode, she couldn’t have been happier. Running with the pack was a mindless activity. They all were united in thought and spirit it felt like, so every move, every target, every action was communicated wordlessly throughout them all. She had to wonder if it was a similar sensation to being a soldier within Cullen’s ranks.
The smell of the forest and the thrill of the hunt satiated her and whenever she got the opportunity she nibbled on a piece of rabbit meat that she scorched with her fire. As the sun was setting, she had tied together three rams and had a handful of rabbits. The wolves helped her in dragging them to the bridge where there were a few leery guards looking at the product with question. She threw them at their feet and let out an exhausted sigh. “Commander Cullen was expecting these. Can you take them to the kitchens?” They looked to one another before slowly nodding in unison and gathering a few men to take them back.

Every muscle in her body ached but she felt accomplished. The pack was full of food and of life. Each wolf came up and gave her either a kiss on the cheek or a touch to the forehead with their nose before taking off. She made a mental note to get a type of doggy door installed in her room so they could come in and out whenever they pleased. Kain followed her to the dining halls where she found Dorian already waiting with a plate of whatever was for dinner at his side for her. She nearly collapsed into the chair and began attacking the meal, her wolfish nature already showing through with how fast she was eating because he laughed and rubbed her back. “Well somebody’s been working hard.”

In between bites she answered: “You have no idea.” It was barely a few minutes before her plate was cleaned and she was leaning back with a satisfied smirk. The Tevinter looked her up and down and then glanced to Kain. “What were you doing all day, anyway? You smell like outside.”

She laughed, running a hand through her hair and realizing it was knotted and messy from wrestling with the wolves and helping them tackle the ram. In her human form, it was not as graceful, but they appreciated the help. “Hunting mostly. It’s a really good physical workout; You can join next time if you want.”

He scoffed and pushed his plate in front of him. “I’ll pass, thanks. The blood would never come out. You ready for another exercise?”

Athena groaned, rubbing her thighs to try and get some of the soreness out while agreeing in a hum. She hadn’t used any of her magic that day so mana wise she should be okay to toss the flame around a little. He pulled a smaller vial out of his pocket and wiggled it in front of her face and without even considering another option she downed the whole thing. The acidic taste of the healing potion washed away any happiness that was brought with the dinner but it took away a bit of the ache. After going back and forth for another hour with Dorian she returned to her bed, clothes singed and hair full of soot, but it was the exhaustion of a hard day’s work that instantly put her into a dreamed state of sleep.
A Step Back

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was obvious that Solas was looking for her already. When she entered the Fade there was a familiar hum of magic and cold within the air. It brought a nervous chuckle from her lips while she disregarded it, swatting at the calling like it was a gnat in the air. She needed a day to think about things. Like him, there were many considerations. Was their fate sealed like Lavellan’s? Would he break her heart and still attempt to bring the world asunder in a move to bring his people back? Could she ever reveal that she knew his identity? If she couldn’t, there would always be a lie between them and that was the kind of thing that ruined a relationship. There was always the fear that she would end up like Felassan, who failed in his attempts to bring the eluvians to Solas. He was a dear friend of the Dread Wolf’s, and in the end he still died by his hand.

There were many things to consider and the thoughts weighed heavily on her mind. The barrier from her body spread outwards but a single spirit came forward. Wisdom approached her, putting a kind hand on her shoulder while trying to meet her gaze. “Your worries are so loud, Athena.” She was snapped out of her trance and looked to the spirit, a blush coming to her cheeks.

“I’m still trying to get used to this whole ‘dreamer’ thing. Can anybody hear my mind? Or just spirits?” Out of manners she swirled her hand and brought back an image of Central Park near a bridge where there were enough benches for them to sit on. The spirit hummed in appreciation and sat down, patting on the seat next to her.

“Like many have said before, you burn within the Fade. It attracts a lot of attention, good and bad. You will learn to control that fire, use it for your own will. But I was not drawn here to speak of that. What troubles you so?”

Her throat was suddenly dry and she began to wring her hands back and forth while she sat next to her friend. She let out a defeated sigh, hanging her head low in her posture. “My friend, do you think things like destiny and fate are set in stone? Are we all trapped in these events?”

The spirit thought for a moment, resting her hands on top of her thighs while leaning forward to catch Athena’s gaze. “You have seen how time magic began to unravel the world. As events happen, they are set into stone and cannot be changed. But things that have yet to happen . . . I believe they are still malleable, even if you have seen their future. Have you come across anything that was new to you?”

Athena instantly nodded, sitting back in her posture on the bench while crossing one leg over the other. “Corypheus knows of me here.” It almost felt like saying Voldemort in the Fade. She felt
like he was listening, or that his Nightmare demon was searching the Fade for either her or the Herald. The name sent a shiver down her spine and a frown to her lips. “He knows of me, has plans for me. I think it’s because of what I know but I was not expecting that.” She swallowed a lump of nerves while shaking her head back and forth. “And between us, I was not expecting for Solas to have taken a liking to me.”

The spirit seemed to smirk while sitting back, clasping her hands within her lap while nodding. “He has sought my counsel for many things lately.”

The spirit’s voice faded into silence, her tone bringing a blush to Athena’s cheeks. “I know you two are friends; I will not ask to breach your trust. There are . . . things I have seen. Things I know that might happen that could unravel this world. I feel like I’m helpless to stop it but I have to do something.”

She then put her palms over her eyes and leaned back on the bench, letting out a sound that was a mix of frustration and sadness. “Then do something. This is where you are unique, Athena. You know the outcomes and can help the world avoid the ones that will cause harm. Do what you can and what is within your power.”

The cool chill of Solas’s call ran up her spine again and she instantly dropped her hands to her lap and gripped onto the fabric of her pants. “I . . . will try. Thank you for your help, my friend.”

The spirit smiled and nodded, placing one of her hands over hers and squeezing it. “I am here, for whenever you need my counsel or an ear to hear your troubles. You only need to ask.” The spirit faded away and Athena took the moment of solace to sit back within the bench and take in the scenery. The New York skyscrapers loomed over the park, protecting her like silent guardians. The small pond in front of her housed a myriad of ducks and pigeons, their small cries echoing throughout her mind. She let out a sigh and reached into the Fade and felt that small click that would let Solas in.

In a smooth whirl of color, he appeared at her side, standing near the bench while he looked around and smiled. “This is beautiful.”

She nodded with a grin, pointing up towards the skyscrapers. “We were up there, er- last night.” Her blush was mirrored in his cheeks and he chuckled, gesturing towards the open seat next to her on the bench. Athena waved with her open hand, inviting him to sit while resting her hands in her lap. He sat back and took in the park air, scanning the horizon and taking notes of things. They sat in silence, listening to the birds flying overhead and the shadows of people walking by.
Athena spoke first, biting the inside of her cheek. “How come other people aren’t able to do this?”

He glanced to the side and shrugged. “Being a dreamer is a rare talent. From the memories I have seen, it was much more common in the times of Arlathan but as the times have gone on, there seem to be only a few a generation.”

She smirked, trying not to glance over at him and reveal the almost smug look she had in her mind. Sure. “seen memories”. “So when other people dream, it is just the fantasies within their minds that play out? I almost find that sad.”

He nodded in response, resting his left arm on the armrest and stretching his back into the bench. “It is; they are cut off from so much history in this world. They are cut off from so much of themselves.” His voice was tinged with sadness and she just knew why. He created the veil. He was the reason that the dreamers were lost to time and that the Gods of old and new were locked away.

She nibbled on a piece of dry skin on her lip while trying to lighten up the conversation: “What was Arlathan like, from what you’ve seen?”

He smiled and looked over to her, gesturing to the park. “Imagine tall crystal spires within the forest, magic thickening the air as you walked through it. Immortal beings walked the earth and there was so much time to simply enjoy life and everything it had to offer. Magic was as simple as breathing and it invigorated everything it touched.” There was a look of almost nostalgia on his face.

She hummed in response, standing up from the bench and stretching to the sky. “That sounds wonderful. Walk with me?”

Solas joined with a smile, standing and falling into step at her side while she walked along the sidewalk around the pond. She tried to not allow the silence to be awkward, looking around and tightening the images of the horse-drawn carriages and the colors of the autumn trees until they were crystal clear like her memories. “How was your training today?”

She shrugged and suddenly realized that even in the Fade she could feel the soreness of her legs and abdomen. “Mostly independently driven. I hunted with the pack and then Dorian ran me through a training exercise with fire.” At the mention of the Tevinter’s name Solas seemed to bristle and clench his jaw. There was a barely noticeable flare of his aura that caught her eye, a wicked smirk coming to her face. “Solas.”
“Hm?” He answered curtly, suddenly very focused on the path ahead.

“Are you... jealous?”

He flinched and pinched the bridge of his nose, stopping in his tracks while hissing under his breath. “Why do you ask?”

Athena chuckled, turning around and walking backwards to look him up and down. “You’re not very subtle, hahren. Jealousy isn’t a good look on you.”

He looked up at her with almost an annoyed stare, slowly walking forward and keeping a space between them. “The two of you are close.”

She nodded in response and put her hands in her back pockets, occasionally glancing over her shoulder out of instinct to make sure she wouldn’t walk off of the sidewalk or through the shadows of people in the background of her memory. “Yes, we are. Misery loves company he, like me, was automatically hated when he arrived. He... is not something to fret over. I take comfort in knowing I have a close friend here with me.”

He stilled for a moment then nodded, letting out a controlled sigh. Satisfied with his answer she turned on her heel and began to walk facing away from him, beginning to hum a line from a random song in her head. “I am glad there is someone for you to spend your time with while I am called away.”

Something about the way he spoke, how his words almost sounded broken and there was a twinge of sadness to them, stopped her in her tracks. She rubbed one hand around her wrist, while trying to catch her breath which was now trapped within her chest. Suddenly she could feel him behind her, his hands gently resting on her hips as if asking permission. Athena stilled under the touch, eyes widening while she froze for a single moment. Thousands of conflicting thoughts rushed across her mind but instinct won in the end. She took in a deep breath and leaned back into him, feeling his chest against her back. He wrapped his arms around her and brought her into an embrace that pulled a sigh from her lips. She rested her hands on top of his arms and leaned her head back into his chest, closing her eyes while feeling the rise and fall of his breaths underneath her. Solas responded by resting his cheek against the top of her head, pulling her in against him and taking in her scent.

They sat for a few minutes, eyes closed, breathing in unison as the park air gently blew over them.
The butterflies in her stomach forced her to speak her, her words shaky but manageable. “I thought we were taking a step back?” He chuckled, the rumbling of his laugh vibrating against her back while he rubbed his cheek over the top of her hair.

The action sent a chill down her spine, her hands squeezing on top of his arms. “Even so... it does not mean I do not care about you, Athena.”

The words stirred within her gut and she could feel his aura sliding over her skin. She closed her eyes and made a sound that almost resembled a growl. “It’s really hard to keep a clear head when you do that.” The magic acted as a tighter embrace, putting pressure and sending cool chills down her skin. It brushed across her lips and drew a small gasp, bringing her own magic to bear and enveloping her skin in it. He turned his head and pressed his lips against her scalp and she was nearly lost within it. The small action brought her to dig her nails into his arm and pull them firmer against the bottom of her belly.

Even though their motions were innocent on the surface, everything within her was ready to burst. She longed to pick up their conversation from the night before, feel his magic within her, filling her like a cup. It felt like that was what he wanted to, but he was the one to break away last night. She knew he needed time; she didn’t want to rush into anything even though as this moment it felt like he was willing to dive in head-first. Unfortunately, they would have to do the adult thing and actually give it time. With a groan of reluctance, she pushed forward out of his grip and turned to face him.

He cocked his head to the side in confusion, dropping his hands to his side. “Is everything alright?”

She ran her hands nervously through her hair, gaze on the ground while she mumbled. “Words! -ah – hold on.” Athena slapped the tops of her thighs, let out a frustrated breath, and then finally met his gaze... which almost made her crumble but she held firm. “I know I - no - we have things to think about. If we don’t allow ourselves space to think, we’ll” *Fall. I’ll fall and drown. “Get into trouble. Whatever happens, I want it to be well-considered for both of us.” Good, that hopefully sounded adult enough without turning me into a blubbering mess.*

He smiled at her, his eyes showing a bit of sadness but he nodded in agreement. “You are correct. I apologize. Perhaps in the Fade I could help you harness your emotion and aura?” The suggestion helped her blush to fade and she nodded, knowing that Harmony would probably like to help her as well. Solas took a quick step forward, aided by magic, to bring him in front of her with a single hand under her chin. She barely even had time to gasp as he bent down and brushed his lips against hers, smiling while whispering against her skin: “I will leave you to your sleep, Athena.” Before she could reach up and touch him his body disappeared into a burst of magic, the wind blowing it against her skin and leaving her alone in the Fade.
For me in my canon I find it very hard to believe that Solas and whatever Lavellan only kissed like 3-4 times in the whole game. Love-scene or not, I just don't accept that! :P
Preparing for Halamshiral

The next two weeks were filled with different series of exercises. She would start off with a drill against Dorian, then she would hunt with the wolves, then it would alternate between another drill with Dorian or spars with the Chargers. Sometimes Cullen or Cassandra would step in as a sparring partner to help her hone her skills against Templars and their movements. And at night... Solas and her would practice meditation and using her emotions as a fuel for her magic, keeping a respectable distance between them aside from a few brushes of their hands during exercises and lingering gazes as they passed. She did feel more accomplished by the end of it. Her body was stronger, faster when she moved her staff and her spells came to her more readily. In the time she had even managed to learn a simple healing spell from Dalish, using a small blade to slice a one-inch superficial cut on her arm until she could heal it with only minimal scarring.

The morning the party was due to return Josephine pulled her to the side after breakfast, her famous clipboard noticeably gone from her hands. “Lady Athena, I was wondering if I could speak to you for a moment.”

She nodded with a smile, allowing herself to be led into the Ambassador’s office where there was a neatly organized stack of letters on the desk. Josephine had been busy making the keep presentable for the Herald when she returned. Already the major repairs were finished and the Herald’s bedroom had been set up with the finest luxuries they could manage in such a short time. Once the door was closed Josephine sighed, gesturing to both Cullen and Leliana who were already present in the room. Athena stilled, looking to all of them, “Uh-oh. Am I in trouble?”

Leliana shook her head while Cullen chuckled, shaking his head back and forth while looking to Josephine, who smiled and started. “We were wondering if we could speak to you about something that was troubling us in Rathein’s future she saw.” Athena twisted her lips to the side then nodded, joining them in front of the campfire. “She said she saw the Empress be murdered. That cannot be allowed to happen.”

I completely disagree. Athena thought to herself, knowing well all the events that caused Empress Celene to burn the Halamshiral alienages when the elves there tried to revolt. Still, she paused and looked to the others. “Okay, what are our options?”

Josephine picked up some letters from her desk. “We already have a way in. The Duchess Florianne is hosting a ball... and has insisted that the Inquisition attend. We would be the guests of the Grand Duke Gaspard.”

She bristled, rolling her shoulders around while looking to the Spymaster. “The man currently throwing the country into a civil war?” Leliana confirmed her statement with a small hum of acknowledgement, keeping her hands clasped behind her back but there was a certain gleam in her
eye that showed almost an appreciation for her knowledge about the Game. “None other.”

Josephine continued on, shuffling the letters around until she put them on the desk with a sigh. “Allow us to be frank. We would like your help in this matter because the Game is a very sensitive beast and everything must go well. It will be the Inquisition's first appearance since Rathein...”

They all paused and looked to each other, Athena smiling and filling in for them. “Will be elected Inquisitor? Do not worry, it is a wise choice that will be well received by the people.”

The Ambassador gave a genuine smile, pulling up her clipboard and preparing her quill for whatever came next. “Do you have any suggestions? We will leave for the ball in six weeks’ time and I would like everyone to be prepared.”

Athena thought for a moment, shifting her weight between one foot and the other. “Have Vivienne meet with us this evening to discuss the evening’s attire. Even though Rathein will pick her personal party for the evening, I think it would be wise to bring Madame de Fer and Dorian with us. They have intimate knowledge of the Game and will help prove to be a distraction while the Inquisitor is investigating.” Cullen released a sigh of frustration and she flicked her gaze over to him. “Don’t worry, Commander. You do not have to be involved in planning the clothing. I’m sure you’ll need to prepare whoever is coming.”

He mumbled a “thank the Maker” before turning to leave the room. “Oh Commander?” She added, a wicked smirk coming to her lips.

He turned on his heel and arched a brow at her. “Yes?”

Athena looked to Josephine and Leliana before turning her gaze back to him. “I should warn you, from what I know of this event you will be very popular with the ladies of the court. It would be best to sharpen your sword to fight them off.”

Leliana and Josephine broke their respective characters and giggled under their breaths while Cullen’s cheeks instantly reddened with a blush. He cleared his throat before leaving the room, leaving behind a string of curses involving the Maker and Andraste. Athena joined in their laughs, looking up to the two women. “If that was all?” Josephine nodded but then Leliana cleared her throat and picked up a letter from Josephine’s desk. “News travels fast, Sorcière of the Inquisition. The Orlesian Court is already quite fascinated with you.”
Athena paused with a groan, slapping a hand to her forehead. “I have a damned title already?”

The bard nodded, trailing her hand on the desk while walking to exit. “We should take advantage of this. Think of it what you’ll want to wear before we meet with Vivenne’s seamstress tonight.” Josephine sat behind her desk and began to feverishly write things down that they would need. There was a rumbling of voices in the main hall and when Athena went to investigate she heard the horn signaling the arrival of the Herald and her party. Josephine instantly rose from her seat and walked out but she took a moment to stay behind and catch her breath. From the sounds of the whispers everyone was gathering in the courtyard, which meant that Rathein would probably be named Inquisitor soon. She knew the speeches and she knew the words so she followed the group of people towards the front entrance of the hall. The moment she was meant to exit she cut to the left and pushed past the door into the rotunda. Solas had not yet returned, which allowed her a moment to pull over a piece of his parchment and write: Welcome back in a simple script, leaving the note unsigned in the center of his desk. She took the moment of peace to glance up at the beginnings of his paintings. The artistic side of him brought a smile to her lips, a soft blush coloring her cheeks.

There was already a growing volume from the crowd outside so she walked out and leaned against the doorway of the hall, staying out of view of the public while being able to see the ceremony.

Inquisition, will you follow?

The cheers sent a chill down her spine, a smile instantly coming to her face while she looked at her friend. Rathein held the sword up with ease, her face determined as the people screamed their words of worship towards her. Leliana came up to the now Inquisitor’s side and began to brief her on the upcoming ball at Halamshiral. When they walking closer to the door she could hear Rathein stating: “Wait wait wait. I need to scrub the smell of dead corpse off of me, then we speak of Orlesian Balls. Speaking of which.” The brown haired mage turned and punched Athena lightly on the shoulder. “Thanks for the tips but I don’t think that bog water will ever come out of my shoes. You’ll pay for my new ones.”

She chuckled and pulled Rathein into a quick embrace. “Missed you too, smelly. Did you come across the Sky Watcher?”

The Herald nodded with a smirk. “He’ll be here by sundown. He’s an odd one. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a week’s worth of nasty to get off me. I’ll see you tonight.” Rathein patted her on the shoulder and turned towards her room upstairs, leaving Athena with Leliana.

She let out a sigh, looking over towards the red-haired rogue. “You know; I don’t know any of your dances here.”
The bard smiled with genuine excitement. “We’ll be happy to teach you. Being a part of the inner circle, there will be many eyes on you.”


Leliana nodded as if it were a known fact, looking her up and down before returning her face to the cool neutral mask she was fond of wearing. “You have the Herald’s ear and have an insight to events that have yet to unfold. You are a great resource to us.”

She was then left alone with a shocked look on her face. It took a moment, but eventually she exhaled in a whistle and rubbed the back of her neck. Halamshiral was one of the largest events of the Inquisition with many opportunities to screw it up. It was definitely not something she was looking forward to. The party would still need to venture to Crestwood first and meet with Hawke and Stroud before conquering the monster that was Orlais.

“Heavens no, not that color.” Athena was adamant, dismissing the horrid red color that Josephine and Leliana suggested.

Vivienne hummed in agreement, sorting a few different colors of fabric in her hands. “Agreed, it is so... bold. We do not need such a loud, ugly color for our first appearance. What do you think, my dear?” The Enchantress turned to her showing a silver color in her hands. She looked it over, glancing up to Vivienne with a smirk on her lips. The First Enchanter was being very formal in all of this, not calling her an abomination or throwing any backhanded comments her way. It was refreshing, but the woman was a master at the Game and was probably concealing her true emotions.

“It would be a great accent color, perhaps the buttons and the seams with...this one for the tops.” She plucked up a deep navy blue for the tops and then a pitch black for the pants. “The silver will make the stitching pop and will be an instant accessory. Can we individualize the uniforms to each person? Who all did Rathein pick for her personal guard?” Josephine pushed forward a list and she scanned it quickly.

Heat threatened to rise to her cheeks in a flash of anger, the elf’s introduction ringing through her mind: *The Lady Inquisitor’s elven servant, Solas.* “Shit.”

Vivienne arched a brow. “Is something wrong?”

She shook her head, “Never mind. What do you think of this color combination, Madame de Fer? They were similar to the salon you held at your estate, no? They show a subtle power while also showing grace.” The mage smirked at the compliment, nodding and passing them to the Ambassador.

“These will do.”

Athena lifted a finger to add: “Thinner fabric for the ladies. We have figures, we should show them.” Leliana chuckled and nodded, passing the formal uniform designs to the seamstress who was already jotting down measurements and taking notes on who she would need to track down. The Spymaster turned back towards her with a mischievous look in her eye.

“And you, Sorcière? Did you think on what I said earlier?” She shifted uncomfortably, shaking her head back and forth with her answer. There were torn up designs scattered all over her room but she could not produce anything substantial that didn’t resemble a poofy prom dress.

Vivienne lifted a piece of parchment with a design to Leliana, who looked at hungrily with a smile. “Oh yes, this will do indeed.”

The First Enchantress shrugged. “I think it will fit the character, don’t you?” Leliana nodded before passing the paper to Athena, who almost dropped it in shock.

“Wow. That’s. . . revealing.”

“Yet flexible enough for you to still fight in if the need arises. We can have the man in the dungeons add an enchantment to it if you like. It’s obvious you have been training and we should show that off, my dear. And in the meantime, practice walking in these.” She pushed a thin wooden box with heels out from under the table and already she could see there was a few pairs of sharp-heeled boots and then regular heels as well.
Athena fought the urge to glare at her while submitting with a sigh. “Fine! Whatever the Inquisition desires. I will begin wearing those in the morning if someone can get them to my room. If that will be all for tonight?” The ladies hummed in unison, giving her the cue to leave Vivienne’s lounge and skip down the stairs into the rotunda. Solas was laying on his couch, legs rested up on the armrest with a book in his lap. He nonchalantly turned a page without even looking up at her. She almost walked right past him but his voice stopped her.

“You are angry.”

She groaned, turning on her heel and walking over towards him. “I guess your lessons are going to waste on me then.” He shook his head and sat up straight, putting the book aside.

“No, it was not your aura, it was your expression. What’s troubling you?”

She looked to him but then her gaze dropped to the floor, her hands clasped in front of her hips. “There’s something that really bothers me about this upcoming ball.” There wasn’t anything else and she could only feel herself getting more frustrated. She would have to potentially confront Celene and Bria, knowing everything that happened and how Celene only tolerated the elves on her lover’s behalf. There would be so many lies, so many grabs for power, all for the price of snuffing out the weak and those at the bottom.

“Athena.” He reached up and touched her hands with his to grab her attention. She blinked, looking to him with her jaw clenched and her lips in a thin line.

“They introduce you as a servant of the Inquisition.”

He appeared unfazed, shrugging while sitting back in the chair. “Elves do not rise high in Orlesian courts.”

This didn’t help, adding fuel to his fire because she knew in his core it wounded his pride. “That’s it? You’re okay with that? They could at least say expert in the Fade, Adviser to the Inquisitor or something!”

His face remained passive, eyes searching hers for more. “If I was in agreement with it, do you think it would change?”
She paused before throwing her hands into the air in a moment of frustration. “It’s not right! The highest ranking elf in Orlais is a woman who got there through scandal and sleeping with the Empress! All the other people of her kind who have accomplished many things have been ignored. Gah!” Athena balled her hands into fists and crossed her arms over her chest, letting out a huff of anger through her nose. There was a moment of silence between them; she was trying very hard to control her aura which thankfully did not give the severity of her anger away. It was becoming easier to keep her magic under wraps which would definitely be a necessary skill when going to the courts.

“It matters that you care, Athena.”

This relaxed her posture, face softening while she finally met his gaze. “Of course I do. Any person that calls themselves decent should.” He chuckled and nodded, sitting back while holding her eyes. She smirked, feeling the heat crawling up from her chest before shaking her head and turning away. “I need to go run this off with the pack. I’ll see you tonight?”

He nodded, reopening his book and returning to his reserved posture and facial expression. “You shall.”
Before she returned to her room for the evening, she exited the rotunda and instantly stopped in front of Varric. By this time Rathein and Hawke had probably already talked and they would be heading to Crestwood in a day or two. She looked down at the dwarf with an expectant smile, one hand resting on her hip while the other rested by her side. He was in the middle of a bunch of letters but he acknowledged her existence with a smirk. “Yes, Walker?” His quill kept moving but she flicked her gaze down to notice that his ink had ran dry and he wasn’t actually writing anything.

“You’re seriously not going to introduce me.”

He chuckled and shook his head back and forth. “Nah, she’s already on her way to Crestwood. I guess you’ll have to wait like everybody else.” There was an obvious tease in his voice and she groaned, flopping down into the chair across from him and allowing her body to sink into the cushion. After a moment of sulking she sat up and began reading some of the letters. One of them written in a gold ink caught her eye so she lifted it and began reading it softly to herself. “I can’t wait to touch your golden locks on your chest- oh Maker Varric!”

He full on laughed and leaned back into his chair, resting his boots on the small table while gesturing for her to hand the letter over. She read the letter over with a groan of disgust, quickly jerking her hand over to him to give him the letter that now felt tainted in her touch. “That’s the kind of fan mail you get? Goodness, man. No wonder you’re smiling all of the time.”

He waved her off and continued to chuckle, dipping his quill into his inkpot to get back to work. “That’s what you get for meddling. I hear you guys are leaving for Crestwood tomorrow afternoon.”

She paused, arching a brow while completely sitting up within the red chair. “Oh? You’re not coming?”

Varric shook his head and grabbed a stack of papers while turning them vertical and knocking them against the desk, straightening them in a neat stack before continuing his writing. “Nah, I heard it’s you, Bull, Cole, and your friend in there.” He looked up from his position with a teasing smile and she didn’t give him the satisfaction of blushing. Instead she rose from her position and wiped imaginary dust off her thighs and backside to keep her gaze from his.

“Oh-huh. Good choice. Cole needs to get some outside experience. He could use some fresh air.” He looked up to her one more time before nodding in agreement, shooing her away from his area.
with a playful gesture.

“Go get some sleep, Athena.”

The next morning Athena rose from a rather intense training session with Solas and Harmony. They were practicing trying to elicit different emotions from her to see how well she could contain her reactions. It was going well until Harmony began whispering thoughts into her mind that reminded her of the kiss she and Solas had shared. In that moment she flared out at the spirit with a push of barrier and they called the lesson over. With a groan she pushed up from her bed and looked down at a rather large crate with a note on top. The script was cursive, elegant, and in a font she could only guess from the hand of Madame de Fer herself.

*Today marks your quest with your new title in the public’s eye, Sorcière. The longer you wear this mask, the easier it will be to wear it in front of the court. You must be convincing; it is essential. -V*

She arched a curious brow before opening the crate and then instantly cursing under her breath. “You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

Rathein and the others were already waiting on their horses when she arrived. Bull gave her a whistle and Rathein instantly began laughing to the point where she almost fell from her horse. Cole tilted his head in confusion and Solas smirked with the others. Athena trudged in her heeled boots, wearing tight black pants that tucked into them with a larger skirt that had slits up her sides to bring more attention to her curves. For the top, however, was a halter-toped wyvern bone corset in the colors of blue and silver. She was wearing a scowl, itching the back of her somewhat styled hair thanks to products in the crate while pulling herself to Prince’s back, not even meeting the gazes of the others while stating rather matter of factly: “A word from any of you and there will be consequences.”

Bull couldn’t help himself, slapping his thigh while pointing at her. “Fuck, Athena! You know you look like Vivienne.”

She bristled, rolling her shoulders to cool herself while looking to the side where his horse was. They all began to move forward but she leaned down to his horse, using her magic to whisper into
his mind and have a small conversation. The mount blinked in acknowledgement, waiting until they were on the other side of the bridge before bucking Bull into the snow with a simple kick of its back legs. The Qunari fell off with a groan, snow falling on top of him and burying him underneath with a wave of her hand. The white and black spotted horse shuddered at the loss of weight, shooting her a glance while her voice echoed through Athena’s mind. *He rides me too hard anyway.*

Now she couldn’t help but chuckle under her breath while kicking her leg over her saddle to jump down and help him up. The impact on the thin heel brought a wince from her lips but she extended a hand to help Iron Bull up while raising her voice for the others to hear. “Madam Vivienne and Leliana think I should start dressing to fit my new title that the people have given me.” Bull shook his head to clear his view of snow, smirking while grasping her hand and pulling himself up from the ground. Before he jumped onto his horse she stopped him, flicking her gaze to the mare with a smile on her lips. “Be nice to her, Bull.”

He huffed under his breath, making sure to be smoother in his ascent to the saddle with an over-exaggerated gesture. The horse whinnied in appreciation before moving forward after Rathein, who was shaking her head at the whole group. By the time Athena moved to Prince’s back Solas was glancing to his side with a smirk. Athena used the tip of her nail to scratch at the inside corner of her eyes since Vivienne had included a set of basic makeup within the crate as well and she didn’t wish to smear her good work. “What.”

Solas looked to her, keeping his eyes above her shoulder while stating an observation. “We could add a warming rune to that.”

Athena blinked before smiling in returning, glancing down at the revealing get up with a shrug. “I suppose you’re right. Can we do that with it on me though?”

He instantly turned his gaze towards the path ahead, fighting the blush in his ears while he failed to think of a response. Cole was the last one left, holding his reigns loosely while looking her up and down. “I think you look nice.”

“Finally! Thank you, Cole.”

When they reached Crestwood, she could instantly feel the sense of death in the area. Thankfully the main camp was on the outskirts of the town where Scout Harding was awaiting the Inquisitor
for a report. Athena dismounted Prince, leading him to the side while giving him an embrace around his neck in appreciation for the smooth ride. He leaned down and rested his chin on her back, breathing hot air down the back of her corset. Rathein let out a sound of concern, her gaze fixated on the swirling portal out in the middle of the lake. Athena patted her companion on his flank before joining her, almost having to shield her eyes from how bright the Rift was.

“We’re going to that?”

“Yup.”

“That thing right there?” The Herald was in disbelief, a look of reluctance on her features and posture while they looked to the horizon. Athena patted her on the back while pointing down the hill they were on.

“First things first, let’s go meet the mayor.”

The party lightened their loads in their packs before taking off towards the town. Athena already had her staff drawn, mana tingling at the edges of her fingers. She hadn't had a chance to use her battle skills since Haven. She hoped that all the training she did would come in handy now. They approached two warriors fighting off a small group of undead and she was quick to notice their Grey Warden armor. She shot Rathein a look of warning, trying to communicate that they should keep the reason they were here a secret. The Herald nodded in return, drawing her staff before entering the fray.

Athena planted her feet firmly in the ground, reaching down into the magic of the earth before throwing her arms up. A wall of flame burst forth from the soil, moving forward with Iron Bull and Cole behind it. It ignited the corpses, sending them in a frenzy of unfocused attacks that made them easy targets for the warriors and mages to pick off. A Grey Warden archer landed an arrow directly through one of the skulls of the targets, smirking to himself while standing from his position and nodding to the group. “The Grey Wardens thank you for your help, Inquisitor.”

She fought the urge to scowl at them, sheathing her staff on her back and pulling up the sides of her corset in a not-so-attractive gesture. The wyvern bones were rigid and unforgiving. She knew from the night before that they were leaving almost permanent indents in the sides of her waist. Cole came up to her side, looking from the Grey Wardens to her. “You don’t like them.”

Athena shook her head, putting a finger to her lips to gesture him to lower his voice. Solas flicked his gaze over to them while humming in agreement with a curt nod. Cole looked to her and she could feel his presence within her mind, she shut him out, pushing her barrier out with a small
pulse. “Why?” He asked, a small amount of hurt lining his voice.

She stilled, rolling her neck while rubbing the back of it with her hand. “There are things they can’t know yet, Cole. That is one of them. You and I can talk about it later, okay?” The boy nodded while sheathing his daggers and then she forgot where he went. Athena cursed under her breath while moving forward with the others towards the city. There was another swarm of undead at the gates that they dispatched before entering. The villagers were relieved, stating how they didn’t lose anybody during that night. From their tone Athena could tell it was the first time in weeks they hadn’t lose anybody to the undead swarms. When they entered the town, she grabbed Rathein’s shoulder and pointed up towards the hill. “The mayor’s hut is up there. I need to go talk to someone. Solas, follow me?” She looked to the elf who nodded and fell into step with her without question.

She led him to the hut of the female elf who had been initially saved by the Grey Wardens. All she could do is praise them and speak of how she was going to go join them herself. Athena jerked her chin in her direction while looking at Solas and he took the hint. “Now would not be the best time to join the Wardens. The Inquisition could always use an agent such as yourself.” The girl paused, obviously upset by the suggestion that it would be bad to be a Warden, but in the end nodded and agreed.

Athena smiled, bringing the elf out of the hut while pointing in the direction of their camp. “There is a Scout there, Scout Harding. We cleared the road so it should be clear for you to make it to our camp. Welcome to the Inquisition, Jana.”

Jana beamed, throwing a few of her belongings into a bag before running off down the beaten path towards camp. Solas watched her leave, a twitch of his lips catching Athena’s attention. “What’s wrong?”

He began to turn back towards the Herald’s direction and she fell into step with him, even with the added discomfort of her heels. “What would have happened if we did not intervene?”

She stilled, her gaze dropping to the ground. “I . . . I can’t . . . Nothing good.” Sacrificed for a blood ritual, nothing major. He nodded and looked to her, a small amount of happiness lighting up his face in the dreary environment that was Crestwood.

“I am glad we could change her fate then.” She smiled in response, rubbing her hands up her cold arms while leading him up to sister who needed the location of the corpses before coming down to the mayor’s hut. The sister was surprised she knew where they were even before the dam was emptied but she thanked them nonetheless. By the time they descended the steps towards the mayor’s hut, Rathein and Bull were talking and there was an evident blush on the Herald’s cheeks. Athena chuckled, clearing her throat while slowly approaching them from the side.
“Are we interrupting?”

Rathein turned on her heel, stammering while trying to find words to dismiss the small flirtations they had just seen. Bull chuckled and shook his head, pointing with his thumb towards a path to the side. “Just talking out the next plans with the boss.” The Inquisitor emphatically agreed with him but the blush was still rosy on the apples of her cheeks. Things between the two of them seemed to progress quicker than in the game and she kind of liked it. Although she and the Herald were like sisters, familial love wouldn’t get them through the trials that lay ahead. Bull would know exactly how to take care of her stubborn personality. Solas… well. That had yet to be decided between the two.

“Uh-huh. Sure, Bull. We should probably get headed to camp before nightfall. There’s a wyvern in the caves and I’d like to get settled before that thing wakes up and hears us scrambling around.” The Qunari’s eyes lit up at the suggestion of a fight with a wyvern but Athena denied him by flicking him on the arm. Athena led them on the path and gestured for them to follow her.

“Stroud first. Then Wyvern, Bull.”
Meet Hawke

As they approached the cave where Stroud was headed, Athena was a bundle of excitement. Even with the agony of Vivenne’s chosen attire digging into every bone in her body, she was about to meet Hawke! Her character had been a sarcastic yet confident person, giving love to all her companions and acting as the mediator between them all. In the end Hawke had supported Anders in this particular story of Dragon Age, regretting how the rebellion had to be started but supporting his beliefs in their foundation. She had run away with Fenris and Athena chuckled at her apparent attraction for hard-to-read elves with voices that sent her head spinning. They would be the end of her.

When they walked up Rathein looked the new woman up and down before clasping hands with her in a gesture of alliance. Hawke gave off an aura of power and it wasn’t just her magic. Perhaps it was everything Athena knew she went through... but the woman was something to be reckoned with. This rendition of the Hero of Kirkwall had long black hair with red make up surrounding her eyes accompanied with the traditional slash down the middle of the face. It created a fiery look about her, especially with the matching color on her lips. She looked to each of the party members, mumbling their names and trying to match them to the stories she had been told in Varric’s letter. When Hawke looked at Athena, she smiled and extended her hand in greeting.

“I feel like I practically know you already, Walker.”

It was difficult not to nerd out but she accepted the hand shake with an eager grin on her face. “Yes! Er – I’m sure Varric is very detailed in his letters.”

“I have heard you know all about me as well?” There was trepidation in her voice but it was lined with curiosity. Athena couldn’t help but shrug, resting a hand on her hip while gesturing the other to the air.

“Long story short? I know things. It’s frustrating for everyone involved but I’m here to help.”

The group made sounds of agreement, Rathein chuckling while Bull did somewhat of a grunt. The mage nodded, her face hardening into one of concentration and determination. “I can accept that for now. Come on, Stroud is inside waiting for us.”

The group entered the cave and began to walk through the wavy path with the sharp rocks lining the edges. Rathein and Hawke talked back and forth at the front of the group while Athena trailed in back with Solas. Her gaze was glued to the floor when a wave of dread suddenly ran over her mind. At some point in the future, they would lose either Hawke or Stroud. Every time she played...
through the game she changed her mind because the choice was just so damn awful either way. She was lucky to have survived the Fade for the few days that she did. Desire had been confused enough at the time to protect her from the others while teaching her the basics in magic. If it had been any other demon... even worse if it had been the Nightmare demon? She surely would have been dead.

And now Stroud or Hawke could be facing that beast. Hawke was a mage and had experiences in the Fade personally, but it wasn’t physical. The magic was much more intense. Athena remembered how the emotions of everything around her pressed in on her mind and attempted to influence her. The normal tingling that occurred when they were near a rift sent a single shiver down her spine, leaving the sensation that something was wrong. In the Fade? It rocked her very core and gave her an altered sense of self. Towards the end of the few days she knew was bound to go insane. Was there food to eat there? Could a physical creature survive within beyond the Veil?


Athena snapped, running a hand through her hair nervously. “Cole, No.”

The boy stilled, appearing at her side with a neutral expression. “You know things. You can help now.” He spoke low but Solas still looked over his shoulder and met her gaze. There was a shared message of concern and she couldn’t even respond. Instead she let out a heavy sigh while bringing her staff forward, wringing her hands around the middle of the shaft to give her energy a place to go. “You will help, Athena,” Cole pressed.

“Thanks, buddy.” He stayed next to her and she knew he was holding off on causing her to forget. Was it that obvious that his words didn’t help her? It was painfully clear that she needed to write down the major events and begin planning on little things she could do to change their fates. Did it even matter at this point? Her thoughts consumed her while she bumped into Solas’s back. They had all stopped and were looking at the Grey Warden, who had his sword drawn at Rathein. Bull was on guard, his Ben Hasserath eyes surveying the situation for any potential harm. The Herald did not seem to be bothered, especially with Hawke at her side to keep the peace. Normally Athena would have smiled in pride at the character but she was stilled when Solas reached behind and gripped her staff, sending a wave of his cool energy through the object to help soothe her.

The sudden change in magic in her staff brought a jolt to her hand, gaze slowly trailing up from the ground to the matter at hand. His cold influence helped to center her and she slipped her staff on her back, reassuming her posture as the Sorciere of the Inquisition and smirking at the Grey Warden. Solas nodded at her recovery, looking back with a frown when Stroud mentioned the Calling that all the Wardens were feeling through Orlais. Hawke snapped, reacting first with reactionary anger. “Maker! Why didn’t you tell me?”
Stroud frowned and looked over his shoulder back at them. “It was a Grey Warden matter. I was bound by an oath of secrecy.”

Athena couldn’t contain her eye roll. Yes. A Grey Warden matter that affected every Warden in all Orlais. Why would that be out of the ordinary? She wanted to say something to Stroud when she felt a prickling of magic against her skin. It was a white-hot pressure on her mind and with a quick look to both other mages Hawke and Rathein she had a feeling they couldn’t sense it. She looked at Solas with a hardened stare, taking in his features and noticing that he was clenching his jaw and fighting to not clench his fists at his sides. It only continued to get worse when the Warden mentioned a blood magic ritual. She stepped to his side and glanced to the others, who were thankfully all scowling at Stroud with different variations of the expression.

With a gentle touch, she pressed her hand onto the small of his back, sending out soft pulses of her aura to try and catch his attention. His back twitched under her touch, his magic snapping back like a rubber band against his skin. He glanced to her, his eyes meeting hers and for a second confusion knit his brows together and there was a small flash of fear racing across his face before he finally softened and nodded at her. Was she not supposed to feel him reacting? As Athena pulled her hand into her pocket, Rathein was moving towards her direction. Stroud and Hawke was walking out of the cave, bickering at each other over the current situation, and she cursed herself for getting too involved in her thoughts and missing important plot points of the conversation.

The Herald stood in front of her, waiting expectantly for some thing or words to help her. Athena stilled, looking to her friend before letting out a sigh. “Okay, what do you want to know?”

Bull scoffed, sitting against one of the tables Stroud left behind. The Qunari was so large it still looked like just a chair underneath him. “Blood magic? Tevinter rituals? Sounds shitty to me.”

Solas chimed in, clasping his hands behind his back and humming in agreement. “Indeed. If what Stroud suggests is true. . . The Wardens may not be able to be saved.”

They all looked to her and she felt a pit of dread growing within her belly. What could she tell them? The demon army wasn’t exactly something that could be avoided. The plan was already in progress and if they sent any scouts to Adamant they would be destroyed by the Wardens currently occupying it. For some reason, Athena felt like this was one event that might be able to go smoother without changing major details. There was one thing she was bound to change and that was to save both Stroud and Hawke from being trapped in the Fade. She would just have to be careful with her words. The Herald walked forward and playfully pushed her on the shoulder. “Can’t say?”

Athena bit the inside of her cheek and nodded, sheepishly looking up to meet her gaze. “Not exactly something I can think of on the spot. There’s just so much to remember from what I know,
it’s difficult to separate that from what I’m living right now. I’ll update you when I think it over?”

Rathein let out a sigh, rubbing the back of her neck while looking up at the top of the creepily decorated cave. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this whole thing. First the Wardens disappear and then they are doing rituals in the desert? That sounds just greaaaaat.”

This brought a chuckle from both Athena and Bull, their eyes meeting for a moment before Cole materialized next to her. Before he could even speak she shot him a look before putting a barrier up in her mind. He furrowed his brow, looking her up and down and she could feel him trying to “help” her. He was right; she was worried. At this point she felt helpless because she knew of all the things that were coming but didn’t know how to help them quite yet. The Wardens were going to attempt to summon a demon army. What could stop them? Instantly her mind went to the Templar. What if they could recruit Templars to go with them to Adamant and suppress the magical forces so that less demons could come through? The Inquisition could use its resources to find the Littany of Adralla and dispel the demonic forces.

There were many things to think about.

The group sat in silence until Athena let out a groan and pushed herself from the wall, walking away from them while throwing her hands in the air. “Gah! Fuck it. I’ll think of this later.” She turned on her very sharp heel, thanks to Vivienne, and looked back at the group. She pointed out towards the exit of the cave while quickly going through a list. “There’s a cave of red templars. There are some wyverns in a cave we need to kill. Bandits. Dam. Rift. Home to Skyhold in a few days. Think we can knock it out quick?”

The Inquisitor laughed, giving her a quick shrug with a nod. “I don’t see why not. The humidity of this place is killing me. Which first?”

She thought for a moment. “Probably Templars. They are the larger threat here and should be taken out quickly. There’s a camp by the wyvern cave and then the bandits are on the way to open the dam.”

With a gesture their leader instructed for them to get started. Solas, Iron Bull, and Rathein headed out towards the cave entrance. The Herald looked over her shoulder to see why Athena was falling behind and she dismissed her friend with a gesture, mouthing the words “Give me a minute.” The short-haired mage nodded while talking strategy with Solas and Bull to keep them distracted. Athena knew that it wouldn’t work for the either of them. They were both too perceptive. But they would play along to appease both women.
Athena leaned against the table where Bull just was, allowing the entirety of her weight to sink against the furniture piece. She had forgotten where he went, but Cole appeared at her side. She sighed and leaned her head on his shoulder, watching the group leave the cave. “Can you keep a secret, Cole?”

He nodded wordlessly, looking to the side down at her. She crossed her arms under her chest, relaxing more as the others disappeared from their view and hopefully from earshot. “I don’t know what to do. I feel like everyone is expecting so much of me but I can barely keep up, let alone think of what is going to happen.”

The boy slowly turned and looked towards her gaze, leaning his head against hers. “I could help. You go to other spirits for help, let me try.”

Could he keep her secrets? She fidgeted in her position before slowly letting her barriers down, allowing the thought of the Littany to come forward in her mind. It would be a touchy position, because it was what a Templar leader used on Cole to try and prove that he was a demon. The boy stilled beside her but did not move, her body tensing but he hummed in a sound of contemplation.

“If there are a lot of demons at Adamant, that will work. It makes things...hard. I couldn’t hide. They wouldn’t be able to either.”

“What do you think of the templars?”

He hummed again but it sounded reminiscent of a groan, bringing his hands up to adjust his hat since leaning against her misplaced it on his head. “Cassandra. Organizing something like that would make her happy... Cullen too.”

The fact that he wasn’t freaking out over the future brought a sense of calm to her mind. She smiled and nuzzled into his shoulder, giving herself and him a moment of alone time before she went out with the others and continued their journey. The others saw him for a demon... but he helped. The spirit of Compassion brought a peaceful presence about him, even when he was being accidentally intrusive. “Thank you, Cole. I’ll start working on that when we get back. You won’t tell anyone else?”

He shook his head and already she could feel herself forgetting why they were talking. He looked down to her with the faintest traits of a smile. “Telling would hurt you. I don’t want to hurt you.” Athena blinked and looked around, forgetting where he had gone and why the left side of her body was suddenly cold from the absence of warmth. She rubbed her hands on her bare upper arms and walked out of the cave, smiling at Rathein before continuing with the group.
Wyvern Hunting

Chapter Notes
I had a friend do a commission of Athena and Rathein! :D

http://www.ebonyceleste.com/ < ---- Go on and check her other stuff out!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Athena knew Crestwood wouldn’t be so bad if it weren’t for the fucking heels that Vivenne suggested she wear. The thin shoes sliced through the mud and sent a jolt of pain up her calves every time she mis-stepped or nearly rolled her ankle. They had pushed through the camp of Red Templars and were about to venture into the wyvern cave. Iron Bull was nearly giddy with excitement. He was switching his axe from hand to hand while waiting by the entrance, eyes completely glued on the darkness within the cave. Rathein was trying to think of a plan for the creatures when Athena gave her a soft smile. The Herald rolled her eyes in a mock fashion, winking before giving her a smile.

“You know about the wyverns?”

She nodded, placing her staff on her back while smoothing out the fabric of her pants and skirts. “There’s one large one and a few of its spawn? Children?” She looked with a quick glance to Solas for clarification but he shrugged while taking a drink of water from his flagon. “It’s miniature clones then. They go into a frenzy when you attack so I think we should take out the little ones while Bull keeps the attention of Momma Scales in there.” She pointed with her thumb behind her shoulder towards the cave, leaning her weight into the boulder at her back to give her feet a break.

The short-haired mage rubbed her chin and thought it over before drawing her staff with an almost apathetic motion. “Let’s get this over with then.”

Iron Bull was the first one through the cave and was speaking a trail of Qunari clips and phrases. Athena had to chuckle at him, keeping his pace with a light jog behind him. She kept her staff at her back. The more she fought with it, for some reason the more unnatural it felt. When she imagined magic, she thought of it was a force, like air, that flowed through everyone. The staff was an unnecessary tool when it felt so much smoother to just use her body in the spells and motions. Even spelling out glyphs was quicker with her fingertips than by using the staff to try and jot it on the ground like a toddler using a life-sized pencil. This battle would be her test to see if it made a difference or not.

They approached the glen and it used most of her willpower to not gasp at the sight. The glen and pond within the cave lit up the environment. There were halla statues within a pool of water and the vivacity of the grass, algae, and trees lit up the room. It was obvious that the wyverns were foreign because the place screamed with such serenity they were an odd site in the middle. Magic tingled along her skin and brought a smirk to her lips. She kept to the side of the cave, eyes glued on the wyvern and her children. Rathein was at Bull’s side, motioning to Cole to flank the beasts.
while Bull came up front. Solas mirrored Athena’s movements on the opposite cave wall, his staff drawn and eyes focused.

“Now!”

They all jumped at once. Athena pulled within her core at the magic and found her body to feel energized, electric with the thinness of the Veil within the cave. The barriers snapped from her hand in an instant around Cole and Bull as they sunk their blades into the hide of the larger wyvern. The younger ones reacted, throwing their heads back and shrieking into the air while turning to the closest target: Rathein.

The mage hissed and brought her staff up to block the small scaled creature’s bite. Athena flicked her gaze to the thing, pulling on the connection she had with her wolves to push out a pulse of magic that was almost like a scolding mother’s No! The baby creature stopped for a moment, eyes slowly turning towards her with the same glossed over look she had seen in the pack the first time she had met them. Rathein took the opportunity to bring her staff down with a crash of lightning into its back. The spell was quick and effective and in a moment, the target was stilled.

The sensation was new but Athena felt the snapping of a cord breaking within her chest. It brought her breath from her, eyes wide while she looked to the dragonling. Their eyes met and she could hear its heartbeat within her mind, panicked and frenzied, but eventually it slowed into silence. The feeling left her hollow, face blank as she turned towards the main pest within the cave. Momma Scales whipped her head into Bull and knocked him back a few paces. He laughed at the attack, picking his axe up from the ground before bringing it down into her scales with an echoing crack.

Solas twirled his staff and brought it down into the ground, ice forming at the wyvern’s feet and freezing it in place. Its body twitched and fought the spell but soon its suffering was ended. Cole materialized underneath its neck and sheathed his daggers in between her scales, releasing two streams of hot blood from his body. The wyvern slumped to the ground with a fading cry and the whole party sighed in relief, save for Athena.

Bull was celebrating their kill, looking in the mouth of the beast and picking a few teeth for himself as a souvenir. Cole patted the creature’s side and mumbled his apologies while Athena walked to the water’s edge. Her gaze wasn’t focused on anything but it landed on the statues of the halla. There were so many emotions attached to this place from her playthroughs of the game. The visage of the glen brought a sense of dread over her mind, it rushing like a cold down her spine and bringing tears to her eyes. If they did go through with this, if they became something more than travel companions, this could be where her spirit would break.

This is where he would leave her.
She fell to her knees at the water’s edge and splashed water onto her face, trying to rub some of the grime and oily foundation from her face. The water was crisp, clean and pure. The sensation brought a wave of clarity to her mind and allowed her a moment of reprieve before she heard a voice behind her.

“How. Questions. Knowing. Will it happen to me too?”

Her eyes widened and she snapped to Cole, giving him a look that instantly shut his mouth. Solas was at his side and he gave her a questioning look, tilting his head to the side while looking from her to the statues and pond behind her. He hummed, placing his staff on his back while smirking. “This place is beautiful.”

Shit.

She nodded in agreement, pushing up from her pained heels to stand. “It ’tis. It’s leaving a sour taste in my mouth though.”

He paused, taking a step closer to her. “Why is that?”

Cole answered for her while the path of her eyes fell to the green floor, confusion riddling itself in her features. “She felt the fledglings die.”

Solas stilled, trying to find her gaze. When he failed, he nodded and looked to the spirit/boy next to him. “Your abilities grant you more than just the power to influence animals. It binds you to them.”

Athena looked up with a small groan of acceptance, patting her hands dry on her legs while bringing a cloth from her bag to wipe underneath her eyes and clean some of the old make up from her skin. “I get that now. With the bear I don’t think I successfully influenced it so I wasn’t able to feel it die. This one, this creature heard me. I could feel its panic, its utter shock as it faded into nothingness. Cole, it’s what I imagine you hear when you look at the hurting.”

The boy nodded solemnly and wordlessly, sheathing his daggers into the holsters on the sides of his thighs. Before they could continue Rathein gestured for them to leave the cave “Come on, you three. Let’s set up camp and tell the agents about this place. I’m sure they need to come collect the scales.”
Athena volunteered to be first guard that night. The sky was clear and they had gotten rid of the red templars so the only thing that had to worry about were some local bandits. At this point they probably lived in the Keep or traveled in packs of two or three. She wasn’t too concerned with them, especially since she had befriended and bonded with a Druffalo that was eating dried grass near the camp. She placed her hand on its forehead and smiled, stroking its thick fur while it happily chewed at its meal. *Thunder*. It named itself, flicking its eyes up to her before going back to its dinner.

“**You’ll help me keep watch?**”

The creature groaned, pressing against her body with its large horns. She laughed and patted him on top of the head before returning to camp. Bull and Rathein were about to retire, in separate tents even though they had begun to routinely eat their meals next to one another. The Qunari looked to the druffalo and scoffed, shaking out his bedroll while looking Athena up and down. “**You made friends with that thing?**”

She smiled back at him, pointing towards the creature with pride. “**Absolutely. You ever piss off a druffalo? It would take three of you to take him down. He’s going to help me keep watch.**”

Bull rolled his eyes with a small smile before crawling into his tent and Athena noted that there was a vacant spot next to him. Is that where Cole slept? She couldn’t remember the last time she saw him, was it the cave? She cursed under her breath at the spirit’s ability while bringing her lute out from her side. Night by night she was practicing, trying to get as fluent with the strings like she was in the Fade. The calluses were beginning to form and it was easier to play the music in her head but she knew she wasn’t Jimmy Hendrix. She sat and leaned up against a rock formation that was giving their camp shade and protection. From beyond their camp was the broken-down ruins where they would eventually find the dragons and to their left was the bog. As she was taking note of everything they would need to do she felt the cold trickle down her neck. She smiled, glancing up to Solas while placing the instrument in her lap.

“**You have to let me guard this time. No sneaking me off into the Fade like in the Coasts.**”

He chuckled, shaking his head while gesturing back to the tents. “**I put your roll next to the Herald’s for when your shift finishes.**”

Athena nodded in a gesture of appreciation, holding his gaze until she began to feel the blood creep
up into her neck. Thankfully before it reached her cheeks he gave her a wave and turned back
towards his tent. “Good night, Athena.”

The way his voice softened when he spoke to her, it put a pressure in her belly and heat within her
chest. She shakily picked up the lute and rested it against her abdomen, waiting to hear their deep
breaths that indicated that everyone was asleep. The fire roared next to her and provided a calm,
crackling sound throughout the environment. The white noise was good; it helped to clear her mind
and allowed her to reach back to the lessons that Inspiration gave her on music.

It felt like an hour or two had passed before she finally picked up the instrument and began to play.
At first it was wordless songs that she knew. Her eyes kept on the horizon while her fingers
strummed, occasionally missing a note by a half step. She could recover without stopping
altogether, her body slowly rocking with the beat. Eventually she began to hum along with the
lyrics in her head, smiling as the music floated through the air in the camp. The sound of her
instrument wasn’t loud; it didn’t attract attention from the bandits or a lingering Templar. There
was enough noise with the fire, Thunder’s herd, and the rift’s crackling that her music was trapped
within the camp.

Athena paused in between songs, glancing in between the tents before her gaze rested on where
Solas was resting. If she focused, she could feel his aura expanding and contracting with each of
his relaxed breaths. Even in his sleep, he could control his magic, keeping it within himself like a
secret from the rest of the world. Rathein’s flared like her storm magic, filling the tent with a static
energy while she tossed and turned in her deep sleep and dreams. With a sigh, she turned back to
the area and kept watch, a smile creeping on her lips while she tried to play the next song. It started
out with a hum and quickly progressed to actual singing, her heart filling with emotion while she
performed for the creatures and spirits through the veil that were willing to listen.

At the swell of the song she glanced over to his tent, eyes glossing with happiness as a bashful yet
honest smile played on her lips.

“I know you haven’t your mind up yet. But I would never do you wrong. I’ve known it from the
moment that we met...”

No doubt in my mind where you belong. Her fingers began to strum the next notes but she was
quickly cut off by a voice that was softer than her playing. “He can hear you.”

She had to bit her tongue to contain the yelp that almost fell from her mouth, eyes wide while she
fumbled with the lute in her hand, ceasing the music in a sudden flurry of sounds. Cole sat across
from her, one leg bent while his hand rested atop his knee. He watched the horizon with her and
they were close enough for the bottoms of their feet to be touching. Athena flushed with
embarrassment, gaze shooting to the side while mentally she ran through a series of curses that
would make even a sailor blush.

Cole continued speaking but didn’t look over at her. “He sleeps but doesn’t. One foot in and one foot out. Always watching. He – oh!” He winced, looking to Athena who only smirked in recognition of what happened. Solas had cut him off. Cole silenced for a moment while crossing his arms in frustration of what to do. “He liked the music.”

Athena almost hid her face in her hands like the elf was sitting there watching her instead of sleeping in his tent. The blush had conquered every inch of her face and she could feel the heat emanating from her body. The boy spoke again and it brought her back into the conversation. “I did too. Can you... keep playing? It takes away the hurt.”

She went to ask “whose hurt” but the expression on his face answered it for him. He was still adjusting to everything as well and she knew how the red templars affected him. With a nod, she picked up the lute again, slowly plucking the strings until she could get into a rhythm and groove again. Cole smiled and relaxed, listening in silence as both of their guard shifts came and went.

Chapter End Notes

Song:

Make You Feel My Love - Adele
“Why would you want to swing from a chandelier? Isn’t that dangerous?”

The rest of the group looked at Cole and Athena in confusion but she simply laughed, rubbing his back with a smile on her lips. “It’s just a song, Cole.”

He paused in his walk, nodding to himself in affirmation. “I would like to hear more songs.”

She looked over to him and gestured in agreement, looking up and realizing they were reaching the ruins where the dragon rested. They had checked in with the “Naturalist” on the edge of the farms and informed her of the wyvern’s demise. Thunder had escorted the group down to the ruin before returning to his herd at the bottom of the hills. The moment her heels began to click against the stone she tapped Bull on the shoulder. He looked down at her with an arched brow in question and she jerked her chin to the side. While the others were discussing how to approach the keep where the dam was kept she brought the Qunari to the edge of the ruin on the cliff.

“What’s up?”

She put a finger to her lips while smirking. “I have a surprise for you. Keep quiet though, okay?”

He stilled, looking at her in suspicion. “Oooookay. What is it?”

Athena jerked her thumb towards the side, over the wall of the ruin. “Look down there. What do you see?”

Iron Bull put his hands on the broken wall and bent over and looked down into the rainy abyss. It took him a moment, his eyes searching, but the heavy heaves of breath from the creature helped him locate the dragon sleeping at the bottom of the mountain. Bull smiled, slapping his hands against the wall before standing up tall. “Ataaaaashi,” he whispered between them, looking back to her while patting his hand on her shoulder. “When all of this is clear, you and I can come with the Chargers and knock this thing to the dirt. What do you say?”

She laughed, looking over to the Herald. “You don’t want to invite the boss? You two seem close.”
Bull smirked and crossed his arms over his chest. “Business is business.”

“Maybe in the Qun it is, but that there? That’s flirting.” Athena stilled and stepped closer to him, her body adapting a hardened stance while she met his gaze. “Don’t think of her like those kitchen maidens, Bull. She’s not somebody that needs to be told she’s pretty.”

“I know.”

“I know you do, I’m just making sure. She’s my friend. You have me to deal with if you do her wrong.”

He laughed, looking her up and down. “You? I could break you.” There was an almost sexual tone to his words but she pushed it off, flicking her hair over her shoulder with a dramatic gesture.

“Me? Oh sure. But what about me, the pack, and my buddy Thunder over there and his friends.”

Bull went to scoff at her but stopped to consider her words, glancing over at her before turning back to the group. “Shit, you might be right.”

The bandit’s keep was easily taken. They were a rather unorganized group that attacked first before assessing the group’s strengths and weaknesses. The party was moving along the bridge towards the dam when Athena heard a soft humming sound behind her. Solas was walking in front of her step, softly humming a song that felt oddly familiar. It was one of the songs she had been playing the night before, the song that Cole said he could hear even in the Fade. The thought almost made her stop and gasp but instead she looked to the water on the ground and threw a small splash at him with a force of magic.

He touched his hand to the back of his head, rubbing his fingers together while commenting. “Childish.”

Another splash, this time on the back of his shirt. “Yeah? Deserved, you were just making fun of me.”
Solas shook his head, waiting for her walk past his side. “I enjoyed the music, Athena. I heard it in my dreams last night.”

She paused, looking to him with a light blush on her cheeks. “How?”

He gave a smug smirk, looking to Rathein and Bull who were also talking back and forth in front of them. “Sometimes when I dream I enter a state of light consciousness. I’m able to stay alert to my surroundings here while exploring the Fade.” She nodded, looking back to bridge while wiping some of the rain from her brow. “A spirit of Inspiration was also doing a poor effort at echoing them.”

Athena froze, nearly rolling her ankle on the heel while cursing under her breath. “Ooh I’m going to get her.” On the next step, she did nearly trip, the heel of her boot sliding on the slick stone and sending her body to the side. Without even flinching he placed a hand on her shoulder and the middle of her stomach to catch her. The quick, effortless movement on his behalf nearly took her breath away, her eyes looking down to the touch on her stomach in disbelief. Could he feel how nervous he made her? How her heart dropped into her stomach like a pound of lead? She swallowed a lump of nerves, using his support to stand up to her full posture. She wiggled her feet within her boots and ensured she finally had proper footing before stepping forward again.

“Uh- Thank you, Solas.”

He nodded back to her, waiting until she was in front of him so he could lean in behind her ear with a wicked smirk on his lips. “Do not think I have forgotten about the-”

Rathein whipped open the door to the dam and gestured for them to come into the closed tavern. Bull was already smirking, looking at an image near the fire. Athena and Solas quickly filed through and then she smiled as well, standing next to the Qunari to allow her pulse to calm down. In front of them were two lovers, caught in the almost act, hiding from everyone else. The boy made a noise of frustration, falling to the side, while the girl tried to hide her face underneath the makeshift covers they had brought with them.

The Herald chuckled, continuing to the room with the controls for the dam while shouting: “Bull! Could use you for this lever!”

The mercenary leader walked into the room and clapped his hands together before working on the pulling the dam open. Which left her, Solas, and suddenly Cole in the room with the embarrassed
teenagers. Athena started. “How did you get past the bandits?”

The girl sighed, turning and smacking the arm of her partner. “You didn’t say there were bandits!”

The boy raised his hands in defense, standing up to full posture. “Better than spiders, anyhow. They never come this way and I could lock the door!”

Now Athena smiled, looking the pair up and down before gesturing up towards the hills. “Well, the keep is now safe. I’d give it maybe a day or two before Inquisition soldiers start to arrive and set up here. You might want to make it back to Crestwood before. . .” She allowed her voice to trail off with a tone of false worry, eyes hardening on the fire.

It was the girl who was the braver one, standing up holding the blanket against her stomach. “Before what?”

“Before the dragon sleeping in the ruins wakes up.”

Boy of the lovers gasped, looking to one another. “Back to town it is!”

Without another word, they grabbed their picnic supplies and exited through the front door, leaving it swinging to a close. Solas looked to the side at her, a mischievous smirk on his lips and for a moment she thought she saw a glance of the Dread Wolf peeking through his normally calm visage. “That was clever, Sorciere.”

A soft groan formed in her throat at the title, lips twitching into a frown. “Please don’t. Not you.” He stilled, the playfulness falling from his face while he listened. She continued, glancing to see that Cole had made himself scarce again. “It’s just – You know me. That title this-” She gestured up and down to her garb, the merciless corset still digging into her sides but now it had the discomfort of being moistened by the rain. “Is a mask I’m being forced to wear. Something for the people to throw their emotions at. I haven’t been able to wear the title with pride yet.”

The familiarity of the words she used brought a curious look from his eyes but he nodded, readjusting his coat. She could hear the chains on the dam lifting and even near the fire she was suddenly aware of the damp soaked within her clothes. Goosebumps danced along her skin, bringing her teeth to a near chatter. “Are you alright?”
She nodded, rubbing her hands up and down on her arms. “Damned rune I drew last night wore off. You’re lucky; you get to at least wear a coat, good fitting pants, and boots.” He smiled, opening his arms to shrug, which left an opening his coat. Without even waiting she took the opportunity, closing the gap between them and wrapping her arms around him in between his shirt and coat. There instantly was warmth and she could tell that he had drawn a rune on his clothes as well, but his was more detailed and potent in its effect. There must have been something else for water repellence because the inside of his coat was remarkably dry. Instinctively she rested her cheek on his chest and let out a content sigh, allowing the heat to soak into her bones. He had yet to rest his arms on her and she could feel his body still underneath her, his breath caught in his throat while his pulse began to climb underneath her touch. She responded in kind, loosening her grip around him and realizing that even though she was probably touchy both in and out of the Fade, he wasn’t. “Sorry! Oh uh - Thought you were offering.”

He chuckled, the sound raspy and dry, while looking down at her. The sound tightened her chest and the insides of her thighs but she moved to try and step back from him. He finally relaxed and put his hands on her back, drawing small designs on the back of her corset with his index finger. When he was finished, he tapped the design and all the water disappeared from her clothes into a puddle on the floor. She instantly smiled in relief, going to step back since she was dry but finding that his arms were still on her back, holding her close against his chest. He hummed in reluctance to her movement, looking down at her with a heat in his gaze that nearly melted her into the puddle he already created. She slowly looked up from his neck to his gaze, the flush of her chest following her movements to climb into her cheeks.

For a moment, there was a heavy silence between them. Both of their auras were contained and she focused on the rise and fall of his breaths to keep herself standing. Her head was swirling and the memories of the Fade replayed themselves in her mind. This was the first time they touched like this in person. Here she could feel the tone of his body under his shirt, the subtle applications of pressure from his hands on her back as he pulled her closer to his embrace. He looked up from her, checking the door and smirking with confirmation that the Herald and Bull were still fiddling with the damn gears. He then looked back to her, a hand moving from her back to cup her cheek. He slid his thumb over her lips and then down the length of her chin and she fought not to throw herself at him and be lost within his warmth.

Solas leaned down and pressed his lips to the top of her head, bringing her in to a tight embrace before resting his forehead on hers. Both of their eyes were closed as they relished in the moment. Her breaths came shaky, her hands nearly trembling on his back while she gripped his shirt as a firm reminder that he was still there. He whispered her name in the space between them and it threatened to bring a soft moan from her lips. The door behind them creaked and a few things happened at once. There was a large whirl of movement in front of her, sudden cold drafting up the front of her body as Solas fade-stepped to the back of the room and assumed a neutral position with his back against the wall and his eyes closed.

In his place stood Cole, his arms wrapped around Athena with his coat open. She was resting her head on his shoulder and chuckled after coming from the trance of romance. Rathein laughed, nudging Bull while pair standing in an embrace in front of the fire. “Vivienne’s choice of clothing
Athena chuckled, pulling Cole into a firm hug while smiling into the crook of his neck. He patted her back in response and she could feel him smile too, just barely. “No, my friend, they are not. Perhaps as the Inquisitor you can put in a good word for me on the safety of your companions and how they should be given proper traveling attire?” She pulled back and turned with a small sway of her hips, the now dry fabric of her skirt following with her body. Rathein took notice, looking her up and down.

“You’re dry.”

_Not entirely._ She thought to herself with a chuckle. In a gesture of teasing, she brought her hand up to her face and examined her nails for a moment before pushing the hand away to examine the backs of her hand in the firelight while the other rested on her hip. “Oh you know, just a rune I came up with. I did work while you left me alone in Skyhold.” She flicked her gaze to Solas and he opened his eyes, giving her the ghost of a smirk before pushing off from the wall to walk back over to them. He broke through the joking conversation, his voice cutting like ice through the humor.

“Shall we continue to the Rift, Inquisitor? With the dam drained we should be able to reach it.”

The leader of their group nodded slowly, motioning for them to all walk out of the tavern. Solas opened the door for them all and when Athena walked by he slid through, allowing for the front of his body to slide alongside the back of hers before falling into step behind Rathein and Bull. With a small smirk, she reached down to the water on the ground and levitated a small amount of water maybe a few teaspoons full above the collar of his shirt. Then without warning, she dropped it, aiming that it would slide down his back and avoid the ruins and glyphs that were keeping his clothes dry and protected. She could see him jolt in a motion of shock and then he gave her a playful glare over his shoulder before continuing forward.
Athena was nearly to the point of grinning in the back of the room, her eyes bouncing back and forth between the spirit and Rathein, who was looking at Command with great curiosity. Iron Bull made a slow sound of confusion, his facial expressions obviously showing some trepidation with the ethereal being floating in front of them. He was keeping guard at the edge of the broken house in the valley that was created by the lake draining through the now open dams. Solas smiled at the being, chiming in for the group as the resident expert on things beyond the Fade.

“A lost spirit! This should—“

The spirit turned and quickly cut him off with a voice that was used to having people obey. “Silence, let the other one talk.” Athena couldn’t stifle her chuckle, covering her mouth with her hand while looking to the side in a poor attempt to blend in with the wall. The elf looked over his shoulder with a puzzled expression but she ignored it and looked back the red flickering of light in front of them. Rathein froze and shook her head, jerking her chin over to his direction to try and get the thing’s attention from her. “Spirits are your expertise, Solas. . . “

Command threw her skeletal looking hands up in the air, frustration rooting itself in her voice. “Then tell me why nothing here changes!”

He spoke softly, almost like trying to speak to a friend. “This realm follows different rules from the Fade’s. Will alone cannot overcome what you seek.”

“Then what’s the point of it?”

“A solid form is both shackle and strength. It affects more than you imagine.” Athena felt the impact of his words more than the others, knowing that if anyone could speak to this subject it would be him. He was the one who was in a deep sleep, venturing through the Fade for eons only to have woken up a short time ago. Was he shackled in his current form? Is that why he needed Corypheus’s power to open the foci?

Rathein paused, turning towards Cole who was looking at the spirit in awe. Her voice was uneasy and Athena tried to move to get in her gaze but the Inquisitor was looking for something solid before moving forward with whatever the spirit wanted. “Cole? Maybe you can give it some
The boy tilted his head, trying to find words. His face lit up and he was excited about the potential to help in this situation. “Maybe? My name is-”

The spirit jerked its nose in the air, scoffing out a sound of disgust. “Compassion. Did I ask your name?”

He stammered and already Athena could feel the energy swirl around him, trying to make them forget. She took a step to the side, reaching down and squeezing his hand with hers. He then shook his head and mumbled an apology to the group before returning to his reserved silence. The Inquisitor pinched the bridge of her nose, taking in a deep controlled breath before continuing. “Are you a spirit or a demon?”

“Demons? Those dolts that would suck this world dry. I am called to higher things.”

Rathein pressed on, using her knowledge from the teachings in the Circle to try and turn the tone of the conversation. "All powerful spirits represent something. Compassion, Justice, Wisdom.”

“Soft virtues. I am something more. I am Command.”

When the spirit identified herself, Athena felt something hum within her core. She took a step back, pressing a hand to her stomach in confusion while looking down to the source of the sensation. It was close to a calling, but why? It was something she had only felt once before. “What of you? I felt your coming, is there something alike in us?”

Rathein shrugged, raising her left hand and in response the green mark flared to life, its energy crackling like lightning upon her skin. “You probably sensed the mark.”

Command snapped, her form flaring in the air and solidifying while she scolded the Inquisitor. “No. Not you. Her.” The group then simultaneously looked to her and she could feel the blood drain from her face. Athena slowly looked up, meeting eyes with the spirit and arching a brow while pointing a single finger to the center of her chest.

“Me?”
The spirit nodded, her form becoming a little clearer in her eyes. She could see traces of armor and she held a posture that demanded authority, like Cassandra but with more unbridled confidence. In response, she hesitantly nodded her head in respect, placing a fist over her heart. “I. . . I guess that must be it. I know why you are trapped and I will end the enemy who has disgraced your name, Command.”

The specter made a noise of acknowledgement before dismissing them from the area. Athena walked in auto-pilot, stunned while trying to find a way to describe what she felt. When Command said her name, there was a pulse of power that came from the spirit. It was like a call, like when she felt Solas searching for her when she was in her wolf form. It tingled on her skin and strummed within her core like a string. It felt foreign but it helped to fuel the drive that led them through the cave and in the direction of the rage demon. As they came across corpses and the dead left behind, she threw her spells and cast barriers but there was a gloss over her mind. Anytime there was a slight differentiation from the canon she knew, it threw her for a loop and this was no different.

Cole appeared at her side, nonchalantly sliding his blades together to remove some of the undead residue that was attempting to dry. “That was new?”

With a small jump, she snapped from her trance, looking around and taking in where they were. They were at the base of the cave behind the mayor’s house, in the deep roads looking halls that would lead them to the rift. The natural lights illuminated the cave, the ancient dwarven technology still holding true even after all of these years. “Yeah, Cole, that was new. There was something strange too. Why. . . Why did she say we were similar?”

He put his daggers away and crossed his arms over his chest, obviously deep in thought on the topic. “Burning, bright, always burning, always bringing in like moths to a flame.”

Solas fell back from the group for a moment, obviously eavesdropping because he looked to the side with a small smile. “You are connected with the spirits, more than others.” Athena became victim to her thoughts once more, bringing her staff in front of her body because she knew that when they rounded the corner the rage demon would be there.

“I feel like it is more than that. When she identified herself, it’s like I could feel her influence in my body. It was more than just a name, something within me called to follow her. Did. . . you guys feel it too?”

Cole nodded without hesitation, his voice rising to a louder volume than his normal ghost of a whisper. “Yes. It knew me, not as Cole, but Compassion. But, you aren’t like me. You are, you want to help, but you’re not like me.” The boy was obviously confused to the exact words that he
was trying to say but she gave him a smile, patting him on the back and rubbing between his shoulder blades.

“You mean I’m not a spirit?” He gave a curt nod, his hands fiddling with the tops of his blades at his sides. There was a moment or two where she questioned what she was in this world. Could she have been a spirit/human like Cole, who was from one world but existed within the other? She couldn’t make people forget, if anything they remembered her more with every action she did... even if it was as little as what jam she ate with her morning toast.

“Dreamers are linked with the Fade more than others. You have the ability to shut your eyes and enter the other realm, much like I do. Your magic is also unrestrained, unrestricted like mages that trained here in the Circles. It could leave you more sensitive to spirits and breaks in the veil.”

Rathein shot a glare over her shoulder at the mention of Circle mages. “Hey!”

Solas flicked his gaze to her, raising a hand in apologies. “No offense meant, Inquisitor. There are just different methods of training and she has had to pick and choose training from a variety of training regimens.”

Bull agreed with a grunt, shoving his hands in the pockets of his flared pants while looking over his shoulder. “You mages all have unique fighting styles, like fingerprints. Mages trained in the circles have sharp, quick movements and they are always thinking of how they were taught to summon magic. Elves and the Dalish weren’t taught by books so their magic flows a little better. They call on their own will and magic to perform the tasks. They are harder to fight because there aren’t as many cues to follow on in battle like with circle mages. Athena’s kind of like that. She thinks and the magic just does. Aaaah shit, here’s the thing that spirit was talking about.” The Qunari pointed forward towards a large rage demon that was trudging like a slug along the ground. It had a companion wraith traveling alongside it and the presence of the two sent a chill up Athena’s spine.

She cleared her throat, looking to the tank of the group. “I think I need to be the one to kill it since I said I would. Can you keep the smaller thing off me?” He nodded and drew out his axe with a grin, the thrill of the battle infecting him like a disease. He ran forward with a war cry, using his large presence to draw the attention of the demons. Rage looked to the side and roared, its body increasing in size and Athena knew that meant it had raised some sort of guard. She cursed under her breath and ran into the battle, her staff dragging along the ground while she summoned up energy and sent it coursing through the item.

The demon turned in a smooth motion, molten claws slashing out at her. She brought up her staff to block it while sending a stream of lightning from her fingertips. Fire would hurt it but since it was made of the element it would be harder to bring it down with her natural element. The demon cried
out at the lightning, the spell keeping it stunned in its place. Solas was at the edge of the battlefield and she could feel his spells lash out and keep the creature bound to its place even further with its ice magic.

Rage twisted its body and broke free, taking in a deep breath and exhaling flames towards Athena. In a moment of blind panic, she raised her arms up to block the attack, a swell of mana coming into her hands. She meant to guard herself from the flames but instead her hands tore through the veil, warping her body to sprint to the side in a burst of flame. With a few blinks she looked up to see she was now standing next to Bull, who was towering over the fallen wraith with a look of pride and a battle well fought.

Athena turned around and looked at the scorch marks in the ground that proved she had just fade stepped but with flame. It was an exhilarating sensation. Her skin was alive and heat emanated from every pore. She laughed and clenched her fists, spinning her staff around in her hand before channeling magic into it. Hot, white fire formed a pointed tip at the edge of her staff, turning her weapon into a sort of spear. With a wordless cry of fury, she pushed the weapon into the demon’s back and twisted it into the place.

Rage roared, its body twisted in an attempt to escape, but it inevitably failed, its body crumbling to ash all around her weapon. Athena pumped a fist in the air in a gesture of victory, looking to Bull with a smile. He walked over and patted her on the back, the weight behind his hand pushing the air from her lungs. The rest of the group joined her, Rathein standing in front with a smile on her face. “Did you just fade-step? I thought that was only in the school of frost magic.”

Solas hummed with curiosity, clasping his hands behind his back while looking her up and down. “Normally it is.” He then smiled with pride and Athena felt a familiar tightness in her chest as a blush crawled up her neck to her cheeks. “But as the Iron Bull said, her magic is natural, new.”

The Inquisitor chuckled and nodded, pointing to the room that was already loud with the sound of the rift. “Let’s go close this thing and get out of here. Crestwood gives me the creeps.”

After closing the rift and fighting through the multiple waves of demons, the group returned to the now-sunny sunken village of Crestwood. Command was waiting for them, her ethereal arms crossed over her armored chest. Out of respect Athena dropped to one knee and bowed her head, resting her hands on top of her knee while speaking plainly. “I have disposed of the demon, Command.”

The spirit smiled, looking down with pride. “I had no doubts. Now that my sovereignty has been respected, I can depart this unchanging nightmare.” Athena rose from her spot but the spirit remained, tossing an amulet of power at the Inquisitor while looking back to her. “Summon your armies, you will need them in the coming days. My blessing shall be your reward.” With a burst of
power the spirit disappeared back into the Fade and she had to take a step back as the impact of her blessing hit her. It was the familiar strum of a string like before within her chest, her magic flaring with a pulse before returning to its natural state of rest. Rathein looked at the amulet then put it in her pocket, looking at her friend with a curious gaze.

“What was that?”

Athena shook her head, patting her body down to check for any wounds or changes. “No clue, let’s go make camp. I’m with you, I would like to get out of here as soon as possible.”
The group was able to get out of the proper village of Crestwood before making camp for the night. The veil was stronger where they were and the sense of dread and death lifted from their skin. They all seemed more relieved, especially Cole. He didn’t hide his presence and was allowing them to remember him while he casually listened to their conversations behind Athena on Prince’s back. He didn’t bring his own horse. He still felt like he would inconvenience people, so she and her companion had gotten used to him suddenly appeared behind her on the saddle. Prince enjoyed the boy’s company; he would run off to find his favorite root vegetables and was always sure to thank him for the smooth voyage.

They were all settling down for the night. In a not so conspicuous move Rathein put her bedroll in Bull’s tent, making some comment about how she had been having bad dreams and his snoring helped her to sleep. Athena gave her a wicked grin with a wink, which brought a flushed blush to the Inquisitor’s face. Bull couldn’t help but chuckle as he crawled into the larger tent that was made for him. He casually laid back on his bedroll and rested his hands behind his head. Rathein paused for a moment, shuffling on her feet while Athena laughed. “Subtlety is not your strong suit, darling. Get some rest. Cole and I have guard tonight then we’ll be back at Skyhold in less than a week at our pace.” The short-haired mage nodded before sneaking in and fastening the front of the tent to be closed.

Athena took in a deep breath and sighed, leaning back into the log that was supporting her weight. Solas came from his own tent while taking a sip of water from his flagon. He came and sat next to her, offering her the drink with a smirk. She smiled, taking down a mouthful of the crisp river water before closing her eyes and letting the sound of the fire crackling to soothe her mind. He bent his knees and rested his hands on top of them, looking out at the forest beyond their camp. “Tell me of your first shift, Athena.”

She opened one eye and looked to the side at him, “What do you mean?”

He smiled, gesturing to the forest beyond them before relaxing back next to her. “You were able to do it once, perhaps if we trace what led you to do it in the first place we could replicate the process.” She hummed, resting her hands in her lap and looking into the fire. Its heat warmed her skin, brought a sense of familiarity to her that made her smile.

“Well, it started when a few of the villagers tried to get the jump on me in the camp. They were mad; Haven had just happened and they were still all mourning the loss of their families and their lives. One of them punched me, a mother in the back threw an empty bowl of porridge at me that drew blood. . . I was furious.”

Solas looked to her, face blank with small signs of a frown around his lips and eyes. He didn’t ask
questions; he just simply listened. “I had to get out. A Marquis gave me the space I needed in the
crowd to run and I just let my feet carry me. I ran past the camp, past the tree line until I couldn’t
hear the sound of the people anymore. The wolves joined me without question. I didn’t even call
out for them; they just simply knew I was there.” Talking of the memory sped up her heartbeat, the
smell of the trees and the forest washing out her mind and bringing her back to the sense of her
pack. Far off, far away in Skyhold she could almost feel them. Kain was resting on her bed after
spending a day running with Cullen’s troops and napping in his office. The rest of them were
patrolling the edge of the forest and getting to know the guards that were beginning to bring table
scraps with them on their shifts at the front of the gate.

“At one point it wasn’t me and the pack, we were one unit, one heartbeat that moved through the
forest together without thought. We approached a clearing and without thinking I just jumped. I felt
my mind go white and when I landed I was one of them.” She finished with a shrug, the remnants
of a smile twitching the corner of her lips.

He processed all of it and nodded, standing up from his position in a smooth motion. “Your ability
is more innate, instinctual it sounds. You used the anger of the attack to fuel your magic and your
shift. They teach children to control their emotions when their young because excitability is a great
kindling for magic but it can be dangerous and attract demons; that subject is still new for you.”

He sounded so academic it brought a chuckle from her lips. “Yes, but I would rather learn how to
do it without getting hit every time. That is not worth it.” He gestured for her to stand so she did,
arching a brow in confusion at him while he led her to the edge of the camp.

There was a mischievous smirk on his lips as he led her with a hand resting on her lower back.
“Surely there are other memories you can call upon that had your heart racing.”

She nearly tripped over in embarrassment, blood rushing to her neck and face. He laughed at her
reaction, smoothing his hand over his head while glancing over to her. She straightened up
instantly, scratching the side of her temple while trying to think of a response. Sarcasm won again
and she shrugged, straightening her posture to appear somewhat confident in her words. “I had a
really good dream once but it feels like so long ago now.”

He looked to her with a grin before laughing, rubbing the back of his neck as his cheeks flushed
with color. She felt smug about it, rolling her neck and shoulders while trying to re-summon the
feeling of her pack. She could feel the wind coursing through the trees and it carried the smell of
the wild. The rush of the call of her pack forced her eyes closed while she took in a deep breath
through her nose. The scents swirled around in her head, made her world go black when she felt a
warm presence in front of her. His hands were cupping her face and before she could make any
sounds of protest or open her eyes his lips were upon hers.
The shock of the gesture brought a small whimper of surprise from her. He smiled against her lips, moving a hand to the curve of her lower back to bring her in closer to him while still caressing her cheek with his thumb. Her hands were still, stunned at her side but as he moaned against her mouth, softly biting the skin of the swollen bottom lip, she gripped his hips, clawing at the fabric that rested against his skin. She flicked her tongue against the surface of his lips, drawing in his taste and muffling the small cry that echoed from his throat. He gripped against her back, nails slightly digging into the fabric of the corset that Vivienne had packed for her. She could feel a tightness in the base of her belly and between her thighs and her mind went white, her heart racing and pounding in her ears. They were pressed together so tightly; she was certain he could feel her heartbeat against his chest.

Solas broke off from her, kissing down her jawline into the curve of her neck. She sighed and reached up on the tips of her toes, wrapping her arms around his shoulders while nuzzling her cheek along his shoulder to the inside of his neck. It was strange. . . but he smelled of pack. She wasn’t sure if he still shifted into the Dread Wolf while at Skyhold but his tunic reeked of the forest and it felt like home. His magic pressed into her body, pulsing and squeezing around her hips and chest while he bit down on a soft piece of skin on her collarbone. “Does this suffice, Athena?”

Her name on his lips brought a soft cry of pleasure from her, her arms squeezing him closer while she nodded in response. He laughed, the soft puffs of air against her skin sending jolts of electricity down her spine. He placed a final kiss on her neck before whispering in her ear with a growl in his throat: “Run, Athena.” By this point she could feel his magic pulling at her core, invigorating every nerve, every hair, every breath. She didn’t need more encouraging and her body was already willing to respond to whatever command she thought of. With a sound that was like the crack of a whip her body fade-stepped away from him and into the forest. There was no scorch mark beneath her steps this time, it was pure agility and instinct that pumped her body through the trees and over the obstacles.

The color of her eyes disappeared and the beast took over her gaze and with a jump she ran in her furred form through the trees. Her body appeared as a white blur in the night, striking between the trees and bushes like lightning. It felt like hours went by until she finally stopped, her breaths coming in deep pants against the cold air. Athena felt alive. After days of being constrained in the costume of the Witch, she was finally able to be herself and just run away from it all. She missed her pack and Kain, but for now it was calming being alone in the forest with only her heartbeat to guide her. The wind swirled around her and in the moment, she threw her head back and howled. The sound carried through the air, echoing past the forests and hopefully to her pack at home.

“This suits you better than the character the others have given you.”

Athena whipped on her paws to see Solas standing there with a pleased smile on his face. He bent down on his knee, extending a hand to her. Without hesitating she walked up and rested her face in his hand, tilting her head to his touch and closing her eyes. He chuckled, sitting back on the backs of his heels while stroking his hands over her fur. It was an odd sensation, feeling his touch in a shifted form, but it was soothing nonetheless. If she were a cat she would have purred so an excited
wine left her maw instead, her tail slowly wagging behind her. She was still getting used to this body, but the action felt right.

“Perhaps in the future you can use that as inspiration to shift in the future.”

She laughed and the sound came out as a mixture between a bark and a growl. If she was human she would have blushed but instead she moved her head from his hand and sat back tall on her haunches. The moonlight nearly reflected in her fur, it standing out like a beacon in the forest. He looked to her and smiled, glancing to the surrounding area with her. “Even in this world... you burn. Your fur is like a white flame against the trees.” There was a swell of pride in his face and it reflected in her heart. She looked to the moon and nodded, basking in its glow before turning back to him, walking up to where she could rest her chin on his shoulder.

He stilled for a moment but raised his arms to wrap around her, taking a deep breath into her neck before she backed away and rested on the ground, setting her head on the tops of her paws. Solas shook his head with a smile, leaning back against a tree while resting his hands within his lap. She looked up to him and they held each other gazes for a moment. Athena could feel the exhaustion from the Crestwood adventure setting in on her eyelids and he noticed as well. “Spend the night with the woods. Gather your strength. I will take your shift back at camp.” Before he stood up to his full posture she rose and walked over to him, pausing at the realization that she was not in her regular form. She stilled, lifting one paw off the ground while looking between him and the ground with awkward whines of confusion. Did she kiss him good night? There was an unidentified grey area so for the moment she took a hesitant step forward and pressed her nose to his cheek and then rested her forehead against his. It was a gesture that her pack and her shared so she figured it would be appropriate here.

She could tell it was appreciated because he instantly smiled, bringing a hand to hold her head against his for a moment before allowing them to part. Athena nodded and watched him take off into the forest before turning to explore the surrounding areas. There weren’t any wolves close by, or at least none responded to her initial howl when she began her hunt. There were a few curious foxes and rabbits that ran between her legs and didn’t seem to fear her. She blended within the woods and it was something that gave her peace. The hours passed and when she returned to camp Cole was sitting at the edge.

Twigs, berries, and dirt caked her fur but she collapsed in her bedroll. Her breath still came in pants and it was hard to get comfortable. Cole was silent when he came in, but she felt his hand stroking down her fur while he smiled at her. “You’re happy.” He whispered, pulling a blanket up over her body before going back to his watch by the campfire. The sudden warmth and comfort of being at camp shifted her body back to normal and it didn’t take long before she was peacefully sound asleep.
“You have done well, Athena.”

She opened her eyes in the Fade to gaze upon Wisdom, who was smiling at her while standing next to Command. The newer spirit companion was intimidating, tall, armored, with a gaze that pierced straight through her core and sent a chill down her spine. She had her hair pulled back tight underneath a dragon-scaled helm with horns. Wisdom nearly paled in size and comparison, but their demeanors were total opposites. Athena smiled while looking at the two of them, giving a sarcastic glance to the newest member of the Fade brigade. “I thought you did not want to associate yourself with soft virtues, Command?”

The spirit turned her nose up and away from Wisdom, crossing her arms over her chest with a scoff. “This still stands true. However, you showed potential back in that awful world. It has been a long time since a mortal has caught my attention and earned my respect.”

Athena arched a brow and nodded, looking around the empty area that swirled its light greens and whites. “Where are Harmony and Inspiration?”

Wisdom clasped her hands in front of her and smiled. “They are growing as spirits. They are being called elsewhere to help others. You are growing as well, Athena. You are needing their influence less and less.” She knew this was true but it still made a part of her sad. The spirits were the first people to be kind to her in this world. Wisdom was the first person to approach her when she crash landed into the Fade.

Seeing her, a familiar face from the game, gave her hope. “I can still call upon you guys for company though, right?”

The spirit laughed, the bell-like sound ringing through the fade while she accompanied the sound with a nod. “Of course, we will always be here for −” Their friendly chat was cut off by a tearing sound, like paper through the air. The three of them turned and looked towards a small rip in the Fade where ethereal chains were forming. Hot, fiery wisps of mana wrapped around them and manipulated their movements. They clanked together and slid as if they had a mind of their own . . . and they were heading straight towards Wisdom.

“Someone. . . is summoning me?” The spirit asked to whoever was listening. There was no fear in her voice but suddenly Athena was running in front of her, gripping the chains with her own hands and staring down their length. Through the Fade, in the small tear that led to the other side, she could see the cowardly wizards who were trying to summon a spirit to protect them from the
bandits in the Emerald Graves. The chubby-faced one was leading the ritual, the so-called expert from the Kirkwall Circle. She growled, gripping the chains with a mana-wrapped grip before snapping them back towards the would-be mages. The chains passed through her hands and fell to the ground, continuing towards their intended target.

The spirit’s virtue shown through and she sighed, falling to her knees while the chains wrapped around her wrists and ankles. Without thinking, Athena turned on her heel and reached her hand out towards the mages on the other side of the temporarily torn veil. A flame-laced whip reached out and struck one of the three from her hand, it leaving a crescent shaped burn on his face. The mage stepped back and touched his cheek. When he saw the blood on his fingers he gasped, looking into circle that made up the ritual. “The spirit is fighting back! We need more power!” He raised his hand and joined his magic into the proceedings and Wisdom cried out. Her body was being dragged forward by the chains. It was as if they were being pulled by a crank and every movement brought her closer to being pulled to the other side.

“You can’t have her!” Athena roared, reaching down and gripping the mage’s arm with her hand. Flames scorched her target’s arm, a burn in the shape of her hand print melting through his clothes and onto the skin. They looked into the air, her body like an invisible force pulling the man upwards. She needed to do something. Wisdom was important to her, and to Solas, so losing her wasn’t an option.

“We have to finish the ritual or else we’re dead! Hurry now, at once!”

The chains grew taught and pulled on Wisdom, her face finally settling into panic. Her body lurched forward and Athena placed herself in her path, catching her friend and wrapping her arms around her to stop it. There was a stilled moment and Wisdom smiled into her chest, looking up into her eyes with a glimmer of hope. “Endure, Athena.” The moment her words left her lips, her body and the chains were pulled through the tear. It slammed shut behind her with a thunderous echo. Hands shaky, mouth dry, Athena fell onto her knees in the Fade. With a wordless scream, she slammed her fists into the ground and lamented yet another failure that she could not prevent.

Wisdom would die. There was nothing she could do to stop it.

Command stood behind her and gripped her shoulder with an armored hand, bending down to speak low behind her ear. “Remember what I said, Fade-Walker? Summon your armies. Prepare yourself and then you can change the world, command it to do whatever you desire.” As the spirit squeezed her shoulder she felt her influence, her blessing coursing through Athena’s magic and mixing with Inspiration’s, Wisdom’s, and Harmony’s within her chest. Her heart beat within her ears like a battle cry, the drumming pulsing her blood through her veins and ripping her from her sleep with the sunrise.
Instantly she flipped from the ground and packed up her bedroll and tent, throwing everything onto Prince’s back. Solas was at the campfire wincing at the tea in his hand, eyes scowling at the drink while he tried to wash away the dreams from his mind. Rathein exited the tent with a pleasant smile on her face and Athena tried not to notice the blushing love mark on the inside of her neck. “Tea gone bad, Solas?” The Inquisitor asked, taking a cup of tea from the kettle while breathing in the morning air.

“It’s tea; I detest the stuff.” He frowned, sitting back on the log in front of the campfire. “However, I awoke from a terrible dream last night.” She fastened her roll against Prince’s side, taking a moment to stroke the horse’s head with her hands while communicating her plans to her companion. He looked into her eyes, feeling the fear and dread in her stomach, and nodded, shaking out the morning stiffness to show that he was ready to go. They both pressed to one another and by the time she looked back to the group Rathein was giving her a curious stare.

“Going somewhere?”

“Mm-hm. The Exalted Plains.”

Solas’s eyes widened at the realization that she too knew about Wisdom. She met his gaze, giving him a somber nod before looking back to the Inquisitor. “He’ll tell you. I need to finish packing up then I’m going to get on the road early. Cole, want to join me?” She asked the open air, knowing the boy was listening in and hiding somewhere. He was sitting top of Prince already, hands gently grasping the reigns. It made her smile because somehow he already knew she would not be riding traditionally today. Solas was explaining the situation, describing how a friend of theirs had been captured. The slight differentiation of canon brought a smirk to her lips but soon she took off her jacket and threw it in Cole’s lap, leaving her with just the corset and skirts. The last measure was taking off the blasted heels before shoving them in the side of her pack.

“Okay, we will leave as soon as we can get ready. Athena, I’m assuming you’re going to scout the path?”

Her answer was simple and exhilarating. She pulled at the feeling in her chest, pulling on the memories from the night before with a ghost of a smile on her lips. In a fluid motion, she knelt and took a step forward, transitioning into her wolf form without any trouble. With a confident flick of her stark-white tail, she nodded back at her friend with an excited yelp. Rathein’s jaw was on the floor and Bull was behind her, a smirk on his lips. “Well that’s a neat trick, Alpha.” He walked out and used a single finger to close the Inquisitor’s mouth with a click of her jaw. The Herald shook her head and gestured for Athena to go off and scout, obviously left speechless by seeing the shift first hand.

Alpha? That’s a nickname I can handle.
Athena looked to Solas and she didn’t know how to convey that everything would be okay. Even if Wisdom fell, he had made statements in the game that a spirit could come back if it had influenced enough people. Wisdom had made impressions on Harmony, Inspiration, Command, Athena, and Solas. Instead of saying anything she held his gaze, nodding a silent promise that she would try. Between the five of them, she would come back. With a quick turn on her paws she took off down the path at a sprint. Cole urged Prince forward by leaning forward on the saddle and gripping the reins loosely. The brilliant steed followed with no instructions needed and they took off onto the trail towards Orlais.

By the time she reached the first dead mage she could tell the party was not far behind her. Solas’s influence reached out thin through the air, keeping the two of them connected while she scouted out the path. The stench of the burned skin caused her to curl her nose, baring her teeth and snarling at the corpse. She only had a few moments left before the others arrived so she threw her head back and howled. With the howl went a pulse of magic, one that she had been strengthening every time she used it in preparation for this. The Plains were infamous in the game for their amount of annoyingly strong black wolves. Every time she went to pause the game somehow she was attacked by a group of three or more. They never stopped coming and that was something she could use to her advantage.

*Summon your armies.*

The words rang in her head and the battle cry started within her belly. She shifted back into her normal form. feet bare on the ground with her staff in hand. At the outskirts of the horizon she could see the wolves gathering like a thick black line on the tops of the hills. She pulsed out with her staff, sending them a signal to wait. They disappeared back into the brush and she could feel their curious minds within her own. Solas and the group arrived within seconds and Cole was standing by her side.

“One of the mages, killed by arrows it seems.”

They continued on to the next group of bandits that had been raked by claws on its flesh and burned to death. She kept her face hidden while Solas lamented: “No, no, no, no!” Cole looked over to her and she could tell that he was about to try and “help” them both. She silenced him with a glare, making a movement over to her neck to cut him off while running towards the sight where she knew Wisdom was being kept. As they rounded the corner her body stopped as if she had run into an invisible wall. Even though there was a Pride demon roaring in front of them, she could see and sense her friend trapped on the inside, crying out against her prison.
The chains were burning hot and warping her image and Athena let out a growl of frustration at the same time as Solas. Rathein joined behind them, looking between the pair with a leery gaze. “The mages turned your friend into a demon?”

Solas went to answer but Athena drew her staff, turning on her heel. She could feel the flame of her aura pulsing out with her pulse and the white of the wild threatened to wash over her mind. Her magic was so close to call it felt like it coursed through her body in waves. “We don’t have time for lessons on spirits, Rathein! We have to – “

“A mage! You’re not with the bandits? Do you have any lyrium potions? Most of us are exhausted, we have been busy fighting that demon!”

Solas nearly roared, eyes piercing through the mage. “You **summoned** that demon! Except it was a spirit of Wisdom at the time. You made it kill! You twisted it against its purpose!”

The mage stammered, falling back while taking a step and pointing to his friend that was standing in the shadows with a cut across his cheek and a bandage on his arm. Athena fought the urge to grin with pride at the man’s wounds. He was the one she had seen in the Fade and apparently had been the brunt of her attacks. “It fought since the beginning! It hurt us as it crossed the Veil. I can see how it might be confusing to someone who has not studied demons but after you help us – “

“We are not here to help **you**!” he growled, taking another step closer to the lead mage and summoning his own magic to bear.

Rathein and Bull smirked, gesturing to Solas. “You really don’t know who you’re talking to here. I’d hold off.” The mage continued and Athena had to keep from gagging at his hubris.

“Listen to me! I am one of the foremost at Kirkwall circle!”

Athena and Solas turned and screamed in unison: “Shut. Up!” Solas stopped in a moment of surprise, Athena did not. She grabbed the mage in the back by his wounded arm, dragging him in front of the party.

“Tell me, ‘foremost expert’, could you really not tell the difference between a spiritual attack and mine?” He looked to her in confusion, fear setting in on the edges of his gaze as he watched her. She clawed at the bandage with a quick gesture and tore it from the nameless mage’s arm,
revealing the hand-shaped burn underneath. “You – “ she looked at the wound, matching her hand up with it perfectly while looking to him with pure hatred in her eyes. “Idiots.”

The group was silent for a moment and the “expert” was stunned silent, his eyes looking between Athena and the mark she had left on his companion. “How-“

Solas did not give him time to ask questions, anger fueling his voice and movements but he flicked his gaze to her before turning back to the chubby mage. “You summoned it to protect you from the bandits.”

Athena growled, pushing the mage away from her with a scowl and turning to Rathein. “We don’t have time. We need to break that summoning circle now. Trust me, my friend.” Her voice was heavy with desperation and before hearing a response she twirled her staff in her hand once before taking off towards the barrier. Wisdom roared, clasping her claws together before turning and placing Athena in her crosshairs. The demon summoned a double whip of lightning and crashed them down on the ground. She pivoted and rolled on her shoulder to the side, recovering quickly to a crouching huntress’s position. The others had hurried as well and she yelled out to them: “You get the pillars; I’ll keep her attention. Please, go!”
The rest of the party started on the pillars while she fought to keep the spirit’s attention. Anytime Wisdom tried to turn towards Bull or the others, Athena launched a well-targeted fireball towards its face. They were small attacks and probably felt like a bug bite, but it was enough to keep it distracted. At one point she turned to face her friend and saw a large ball of lightning aimed directly at her. She clawed through the air in front of her, tearing through and Fade-stepping out of reach of the attack. The scorch marks flared up and created a wall of flame behind her on accident but she used it to her advantage. Athena reached for the flames, gripping her hands into fists and brought the wall closer to the enraged spirit. The wall bent and kept the creature contained; it looked like there were only one or two pillars left to destroy.

As each pillar dropped, there was a snapping within the air. Athena looked to the pride demon and she just knew each pillar was a piece of the chain holding Wisdom on this side of the Fade. She stepped to the side, taking in a deep breath and hardening her gaze to regather her focus on keeping the demon distracted from the others messing with its binding circle. There was a wash of cold over her and she looked down to see a light blue barrier dancing across her skin and intermingling with her own magic. She couldn’t bring herself to meet his glance. If this didn’t change... it would hurt them both too much. Instead she tore her eyes back towards the demon and put herself between it and Bull, raising her staff to block another lightning whip that cracked down from the skies. The spell pushed her backwards in the ground and she nearly collided with the Qunari. Bull took the moment to grab her by the shoulders and look her in the eye. He saw the tears already forming in her gaze and he gave her a nod of knowing. The Ben Hasserath was great at reading situations and people. He had to know. There was no way this could end well; it was just a way to end better.

With the final pillar down the spell binding Wisdom pushed outward and Athena steadied herself on the tank’s arm. Wisdom was crouched on the ground and she bit her tongue to keep the cry from bursting from her lips. Bull gripped her shoulder before walking over towards Rathein and Cole appeared by her side. Solas crouched in front of their friend and she knew the text too well. The spirits visage flickered in front of them. Wisdom was trying to hold on but the mages had sapped her strength. All that was left was a hollow shell of what she once was. *Now you must endure.* When Wisdom spoke the words this time she also flicked her gaze back to meet Athena’s. The spirit smiled. Her breath stilled and the tears silently began to flow down her cheeks in small, hot streams. Solas did what only the Dread Wolf could and with a wave of his arms he guided their friend back into the Fade. *Dareth shiral.*

Rathein broke the silence, stepping forward and looking between the two of them. “We... did everything we could.” Solas stood from his place and nodded, grief overtaking his features. The sight broke Athena’s heart further but she used the anger to dry her eyes and look at the horizon. They were all still there, in the bushes and past the hills, waiting for her call. So she did. It was a call from her heart to the rest of her pack and there was a feeling in her body that let her know they were coming.
“You tortured and killed my friend!” He stalked them like prey, his body language screaming with intention and it fueled her instincts while validating her own rage. The Inquisitor stepped forward with her arm out to stop him. Athena knew she was doing her duty as the mediator of the group but the defiance of justice brought a growl from her lips. Rathein looked to Solas with a pleading gaze.

“That’s enough, Solas. No more.” He stilled, looking to her and back to the mages with a look of disgust.

Just as he was about to accept her answer Athena pushed from Cole’s side and snarled: “No.”

The Inquisitor turned at the rejection of her decision, crossing her arms over her chest. “No?”

Athena continued, pulling on the members of her pack while looking back to her friend. “Your choices are not yes and no. They are slow and fast, Inquisitor.” Her words and the tone that came with them sounded foreign to her, like the voice was not her own. She didn’t know where the confidence came from but she could feel the flames of her magic burning within her chest and on her skin.

Rathein shook her head in confusion, looking between Cole and Bull to try and find answers. “What do you mean slow and fast?”

Bull’s eyes widened. “Shit.”

The wolves had appeared. All around them in a circle stood dozens of the dark-furred wolves that were known to roam the Exalted Plains. Their eyes were not glossed over with magical influence; they recognized their alpha when they heard her call. The wolves were not snarling or pressing forward with bared teeth like the beasts people assumed them to be. No, they were waiting on her, their silence thundering within her ears.

“Fast. Or slow.” Athena did not still and she was not looking at her friend, instead she was gripping her staff and staring down the mages whose lives were about to be over. The presence of the pack was threatening to wipe out her consciousness with a blanket of white power, the drumming of their cohesive hearts running in her mind like a stampede. Rathein tried to find Athena’s gaze but gave up with a frustrated groan, giving Solas the go-ahead with a flick of her wrist. He did not hesitate and soon the mages burst into flames without another word. It was strange seeing it in person because the contrast of his magic then verse all the other times was so powerful. Ice was his specialty and element to call, but in this moment, he called forth the flame to end the lives of
the mages.

“I need some time alone. I will meet you back at Skyhold.” The Inquisitor did not respond and turned back to Bull and Cole, allowing Athena and him a moment alone. She took a step towards him and the words were on her mind but they couldn’t make it to her lips. *You do not have to grieve alone!* Instead, she could only get his name out and the volume was barely above a whisper. “Solas.” He paused, gripping his hands into fists at his side while giving her a glance over his shoulder.

“I’m sorry. . . I can’t.” With a sound of thunder through the air he fade-stepped away from them until he was out sight. She choked back a sob, gripping the fabric of her skirts and clenching her eyes shut to try and contain the cries that desperately wanted to escape.

“What the fuck was that, Athena?”

The Inquisitor’s voice cut through her emotions, bringing her back to reality if only for a moment. “What?” She turned on her heel to see a very unhappy Rathein glaring at her with Bull supporting her at her back.

“You heard me. What was that?” Athena wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, placing her staff on her back.

“Imagine if it were me, Rathein.”

The mage scoffed, shoving her hands into her pockets. “No wa-“

“Imagine if it were me. What would you have done? That spirit of Wisdom was the first person to greet me when I was torn into the Fade. She gave me hope and has guided me ever since. She was my first friend in this damned place even before you. Now I ask again: What if it were me?” Her voice had broken its confidence and shook in time with her body’s tremors but the intention was still there. The wolves had gathered peacefully around her now, the larger of the pack coming up and touching her hands with their noses and heads. Rathein was uneasy around them but Bull paid no mind to them. Cole was reaching down and running his hands along their fur with a soft smile on his face. He knew they would not harm them.

“I. . . I guess, yeah, I would have done the same thing. But it’s not-“
“Not the same because it’s a spirit? Look me in the eye and say that again.” Athena hardened her tear-stained gaze onto her friend and held it. The exchange lasted for a few seconds but Rathein finally broke it with a sigh, rubbing the back of her short hair while looking to Bull.

“Well- shit- warn me next time, okay? Especially with these guys!” A wolf pushed past her to slide its flank against her leg, its eyes hopeful and excited while looking at its new friend. Athena bent down on her knees, pressing her head to theirs and taking in their scent. Rathein and Bull stood like they expected something else, but thankfully Cole stood between them and spoke softly.

“She will meet us by the camp at the edge of the area by tonight. She needs her time to mourn as well.”

Bull pulled on Rathein’s shoulder and got them all to leave. Cole hesitated, looking to Athena with a small wave before joining the other pair. When they were out of earshot, she scratched behind the ears of the wolf closest to her before whispering: “Want to run with me, my friends?” The wolves all threw their heads back and howled and the mixing cacophony of voices swirled within her heart and soul. She fell on her hands and knees in a smooth shift, joining in their sounds while leading them in a run across the sloped plains. Her stark white fur stood out amongst the sea of black and browns but it fit. They swirled up to the elvish temple and dispelled of the demons without disturbing any other the other tombs. She led the golden halla back to the Dalish encampment without harming another creature on the fields. They defeated the demon surrounding the young elven teenager’s final resting place so they would be able to fetch his body in peace. By the time the sun was setting, she stood out of sight of the Dalish camp and shifted back to her human form. Dirt and mud caked her skin and her clothes were tattered, but she had regained a small piece of sanity from escaping her responsibilities and grief for a few hours.

Fang, the alpha of the pack in the Plains, pressed his nose to her palm and whined. She turned and crouched, pressing her lips against his head. “I will miss you too, my friends. I need you to be my eyes and ears for me. Spread yourselves out, stay within howl’s reach. If you see anything odd, call for me and I will hear you.” The pack made small yelps and barks of acknowledgement before they turned and spread out throughout the plains. When they were out of sight she approached the Dalish camp with her hands up in a defensive position.

“I mean no harm. Might I speak with you?”

The group of elves paused but it was Loranil that waved her over to where he was sitting. She sheepishly weaved through the camp, shooting a glance of greeting to the Keeper who was assessing the golden halla with the herder. Athena sat down and tried to get some of the twigs from her hair while the young elf beside her seemed so excited he could barely stay in his seat. “You’re with the Inquisition, right?”
She paused with two pieces of hair in her hands, it veiled in front of her face as her fingers worked on getting a stubborn leaf out of a knot. “How did you know?” The hunter chuckled, sheathing his two daggers at his side with a pat against the sides of his thighs. “A few of our scouts saw the Inquisitor leaving with a Qunari looking fellow. There are few humans in this area that are not related to the shem’s civil war.”

Athena gave up on her appearance and flicked her hair back, rolling her shoulders while rubbing the back of her neck to work out a tense spot earned from the wraith in the temple scratching at her. “Yes, I am. I was exploring the area by myself and we’re returning to Skyhold tomorrow morning.”

Loranil stood up in a quick motion and the grace that came with his race was obvious. “Could you take me with you? Do you think that would be alright?” She arched a brow at him and then pointed her thumb back towards the Keeper. “Think he would mind?” That stopped him. He hung his shoulders and head low in disappointment.

“Probably not.”

Athena stood from her position with a smile, clapping him on the shoulder. “Let me try my hand at it. I’ll be leaving here before sundown so pack your things.”

He turned around and began darting around camp in an attempt to pack up his life. Thankfully the Dalish were nomadic by nature and typically lived light in terms of possessions. It was difficult to have many material possessions when you had to fit everything within caravans and on the backs of halla. Athena stopped by the elf who was restocking, giving her a written promise of trade with her signature to serve as the seal of the Inquisition. “The great bear furs will take some times; we haven’t come across any of them yet. Everything else should be here within the fortnight.”

“Ma serranas, lethallan. This will be very helpful.”

Athena smiled, rubbing the area where her bear scar occasionally itched. It had healed nicely, leaving a ring of teeth marks around her forearm like some kind of hipster tattoo she had seen on others of her generation back home. She then walked over to the grieving sister and informed her of her brother’s “bravery”, marking the location of his body on the map. “I did not want to disturb him in case you had practices of your own. We left a clear path for you to find him.” The sister was left thankful, but grieving. She finally walked over to the Keeper who had his arms clasped behind his back. She had to keep from smiling at the familiar posture, bowing her head to hide the expression that could be seen as disrespectful. “Keeper Hawan. It is a pleasure. I am Lady Athena with the Inquisition.”
“The Dread Wolf has caught your scent.”

She perked her head up and slowly stood back to her full posture. “What do you mean?”

He pointed out towards the plains and beyond that where the grave site was. “My scouts observed the pack defeating the demon and herding our halla. You walked out of that pack, the largest grouping of wolves I have seen in years, unharmed. The wolves know you. It is rare that a shemlen like yourself honors the way of our people. Our Loranil wishes to join you. . .Please watch over him.”

Athena dug her heels in the ground to keep her body from twitching in shock. They seemed much more amicable to accepting her this time, maybe it was easier when there wasn’t a whole party of people to judge? She bowed in thanks and looked over her shoulder. “Is there a statue of Fen’Harel where I can place an offering to distract him from my scent? I would not wish to bring a bad omen upon the member of your clan you have entrusted to us.” There was a sarcastic twitch of her lips but she fought and turned into a genuine smile of respect towards the leader of the clan.

The Keeper smiled, relaxing his hands by his side. “Indeed there is. Loranil can show you on the way back to your camp. Dareth shiral, Lady Athena.”

She turned towards the new recruit and gave him a thumbs up, walking over to him while her lips curled into a wicked smirk. “Hey, do you happen to have any tea?”

The elf stilled, digging through his pack and bringing out a small pouch of tea leaves. “What do you need this for?”

“Oh nothing, just an offering. Let’s get out of here. I’m sure the Inquisition is expecting us by now and we leave in the morning.”

He clasped her hand in thanks before leading her to the wolf statue that stood at the edge of their camp. Athena rested a hand on its chest, feeling the ancient magics that swirled within it. Could he feel those that visited his shrines? Whether they were placed there by the Dalish or the God himself, something about it made her smile. At the bottom of the statue was a stone plate where there were dried flowers and coins. She jostled the tea pouch within her hand before dropping it onto the plate. Athena turned with her new ally, chuckling to herself while leading him back to the camp on the edge of the Path of Flame. If there was one thing that would keep the “horrid” Dread Wolf off her scent, it would be something he detested.
Don't hate me for keeping with canon on Wisdom. I promise there is a follow up to this plot and it will all mean something!
They arrived at Skyhold just as the sun was setting. Athena let out an uncontrolled groan of gratitude that they were finally home. Loranił was in such awe of the fortress he nearly fell off his halla that he brought from the Plains. Rathein tasked her with bringing their new recruit to the Commander’s office to help get him settled. As she ran up the stairs, she waved towards Blackwall who was walking towards the tavern for the night. The Warden stopped at first but gave her a gruff smile accompanied by a curt nod in return. Before she knocked on Cullen’s door, she attempted to straighten out the dirtied and tattered clothes that Vivienne had given her. It all looked awful after her run with the wolves, but somehow that gave her a sense of pride. After a few loud knocks, she heard the Commander order them in. She opened the door and brought in Loranił with a smile.

Cullen was standing at his desk, hands supporting him in a wide stance on his desk. She could see that he was fighting off a headache from the tension in his jaw and the light amount of sweat on his brow. Athena bent down to try and catch his gaze, smiling when he looked up to her. “Is this a bad time, Commander?” A familiar whine greeted her and soon she was knocked on her back by Kain’s large paws into her shoulders. The wolf sniffed her up and down and she couldn’t help but laugh at the ticklish puffs of air on her skin. Loranił took a step back, murmuring a “Dread wolf take you” towards the supposed beast that was attacking his new friend. Kain licked her cheeks while she sat up, looking towards the elf in the room.

“Don’t give him credit for this guy here. The wolves here are mine and they all guard the castle. I’ve raised Kain here since he was a pup. Isn’t that right?”

The wolf obediently sat back in a straight posture and nodded in a human-like gesture. The elf stilled, looking back and forth between the wolf and his ally but eventually he nodded. Athena pushed from the ground and winced as the heel of her boot got caught in a crack of the floor and rolled her ankle to the side. “Curse these blighted things!” With a look of determination, she tore the boots from her feet and felt relief when she stood bare-footed on the ground. Cullen rubbed the bridge of his nose but was smiling underneath the pain. She smirked at him, looking down to Kain with a wink. “Well good to see you haven’t fattened my friend here with table scraps. I was worried for what crazy antics you two would get into while I was gone.”

The Commander chuckled, glancing up at her and then immediately straightening his posture. She froze and her face twisted into something of confusion before she finally realized they weren’t alone in the room and he still had appearances to keep up, especially in front of his new soldiers. “Forgive me, Commander. This is Loranił. He is a recruit from a Dalish camp in the Exalted Plains and he is very eager to join our cause.” The blonde-haired leader of the Inquisition’s soldiers walked from behind his desk and shook the boy’s hand. Loranił was nearly floored but he assumed the soldier’s posture and neutral face well enough.
“Pleasure to meet you, ser.”

Cullen nodded and gestured to the door behind him. “There are some Lieutenants past that door. They will show you to your quarters. Training starts in the morning for you. Welcome to the Inquisition, Loranil. You’re dismissed for the evening.” Loranil disappeared without another word for the Commander but he looked to her with a smile, clasping her shoulder and meeting her gaze.

“Dareth shiral, lethallan. I will see you around.” Athena beamed with pride. The moment the door shut she heard Cullen let out a wince of pain, leaning his body against the back of the door.

“They’re that bad?”

He took two fingers from each hand and rubbed his temples. “Today has been one of the bad ones. I can’t get them to go away.”

She bit her bottom lip, looking him up and down while making a small sound of sympathy. “May I try something? I used to get these awful headaches after work and sometimes this would help.” He nodded, his eyes still closed while trying to conquer the pain. “I have to touch you though, is that okay?”

He groaned: “You could stab me and I don’t think it would hurt as bad.”

She stepped forward and tentatively took his hands from his temples. Instead she lightly grabbed a bit of hair and pulled up. He was probably experiencing withdrawal headaches but she knew from her patients these would sometimes manifest as tension headaches. Redirecting that tension, like pulling on the hair, would give hopefully even a moment’s relief. While she did that she directed some of her healing magic, as basic as it was, into his head.

He sighed and visibly relaxed against the door and she allowed it to continue for a few seconds in different areas of his scalp before letting go and taking a large step back to give him space. Kain rose from his position and returned to his rightful place directly by her side. “Better?” He nodded and smiled, looking up with a soft blush on his cheeks.

“Much actually. Thank you, Athena.”

She smiled and looked to the door behind him with a slight raise of her eyebrows. “You’re
welcome. Now am I free to leave or am I trapped here forever?"

He stammered and stepped to the side while opening the door. “Uh-no. I’m sure there are many things you need to catch up on. Thank you... again.”

She chuckled under her breath and nearly skipped out of the door and down the stairs. Just as she was about to reach the edge she ran into a familiar boy who was out of breath with a large grin on his face. Tobi instantly wrapped his arms around her legs without hesitation and buried his face into the fabric of her skirts near the bottom of her chest. Athena wiggled to the bottom of the stairs and then fell to her knees, wrapping the child in an embrace. “Oh I missed you, sweetheart!”

He giggled. “I missed you too! Can you tell us a story tonight? Like the bear?” He pulled back and brought his hands up like paws while baring his teeth at her. She made a motion of false fear, covering her face with her hands.

When he did not attack, her she chuckled and dropped her guard. “Of course! Allow me to freshen up and change into some comfier clothes. Where is Mother Giselle keeping you?”

“By the gardens! I’ll see you after dinner!” He took off and joined a small group of children before running back into the castle’s depths. She then walked towards her room and discovered they had done some more improvements since she had been gone. The basement area had been cleaned out and she assumed it was Josephine who put a bath with water and vanity in there. There were candles lit for illumination along ridges in the wall and there was a note on the vanity desk which was already stocked with different make ups and perfumes. Welcome back, Sorciere. The letter was left unsigned but she was thankful.

Athena dipped down into the water and traced a quick heating rune at its base before running upstairs and digging through the new wardrobe that had been set up on the side of the wall by the bed. On the left side were Vivienne’s pickings, soft fabrics and outfits that would make a bard blush. On the right were more comfortable things like coats and basic shirts and pants. It was like having two lives within one closet. She opted for the comfortable tonight and quickly took a bath before running to the main hall for dinner with her hair tied up in a wet bun.

There didn’t seem to be any party members in the hall so she shoved a piece of bread in her mouth while using her hands to carry a bowl of soup and a wooden cup full of water. Just as she sat down somebody clapped their hands on her shoulders from behind and plopped themselves into the chair next to her. “Well, you could have at least dried yourself a bit better before showing up to dinner looking like a drowned rat.”
She almost spit out the bread from surprise, gently taking off a bite and placing the rest on the side of her soup bowl. “I missed you too, Dorian.”

The Tevinter smirked and repositioned himself so he was sitting on the table looking down at her. Athena nudged against his knees while continuing on with her meal. “Are you ready for tomorrow, my dear?”

She paused, rolling her eyes and swallowing down a warm bite of soup and bread. “Ready for what?”

“Practicing for the ball of course! Josephine has the whole day planned. We are to go over different dances and then by the evening you have a special assignment.” He snapped his fingers in the air while assuming a mock tango posture.

Now that made her lose her appetite. Athena groaned and pushed back the meal with a small huff. “What is this special assignment you speak of?”

Dorian winked and shook his head. “Can’t tell you yet. I’ll just say. . .you should probably get some rest since we leave in a few days for Orlais. Good night, darling.” He leaned down and quickly kissed her on top of the head, ruffling her hair after on his way out of the hall. Athena took a moment to process what he said, wondering what kind of special assignment they had planned for her. Whatever it was, it probably wasn’t going to be good with the tone he had.

She finished up the rest of her meal even though the taste was going sour in her mouth before heading to the gardens. The area was beautiful and there was something serene about the place when the moonlight illuminated the plants. A large stone on the edge of the garden by the gazebo caught her attention, the moonlight reflecting from its freshly polished surface. She leaned down in front of it and what she saw brought an audible gasp from her lips.

*Chancellor Roderick. Beloved member of the Chantry.*

Athena fell to her knees and covered her mouth in shock, her hands shaking as she did it.*He was supposed to live. I saved him.* She asked out loud just so the world could hear her. “How. . .”

“He caught the draft on the travel from Haven and went in his sleep soon after you went to Crestwood with the Inquisitor. He was at peace.” Mother Giselle’s voice was easily recognizable and it was so controlled, so peaceful, it brought tears to her eye.
Athena wiped the forming tears from her face but she could not take her gaze from the tombstone. “He wasn’t supposed to die, Mother Giselle.”

The Chantry woman came and kneeled at her side, tilting her head in question. “What do you mean? Everyone has a time to meet with the Maker, child.”

She shook her head, pointing her finger at the tombstone. “No. He was not supposed to die like this. He died in the world I knew by the hand of a Templar in Haven. I saved him. He wasn’t supposed to die!” She slammed her fists against the ground, letting out a sound of frustration between gritted teeth. “What. . . what if I can’t change anything?”

Mother Giselle rubbed her back, still having a slight smile on her face. “At least you are trying, my dear. Some people go through life and allow things to happen. You are someone who will do whatever you can to make a good outcome. That is an admirable trait, Athena. This way of passing was much more peaceful for the Chancellor than a murder. You still helped him.”

Those words struck a cord and she nodded slowly even though it hurt, her eyes slowly drying and she could feel the lump in her throat that normally triggered her to cry fade away. Mother Giselle patted her back and rose, motioning down from the garden. “Come now, the children are excited to hear your story. You raise their spirits and in turn they raise yours.”

“Wait, I thought their room was in the gardens?”

The sister chuckled, pointing in the direction of gathering area that was not in the game. It was a common space with benches and a fire in the center for people to talk at that wasn’t the garden, the healing tents, or the barn. “Word of your first story with the bear has spread. There are more people interested in your tales and of your origins.”

Athena instantly blanched and she could feel the color draining from her face. Her hands shook while she tucked a still damp piece of hair behind her head. Kain pressed his nose to her cheek and whined, sensing her fear and discomfort. “Well. . . that’s not something I was expecting.”

Mother Giselle smiled, offering a hand to help the woman up. “There are those who still fear and blame you, but there are also those who see who you truly are and smile. Remember those people when you move forward, not the ones who fear you.”
She chewed on the inside of her cheek, making small noises of consideration while idly stroking Kain’s fur and scratching behind his ear. The wolf tilted his head into her hand and the small action made her smile. Are you alright? She could hear him ask into his mind and she nodded in return. As her magic developed, the more she could understand from the animals she interacted with. Kain was the first to their bond would always be the strongest. He could pick up on the subtle changes in her mood and body posture. “All right, let’s go Mother Giselle. Thank you for your kind words and wisdom as always.”

They walked through the gardens and through the Rotunda on the way to the fire circle. Athena looked up at the painting outlines Solas had already done, tears forming in her eyes again at the thought of the hurt he was experiencing. She knew in the game he came back, but with Chancellor Roderick’s death her confidence in set events was shaken. Would this be enough to drive him away? Wisdom was a great friend to them both but who knew how many years Solas had been in his sleep with only the comfort of spirits to keep him sane. Mother Giselle moved onto the next room and while she was alone for a moment Athena quickly grabbed a piece of blank parchment and jotted down a message. She put it on the center of his desk unsigned. In the speed of the moment, she pressed the parchment to her lips and pushed forward with her aura to leave a magical signature onto it. Athena slid the message underneath a book with the corner sticking out for him to see, quickly keeping up with Mother Giselle to avoid any suspicion.

I’m sorry for your loss. I tried.
There were a lot more people at the campfire than the first time. The children were front and center, Tobi sitting in the middle with an excited grin on his face, but there were more adults and scattered soldiers on the benches as well. Varric showed his support by sitting towards the back. When Athena arrived, he smiled and raised his mug towards her, nudging Cassandra next to him and getting her to smile as well. She looked through the group and saw a few of the Chargers sitting close to the dwarf and the Seeker. Krem smirked at her and the gesture from the normally reserved lieutenant gave her the confidence to start.

“Well... my first story was about a bear, but this time I want to tell you a story from my world. It was one of my favorites as a child. It’s a little story called Thumbelina. I’ll be using my friend as a partner in this story. Everybody, this is Kain.”

The wolf came up and bowed, putting one paw in front and bowing like a real noble. This elicited a laugh from the crowd and he ate it up, bowing again before sitting at the side of the area with pride in his chest. Athena was trying to find out what details to cut from the story to make it shorter but she started and decided to wing it. “Thumbelina was a girl who lived on a farm with her mother. Things seemed pretty normal for them. They took care of the animals, worked on their vegetables, and lived a quiet life together. But here’s the thing: Thumbelina was only thiiiiis big.”

She then separated her fingers to the size of a walnut and winked. The children, especially Tobi, gasped and shouted their words of disbelief. Athena held up a finger to shush them, smiling before continuing.

“Thumbelina had a voice of gold and had a way with people. She could speak with the animals and they protected her. Well one night before bed, Thumbelina was singing in her room and dancing about by herself. Her bed that was made from the shell of a walnut! Her mother had told her a bedtime story about fairies and how there was a handsome, magical fairy prince!”

Tobi raised his hand in question silently and this caught her attention. Athena paused then smiled. “Yes, Tobi?”

“What’s a fairy?”

“They are small winged creatures that fly throughout the air. They kind of look like this!”
She opened a palm and concentrated, summoning a small flame. That action was easy, but then she hardened her gaze and willed the flame to take a shape into a small pixie-like-thing. The flame danced and sputtered but eventually it took its desired shape. With sweat on her brow from the delicate workings of the summoning, she urged the flame to flutter through the air and dance before the children before disappearing with a burst of magic. “That night, somebody was listening to her singing. The Fairy Prince himself appeared before her! And! He had wings and rode on the back of a large bumblebee!”

The crowd seemed perplexed by the idea but they allowed it. “He invited Thumbelina to come ride with him, and when he did he sang her a song.” She summoned up another flame and it was the shape of the two characters flying on the back of their fluffy flying mount. Athena hummed the opening lines of the song, twirling her body while keeping in control of her small summoned characters. Once she began to sing, she moved into the shadows and allowed the characters to be in the limelight.

“Let me be your wings. Let me be your only love. Let me take you far beyond the stars.”

The characters began to dance within the air. They swooped down and got within touch of the children, causing them to reach out and grasp. They missed the characters by that much so they wouldn’t be burnt as they continued to dance on over the crowd.

“Let me be your wings. Let me lift you high above. Everything we’re dreaming of will soon be ours.”

The lyrics brought a swell of emotion inside of her chest. Love songs always made her swoon and naturally she was an empathetic person; it was difficult to separate personal feelings from the story and she drew power from her own emotions and memories. Blood rushed to her cheeks in a blush and in the shadows of the fire Athena smiled, thinking of the God who frequented her dreams almost every night. The last few nights had been cold in the Fade without him. She had not allowed herself to dream to give him some space, but there was a growing doubt inside of her that he would not come back. What if this was the one thing that was different? To keep from getting distracted in the story, she swallowed down her fears and continued with the story.

“Anything that you desire, anything at all. Every day I’ll take you higher, and I’ll never let you fall.” She saw movement in the back of the crowd and noted that Cullen had snuck into the back row where Varric and Cassandra were. He didn’t seem to be in pain anymore and he nodded in silent greeting when her gaze glossed over him.

“Let me be your wings, leave behind the world you know. For another world of wondrous things.”
Athena had to smile at the lyric, manipulating her hands to have the characters dancing in their flight. She had been taken into another world of wondrous things by a creature unknown. Every day the pain of being torn from her old home lessened. Every friendship, every encounter, every kiss brought her one step closer to normalcy. Athena gestured to Kain and patted her shoulders in a swirl of the moment. He jumped up at her command, using small awkward movements to dance with her around the campfire as she continued to sing. The children laughed at the sight and some of the adults joined in as well. She rubbed her nose against her friend’s. *You will have to do until my wolf returns, darling.* Kain licked her cheek and continued to “dance” with her until the end of the song.

She went through the complete tale. Kain played a wonderful evil toad who tried to steal Thumbelina’s heart and then fought off the summoned flame that was the Fairy Prince. In the end, the enemy was vanquished and the crowd of children cheered. Once the story was over and the lovers were reunited Athena clapped her hands together and dispersed the flames she had summoned to help tell her story, bowing at the conclusion while the crowd that had gathered clapped. The children all ran around the fire and pelted her with hugs, their voices mixing together in a cacophony of high pitched sounds that were impossible to separate as they attempted to take her to the ground.

“I want wings!”

“Me too!”

“I want to marry a fairy prince!”

Mother Giselle approached the children from behind, touching a few of their shoulders with a smile on her face. “Now now, children. It is time for sleep. Thank Lady Athena here for the story and then off to your rooms.”

The children all murmured their words of gratitude but Tobi was the one who stuck around last, giving her one more tight hug. She embraced him in return, kissing his cheek before burying her cold nose into the vulnerable spot of his neck. He squealed with laughter, running off and joining the other children that were waiting for him. Varric, Cassandra, and Cullen approached her after and they all seemed relatively pleased, which brought a sigh of relief from her lips.

“Adding music was a nice touch, Walker. You might have a future as a bard.”

She instantly shook her head and waved her hands in front of her face. “No thanks, leave me out of the Game and all of its workings please. I’ll sing to entertain and get things off of my chest but do
it for a living? No thank you, Varric. I’ll leave that up to you and Leliana.”

The dwarf chuckled and nudged the Seeker, pointing up to her with a small jerk of his hand. “This one over here wouldn’t stop sighing. I thought Curly was going to have to catch her mid-swoon.”

Cassandra scowled at him and pushed him on his shoulder, knocking him from his balance which only made him laugh more. When the Seeker turned back to Athena she smiled, her features taking on one of a love struck teenager. “I love romance stories. That was so... sweet! Thank you, Athena.” Athena’s face brightened while she nodded in response, rubbing a hand up her upper arm sheepishly as their compliments put a blush to her cheeks.

Cullen had a small an almost sarcastic smirk on his face and she arched a brow at him, pushing two fingers into his shoulder to knock him off of his balance. “What?”

“You say keep you out of the Game, you do realize that we’re leaving for Halamshiral in a few days, right?”

She nearly scoffed back at him but instead she put a hand to her forehead and hissed between gritted teeth. “Maker, Josephine is giving us dancing lessons tomorrow, right? I think I’m already coming down with something and suddenly can’t make it.”

The Commander chuckled and shook his head. “If I have to go to that blighted thing, so you do.”

“Fine, Cullen. You’ll need all the lessons to win the hearts of the ladies who will be throwing themselves at your feet. You may have fought the strange and inhumane, but have you ever had to fight off a swarm of swooning Orlesian women?” He paled in response, clenching his jaw while utter despair took over his features.

Varric walked over and slapped him on the back, “Cheer up, Curly. Keep your sword sharp and you’ll be fine.”

Athena turned to the rest of them with a small shrug. “Bright and early then?” They nodded in agreement and began to head towards their respective directions. I am late with an appointment with my bed. Once the campfire had cleared of people she darted up the stairs to her tower with Kain. He jumped onto the bed with her and she set up her appropriate wards before crawling under the covers and drifting into the Fade with Kain snuggled at her side to keep her warm.
A wave of sadness took over her mind the moment she saw the familiar swirling colors and it brought a wince to her mouth and eyes. Inspiration and Harmony were there, waiting for her. The artistic spirit instantly walked forward and brought Athena into an embrace, burying her face into the side of her neck. She instantly responded in kind, resting her chin on her friend’s shoulder while looking to Harmony. He appeared more put together but there were still small giveaways that he was upset. His lips were twitching into somewhat of a frown and he had his arms firmly crossed over his chest.

“I’m so sorry you guys. I tried – I couldn’t save her.” *Add that to the list of people I lost.*

Harmony stepped forward and put his hand on Inspiration’s shoulders, bringing her back to his side. “We know you did. We heard, Athena. There was nothing else that could be done.”

“You used my blessing well, girl.”

Athena turned on her heel and looked at Command, who almost appeared smug in her appearance. She was without her helm and so her sharp features were more noticeable. That didn’t make things better. She rolled her shoulders back and ground her teeth down while staring through the militaristic specter.

“What.”

“The wolves gathered at your call with *my* power influence. You use it well. You use the blessings of all spirits well.”

“I can’t talk about semantics of power tonight, Command. Please, let me think of something else.”

In a defensive move Harmony stood between the spirit and her and glared, an image of his former identity shining through with a moment. “Another. Time.” The spirit turned her nose up and allowed her form to dissipate through the Fade, a haunting chuckle echoing through the area as she did. Athena sighed, rubbing the back of her neck while looking around. There was no familiar cold call, no chill running up her spine indicating that he was trying to find her. Did he even know that she was there? She knew the pain he was suffering. She had given him enough space and knew he shouldn’t be alone.

“How do I call to someone in the Fade?”
Inspiration rubbed her face and tilted her head in confusion. “How do you call your wolves?”

Athena closed her eyes and traced the small strings that connected them all together. Even when she was not running with them, their hearts beat within hers and across the Plains she could feel them now. Even far in the distance she could hear Thunder sleeping in front of a cave. “I just... feel for them? It’s difficult to describe. The phrase I keep hearing is ‘You think, you do.’ I’m still trying to figure out what that means but I just know I need to get to -”

Her voice trailed off as tears stung at her eyes, a sob choking her words within her throat. Endure. The word echoed through her head and she nearly fell forward but instead she hugged her arms to her chest and slowly dropped to her knees. Things felt so empty within the Fade with Wisdom, even though two of her friends she had helped turn were there. The memories of her being taken and dying played on repeat in her head and the overwhelming feeling of helplessness took over. Chancellor Roderick, Wisdom, who would be next? Was there anyone that she could help in this world she was thrown into? Were they all trapped within their pre-written fates that she had seen countless times in the game? Something had to change. Wisdom had once told her to do something.

She needed to start doing things her way.

Athena dug her nails into her arms and hardened herself, withdrawing the anger, the rage, the unbridled hurt into herself with slow, deep breaths. Harmony gave a small hum of acknowledgement, kneeling in front of her and placing his hands on her shoulders.

“Good. Keep it in. Do not let others know how much strength you have inside of you. You burn, Athena. Continue to burn and do not let anybody dull your flame. It is why we care for you.”

Inspiration came up behind her and wrapped her arms around her, resting her cheek on Athena’s back while she closed her eyes and quelled the silent sobs that racked her body. The group rested in that position for what felt like hours but after a time she stood and cracked her neck to the side, looking down at Inspiration with a blank expression. “I think I’m going to try and find him, okay? I will come back tonight; I’m going to need your help for something.”

Inspiration smiled. “What’s that?”

“We’re going to a large ball and I haven’t the slightest idea of how to dance.”

The spirit wordlessly nodded in return, giving her a small wave before disappearing with Harmony.
into the thickness of the Fade. Athena walked forward with a single thought, a single person at the front of her mind, bringing the memories of their time together close to heart. The world swirled around her and opened a path in a peaceful meadow but then it stopped. The temperature dropped to the point of bringing goosebumps to her skin and it felt like he was within reach but there was something blocking her, a barrier? She reached her hand forward and it collided with something solid that sent a chill up her arm and down her back.

She rested her hand flat against the barrier within the Fade and sighed, turning and leaning her back against it. Her body slowly slid down until she was in a sitting position and she just rested there. The cold on her back was comforting and there was a certain peace in knowing he was in there somewhere, even if he was blocking people from finding him to give himself time to grieve.

“Ir abelas, Solas.” Athena called out to the empty air, resting her head back on the barrier behind her while closing her eyes. “I don’t even know if you can hear me but I have to try. I know you are hurting... but you do not have to endure alone. You do not need to shoulder this pain alone. I will leave you be, but please know that I am here for you.” With a deep breath, she rolled her eyes back and brought herself back into the physical world, wrapping her arms around Kain and waking him up with a warm embrace.

Chapter End Notes

Song:

Let Me Be Your Wings - Thumbelina.

Keeping them obscure childhood references alive, y'all.
Okay for those you curious enough. . .

I have a Spotify playlist I listen to while writing, and it will include the songs I end up using in the story. It has the same title as the fic so if you search it and see a pic of our lovable egg, that's it!

Now you can see how eclectic my taste in music really is.

“Again, Athena.”

Josephine was relentless but she kept on with a pleasant smile on her face like some sort of demented squadron leader. Dorian, ever the willing partner, chuckled at her attempts and separated from her, bowing to restart the dance while winking at Athena. Everyone had been checked off on most of the basic dances. Cassandra was a noble and had learned them in her youth. Blackwall, the mysterious Grey Warden, somehow already knew them as well. Bull was a natural and toyed around with Rathein, who had also learned them being of noble birth in the Free Marches. Cullen had, much to his gratitude, passed the first few times from his training in the Templar schools for formal events and his sisters pestering when they were children. They all were being fitted into their royal blue outfits and admiring one another while Dorian and Athena danced the Orlesian Waltz #3, which was drastically different from #2 because how dare she point her foot to the right instead of the left on the third turn.

Vivenne was running over the designs for The Sorciere’s outfit one more time, Rathein casually walking over to her. The Inquisitor’s eyes widened at the outfit, her gaze slowly looking up to her friend who paled and nodded in response. Isn’t it dreadful? They seemed to communicate to one another, both smiling at the end of the thought. Dorian was a patient partner, cracking a joke at every mistake but helping her get up to speed nonetheless. As they danced there was no pressure of romance, no worrying about what the other was thinking. He was becoming her best friend and would help her get through this awful event at Halamshiral.

“Much better, Athena! You do not need to show me anymore. I’m sure you will do just fine.”

She pulled Dorian into an embrace, kissing his cheek before patting his arms in thanks. He looked down to her, resting a hand on her shoulder while smirking. “I can’t be your partner the whole night, little dove. You’re going to have to go wow some of the nobles of the Orlesian Court.”
Leliana came from the side, gliding on the dance floor as if it were air. “He’s right. You are going to be instrumental in that night. The Inquisitor is going to be the face of the Inquisition, formal and polite with every duke, comte, and baroness. You, you are the Sorciere. You are a mystery to everyone and they have already set up a character in their mind. You need to bewitch them and distract them while we are investigating Corypheus’s connection.”

Athena smirked, crossing her arms over her chest. “I am aware, Leliana. Do not worry. I have a plan of my own. Rathein and I are meeting after this to go over the details.”

Cullen cleared his throat, making a gesture to Josephine and Leliana asking silently “what about us?” She shook her head and gave him a wicked smile. “Nope, sorry. I’m going to help you how I can but. . . it would be easier if the fewest number of people knew what was going on.”

The Council shared looks of discomfort before succumbing to a unison hum of acceptance. She put her hands together in a praying position and thanked them before turning and grabbing Dorian by the back of his collar. He arched a brow and looked over his shoulder with a curious look. “Miss me already?”

Athena lowered her voice and stepped forward, nearly pressing her chest against his back to keep her words soft. “You and I are going to need a distraction at some point. Nothing magical, just something attention grabbing to keep the nobles and fluffy-skirts occupied. Think you can manage that?”

Without hesitation, he grinned, answering with a small nod of his head. “I think I have just the thing. I will see you tonight; don’t forget. You and I have some more training of our own.”

She rolled her eyes and pushed him out of the doors, turning back on her heel and seeing Rathein and Vivienne still discussing the wardrobe. Athena walked over, looking at the neatly folded pile of Solas’s outfit. . .with the God-awful hat sitting on top. She picked it up and examined it in her hands, a look of absolute disgust written on her face. “Absolutely not.” Vivienne looked with a blank, uninterested expression at the hat.

“And why not, darling?”

Athena looked to the fireplace and tossed into the flames without a second thought, wiping her hands clean of the object while Josephine gasped at the waste of fabric and fineries. “It is a ridiculous accessory and I think you know that. Nobody else will be wearing that at the ball.” She spoke with ichor in her voice, eyes drilling into Madame de Fer as she so casually lounged on the chaise next to the table. Vivenne blinked once, nodding in response without so much as a smile.
“We all have our masks to wear, dear. We all have our parts to play.”

She snapped, taking a step forward. “Not at the expense of our companions. How are we supposed to be the pinnacles of virtue, the breakers of Chaos when we are willing to throw our trusted into the fire for the Game?”

Rathein made a hum of agreement while looking over the designs for the Sorciere outfit. The Inquisitor rolled up the parchment and slid it inside of her jacket, which earned a flick of a glance of curiosity from Athena. The First Enchantress looked Athena up and down with a slow trail, smirking. She bristled, clenching her fists at her sides. “What?”

“You walk with ease in those shoes. The ballroom will not be an issue for you now.”

Athena went to argue but paused, slowly looking down at her feet and the black heels they were in. Ever since she had been home at Skyhold it didn’t hurt to walk in them. The trudging around Crestwood had made her feet accustomed to the awful footwear so walking in stable flooring like the castle was not a problem. Her words were lost in her throat, eyes wide while the First Enchantress wore a smug smile. “I...uh...do I thank you?”

“Manners, Athena.” The Iron Lady’s words cut through the air and she was eerily reminded of Command.

“Thank you then. Can I be blunt, Vivienne?”

The mage nodded while nonchalantly picking up the travel plans and maps, her eyes calmly reading them over while Leliana and Josephine organized the papers on the desk and packed away the men’s formal attires. “I thought you hated me. You and I haven’t really spoken much and I get the general feeling that you don’t trust me.”

The Enchantress paused, eyes sliding up from her papers. There was no break in her face but Rathein’s eyes had widened at Athena’s blunt words. “I do not trust any mage. Power is a terrible thing to hold and you hold something you do not even understand. You use your magic like a child does in their youth, ignoring foundations that have been set in places for ages.” She slid her legs off the chaise and stood smoothly, her heels giving her a height advantage over Athena. “You revealed to us information that you could not possibly possess. Which is why I made a recommendation to make you Tranquil once you revealed yourself to us.”
Rathein paled, eyes widening with her hands slamming on the top of the table. Josephine and Leliana’s gazes dropped to the floor in knowing while Athena stilled, reigning in her anger and hardening her face while rolling her shoulders back just like Harmony had taught her. “Obviously, you failed.”

Vivienne made a gesture of flicking the topic away, turning and idly stroking her fingers over the image of the carriages they would be taking. “Obviously, you have potential or I would have pressed for it again. Time will tell, darling. You are late with your meeting with the Inquisitor. Pack your things for Halamshiral and do leave those clothes at home.” Madame de Fer didn’t even meet her eyes after the comment about the Tranquil but she gestured up and down to her pants and worn in jacket, insinuating she did not care to see her reaction. Athena walked over and grabbed Rathein’s hand, literally pulling her from her state of shock through the castle, up the stairs, and into her room.

The moment the door slammed Rathein flopped onto her bed, pulling at her hair with a wordless groan of frustration. “Make you Tranquil? Is she fucking joking?”

Athena was somehow not surprised, chuckling while walking over to the door that led to the balcony. “A lot of people were afraid of me. Hell, a lot of people still are. The Sorciere of the Inquisition, Witch, Fallen, Trespasser.” She calmly listed off her rumor-filled titles and tucked a stray hair behind her ear.

“They don’t know you like we do though.”

The hurt in her voice caused Athena to turn and look at her friend, who was sitting almost defeated on the bed with her head in her hands. She walked over and knelt, bringing her face down to eye level before pressing her forehead to her friend’s. “Be honest with me before I start, how do you feel about this Game we are joining?”

The Inquisitor groaned, dropping her hands while still resting her forehead against hers. “I feel like if people handled their problems like you and I did in Redcliffe there would be a lot less corpses to clean up. I never understood Orlais, even in my teachings the politics did not make sense.”

Athena laughed, thinking back to their fight after the events at Redcliffe before walking over and sitting down behind the desk. She drew up a quill and parchment, looking to her friend with a wicked smile. “Good then. Prepare yourself because this could take a while.”
Hours passed and Athena went over every piece of the event and things before it. She went over every detail of the Masked Empire and the pros and cons of each contender for the throne. There were pieces of details scattered all over the Inquisitor’s room, mixed in with maps, crude drawings of the halla statues, and doodles in between. Night was setting in and Rathein was pouring herself a third drink, letting out a heavy breath. “Shit, Athena.”

Athena sipped on a glass of wine, raising the glass to her friend. “Yeah, it’s that bad.”

The short-haired mage drank down the brown liquor with a wince on her face, slamming the glass down on her desk with a groan. “Alright. Now that the details are worked out. . . I completely support your plan.”

“Oh, you put your Inquisitor hat on again.”

Rathein chuckled, picking up a throw pillow and aiming it for Athena’s head. “I have to wear it sometimes, Witch. Even still. . . “ She walked up behind Athena and wrapped her arms around her, resting her head on her shoulders with a soft sigh. “Thank you for trusting me with this. I know it wasn’t easy for you.”

Athena brought her arms forward and squeezed over Rathein’s, leaning her temple on her friend’s head with a soft smile. “I’m getting fed up of sitting on the sidelines and watching awful things happen. Obviously, my minor hints weren’t doing anything so let’s go big.”

With one last squeeze, the Herald looked outside, cursing under her breath before throwing her jacket on. “Shit you’re almost late, Athena.”

She looked outside and saw the angle of the first moon, groaning while quickly glancing in the mirror, using her fingers to settle out the knots in her hair and smooth it out. “What is this I’m almost late for?”

The Inquisitor rolled her eyes. “Some kind of Game training, I don’t know Dorian planned it. Come on let’s go.”

The two women scurried from the room after piling up all the papers and sliding them under
Rathein’s pillow for safe keeping. They giggled and pushed each other through the castle, looking and seeing that many of the meeting rooms and tables were empty. As they got closer to the tavern the noise level grew. Athena shot her friend a playful glare before using her shoulder to open the tavern door and take in what she saw.

It was completely packed and Dorian was waving them over to the bar with drinks already sat out in front of him. The girls looked at each other, shrugged, then joined him. They each took a respective drink from the cups. Rathein smirked and Athena nearly choked on the gasoline tasting tonic. “What the fuck is this?!” She cursed, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

The Tevinter laughed, obviously already about two drinks of whatever this was into his night. “Something to get you loosened up. Look, darling, people here are still afraid of you. Let’s face it. You haven’t done much interacting since we’ve you’ve been so busy with Inquisition matters. If you can’t even mingle with your own people, how are you going to do in a room full of foreign strangers?” His tone and body language screamed with an attitude of ‘you know I’m right’.

She went to argue but stilled, looking around the room at the joyous people that were in the middle of their own celebrations and evenings. There were small pockets of people she was comfortable with like the Chargers and a group of the elves but everyone else was foreign to her. Their faces blended in with the crowd that threw things at her in the events following Haven. She was probably just as afraid of them as they were of her. Athena mumbled, swirling the potent liquor in her glass before looking back up to him. “You have a point.”

“I know I do. Now, drink, go mingle. In Orlais they are suspicious if you are not drinking so you’re going to need to get a better tolerance. Go now!” He leaned in and quickly kissed her on the cheek, using a quick gesture to pull down her shirt to show just a hair more cleavage before shooing her away with a few annoying gestures. The tavern was packed that night and she could see Varric and Sera sitting at a table on the second floor with cards spread on the table between them. Cole appeared on his third floor, peering over the rails to look down at her.

Athena paused, slowly looking up to meet his gaze. He gave her a sheepish wave, face blank with hints of a smile on the edges of his lips. Silly kid. She thought, hoping he could hear her before she took another sour swig of the liquor before walking up to Lanoril’s table. The elf was already four ales into his night, the spottiness of his blush coloring between the lines of his vallaslin. “Oh – Lady Athena!” He attempted to stand to greet her but the liquor took effect on his balance, dragging him back down into the chair.

His others friends, “flat-ears”, laughed at him and raised their glasses at her. She leaned against the front of the table and looked at her friend, her eyes going from his feet to his head. “Alcohol takes the grace from your blood, Loranil.” They all chuckled together and she took the opportunity to pull up a chair and join them, a reminiscent smile on her face. Perhaps that night wouldn’t be that bad after all, and then Halamshiral after.
Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you for the comments and questions.
For the next hour or so she met a few of the soldiers after getting to know Lanoril and his friends. They asked her basic questions of her world, about planes, and how there was no magic. In turn they would answer questions about day to day Dalish life and some of the differences between clans and alienages. It was hard to pull herself away from them because she was so fascinated by elven culture but she did with reluctance. The night went surprisingly smooth. There were still a few people who avoided her gaze and moved tables when she tried to come near them, but she kept her physical reactions to their disinterest restrained, taking sips of a sweeter wine while moving back down the stairs. Rathein was sitting with the Chargers, leaning against Bull’s arm and laughing with them without a care in the world. The Inquisitor fit in so well with the group of mercenaries it was adorable.

She skipped down the remainder of the stairs, raising her glass in greeting to the Chargers yelling at her in a mixture of phrases and voices. Rathein pushed up from her own chair, standing up to hug her friend. She could smell the thick ale on her breath and this made Athena smirk. The Herald chuckled, standing up straight and readjusting her jacket. “How is it going? Bewitching the crowds, are we?” She gave a suggestive eyebrow wiggle and Athena chuckled in return, taking the joke one step further by stepping forward and bringing their bodies close together. She traced her fingers down Rathein’s jawline, bringing two fingers underneath her chin while summoning a deep and breathy tone to her voice.

“You tell me, Inquisitor. . . Is it working?”

The Inquisitor stilled under her touch but quickly realized the joke, bringing her hands to Athena’s hips to pull her closer. Athena batted her eye-lashes and tried to emulate a hooded lid, breaths shaky while cupping her friend’s face in her hands. Rathein bit down on her lower lip, looking down in a gesture of embarrassment before moving forward. They advanced towards each other agonizingly slow. It was difficult not to look at the reactions of the other but she could feel their eyes on her, all holding their breath to see what would happen. When the tips of their noses touched the Herald laughed, bringing her head down to her friend’s chest while admitting defeat. “Damnit you win. I can’t do it!”

Athena smiled with a smug expression, putting a hand on one hip to put her weight into it. She looked to the others and laughed at what she saw. Bull and Krem’s eyes were nearly as wide as saucers, glued to the visage of the two women almost kissing. The leader of the mercenaries spoke low but she could still hear him. “Krem, I’m sorry. I’ve never regretted not having my other eye . . . until now.”
Krem moved his mug up to his face and swallowed the rest of the drink, making a hum of agreement while using the drink to hide the bright red blush on his face and neck. Rathein backed up and returned next to her seat by Bull, kissing him on the cheek with a chuckle before settling into her chair. Athena looked out the window, seeing that one of the moons were high in the sky above them. “Shit it’s late. I should probably wrap this up soon.”

“Sing. Orlesians like songs. You need to practice that.”

The soft voice threw her off, looking over her shoulder to see Cole leaning against the wall with a hopeful gaze. “Do they now, Cole?”

He nodded confidently, looking over towards Maryden and Athena saw the hints of a blush on his cheeks. “I hear her talking about it. She helps a lot of people there just with music. You could too.”

She was going to deny him in that moment. It was much easier to sing at camp when only her friends and allies were listening than in front of a tavern of strangers. The fairy tales she told the children were easy because they didn’t expect outrageous quality. Even back at her home she did not like singing karaoke with her friends because the public attention gave her such anxiety. Cole could obviously read her thoughts because he made a small noise of contemplation, stepping forward and placing a hand on her shoulder out of comfort. “They like it, Athena. Do not worry.”

He led her around the corner from the Chargers to where Maryden normally stood. The minstrel had retired for the evening and was resting against the wall with her feet propped up on a chair. He picked her lute up from the ground and handed it to Athena who looked awkwardly from the instrument back up to him. Dorian sauntered over from his corner of the bar, smiling at Athena with a glossed-over gaze. “Charming them with music now? Fantastic idea!” He then noticed her nervous expression, clicking his tongue against the back of his teeth before speaking in a softer tone of voice. “If you need to focus, just look at me, okay? I’m your biggest fan.”

She nodded, slowly picking up the instrument and holding it properly. Lucky for her, nobody was paying attention yet. They were wrapped up in their own conversations and didn’t notice that she was about to do something potentially embarrassing. Athena took in a deep breath in, trying to find her center and pull on all her practice on the instrument since the time she had been there. Her fingers began to strum along to a song, eyes closed in a desperate attempt to find some center. The tavern door opened and she felt a wave of crisp, cold air come in from outside and her lips twitched into a smirk. The cold would never be a lonely feeling again. It was his signature, his trademark in the Fade and in the physical world. She flicked her eyes open and saw it was not him that entered the bar... but the feeling of the cold on her skin brought her happiness regardless.

Athena found her center, and it was him.
“Said a lot of words along the way, I meant them all while we reigned. But the shores of love get beaten by the waves, and after it was done I wish I’d saved time.”

Cole sat next to Dorian and smiled, leaning back into the chair and listening into sound of the music flowing from her lips and hand. The intoxicated mage raised a glass to her and fell back into silence to keep from distracting her, a sparkle in his eyes showing his pride. There was nothing that could throw her off, in her mind there was only one person in the room and according to Cole, he liked her music. Wherever he was in Thedas, whatever glen he was sleeping in to grieve Wisdom, this was for him.

“One less spark from a flame, one more heartbeat away. I think I lost your scent after the rain. I’ll find you when our paths cross by the gold mines.”

The speed of the music picked up and her hands worked furiously on the strings, her body rocking in a steady beat while her notes climbed to meet the increased pace.

“Where you gonna go, where you gonna go – I can tell you that. Some day in the sky we’ll see the same sun on the rise. Wherever you go, far as Tokyo, I can say – I’ll see you again!”

Her notes climbed to a folk-like croon, eyes closed to center herself and put her emotions, her magic through the music. It wasn’t something she did consciously, but the effect was there. After the first chorus, more people had stopped to listen in with mixed expressions on their faces. Mostly positive. She could see the Chargers had paused in their merriment and were listening in, Rathein and Bull giving her a reassuring smile when she saw them. Even still, their faces were blurs in the crowd and in the center of her mind she imagined it was only the Dread Wolf sitting at a table, giving that rare mile that felt only reserved for her.

“Aching with a debt never paid, horses broken and splayed. Breathing half a breath since you’re away-“

She closed her eyes and sighed, realizing the truth of the lyric before continuing.

“But while your blood is warm I’ll keep the home fires.”

Athena then nearly froze, realizing that soon an almost unreachably high note was going to come
up in the song. Would it be safer to sing it an octave down? The impact of the song was in those kinds of notes and she continued, praying that she would have the strength to do it. Then she felt a warmth in her chest, it spread over her body and she was reminded of her friend Inspiration. The magic she felt had the spirit’s touch to it and it spread into her fingers and her throat. The note was coming and somewhere in her mind she just said “fuck it” and used all her might to try and reach it.

Thankfully she did with a small burst of magic in her vocal cords and the crowd made hollers of being impressed while she leaned back, letting the note echo through the tavern that had grown much quieter during her song. Dorian’s face had fallen from the beaming grin of pride to a softer, calmer version of awe.

“My love is never gone away, it’s gonna come around someday. I’ll see you again...” She finished the rest of the song content, letting out a heavy sigh of relief at the end while her friends and more than half of the bar gave her applause. The drunken Tevinter brought her into an embrace and Cole was sure to grab Maryden’s lute from her hands before he did. “You sang that well for me? Oh – I’m touched. Absolutely touched.” He wiped what he was trying to portray as a fake tear from his eyes and she playfully pushed him away, smiling at him in return.

“Oh you know it, you devilishly handsome demon you.”

He soaked up her praise and then hugged her once more and she could feel the overconfident wall he held up fade away. “We are going to do fine, Athena. Trust me.” She reached up on her tiptoes to give him a better embrace, reaching her hands up around his neck to bring him in closer. They stayed like that for an extended moment before he realized how mushy they were being and patted her back. “Go to sleep. You earned it and I need to sleep these drinks off. I’ll see you in the morning for breakfast?”

Athena nodded in response, taking no time in leaving the tavern and escaping into the cold of the winter night. They were leaving for the ball soon and he still hadn’t returned. In the game, it was simply a skip over time and he came back, waiting was torture. Even before she reached her room she bent down and slid the heels from her feet and continued the rest of the walk barefoot. The stone of the castle was freezing but it provided a step in fighting off the alcohol she had consumed. For the last bunch of steps, she ran them, opening and immediately slamming her door while leaning her back against its surface with her eyes closed.

Sure, entertaining a tavern full of half-drunk people was manageable, but a castle full of cut-throat Orlesians who had stabbed the backs of people their entire lives? That would nearly be impossible. Athena rubbed the back of her neck and sighed, looking to her bed in anticipation of getting a good night’s sleep. Her body then stilled, eyes wide and pulse quickened at what she saw.

Solas.
He was sitting on the edge of her bed, his head in his hands, silent. From the pulsing of his aura she could tell he was asleep in the Fade but the sight shocked her nonetheless. Had he come back earlier today and she had just missed him with all her running around? The sound of her coming in hadn’t woken him, but he was the one who slept “one foot in and one foot out” so surely he knew she was there. Athena dropped her heels from her hands, her eyes never leaving the elf in her room. His features were still carved by grief and his breaths were heavy...

The sight of him like this broke her heart.

Athena took slow, quiet steps forward until she was standing within arm’s reach of him. She reached down and slowly cupped his face in one hand, stroking her thumb over his cheek in a gentle gesture. “Solas...” His eyes shot open and he stood up from the bed in a smooth motion while moving past her in a state of shock.

“I am sorry. I saw the note on my desk and I came to speak with you earlier but you were gone. And I...” He averted her gaze while walking to the door, pain and regret setting even deeper into the edges of his eyes and mouth. She shook her head and grabbed his arm, keeping him from going any further while her mind tried to focus through all the emotions running through it.

“Don’t leave.” Her voice was barely louder than a whisper but she let go of his arm, giving him the choice to stay or go. He paused, resting his hand against the surface of the door wordlessly without committing one way or the other. She sighed with a small shake of her head before turning towards her bed, shrugging out of her jacket and throwing it on a chair near the wall while ripping off her outer shirt, leaving her in an undershirt that resembled a tank top. It actually made her feel more at home; back in her old life her day to day wear was a tank top and jeans so at the end of the day she stripped off all that made her the Witch and was Athena. Just Athena. By the time she turned back she saw that he was a small bit closer to the door but there was obviously a fight in his mind. His hand was clenched into a fist at his side but his face was blank.

Athena summoned up her courage and walked over until she was in front of him, placing a hand on his chest to try and catch his gaze. Before she could speak his voice broke through the silence, his hands slowly coming to rest on top of her hips. “I’m sorry... it has been a long time since I could place my trust in someone.”

She met his gaze for a moment, stepping into his touch and resting her head on his chest. “I know.” He finally accepted her gesture and nearly fell into the embrace, his body sagging against hers while she rubbed his back with a tender touch. He spoke against the top of her head and the words were familiar of a conversation they had already had before.
“This could – “

“Sh. A day at a time, Solas. Come to sleep; you need a good night’s rest.”

With a pull on his shirt she led him back to the bed, moving backwards until she was sitting upright against the headboard and he was resting with his head in her lap, one arm resting on top of her leg. She stroked small designs on his chest with her fingertips, looking down and watching him slowly drift into sleep without another word between them. Kain trotted down the stairs from the small attic type room located upstairs, looking at Solas then to her with a tilted head and confused expression. She smirked, putting a finger to her lips to silence him before looking back down to the elf within her lap.

The peace of him resting with her, arm thrown over her leg to bring him closer to her. . . the image took her breath away. He said it was difficult to trust people but he just allowed himself to be led into her bed. Sleep was when a person was most vulnerable yet here they were. Her eyes fell over every feature, the freckles on his cheeks, the small wrinkles in the sides of his eyes, the curve of his lips. . .

Fuck.

She was completely helpless. It felt like her heart was in her throat and tears stung her eyes in the silence of the night. He would no longer be the wolf who walked alone. She would stop standing to the side as events went by knowing what she did. Athena rested her hand on the side of his shoulder, leaning her body back into the headboard. The air was still even with Kain’s sleeping breaths at the bottom of the stairs. She closed her eyes to take in the peace when she felt a squeeze around her leg where his hand rested.

Solas was bringing himself in closer to her, readjusting his head while whispering: “Come with me, Athena.” He opened his eyes and looked up to her, reaching up to touch her face with his free hand and she couldn’t deny him. She tilted her head into his touch before nestling back into her position against the headboard, closing her eyes and feeling her mind go into the Fade.

Chapter End Notes

Song is Tokyo Sunrise by LP - she is one my favorite artists recently.

Would highly recommend you give her a listen because 1) she is awesome and 2) you will understand the note she has to hit.
The Fade was empty but already she could feel his call. It sent goosebumps along her skin but there was something she needed to do first before seeing him and unfortunately for now it would be another secret between them. Athena reached down within her chest at one of the spiritual blessings and called out for Command. The spirit almost instantly appeared, crossing her armored arms over her chest with a scoff. “Now you wish to speak to me?”

She turned with a steeled gaze, nodding while meeting eyes with the spirit. “You say you can part the skies if you wish it be done?”

The spirit smiled. “Of course. I am Command. The Fade obeys what it will allow.”

She didn’t hesitate, stepping forward towards her with hope and determination in her voice. “Could you command a spirit back into existence if they were lost? It is said a spirit can return if it impacted enough people. Using Harmony, Inspiration, and I . . . could you do it?”

The spirit sneered, dropping her hands to her sides with a feral sound coming from her throat. “You dare question my abilities?”

“Could. You. Do. It.” Athena challenged, taking another step forward and almost meeting the spirit chest to chest. Command looked her up and down before nodding slowly. “I could try. It will take some time to gather the strength needed to do it. This will not be a task I do for free, child.”

She finally relaxed and nodded. “I expected as much. What is your price? I will pay it.”

The spirit smiled while snapping her fingers together. Her body began to dissipate into the Fade but her voice still echoed around her. “This is something I will need to think of because you are asking for quite a large favor, Fade-Walker. I will call for you when I think of such a price.”

Athena put her fist over her heart in a gesture of respect towards the spirit, even though she reminded her eerily of Vivienne. Solas’s presence called to her again, causing her to close her eyes and roll her shoulders as the sensation ran down her spine. She turned and allowed the Fade to turn around her, walking down the path she had previously walked the day before only to run into a barrier. This time, there was none. He stood waiting in a lush glen underneath a large tree to
provide them shade. When she arrived, he summoned a bench with a wave of his hand and she took note of the ornate design, green wrought iron swirling up from the ground to form the main shape.

She walked up to his side without hesitation and took his hand within hers, looking at the place where she assumed Wisdom normally resided. He took her hand wordlessly, his eyes glued to a fixed place in the glen. They sat in the silence for a moment before Athena leaned towards him, resting her head on his shoulder and squeezing his hand in hers. “Were you able to find some peace while you were away?”

He nodded. “I found a safe place to sleep and visited here, where I used to be able to find our friend.”

_Our friend._ The little change in his words still made her heart feel warm. She wanted to soothe his worries, say things like ‘She will come back again’ but that wasn’t a definite promise. It would be the first time she had even attempted such a thing but she had hope that between her and her three spirit allies they would be able to perform such a task. “The pain will fade. You do not need to endure alone, Solas.”

“I know; I’m sorry. As I have said before it has –“

“Been a while. You stubborn, stubborn man.” She squeezed his hand and stepped in front of him face to face, bringing his other hand into her own so she could hold them both. “Why must you think to do everything alone?” Secretly, she knew the answer. He was the last of his kind, the last of the evanuris that walked this world so many times ago. It was by his hand that the elven people fell into oblivion as an unintended side effect of locking away the feuding Gods.

He broke his sad demeanor and chuckled, looking down at her with caring eyes, slowly releasing his hands from hers to rest them on the small of her back while pulling her close. “It is how it has always been done.”

She shook her head and wrapped her arms around him, her gaze still locked with hers. “Not anymore, Solas.” Athena reached up on her toes and touched the tip of her nose to his with a soft smile on her face. “I’ve considered the things that needed to be considered. If that is the same with you...?” She moved her hands up his back until they were resting around his neck, bringing their foreheads to rest against one another’s.

“I believe I have, Athena.”
He smiled, moving one hand up her back until his fingers were in his hair, pulling her forward into a light brush of lips that brought a smile to her face. He brought her bottom lip in between his teeth and she groaned in surprise, scratching her nails lightly on his back. It then dawned on her that they were essentially standing on Wisdom’s grave. It was the former place where he had been mourning the loss of a friend and Athena stilled, pulling back from the kiss with a sound of discontent. Solas paused as well, looking down to her with an arched brow.

“Er- Not here?”

He then looked around to where they were and smirked, nodding in agreement. “Ah. I see.”

“May I?”

He nodded and kissed her cheek, trailing soft kisses down her jawline and into the nape of her neck. Athena playfully glared at him, feeling his magic trickle along her skin. She needed to take him somewhere far away from the thought of grieving. The first time she had showed him something awe-inducing in her world, she took him up. This time, they would be looking down. She fixated on a memory and pushed it outwards into the Fade. Colors of orange, purple, and brown swirled until her back was pressed against the metal railing keeping her from falling down a large canyon.

There was an almost smug smile on her face when he brought her closer in a gesture of being protective to keep her from falling, his eyes trying to take in the large scenic view below them. He kept one arm around her back while putting the other on the rail, looking over her shoulder down into the canyon below. “This is breath-taking.”

She decided to be petty and tease him in return, giving him light kisses on the cloth of his shirt near his wolf-jaw necklace. While he was enamored by the Grand Canyon, she moved up to his shoulder then moved her hot, breathy kisses up his neck to his ear. His lips twitched into a wicked smirk but he was still fascinated with the landscape, his nails digging into the small of her back in response. Athena flicked her tongue out onto the lobe of his ear, her hands clawing into his shoulder and the base of his neck to bring him down and closer to her. Their height difference wasn’t that severe but she noticed he was always standing with such a tall posture; she guessed it was where their race difference showed. As she kissed and lightly brought the skin on his neck in between her teeth, he playfully groaned out a sound of frustration, arching his neck out of her reach before cupping her face with one hand.

The look in his eyes, the genuine smile on his face nearly melted her. Her heart was already pounding against the restraints of her ribcage, her breath nearly absent from the pure shock of finally being with him. There were small things that didn’t line up to what she knew. They had just decided to be romantic with one another and there was no Ar lath ma. The thought of which
brought a tightness between her legs and into the lower bases of her belly. Would they ever get to that point? Maker she hoped so. Rathein and Dorian had been her family since she had been there. They hugged and joked with her, but they didn’t warm her bed at night. Kain snuggled with her occasionally but when she woke it only emphasized that there was nobody there besides her.

Perhaps she was being ungrateful, but with Solas in her arms everything else just smaller. He stroked her cheek and chuckled, eyes glancing back to the canyon. “What is this place, Athena?”

She sighed in happiness. Hearing her name on his lips still felt foreign, unreal to her. “It is one of the wonders of my world. We called it the Grand Canyon, original I know. Our scholars used it to track the planet’s history back thousands of years. It goes on for miles, outwards and downwards.” His eyes occasionally flicked to the view behind him but while she explained it and gestured to the sides his gaze never left her face. She could feel the heat of embarrassment and lust climbing her neck and at the end of her explanation she slowly trailed her eyes back to him. There was a hungry look in his eyes, the deep of his blues threatening to devour her as he traced her jawline with a finger.

“And. . . I’ve lost my words.” Her breath was raspy, barely audible as he closed in on her, the single finger on her cheek bringing her chin upwards so he could take her lips again. This time the hunger translated into his actions. He moved his hands into her hair, pulling on it slightly while his magic opened unbridled into her body. A cold wave plunged into her, drawing a shocked cry that was muffled against his mouth. Her hands gripped onto his chest but he pushed her body against the railing, using the cry to slide his tongue along hers and deepen the kiss. His magic came in pulses, thrusts almost, against the inside of her body. In the fade, they were so much stronger than in the physical world. He always said things were easier in the fade and now she understood why.

Every touch, every kiss, every movement was electrified. He was confident here, walls down and willing to show how he really felt. In the physical world, he was the reserved expert on the Fade. The scholar. Here the true wolf showed and she craved it. Her hands roamed his body, feeling the muscles of his arms and back. She had to wonder if their bodies were altered in the fade, if they appeared how they wanted to look or how they truly were. She could feel his muscles and the tone that came from swinging a staff around hours at a time. The hand that Solas had in her hair moved down to the back of her neck, feeling, clawing its way to the middle of her back, moving to her side.

She could predict its path, her heart racing and skin alighting in a near flame of her aura. It clashed against the pure opposition of her element, and it made the sensation that much more addictive. Her back arched over the rail behind her and he took advantage of that movement, sliding his hand over her shirt and over her breast. The soft action against the very top of her skin made her cry out, gripping his shirt for purchase. That reaction drew a growl against her lips as he bit against her bottom lip and palmed her breast in slow, gentle movements that were unison with his thrusts of his magic. The combinations made her arch against him still, bringing the leg opposite his hand up and behind him to bring him closer to her.
He gripped her thigh and brought her flesh with him to the point where she could grind against his hips, a soft whine coming from her lips. Her mind was white; it was difficult to hold onto the memory of the landmark behind him while he tortured her so. The fade glitched in and out behind them and he smiled against her mouth, using his magic to keep the scene solid while his thumb managed to find the small mound of her nipple underneath her shirt.

She was completely lost and the small touch sent her wild. Her mouth broke from his and she moaned his name, words lost as his lips trailed to her neck and kissed upon the skin that his mouth could capture. "Solas!" She cried, gripping onto whatever purchase she could while he conquered her with magic and touch combined. He hummed into the base of her neck, pausing while tilting his head toward her face. Her breath came in quick pants and her mind was nearly lost to his touch but she moved one hand to the rail behind her, looking for something solid within the heat of the magic of the fade.

"Hm?" He moaned into her neck, using his hand to curve around her hip in its travel south. Athena gasped and used her leg to pull him forward, bringing a hand to his chin to bring his gaze upwards to hers.

"This is something . . . I would like to experience in person. Dreams are one thing. . . " He kissed upon her cheeks and she groaned, bringing her leg down even with his sound of protest. "But it’s real when its skin on skin. You could trap me here forever and I would be a content woman but. . . "

He smiled and sighed against her, trying to keep her thigh elevated so he could press himself against the middle of her legs with a wicked smile. "If you say, Athena." The image of the canyon stayed strong behind them so she stood straight up, brushing her chest against his with a smirk before turning her back to him and looking at the landscape. He wrapped his arms around her, resting his head on her shoulder from behind. They spent the next few minutes looking things over. Athena smiled, resting her arms on top of his in a moment of pure bliss.

"I guess we should wake up now. We leave for Halamshiral tomorrow and that is going to be exhausting.”

Solas smiled. “I have always enjoyed the heavy blend of power, intrigue, danger, and sex at those kinds of events.” At the word sex, he pressed himself more against her back and she groaned, arching her back to push back against him.

“You may like it. You are going to be doing the fun stuff. I have to play nice and dance with the nobles.”
“You give yourself no credit. You will bewitch them all, Athena.”

She smirked, giving his arms a final squeeze before allowing the image of the canyon to dissipate in the air. With a deep breath, she rolled her mind back into her body and opened her eyes in the physical world. At some point in the night they had adjusted and moved to where she was lying on her side and he was spooned behind her, his arm underneath her head to support it with his other hand curled around him. Athena smiled, nuzzling her cheek into his arm and pressing herself against his body in an attempt to memorize how it felt for him to be there. There was a stirring behind her and she felt his arm around her tighten, pulling her closer to him while he pressed his lips against the back of her neck.

“On dhea, Athena.”

Chapter End Notes

On dhea - Good morning

Thank you all for the wonderful reactions to the last chapter. It was something I had rewritten about three times to get right and I'm glad it finally worked out. <3
Good morning, he said in elvish against the back of her neck. She smiled and nodded, rolling onto her back to meet his gaze. “That it is. Good morning, Solas.” Athena leaned up and kissed the tip of his nose, the content smile on her face never faltering. She stiffened and stretched, whining as he pushed himself into a sitting position on the side of the bed. Kain did not hesitate to rise from his position on the floor and jump into bed where Solas’s warm spot was. The wolf made a series of frustrated grunts, resting his head on top of his paws while looking to Athena. My spot. She laughed and ruffled the fur on the top of his head, pushing her foot from the bed and bringing herself up to a sitting position.

“You took his spot last night.”

Solas smirked, standing from the bed and looking to Kain with a regretful expression. “Apologies.”

The wolf let out a grunt of acknowledgement before drifting into sleep. She laughed, looking to Solas with a small blush on her cheeks. “I guess we should prepare for our journey tomorrow. I have a lot of things to get ready for.”

“What are you planning?” Solas mused, adjusting his shirt and pants after sleeping in them through the night. She smiled at him, walking over and untwisting his jaw bone necklace.

“You will have to wait like everyone else. No perks because you slept with me.” Athena winked and poked him in the center of his chest, feeling happy as she saw a blush color his cheeks with a smile. She then twirled and walked to her wardrobe to pick out the day’s outfit.

“I will see you later then?” He was close to the door now and the confidence she gained from sleeping with him made her bold.

She threw her new clothes for the day over her arm and turned with a swing in her hips to face him. “Unless you are going to watch me bathe, yes I will see you later.”

He gave her a wicked grin, leaning against the door while crossing his arms over his chest. “As enticing as an idea as that would be, it wouldn’t leave us much time to prepare?” The stubborn wolf was just as daring as her. The hungry look from the night before returned in his eyes and she could feel herself losing sight of her plans for the day.
She broke her trance by shaking her head and gesturing him out. “You are right. Go now, you demon, before you make me change my mind.”

He nodded, basking in his triumph of the conversation before slipping out of the door without another word between them. She let out a sigh of relief, using the wardrobe to lean against while regaining control of her breaths and heart rate. Kain let out a soft whine and when she looked at him he was tilting his head towards her. “He’s fine, Kain. Friend. Well, more so.” As she began to move down the stairs she heard her companion’s voice in her head. *Mate?* He asked, a soft sliver of hope outlining his voice. Athena paused, jerking her head to bring the wolf down into the basement area with her. “Perhaps. We will see with time. For now: a bath.”

She turned the nooks on top of her bath and began to draw it, quickly tracing heating runes at the base before she gathered her oils. Athena plucked up the vanilla bottle of oil and decided it would be her flavor the day, dripping a few drops onto the surface of the water. She quickly disrobed and slid into the bath, hissing as the hot water raced up her back. As she was going through the motions of bathing her eyes widened in realization that there were a few things from her old world that she missed. At the top of the list: shaving. Athena nearly reeled in disgust at the state of her legs and what was between them. Rathein didn’t seem to have a problem, did she have a razor? It was probably the shortest bath she had taken so far but within minutes she was dried, clothed, and walking briskly towards the Inquisitor’s room.

The door to her room was half cracked so she entered without knocking, curving her neck around the door’s edge to see the Herald hard at work behind the desk. The short-hair mage was reviewing their plan for Halamshiral and when she saw Athena her lips broke from the hardened frown of a woman hard at work into a grin. “Good morning, sunshine. Sleep well? You did really well last night in the tavern! People are finally starting to warm up to you.”

*Last night?* She then remembered something had happened before her meeting with Solas in the Fade. The tavern and the drinking. It was a more comfortable version of what they would be facing in a few days. The night before they were going to be hosted at Duke Gaspard’s estate for a formal dinner and briefing on their entrance. After the ball, Vivienne had graciously offered up her lover’s mansion for them to stay in. Fineries and luxuries were in their future and unfortunately Athena needed to play the part. “Yeah let’s hope Orlesians are as welcoming. You looking over the plans?”

Rathein nodded, pulling up a piece of paper. “I don’t see why these statues are important but the map helps.”

“I have most of the stuff covered, but I really want to try and reduce how many unnecessary deaths happen. Briala talks a mean game about supporting her elves but they seem to be the first to die with no one answering for the crime. Think we can bring a few extra carriages to store some new recruits?” It was always frustrating in the game seeing the trails of blood and the elf that was close
to death at the hands of a Harlequin. Briala was a revolutionary, or she tried to be, but she forgot what it was like to be common. It was one of her downfalls and probably the reason it was so easy for Solas to recruit her elves late-game.

“I updated Josephine early this morning and she is aware we’re going to need to be flexible for our numbers. They really don’t like not knowing what is going on, but I have to admit, it’s kind of fun. No wonder you tease us all of the time.” Athena went to protect but Rathein winked at her. “I kid. I really like that we’re working together on this. Think we can do it for future things?”

Athena smiled with a nod. “I’m definitely going to try. A day at a time.” Just like with Solas, a day at a time.

The thought made her grin but she snapped her fingers to redirect her thoughts. “Oh yeah! I have an awkward question for you.”

The Inquisitor stood from her position, packing the pieces of parchment away in her bag while humming in acknowledgement that she heard her. Athena pressed on without hesitation; it was almost like talking to a sister when she was with Rathein. “What do you use for, er, hair removal?”

Rathein looked confused for a second before she fell victim to laughter. It didn’t stop until she walked over to a small chest that held her oils and lotions. She brought up a red jar that looked like it had some kind of gel inside of it. She was still giggling, tears in her eyes, when she handed it over to Athena. “What, did you all walk around furry in your home world?”

Athena snatched the jar from her hand and stuck her tongue out at her. “No. You know how men have the razors for their face?” Rathein nodded and leaned against the bed to listen. “Shrink those down to roughly half the size of your pinkie and put a handle on it. Ladies had them too for their legs, arms, and other bits. Some people used a hot wax to rip it out with paper but I never could afford that.”

The Lady Trevelyan snapped her fingers and pointed back at her. “That we have. I much prefer this stuff though.” She redirected her pointing finger from Athena to the red jar. “Apply a thin layer of that stuff to wherever you want to it to work, leave it on for about ten minutes, and just wipe it off. Sometimes it can burn like mad if you leave it on too long so I like to have a bath or lotion ready as back up. You have a hot date?”

She turned away from her to hide the blush in her cheeks. That was part of the reason but from the basic designs she saw for her outfit to the ball it would be appalling to show up with armpit hair that could beat a soldier’s. “We all want to look our best for the Empress, don’t we?”
Rathein snorted with a scoff, shaking her head and scratching the back of her head. Athena turned back towards her, stepping forward to bring her in an embrace. Out of the corner of her eyes she caught sight of a pile of rope haphazardly tucked under the bed. “Bull treating you well?”

The Herald pushed her away and shot her an embarrassed glare, a hot red color setting in on her cheek and chest. “Uh – er- Is it that obvious?”

Athena rolled her eyes and then set her gaze on the rope and Rathein followed with her own eyes, cursing under her breath and quickly hiding the rope in a proper place at the bottom of her wardrobe. “I’m happy for you, Rathein. Don’t mistake my joking with disapproval. I know he makes you happy.”

“Uh- yeah. He does. Which is so strange because you look at him and you would never guess how kind he actually is. My parents are going to react terribly when they find out though. I’m not marrying the rich, well-connected noble they thought I would.”

“You talking about marriage already? I didn’t see him as the type.” Athena jested only to receive a throw pillow in her face.

“Maker no! While you’re here, I need to use some of that stuff too. We could do it real quick and I could help you since it’s your first time. I know they say you burn and all but tomato colored legs would not make a good first impression.”

“Are you trying to get me naked Inquisitor?” She laughed while shrugging out of her jacket, throwing it over the back of a chair while making sure the door was firmly closed. Rathein closed the doors to the balcony before shrugging out of her clothes to the point where she was only wearing her chest bandings. They had bathed in front of each other enough times for it to not be uncomfortable. The Herald started and rubbed the red goop on her legs, arms, and a few other places.

Athena followed, making sure to clean up between her legs because in her old world that was a must. For the ten minutes, they brought out the parchment again and Athena reviewed what pieces of evidence they would need to find. They were so engrossed in their talking they were late to hear someone rattling with the door knob.

“Hey, boss, you ready to start packing up? I need to brief the boys on what to do when I’m gone for the – Oh hello!”
Athena barely had two seconds to fade-step behind a curtain when the Qunari strolled in casually, arching a brow and looking his lover up and down before smirking over to Athena, whose head was poking out from behind the curtain just to glare at him. “You two catching up from last night?”

Rathein didn’t even flinch, leaning up and kissing him on the cheek before jerking her chin over towards Athena’s direction. “We’re just talking over the game plan for the ball. Go, I’ll see you in about ten minutes.”

Bull smiled at her, quickly slapping her backside when she turned away from him to save Athena from the curtain before leaving their room. Athena let out a sigh of frustration, walking out with the red gel still intact on her body. “Does he not knock?”

“Normally no. I host most of my official meetings near the war-room or in the main hall so there are witnesses. This is my place. Come on, let’s get you cleaned up.”

With every wipe of the cloth Athena felt more like herself. It took a few cloths and an application of lotion but her body was soon smooth. It almost felt like a sin to put her pants and boots on again but she felt refreshed, new even. With a wide grin, she gave her friend a high-five before turning towards the door. Rathein hollered out for her as she left: “Just so you know! I’ve put us to share a room at the Duke’s palace. We can suffer together!”

Athena laughed and skipped down the stairs from the Inquisitor’s room into the main hall. People were buzzing about, gossiping about which nobles would be at the ball. She weaved through the masses and waved at Varric on her way into the rotunda. Solas was hard at work on his paintings and was about to finish off the one before the space he would dedicate to the ball. As she walked into the room he smirked, glancing over his shoulder at her.

“Impeccable timing. Can you grab me the brush on my desk?”

She smiled to him, grabbing the smaller brush for finer details from his desk before climbing up the platform ladder to stand beside him. He effortlessly held his color palate in one hand while painting with the other. His focus barely left his work so when she came up next to him she silently handed him the brush with the hand facing towards him. He hummed in acknowledgement, using a twirl of his fingers to switch out brushes before continuing with the smaller one. She looked at the work, taking in the colors and realizing that this close she could see every brush stroke that went into the bigger picture.
“Solas, this is beautiful.”

He smiled, flicking his gaze over to her for a moment. “Thank you. It is a lost art; I have seen it used frequently in my journeys to the Fade.”

“You need to take me on one of these journeys of yours one night. We have been seeing a lot of my world; I would very much like to see yours.”

He nodded and dipped his paint in a swirl of blues before turning to the picture. She tucked a stray hair behind her ear while taking a step towards the ladder to descend. “Rathein mentioned that the group leaving tomorrow is meeting at the tavern to play cards and have dinner. Will I see you there?”

Solas considered for a moment, pausing mid-stroke with his brush before nodding in return. There were a few people walking through the rotunda so she resisted the urge to kiss him on the cheek. Instead she flared her mana out to run up his spine from his lower back. The visible shudder in response brought a wicked smirk to her lips; she instantly retracted her magic like she had seen him do so many times before as she climbed down the ladder and returned to her room to begin packing for their travels the next day.
Never Have I Ever

The turnout for the card game was similar to the heartwarming scene she knew at the end of the journey. Varric, Bull, Sera, Josephine, Cullen, Cassandra, and Rathein sat around the table with Cole occasionally appearing next to Athena to listen in or comment on the fact that she looked happier, 'burned' even more than she normally did. Bull and Rathein were unrestrained in their public displays of affection, occasionally earning an eye-roll from Sera who then made faces at Athena to break the awkward silences. Sera was slowly warming up to her but there were definitely things that made the elf uncomfortable.

“Furry? That’s weird, yeah?” She asked as she jabbed Athena in the ribs with her elbow. Sera was sitting on her left and she had left a seat open across from her just in case Solas showed up. He was absent from the rotunda before dinner when she had come to fetch him. He never was the social type so if he did show it would be a surprise to everyone. Still, the expectation for him showing put a small pit of anxiety in her stomach that manifested into her ripping off pieces of her paper napkin and rolling them up into little balls before throwing them at people around the table.

“You mean me or the wolves?” Kain was sleeping underneath the table and was going back and forth from Cullen to her begging for table scraps. She didn’t give him any but she saw him chewing on something from the table. In those times the Commander avoided her gaze and had a coy smile on his face.

“Er. Both. You can change into one of them, run around and things?” The elf made a hand motion to indicate scurrying around while baring her teeth.

“Yes, Sera. My magic allows me to be close with animals.”

“Ew. Not too close, right?” She then broke off into maddening laughter and Athena pushed her off of her balance until the elf fell from the chair.

“You got a rotten mind, Sera. It makes for fun company though.” In a silent truce, she offered her arm for the dirty-blondie to use to get back up to her chair. Sera smirked and used her fork to steal a piece of pheasant from Athena’s plate once she was back up in a sitting position.

“You’re almost elfier than he is and that is saying something. I see you being friendly with the newbie you brought back with you.” Athena arched a brow before realizing she was talking about Loranil. She scratched the back of her neck and leaned back into her chair.
“He is a sweet kid, full of energy. He’s still doing well, Cullen?”

The mention of his name brought him out a conversation about Orlesian shoes and he quickly leaned over to them. “Yes, he is a promising recruit. Speaks highly of you though, Athena.” There was a teasing smirk on his lips and Athena used one of her rolled up pieces of paper as punishment for it, flicking it at his face and missing. Sera let out a disgusted scoff and threw her hands in the air, looking towards Varric with a mock scowl.

“Come on it now, I was promised drink and games.”

Varric chuckled at the end of the group. He was resting his boots on the table, much to Josephine’s arguing. “Well we have cards or that two truths game Walker taught us. Unless you have another one?”

Athena thought for a second, picking up her ale and swirling it around within her mug. Two truths and a lie was getting old and they were beginning to hear the same things go back and forth. Most people didn’t want to get really personal and that took the fun out of it. Her face cracked into a smile as a mischievous idea came to her mind. “We can play cards and play this game at the same time. It’s called ‘Never Have I Ever’ and can get quite dicey if everyone is interested?”

The group looked to each other and then nodded or hummed in agreement. She started, gesturing for the cards from Josephine so she could deal while she explained. Rathein quickly cleared the table and put their dirty dishes on top of the bar. “You start off with ten fingers held up. Someone makes a statement like ‘Never have I ever been to Rivain.’ In that case if you have been to Rivain you put a finger down while other people who haven’t get to keep theirs up. You want to keep as many fingers up as possible. You can use strategy in this game if you know someone well enough. You can target questions to get them out. We can play cards after but this is a fun ice breaker.”

Bull winked towards Rathein. “I can see this getting messy.”

Athena snapped her fingers and pointed at him in agreement. “See, you know it, Bull. The group sets the tone so we’ll see where we go. Let me start so we can get this going. Never have I ever . . . been to Denerim.”

Bull, Cullen, Varric and Sera put down fingers while the others kept theirs up. She nodded and looked to the group with a smirk. “We can pick an order or whoever wants to try next.” Varric grinned and shot a playful glance to the Inquisitor.
“Never have I ever kissed a Qunari.”

Cassandra rose to defend their ruler but Rathein leaned over and kissed Bull on the cheek, proudly putting down her finger. Sera and Bull also lost a point, both with mischievous grins on their face. Rathein raised her hand in response, grinning back at the group. “On that note, never have I ever kissed an elf.”

Fuck.

Athena felt heat rise to her cheeks and she slowly put her pinkie finger on her right hand down since it was the farthest away from everyone, taking a large sip of drink while other people remarked over one another. Everyone but Cassandra, Josephine, and Rathein had put a finger down. Cullen was getting the brunt of all the questions and he took Athena’s strategy to divert them by drinking some of his ale to hide the color in his cheeks. Sera was the one who looked to her right and then down, her eyes lighting up with devilish glee.

“Oh lookie here, furry has gotten a little elfy! Hah!”

The table went into stunned silence but they all wore curious expressions. Cassandra tried to be the nice one, leaning forward to catch her gaze. “Do they have elves in your world, Athena?” That made it even worse, especially because she felt a sudden breeze on her back that indicated the door was opening. When the cold didn’t go away she knew who had finally shown up and it had to be at the worst time.

“No. No we do not.” Her voice was strained and embarrassed. She pulled her knees up into the chair to hide. In punishment for outing her, she swapped out her empty ale mug for Sera’s full one and began to drink that as well.

Varric clapped his hands together, looking to Solas with an almost knowing smile. “Chuckles, you know anything about this?”

Solas sat down across from her in the empty chair and raised an eyebrow in response, looking at everyone’s hands in question. “About what, Master Tethras?”

Sera couldn’t take a break from her giggling but she managed to get out: “Athena’s kissed an elf!”
Athena was mourning with her head in her hands so she couldn’t see Solas’s expression. She felt his magic pulse out for a second but he was quick to restrain it. Once she looked up from her hands she saw that he met her gaze with an almost wicked and daring look. He smirked at her in warning, picking up a drink from the end of the table in one hand, raising it to his lips. Before she could make any signs of protest he announced: “Indeed she has.” He then took a drink of the ale, his eyes never leaving hers.

Her pupils constricted in panic and her eyes went wide, the color draining from her cheeks in a flash. The table went silent and she thought she saw Cullen frown for half a second before drinking from his mug again. Varric’s jaw dropped and he was barely able to make out his challenge to the fact: “Bullshit.”

Solas shrugged but remained silent, taking in another sip of ale while the table processed the information. Cassandra and Josephine smiled to one another like gossiping girls but it was Rathein who was grinning at Athena like a madman. Athena ran her hands through her hair and stretched back into her chair, shooting Solas a playful glare as her pulse decreased from life-threatening highs. Josephine had a face of disappointment and Bull caught on as well, gently nudging his elbow into the Ambassador’s shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“Well, the court is under the impression that Lady Athena is . . . unmarried. There have been a number of inquiries as to her marital status, even from the Grand Duke Gaspard. Since we leave tomorrow it would be quite the scandal if we changed our statement.”

Athena and Solas shared a quick glance but he was actually the one to speak first towards the matter. “I think considering the circumstances it would be safe to abstain from making any grand announcements.” Athena looked to Rathein who had been waiting for the opportunity to meet her gaze. The Herald mouthed the words: When were you going to tell me? She gave her a sheepish shrug in return, which only earned a rude yet playful gesture from the leader of the table. The conversation drifted back towards her and the other single noble men.

She could only rub her palms into her eyes and groan. “I’m going to need to scrub with a stone to get this disgusting feeling off of me.”

Sera chuckled under her breath, stealing her drink back to take a sip. “That’s just Orlais. I’m sure Elven Glory over there can help you get the feeling off.”

Solas shot Sera a glare but Athena was quick to touch his leg with her foot under the table, giving him a look that said chastising the elf next to her wasn’t worth it. The color in her cheeks had toned down now that the conversation at the table had switched from their romance to the ball. There was a certain freedom in having their romance announced because it meant he wouldn’t have to sneak around, but she couldn’t get rid of the nagging feeling in her stomach that came with
knowing that Gaspard was interested in her based on rumor alone.

He caught onto that, tilting his head slightly to the side with a concerned gaze. *Are you alright?* He asked silently. Athena thought for a moment, chewing on the inside of her lip while slowly meeting his eyes. The answer was a simple shrug. There was no way of knowing. It felt like she would be fighting off the advances of every single man at the ball while trying to help the Inquisitor keep things safe in the background while they investigated the Empress’s life. The group slowly went into the card game where it was quickly revealed that Josephine and Solas were the two best players at the table. They were silent sharks, stealing everyone’s money without letting onto how good they were with their cards.

Since she was new to the game Athena lost her money first. She used the time to clean up around the table and wash the dishes in the sinks behind the bar where Flissa normally helped. Kain was there, begging for any type of scrap she could find, but she refused him. “He has spoiled you, he has. You hunted today and had half of his plate. You are fine, darling.” Athena bent down and kissed her companion on the nose as he whined.

Rathein sauntered over to the counter and winked at her in greeting. “So... Gaspard. That’s going to make things interesting.”

She nodded, stacking the last of the clean dishes on the drying towel on the side. “It also gives me a little more wiggle room to make things all the sweeter.”

Rathein looked confused for a second but then everything clicked and she let out a whispering *Oooohh.* “Crafty Sorciere, you are. You might have this thing down better than you think.”

Athena pointed the end of a spatula at her in warning, flicking some of the lye water at her. “Don’t you dare. Get back to cards, Inquisitor. It’s your turn.” Rathein cursed and turned on her heel to return to the table. By the time the dishes were dried, the table began their travels back towards their rooms. Josephine was reminding everyone to be ready and dressed in *clean* clothes in the morning. The first part of the journey would be on horseback but the moment they hit the Imperial Roads they would be in carriages. The group waved and embraced each other before leaving.

Varric gave Athena a playful wink before leaving and Cassandra approached her with the same coy smile she had after the campfire story. “I’m happy for you, Athena. I’m glad you were able to find happiness here.”

She was surprised to hear that statement from the Seeker. Her words were lost for a second but she cleared her throat and shook her friend’s hand. “Thank you, Cassandra. That means a lot, truly.”
The brunette nodded before leaving the bar. Solas was holding the door open while giving her an expectant look. Kain pushed on the sides of her legs and the trio took off from the tavern into the night. He led her with a gentle touch on the small of her back through the castle grounds, no longer hiding the small gestures of affection. The wind was surprisingly still and the light of the two moons glowed down on them.

“That was a clever surprise back there, Hahren.” She wrapped an arm around his back and rested her head on his shoulder.

He chuckled, resting his cheek on top of her head in return as they walked in sync back towards her room. “Did you mean to keep it secret?”

“Nuh-uh. I thought you were the more reserved one so I avoided screaming it from my tower room for your sake.” This brought a laugh from him and she felt her heart grow warm feeling the rumbling sensation in his chest. There was something unrestrained about him now and it was refreshing. Grief had finally been erased from his features and he acted like himself again, even more so. They reached her door and she slid in front of him, smiling at the warmth that her room provided with the candles in the walls. Kain took his place on the bed, shooting Solas a warning look before he did so. Athena chuckled at the wolf, shrugging off her jacket and laying it on top of the pile of clothes that would be going with them in the morning. Solas was still standing by the door and she gave him a quizzical look while taking off her main shirt, leaving only the tank top and her wrappings underneath.

“Are you staying or going?”

He smirked, closing the door before leaning his body against it, his eyes never leaving her frame as she walked about the room and prepared for bed. “I’ll be back. Don’t . . . go anywhere.” She looked to him with a ghost of a smile on her lips. He shook his head at the thought of him leaving and when she went down the stairs she saw in her peripherals that he was taking off his shirt and sitting on the opposite side of the bed from Kain. Athena quickly descended the steps and ran a cloth in water from the tub, wiping off the daily grime from her face and eyes before looking on front of the vanity.

Her brown hair fell over her shoulders in wavy, loose curls. Her fingers traced over her more prominent cheekbones and jawline, taking note of the small changes that were continuing to take shape on her body with every passing day. There were muscle lines, actual muscles lines along her sides and abdomen. She shimmied out of her pants and looked at the curve of her hips down her legs. Hot damn, Athena. For the first time in a long time she was happy with what she saw in the mirror. It might have been influenced by the fact that there was an Elven God in her bed upstairs, but it was a step in the right direction either way.
She ran her fingers through her hair to straighten out her locks before returning up the stairs, using a pulse of magic to extinguish the candles around the room. From his breathing, she could tell Solas was already asleep or close to it. His chest rose and fell in slow, rhythmic movements and the sound was calming, inviting for her to come and join him. She maneuvered herself between Kain’s body and his, sliding under the blanket to spoon her body against his. He did not fully wake but he took in a deep breath of her hair, wrapping an arm around her and pulling her close to him in a protective gesture.

It felt right, complete almost, being there with him, and the safety of knowing that made it easier to fall into the Fade for the evening.
“It’s about time you showed up! I’ve been waiting on you, Athena. We have a lot of work to do.”

Inspiration was impatiently tapping her foot with a joking smirk on her face when Athena arrived in the Fade. She waved at the spirit and walked over, rubbing her eyes as if she were waking up from a nap even though her sleep was just beginning. “Sorry, got a little – er- sidetracked last night. What do you mean work to do?”

The spirit rolled her eyes but came up and poked her in the middle of the chest with an excited grin. “We need to practice dancing, remember? You have been learning the basic waltzes from Orlais?”

Athena nodded, thinking back to her lessons with Josephine with a wince. “Yeah, they are all the same basic formula with a few minor changes. They’re very much what I expected of the tight-corseted bunch.” The spirit led her into the depth of the Fade more, gesturing for Athena to summon an image around them. She gave a sideways glare before reaching back into her mind, trying to think of a place that would be perfect for them to practice dancing.

There weren’t many places she could think of so Inspiration just tapped her on the shoulder. “What about that green place you took me too? Where we first met Harmony?”

The camp? That would work. With a twist of her wrist she brought forth the image of the lake with the large green area in front of it. “Okay, Athena. Now we need some upbeat music. This dance I need to teach you is nothing like the Orlesian waltzes you have learned. It’s, how do I say, fiery?” When she said the word fiery it sounded like the spirit was trying to emulate Dorian. Athena didn’t know if it was on purpose but brought a smile to her face. She was glad the Tevinter was coming to Halamshiral as a political buffer because she didn’t know what she was do if she was alone while the main party explored the grounds. Between the two of the fire mages, they would have a little bit of fun.

_I met a girl, in east LA. In floral shorts as sweet as May._

_She sang in eights in two-barrio chords._

_We fell in love, but not in court._

The tempo then took off and much to Inspiration’s delight it fitted to the dance she wanted to teach.
The spirit walked over to Athena, resting her hands on her shoulders while pulsing magic into her Fade-form. “What is this?”

“I’ve taught the dance to your mind, now we must ingrain it into your body. You seem to call on my blessing the most so perhaps it will come easiest to you.”

“You were the first, perhaps it is why you resonate the most within her.” The voice was not theirs and both women looked over to Solas who had strode into her dream without his usual knocking. Athena smiled at him, making a sound of agreement with him before assuming the opening stance of the dance with Inspiration.

“You think so? I guess that makes sense.” The spirit and her began to go through the opening moves while he assessed them with a curious gaze.

“What are you two doing?” There was a twinkle in his gaze when he looked at them both and she couldn’t contain her blush. Athena cleared her throat and slowly went through the next moves with Inspiration, the spirit remaining silent but fixing her poses if they were off or not rigid enough.

“Practicing for Halamshiral. Josephine says there are going to be a lot of eyes on me and thanks to you the whole court is going to think I’m available.” She was mostly joking but there was a small pit of hurt within her gut.

“You did say they introduce me as a servant, did you not?” He did not falter, leaning his back against a tree that was close to them. His voice stayed in that slow, deep cadence that was infuriating in this moment. *Come on, where is your Pride that you’re named after?* She wanted to scream at him but instead she nodded to answer his question, allowing Inspiration to dip her back with a hand on her lower back so she could arch over it before being whipped back up into an upright position.

“The other option is me being courted by every noble in Orlais and the Grand Duke Gaspard? Great, that option is so much better than me being with the person I care about.” The sarcasm and anger was evident in her voice, her words clipped short while she moved her gaze to the moves in front of her. Inspiration was getting frustrated with her lack of attention, using small pulses of her influence to try and bring her friend into focus. When it wasn’t working, Harmony appeared on the side and his presence alone let Athena know that she must have been off in her control.

She felt for her aura and realized that it was flaring out with her heart beat, heating up the area around them while putting them on edge due to her emotions. She gave them a silent apology, rolling her neck while bringing in her magic until it was pulsing underneath her skin. Athena closed
her eyes, focusing on her breaths and becoming aware of the fire that was her magic on her skin. As every day went by it was getting stronger. She could tell that the training was paying off. In her and Dorian’s last drill they had been able to go back and forth for an hour before Dorian called it off due to the fact that the flame they were throwing was their body-size and it was scaring the locals. She was so focused on trying to contain herself, she barely noticed Inspiration step back and Solas taking her place, gently placing a hand on her hip while taking one of her hands into his own.

“I do not wish to distract you from your duties, Athena.” His voice was soft and in a way broken. The familiar language caused her face to pale, her eyes shooting open to drown in the depths of his. Those words, they were the start of something she was terrified to hear.

Dancing forgotten, she brought his hand to her face and steeled her gaze. “You are not a distraction, Solas; you are my foundation. I would not be able to endure Orlais if I did not know you would be there to help me through it and stitch my soul back up at the end of the night.”

He paused, bringing her closer by pulling on her lower back as a smile twitched at the corner of his lips and eyes. “Alright, Athena. Now, why were you trying to learn the Rivainese tango? I did not think that was a standard in Orlais.” He tried to get a reason from Inspiration but the spirit remained silent, giving Athena playful wink before allowing the pair to spend time together. They went back and forth through various dances for the rest of the night, talk of distractions and nobles long forgotten by the time morning came around for the Inquisition.

There wasn’t much time in the morning for fooling around so when she came into the physical world it took all of her strength to open her eyes and glare at the sun coming in the crack of the door. She had turned over in the middle of the night, her hands lazily clutching onto the necklace around his neck. Now that her eyes were open, her breath caught in her throat, eyes slowly falling to look at his bare chest. Her hands released the necklace and lay flat on his skin, slowly feeling his breaths rise and fall under her now shaky touch. He was perfect in the morning light, a blush crawling to her cheeks as she took in the sight of his toned chest and abdomen. The darkness of the blanket hid away what was below his waist but there was a sudden need that wanted to know. He stirred in his sleep, pulling her close one last time before he was fully separated from the Fade.

“Good morning, Athena.”

She hummed wordlessly in response, groaning while sitting up from the bed and stretching towards the sky. Kain took the opportunity to sit up and lick both her and Solas’s face in a gesture of approval towards the couple. *Happy?* The wolf asked his eyes sparkling with curiosity as he pressed his forehead against hers. Athena smiled, pressing her lips to his head as an answer. She
then got up from the bed and casually sauntered over to the wardrobe, picking out a basic pair of black pants with a formal white blouse. While she was picking her clothes from the hangers and shelves she felt his hands on the outsides of her thighs, bringing her back towards the bed so he could kiss the small of her back.

Athena yelped as she lost her balance, falling back into his lap unceremoniously. She tried to brace her hands on opposite side of him but he already had his arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her into him while kissing her cheek. “Be careful! You don’t want to fall this early in the morning.” *It might be too late for that.* She thought, turning her face and kissing him on the tip of the nose before escaping his grasp and grabbing the pair of pants she had dropped.

“It would be a lot easier if somebody was more cooperative with the morning. I’m not strong enough to fight you off so I need a little help here or else we will never leave.” He put his hands up in defeat, his eyes never leaving her body as she struggled to pull the freshly tailored pants up her legs. She put her hands on before messing with the blouse so she could just leave when she was done; plus the floor was cold probably no thanks to his magical presence. Solas collected his shirt from the nightstand on his side and put it on in a smooth gesture. Athena caught one last look at his bare chest before, instantly looking away when he tried to catch her admiring his form. He smirked, pulling the wolf necklace over his shirt and patting it into place.

“We are running late. Allow me to fetch some breakfast? Something portable for the road perhaps?” She looked up packing her chest, nodding feverishly while realizing she had stopped halfway in buttoning up her shirt. It was designed to nearly go all the way up to her chin. Athena promptly said ‘fuck that’ and buttoned up past her black chest wrappings, but that was it. She needed to breathe and high-necked shirts always made her feel claustrophobic. As Solas was about to leave the room she scurried over to him, nearly tripping over her lute, kissing him on the cheek.

“Just one of the breads should tide me over. Thank you, Solas.”

He slowed her by capturing her chin with his hand, lightly brushing his lips over hers before leaving without another word. It took a few moments to collect everything, including her frantic thoughts, and rush out of the room with her lute over her shoulder and with Kain at her side. There was already an attendant there to help bring her things down to where the large Inquisition party was getting packed and started. The moment she descended the stairs from her tower she was greeted by a magical slap in the body that was made of pure heat.

Athena paused, her eyes scanning the group to find its source. Dorian was standing with his arms crossed over his chest, an annoyed expression on his face. *That must be it.*

“Do you know what I heard this morning? From Sera of all people!”
She chuckled, trying to bring him into a good-morning embrace but he pushed her back, a sliver of actual anger lighting his voice. Prince looked over his shoulder from his position in the group to see if she was okay and she waved him off with a quick gesture.

“Fucking. Sera. Athena. Maker help me I thought we were friends, family almost. I feel betrayed.”

The Tevinter looked particularly groomed that morning and she made sure to save a compliment for later when she was warming him back up.

“I’m sorry, love, it wasn’t supposed to be announced that way. Otherwise yes, you would have been the first to know. Will you forgive me?”

She plead with him, taking a step closer to where she was nearly nose to nose with him. He scoffed, rolling his eyes before dropping his facade to bring her into a hug. She chuckled into his chest, wrapping her arms around his lower back.

“Of course I do. Now if there are anymore scandals - I demand you come straight to me first, alright?”

They separated and he finally broke into a smile, which caused Athena to rub the back of her neck and fight off a blush since he now knew like everyone else knew. The teasing would be endless. Solas appeared at her side, silently handing her one of the hearty breads they had in baskets in the main dining hall. With a sheepish smile, she put the bread in her mouth to free up her hands so she could stroke Prince’s mane before climbing onto the saddle. Once she up there she bit off a large chunk of bread and cherished in the taste of the sweet and salty pastry. The group was about ready to go, the bulk of them on their mounts while the carts carrying their chests of clothes and necessities moved on ahead.

The last people to show up were the Inner Council and Rathein, who was dressed her most formal of attires with a freshly trimmed haircut and shaved sides. Bull smiled when he saw her and that little bit of affection brought a warmth to Athena’s heart. The Qunari mercenary was a giant teddy bear if people could get past what he looked like. Once Rathein was mounted on her horse the entire party moved forward. The Inner Council was at her back and the rest of them followed. Vivienne seemed content near the front of the group, no doubt she wanted to be close to where the real power was. Which left Cassandra, Solas, Dorian, and Athena in the back to keep each other content.

It didn’t take long for them to descend the mountain and join the Imperial Highway, where there were carriages waiting for those who wanted them. Athena refused the offer, looking inside the cramped albeit fancy things. Josephine attempted to hide her frown but she smiled. “Are you going to be joining us, Lady Athena?”

She shrugged looking down to the Ambassador while patting Prince’s side. “It has been a while
since I’ve rode with my friends here and I can feel a few members of the Plains Pack close by. I think you would rather have me separated from the group if I’m going to talk to them. Unless... you want me to invite the pack of wolves here? Allow me to scout. I will join you in those boxes with wheels after first camp in the morning.”

Vivienne scoffed across from Josephine, looking out the window of the carriage with an unamused expression. The Ambassador quickly reconsidered, shaking her head before shutting the door. While everyone else took their time in loading the chests on the back of the carriages Athena moved with Prince down the highway a few paces, her eyes on the edge of the horizon, feeling for any enemies.

The whispers of the extended pack grew louder as they left Skyhold. Claw and the original six led them to the tree line before returning to their patrols in the surrounding forest of the castle. She hoped to maybe see Fang and introduce him to Kain while he was running by her side. She also had a feeling that Josephine hadn’t informed Gaspard’s people that she was bringing a full sized black wolf to stay with her for the evening.

Boy wouldn’t they be surprised.

Athena looked over her shoulder, catching Solas and Dorian getting their carriage ready. The two men looked to her with different smiles. The Tevinter winked at her and wiggled his fingers towards her while Solas raised a brow in her direction, a smirk of affection playing on his lips. Could the Dread Wolf sense her impending shift? Could he hear the call of the wild swirling within her head, fueling the beating of her heart? Prince could. He gave her a small buck to get her from his back and closer to the ground.

_Run, Athena._ Prince’s voice echoed within her mind with the memory of Solas’s words at the edge of Crestwood. Knowing her friend’s eyes were still on her she began to run. The wonderful brown mount sprinted with her until she jumped into the air, losing her mind to the pack and shifting into the stark white furred wolf that brought her a sense of joy. When she landed, she looked over her shoulder towards the pair. Solas was smiling with pride on his way into the carriage while Dorian’s eyes widened, his hand going to the back of his head while a string of what she was assuming was Tevinter curses fell from her lips.

The steed called for her, anxious for an unbridled run and so she followed, chasing him into the plains at the edge of the highway while the carriages began their travel to Halamshiral.

Chapter End Notes
Bitter best friend Dorian is bitter. I love writing him. He's such a charmer!

As always, thank you for all of your comments! :) They make my day.

Song: Americano - Lady Gaga
Meeting with Fang had been eventful. The alpha of the plains pack and Kain spent their time getting to know one another, exchanging a few growls of warning when one would get closer to Athena than the other. The white-furred wolf rolled her eyes, snipping her teeth at them both as they were getting ready to return to the highway. Fang stated they were slowly getting rid of the demons in the area and they were able to clear an area so an Inquisition soldier could burn the body pit. Good, one less thing for Rathein to do. The shifter nodded and rubbed her cheek alongside her friends, urging them to get out of sight of the highway. She spent the rest of the day in that form, running in between Prince’s legs and enjoying the warm sun on her fur while avoiding her responsibilities as a member of the Inner Council. The idea of planning for the Game made her itch.

The Inquisition set up their large camp as soon as the sun went down. Dorian and Solas thankfully didn’t kill each other during their travels in the days. When she trotted up to them at camp they were discussing different spell tactics, Dorian making a comment on how a certain move made his teeth taste funny. Athena gave a wolfish smirk, walking up to her friend and sitting at the Tevinter’s feet with a tilted head. He almost jumped, running a hand through his hair.

“Maker – Athena. I forgot that was you. Come back and join us, why don’t you? They’ll be serving dinner soon and I am not letting you eat it out of the bowl like a Mabari.”

The sound that came from her maw was a mixture between a scoff and a growl, but thankfully it ended up resembling a laugh enough for him to smile. Solas ran his hand idly across the top of her back, bringing her fur on edge as a shiver ran from her nose to her spine. Cullen’s arrival brought a mischievous smile to her eyes and the elf caught it, nodding while standing to the side. The Commander looked at Kain then to the white wolf, confusion riddling itself into his features.

“Wait if Prince is over there and Kain is here. . . where is Athena? Maker you two – “

Oh! He didn’t realize yet. This made her excitement grow larger as she took a step back, using her magic to pulse forward for her to stand a pace in front of the Commander. In a smug gesture, she had her hands clasped behind her back with a wicked smirk on her lips. “Yes, Commander?” He jumped back with a cry of surprise, face pale while he cursed under his breath. She laughed with Dorian while Kain walked over to help his shocked friend by licking his gloved hand. Cullen’s hand was on top of his sword and she raised her hands up in defense, tears stinging her eyes while she continued to giggle. “Sorry, Cullen. I couldn’t help it. You should have seen your face.”
“Be nice, alpha!” Bull called over from the fire with a hand cupping his mouth. Rathein was laughing at his side, pointing in their general direction with matching tears in her eyes. Blackwall was chuckling with them, his rich and gruff voice bringing a smile to her face.

“I heard the rumors but I didn’t actually expect, well, that.” The blonde-haired soldier gestured to her up and down and she flicked her hair over her shoulders, smiling with pride.

“What? Is that not a trick I should break out at the ball?”

“Absolutely not.” Cassandra and Josephine chimed in unison. The Ambassador was stark white but Cassandra had a bit of a smirk to her lips while she ate her dinner, eyes bouncing back and forth between Athena and the Commander. The reaction of the women brought a low rumble of a chuckle from Cullen. He visibly relaxed and pet Kain behind the ears to regain his bearings. Solas brought her over to the campfire and Dorian sat on her other side. She suddenly felt like there was an odd battle for attention going on but she ignored it, silently eating the meal Solas handed her wordlessly. There were small shared communications between them that didn’t need words and she was infinitely thankful.

During her hunt in the day he would occasionally pull down the window of the carriage and pulse his magic out, looking for her. She would feel the familiar cold call and howl in return, alerting him of her location and that she was fine. The small check-ins made her feel cared about, tingly almost. It was a strange sensation but for the first time in weeks, months, she felt like the bottom wasn’t about to fall out from under her. Rathein and her were working jointly on Halamshiral and there was a man who cared about her. Maybe things would finally be okay for a day.

The group ate in a busy silence but Josephine spoke up first. “Athena, I have been hearing you have quite the talent for music?”

Leliana hummed from her corner of the fire, a curious and delighted look in her eye. “Yes! I have heard the same thing. Might we have a sampling? I would not doubt that the court will ask you to perform. Bards and minstrels are custom at these kinds of events.”

Athena fought to not roll her eyes, swallowing down a piece of overcooked meat with a shrug of her shoulders. Kain obediently dug through her tent and brought out a lute and laid it in front of her. Traitor! She thought to him, grabbing his maw and kissing him on the tip of the nose. He exhaled in a quick motion that nearly mimicked a sneeze but she knew he did it when he was trying to be snarky. She raised the lute to her hands and suddenly felt a swell of magic within her chest. Did Inspiration add something else when she “taught” her the tango in the Fade?
With a twist of her lips to the side she suddenly smiled, looking to the ever-hopeful Ambassador with a wicked expression. “Let’s dedicate this one to our host tomorrow evening. Can we all agree on that?”

Rathein caught onto her tone, humming in response while sipping back on her mug of ale. Bull had packed a cask of his favorite drink to keep them satisfied during their travels that Athena would be staying far away from. The Qunari looked between the two women and smiled, bringing up his own mug with an expectant wiggle of his eyebrows. With that she took in a deep breath, starting a pleasant-sounding string of notes on her instrument.

“Look inside. Look inside your tiny mind, now look a bit harder.”

Already the group snickered and Josephine’s face faltered, a curious smirk remaining on her lips.

“Cause we’re so uninspired, so sick and tired of all of the hatred you harbor. So, you say, it’s not okay to be gay.” Dorian scoffed playfully and nudged her with his elbow. She shrugged in return and continued, ignoring the pressing look Solas was giving her.

“Well I think you’re just evil. You’re just some racist who can’t tie my laces. Your point of view is medieval.” She held out the note and led up with a flurry of notes, winking towards the Inquisitor before reaching the punchline of the song.

“Fuck you. Fuck you very, very much.”

The entire group save for Vivenne erupted into some sort of laughter. Josephine broke her composure and chuckled into her hand, turning her face away to hide the expression. Leliana even was smiling, shaking her head back and forth without objecting to the song. Everyone else was in some sort of deep-throated laughter while still trying to listen.

“Cause we hate what we do and we hate your whole crew, so please don’t stay in touch.” She continued the chorus again and decided to stand, walking around the fire and the backs of her companions.

“Do you get, do you get a kick out of being small minded? You want to be like your father. It’s approval you’re after well that’s not how you find it.”
She overheard Josephine muttering a ‘sweet Andraste’ underneath her poor attempts at hiding her giggles. Leliana smiled at the lyric, giving a shrug at the lyric and confirming that it was true. Athena finally glossed her gaze over to meet Solas’s. . .and there was a swell of pride in his eyes that almost caused her hands to falter on the strings. Instantly she blushed, holding his eyes for a second longer before continuing on through the list. Vivienne was doing her very best to ignore the scenario, turning her nose up at the ground while reading through a book on Orlesian history. Athena made the decision to skip towards one of the ending verses, sitting next to the First Enchantress with a large thump. The mage failed to hide her sneer as she scooted a bit away from her while turning the page of her book.

“You say. You think we need to go to war. Well you’re already in one.” The group made sounds of agreement, looking to one another in anticipation of the next set of lyrics. “Cause its people like you who need to get slew. No one wants your opinion.” This time she made sure Vivienne caught her gaze. Before the woman could respond she pushed from the seat with a strong push of her legs, finishing of the sound with a final round of “fuck you’s”. When she was done, she made an exaggerated strum of the string and extended both arms into a bow.

The group clapped for her, Rathein putting two fingers in her mouth to whistle when she wasn’t giggling. Athena returned to her seat next to Solas and leaned into him with a beaming smile on her face. He instinctively put his arm around her in response, flicking his gaze down to her with nothing but care in his eyes. “Is that what you meant, Lady Montilyet? Do you think he would like that?”

Cullen broke in with a scoff, smirking while resting his head on top of his hands. “Absolutely. Don’t you think he would enjoy that, Lady Josephine?”

The Ambassador cleared her throat and tried to regain her official composure. “Your voice was lovely, Madame Sorcìere and your playing matched it. However, I do not thing that specific choice of song would be wise. At least not until we are no longer being hosted by him.” The last sentence was spoke more under her breath but it made Bull smirk nonetheless. Her calling Athena the title of the court brought a twitch of discomfort to her lips while she put her lute away. She supposed it was something she would have to get used it. It was just something that could be negative or positive depending on what connotation and inflection of the voice was added to it.

Either way, she would have to wear the title with pride until they were out of Orlais. Rathein dismissed them for the evening and Athena had to giggle at the impatient tone in her voice with Bull’s hand at her back. The two were getting quite touchy but she hadn’t seen any signs of a dragon necklace yet on either one of them. She stood and stretched up towards the sky, sighing in relief at the feeling of her back popping in a few tight places. She placed a hand on her lower back and rubbed it, wincing when her finger rubbed over a sensitive knot.

“Are you alright?” Solas asked, standing with her and assessing her up and down with a quick
She winced once more and relaxed into a normal posture, a hand still guarding her back. “Yeah I’m fine. My back just tends to get tight if I spend too much time with the pack. It will go away by the morning though.” He shook his head at her stubbornness, leading them to their tent. Kain made a comment about hunting within her mind and ran off into the plains, staying within mind’s reach of her while she lay belly-down on her bedroll. That twisted her back into an even worse position and she hissed, clawing at the roll as her breath was stolen from her. “Bloody hell I’m not old enough to be feeling like this.”

“Relax, Athena. I have something that might help. May I?” He gripped on her shirt and pulled up and she was helpless to fight him, nodding into her pillow as he pulled up her blouse, which was now dirtied, and undershirt until his hands met her bare skin. He palpated around her spine, rubbing softly on her skin until he found the knot that brought another curse word from her lips. It apparently wasn’t completely muffled by the pillow because she heard Dorian from his tent next to theirs.

“Andraste’s tits – we just settled in. Can’t you two wait?”

“Shut it, Sparkles, or I’ll cut your clothes up in your sleep!” Her voice was strained and pointed but she had enough energy to snap her face from the pillow and shoot the verbal jab towards him.

“You wouldn’t dare.” He mumbled under his breath, falling back into silence while Solas kept a finger on the knot in her back to dig through his pack with the other hand. When he found a salve, he dipped his fingers into the jar, working the mixture onto her back while cooling it with his aura. It was difficult to contain the moan of relief from her lips but she managed by biting her tongue and burying her face into the pillow. He positioned himself to where he was sitting on the backs of her thighs, using his body weight to press into the knot and massage it out.

“You must have been doing some vigorous activity to earn an ache like this.” He mused, looking up to her while pulsing his aura over her skin in rhythm with the working of his hand on her back. Athena twitched and arched her back under his touch, turning her head to the side while letting out a controlled breath of strain. The pain was slowly subsiding but it was still tender to his touch. Her eyes fluttered open in between steadied breaths to see him working on her back, eyes focused with lips partially parted while he worked. Suddenly the ache in her back was gone and she was more fascinated with how delicate he was being despite the hungry look in his eyes as he worked on her back. A more familiar ache began to grow in the pit of her belly, the insides of her thighs tightening seeing him working on her.

“Nothing out of the ordinary. I think Prince might have caught me with his hoof when I was running with him but it didn’t hurt at the time. Thank you, I definitely feel better.” She looked up
to him with a smile and he met her gaze, nodding slowly while rubbing in the last of the salve from his hands. Once he was done he slowly moved off her, using one last pulse of magic to ease the tightness in her muscles. She pushed from the ground with a sigh of relief, arching upwards like a cobra to stretch out her back. He was slipping off his shirt, gently placing it at the foot of his bedroll before.

She could feel the heat rising to her face but she pushed herself to rest on her knees while she removed her blouse and undershirt, throwing them carelessly near the entrance of the tent while flopping onto her back, working out of her pants while twisting her lips to the side in concentration. The hunt and the day’s ride had left her pants somewhat sticky to her thighs but eventually she kicked them off, laying on her roll with a small sound of content as the cool air ran over her skin.

She heard a sharp intake of air from the other side of the tent, her gaze confidently rolling over to catch him staring at her with lips parted and eyes wanting. His eyes started at her face and slowly trailed down her body and with a small chuckle from her throat she twisted her wrist and used a pulse of magic to extinguish the candles around the room. Solas laid at her back, wrapping his arms around her while kissing the back of her neck in slow, controlled movements.

There was want, need, in his actions and that only fueled her confidence. Athena smiled arching her back against him and letting out a content sigh. He was persistent on her neck, giving light kisses and at one point he playfully bit down on her shoulder to elicit a response from her.

“Solas!” She whispered in scorn, rolling over to see he had a wickedly satisfied smirk on his face. He gripped her face in her hands gently, stroking his thumbs over her cheekbones before bringing her lips against his. Athena made a soft sound of surprise before playfully pushing against his bare chest. “The last design I saw for my dress proved to be very revealing so I think love marks must wait until after the ball.” She kept her voice to a whisper, her lips ghosting over his while she spoke to keep the sound they were making as close to silence as possible. He dropped his hands to her waist to pull them forward so he could roll his hips against her body.

She could feel his yearning for her against her hips, eyes widening in surprise which only caused him to grin, angling his head so he could whisper hot, breathy words into her ear. “Is that an invitation?”

Athena leaned her head onto his shoulder, bringing her hands to rest up against her chest to keep them from shaking. Her head felt from dizzy from the sudden increase in her heartbeat and wanting. He nudged the tip of his nose against her ear, waiting for an answer. She slowly nodded against him, tilting her head to try and find his gaze even in the dark of the night. “I suppose it is. After the ball. Otherwise I’m afraid we would miss it entirely.”

Chapter End Notes
This was also another chapter that I was giggling while writing but I love some of the group interactions and chemistry.

As always, thank you for the lovely comments and kudos. You all make my heart full. <3

Song: Fuck You - Lily Allen
Josephine was the one to wake them all in the morning, her kind accented voice echoing through the camp. Athena groaned, gripping onto the wolf bone necklace that had become her piece of security in her sleep. She rubbed her cheek on his arm, trying to shake remnants of the Fade from her eyes and mind. Solas took in a sharp breath as he roused from sleep, pressing a soft kiss of greeting on her forehead while tightening his arms around her one last time. With regret in her heart, she sat up from his embrace, looking down to see that thankfully her bindings were still in place and there was enough light to see her chest of clothes near the front of the tent. These tents were larger than the typical ones for camping. Rathein and the Inner Council had packed cots off of the ground to sleep in but Athena didn’t think that far ahead.

She crawled a few paces to the chest, throwing it open with a groan. There was a halter collared top of magnificent greens and whites on top. Underneath were black pants with a matching green stripe up the thighs with slit skirts to flow on top. She placed the objects on top of the chest, standing up while summoning up the patience that would be required for that day. Josephine said she would need to ride in the carriages today but Athena refused. She could get in the boxes when they were close enough to Gaspard’s estate. Prince would not be tied up to pull their belongings like a pack mule. With a crack of her neck she looked over her shoulder and saw that Solas was getting dressed for the day as well. The others weren’t required to put on a character like she so their basic day to day clothes worked.

For a moment, she was jealous of them.

“Shit I don’t even know if I can wear my bandings with this thing.” She held up the garment and looked at the window of cleavage in the front, showing it to the elf with an exasperated expression. He looked to it and smirked, shaking his head while his hands clasped his chest shut.

“Are you going to be able to do the lacings by yourself?” He asked and she already knew the answer from the teasing in his tone. Athena walked over to him and swatted at him with the fabric in her hands, winking at him in a tease.

“You are just trying to sneak a peek. I see through you, Solas.” This brought a laugh from his lips and the sound warmed her heart, a faint blush of adoration coloring her cheeks. He walked over to her and rested his hands on her hips, thumbs brushing against the bare skin of her waist on the line above her small clothes.

“You are beautiful, Athena. I will not steal looks at what you do not wish me to see.” There was flirtation and sincerity in his voice, his gaze keeping on hers instead of traveling down her skin in a gesture of respect. She smiled turning around while sliding on the medieval torture piece of clothing. Once it was over her head and in a place where her breasts were covered, she undid the
tightly tucked fabric at the side and pulled out the bandings from the front. At the sight of how much Vivienne wanted her exposed she groaned, rolling her eyes and throwing the bandings to the ground. Solas chuckled behind her, stepping forward and taking the strings into his hands. He did small tugs to pull on the corset, looking for any signs of discomfort in her face before moving down to the next row. There was a subtle expertise in his movements and it caused her to arch a brow.

“Exactly how many corsets have you put on, Solas?” She felt his fingers stumble for a moment before he found his rhythm again. Athena glanced over her shoulder and saw a slight blush of embarrassment on his cheeks.

“It is a basic process. There are some mage boots and harnesses that require the same threading.” His voice was calm and cadenced like he was giving a lecture. She smirked, returning to face the front again with her arms resting by her side.

“Quick recovery, hahren.” The subtle jab at his age brought another chuckle from him. He quickly tied a small bow at the top of the laces and then rested his hands on top of her shoulders, leaning forward and kissing her cheek.

“Is that too tight?” She looked down, twisting her body in each direction before shaking her head. The pants were easy to slip on and before long she was fully dressed. There was a small hand mirror in the side of her chest so she combed her fingers with her hair until the waves and subtle curls behaved. The pair looked to each other with a smirk on the corners of their lips before exiting the tent. The camp was already in full activity by the time they arrived. Dorian and Blackwall were trying to fit in a quick game of Diamondback while the ladies were discussing the carriage order and assigned who would sit where. The moment they left the tent some of the Inquisition soldiers collapsed the rent and began running things to the horses.

Kain was asleep by Dorian, basking in the sun’s glow. Athena sent out a pulse of magic and both the Tevinter and the wolf looked over with curious gazes. The black-furred companion came to her side, pressing his nose against her palm until she could lean down within reach of his kisses and whines. “Have a good hunt, my heart?” She asked her friend, the wolf nodded and leaned his head into her touch one more time before returning to his napping place by the fire.

Josephine walked over with her clipboard in hand, an uneasy expression on her face. Athena watched the Ambassador’s eyes follow Kain around the camp and she chuckled. “I’m not bringing him to Halamshiral with me. Do not worry, Josephine. He can either stay with the soldiers or sleep in my carriage until I return.”

The woman visible relaxed, making a small note on her scroll. “Thank Andraste.” She then turned around to everyone and announced for them to get ready. There were a series of grunts and groans
but eventually everyone fell into place in their carriages from the day before. Solas gave her a final kiss on the cheek before joining Dorian. To tease, the Tevinter ran over and kissed Athena on her other cheek before shutting the carriage door. Already Athena could feel their magic having a battle of egos and she rolled her eyes.

“Are you not getting into a carriage, Athena?” Cassandra was one of the last ones to prepare. The soldier looked like her armor was freshly polished and the braid across her head was tight; she must have hated these types of things as much as her.

“Not until I have to. I want to be. . . .me for as long as possible.” The Seeker smiled, crossing her arms over her chest while looking at the carriages, horses, and the soldiers.

“I understand. I always preferred the life of a warrior compared to a noble woman’s. These pleasantries and dresses; they are a waste of time. Enjoy your ride while you can, Athena. I will see you once we get to the Estate.” Cassandra touched the top of Athena’s arm before joining Leliana in their assigned place. Josephine rolled her eyes at her, sticking her head out of the window to call out: “When you do decide to join us, you will be with the Inner Council at the front with Commander Cullen.” The Ambassador then shut the window and Athena felt free to walk over and load onto Prince.

The saddle was warm from the sunrise and there was an inviting wind on the horizon. Without waiting for another cue: they rode.

When the time came to get in the carriage Athena was already unhappy. There were more and more people in masks on the road the farther they got into Orlais. They were passing different vendors, farmers, and diplomats that were on their way to the grand ball in Halamshiral and it just intensified the feeling of dread pitting itself within her shoulders and stomach. Prince could feel it as well. When she slid from his saddle he made a point to press his forehead to his, urging the word Safe into her head. Athena patted the side of his neck, straightening out her shirt before dipping into the seat across from the Commander, who was reading a list of soldiers by candlelight.

“Working hard I see, Commander?”
She sat with a straight posture that would make Vivienne proud with her hands in her lap, trying to desperately conform to the image of a proper lady before she got in front of the Grand Duke Gaspard. Normally she did not have a good poker face but it would be vital to keep it straight during their first impressions. The blonde-haired solder smirked, showing her the list of soldiers with an arched brow.

“It’s never ending. These are my men I have chosen to be part of our forces for the evening. They departed from Skyhold the evening after we left so they won’t be arriving until the morning.”

Her eyes glossed over the names of the soldiers and she smiled when she saw Loranil’s name on the list. Athena pointed to him, looking up to Cullen. “He’s good. We’re going to need him. I would have him around the empty carriages that Josephine is bringing.”

Cullen’s instantly turned to one of curiosity. He leaned back in his chair, resting his arm up on the top of the seat. “I meant to ask you about that. Why are doing that? It seems like a waste of resources.”

She controlled her sneer, sitting tall while rolling her shoulders back. “Fine. I will tell you. There are those at Halamshiral that would rather serve the Inquisition than Orlais. We can provide safety to those who have been scorned by people who have sworn to protect them.”

He shrugged, looking over the list once more. There was an awkward silence between the two and Athena reached forward, snatching the list from his hands and putting it at her side. He reached for it then frowned, sitting back in defeat. “We need to prepare, Lady Athena.”

She scoffed. “Don’t get formal with me. You work too hard and I would like to spend some time talking about things other than Orlais until we get there and I’m shoved into a tiny box with a mask.” There was obvious frustration in her voice and that caused him to relax with a sigh, gesturing towards her with a flicker of annoyance.

“Fine then. What would you like to talk about?”

Athena paused, biting on the skin on the inside of her cheek before smiling with a wicked grin. “You have to tell me. When did you kiss an elf?”

“Maker -!”
They arrived at the front of Gaspard’s estate hours later after many probing conversations of past lovers and his training in the Templar order. If it was a drinking game to get him to blush, she would have been sloshed when the Orlesian servants opened their carriage doors. The Inquisition filed out from their cramped places and stretched, trying to get the grime out of their eyes before the messenger arrived and spoke to Rathein.

“The Grand Duke Gaspard du Chalons has requested your attendance at dinner. While we dine we will unload your belongings into your respective rooms.”

Rathein paused, looking to the rest of the group with an uneasy expression. “Do we not have time to prepare? It has been a long day of riding and I can speak for my team when I say we would love a chance to be at our best selves for our gracious host.” Athena stilled herself, reigning in her annoyance while slowly making her way to where the Inquisitor was standing.

The messenger did not pause. “Because of the early rise for the ball tomorrow, there isn’t much time, Inquisitor. Apologies.” He turned on his perfectly polished heel and walked into the estate with other servants on his heels. Josephine sighed, scratching the back of her head while Athena rolled her eyes.

“He wishes to catch us off guard and assert his dominance early.”

The Nightingale confirmed her theory with a nod and then Rathein and Athena shared a look of mischief. If he was already starting the mind games it would make their plans for the next night that much better. She looked down to her clothes, smoothing out her skirts and readjusting her corset to have the perfect window of cleavage that wasn’t too akin to a harlot but also not too close to the Divine. “We can’t let that happen, Rathein. Are you ready?”

The Inquisitor nodded, gesturing to the inner party. Before they all went inside she walked to Solas’s side, glancing around subtly before hanging her hand next to his, allowing them to brush for a moment before they would have to stay silent about their affections. There was something about the mystery, the secret of it all that gave her a small bit of excitement. But their relationship was so new that excitement was overshadowed by the dread of having to not touch him for the next day. He must have felt the same because he allowed their hands to brush again, his eyes flicking over to meet hers before he smirked and clasped his hands behind his back in the pose that was all too familiar to her.
Athena took in a deep breath, rolled back her shoulders, and took long confident strides to meet up with the Inner Council before entering the estate.
First Turn of the Game

The dinner was set at a long-table where everyone could be seated around it. Gaspard chose to be in the middle of the table on one of the longer sides with Rathein at his left and Athena on his right, which annoyed her slightly but she kept it hidden. When he greeted her, he kissed the top of her hand and she never wanted to cut off a piece of her body until then. For the Inquisitor, it was a noble bow and it set the tone that he did see the two of them differently and had different purposes for them both. When he was in the middle of the bow, the two women exchanged a knowing look before nodding and taking their places on either side of him.

Bull sat himself across from Rathein so he could watch her and Solas took the same cue, sitting across from Athena with a blank yet friendly expression. He had returned to the sheltered character of the scholar. Knowing who he truly was, Athena saw this as another mask that he wore. There was a part of her that was worried that his care for her was yet another mask, a guise that only the Dread Wolf could pull off. But she wasn’t Lavellan and their story was different. It had to be. There was a sense of home when she was with him now and if that was taken away... her foundation would be broken. To quell those fears, she took a sip of the wine and looked at him over the glass. It was like he knew but he looked up from his own polite conversation with Bull and met her gaze.

There was a small twitch of his lips but he kept the smile contained, looking back to Bull and continuing their conversation on the methods of the Qun. Athena was counting down the seconds until the first course arrived when she heard the slimy voice on her left.

“Lady Athena, there are so many rumors surrounding you. I must confess, you have the courts in a state of intrigue.”

She steeled herself, shoving all bits of her typical reactionary sarcasm and modern-day into a small box inside her, presenting the polite smirk she had seen Vivienne give so many soldiers and curious minds. “My dear Duke, you must tell me what you have heard. It would do me an honor if I knew what to expect before entering the Game tomorrow.” There was a subtle flirtation to her actions. When she spoke, she leaned in slightly towards him and put her hand on the table between them, catching his eyes underneath the mask.

He nodded, taking a sip from his drink, which she assumed was something strong to cover the smell of smoke on his breath. “They are wild, crazy rumors. I have trouble believing them myself. They say you run with the wolves and can shift into one under the full moon. My soldiers said they saw you running with a large pack in the Plains next to those ancient wolf statues.” Athena raised a brow, sitting back with a satisfied smirk on her face.

“I do not require a full moon. I would think your soldiers would be more concerned with the
undead conquering your lands than the whereabouts of a single member of the Inquisition. It is a wonder my troops have had to work so hard.”

The Duke did not react to her jab, quickly returning with another question. “Your troops?”

Athena hummed in response, breaking his gaze for the first time while withdrawing her hand into her lap. His eyes followed, much to her internal dismay, so she took in a deep breath to draw his gaze back up. The chevalier gave a small chuckle and she took the opportunity to flick her eyes towards Josephine who was seated at the other end of the table with Leliana, Cullen, and Vivienne. The Ambassador gave her an encouraging smile and there was a delighted twinkle that let her know she was doing well.

Damn. She was hoping to piss him off.

“They also say that you are not from this world at all?” There was now a grave curiosity in his voice. He leaned towards her, his voice low and she could feel his hand move towards her thigh. She kept her face flat but her pulse quickened in her throat. Without drawing attention to the gesture, she pushed his hand back onto his side of the chair and clicked her tongue against the back of her throat, leaning towards him and speaking softly.

“The throne is not where you are reaching, Gaspard.” There was no smile, no flirtation to her voice in that statement but she smiled at the servant who reached between them and put a soup on their plates. There was a familiar chill on her skin and she fought to not look at him across the table. “That rumor is also correct. I was expecting something spicier to come from the players of the great Game. How disappointing.” Her voice was colder than she expected, sharper on the consonants while she took her first bite of soup. It had a mushroom base, which she normally despised, but it was an improvement on campfire food.

“Tell me of your world, Lady Athena. What are your warriors like?” There was a swell of pride in his chest and she could tell he was fishing for compliments, praying that hers would be weak compared to him and that his troops would be the most impressive thing she had ever seen. Although his battle strategy was unmatched, at least according to Cullen, she was not impressed.

“Our warriors? My world’s wars are not the best table conversation.”

“Wait – you haven’t talked about this yet, Alpha. What do you mean?” Bull cut in, Rathein instantly shooting him a sharp look from across the table. He ignored her, his eyes focused on Athena. She could see the wild excitement behind his eyes so she focused on him, completely ignoring the man on her left.
“Wars in my home are messy and unnecessary. You have magic here but we have...technology. Let me put it in these terms: If I had my world’s weapons at my disposal, I could level the entire city of Val Royeaux without leaving my room at Skyhold and plants would not be able to grow there for generations. We try to avoid war the best we can because too many lives have been lost on egos and beliefs.”

There was an intentional insult to Orlais in there but her voice was grim and cold. They were all wrapping their heads around the idea of a nuclear bomb and it set in on each of their faces. Their pleasant faces dropped and soon she was the only one eating her soup without a thought in the world. Gaspard scoffed, sitting back in his chair while shaking his head. “War is always messy. It is why I am hoping this one will end tomorrow. Any more death would be unnecessary.”

Athena rolled her neck, keeping her hands flat in her lap even though she wanted to clench her fists and glare at him. He was such a hypocrite. Bull caught onto that too because his nostrils flared and he was suddenly very focused on his conversation with Solas. As she reached for her wine she thought that would be the end of it but the Grand Duke cleared his throat before asking her softly.

“Are you married, Lady Athena?”

This time she stilled, taking a larger sip of wine down her throat before putting the glass down on the table. She could feel eyes on her so she did the expected thing. She feigned a blush, avoiding his gaze while tilting her head in what would come off as a motion of embarrassment but for her it was pure annoyance. “No, not married, Duke. Why ever do you ask?”

The smile he had was disgusting, like he was hiding some deep secret they could not see through. “There are rumors that you do not only run with the wolves, Lady Athena.” The inflection in his voice put a pit in her stomach and the wolf within her wanted to snarl back at him and snap in his face. Instead, she took in a deep breath through her nose and rolled her eyes to look up at Solas. There was a clench in his jaw, a subtle defensive posture in his body as he leaned towards Cassandra and spoke with her. That sight gave her pleasure and the confidence to keep moving forward through the conversation.

“How crude of you, Duke. Here I thought you despised the Great Game yet here I find myself sitting next to one of its players.” The subtext of his words screamed that he was calling her a bitch, the wolf term. It was obvious from the looks of the Inner Council at the end of the table, especially Cullen whose eyes had gone wide. “If you believe such rumors then you have met my expectations.” There was an audible gasp from the end of the table and she would venture a guess that it was Josephine.
The Duke leaned towards her with a smug smile on his face. “Then I believe I have not.”

They sat back from each other and he yet again attempted to place his hand on her thigh. This time he succeeded for half of a second, gripping the top of her leg before she dug her nails into the top of his hand as a warning. There was heat in her touch as subconsciously she called her magic to bare, keeping her face plain while she removed him from her leg. To keep the insult going further, she turned in her chair and leaned in towards him close enough to whisper, smiling to hint to the table that she was flirting but her voice was colder than ice.

“You may think me a bitch but I roll over for no man, Gaspard. You forget yourself.” He raised a glass to his lips, speechless as the soup bowls were cleared away and the main course was brought in. It appeared to be some variety of game. The meat looked tough and she eyed it carefully. Rathein was the polite one, her voice chipper and perky as she watched the two in their duel of the Game.

“This meal looks delicious, Grand Duke. What is it?”

He hummed in response and cut off a piece, rotating the piece so she could see the pink inside. “Halla.”

Athena couldn’t help the roll of her magic that went over her skin, eyes closed to take in a deep focused breath. The Orlesian on her left continued and there was a blatant teasing in his voice that he could not hide from her. “There are rumors to be a golden halla in the plains where my soldiers reside. Now that would taste divine.”

Her magic translated into a message for Kain, who was sleeping soundly within the carriage. *Tell the Plains pack. Get the Dalish from their encampment now and move them closer to Skyhold. They are not safe.* Kain stirred from his sleep, and she could feel him stand up while tilting her head to the sky. They all then heard the howl that resonated through the estate. Athena lent magic through her connection with Kain, giving his message fuel to reach some of the outlying wolves that were near the edges of Orlais.

“One of yours, Lady Athena?” The Grand Duke asked, placing the halla piece in his mouth with a slow, daring move. She pushed the halla to the side of her plate, picking at the vegetables with a wicked smile.

“Someone has to keep my bed warm at night, Grand Duke.” This brought a chuckle from Cullen who was immediately smacked on the arm by Cassandra. Gaspard frowned, his first break of the night, but everyone else at the table was relatively pleased. Thankfully the conversation turned into
more politics and she was able to tune out, focusing on everything but the halla on her plate while slowly sipping on the same glass of wine, refusing refills when they came around. By the end of the dessert it was obvious everyone was exhausted from the day’s travels.

Athena and Vivienne kept their postures up and the First Enchantress actually gave her a small head nod of recognition. Normally this small compliment from the Iron Lady would have delighted her but the travel from Skyhold left her patience sanded down and raw. When the Grand Duke stood from the table nobody hesitated in joining him. “Thank you, my guests, for allowing me to host you tonight. I look forward to what we can accomplish at the ball tomorrow in our peace talks with the Empress. Commander, would you like to join me in my smoking room?”

Cullen nodded quietly, separating from the group and meeting with the Grand Duke before leaving the room. Their host’s servants left the room with their hands full with dirty dishes and their cloth napkins. The moment they were all alone, Rathein sighed and visibly slumped, gripping the back of her chair to keep herself up. “Maker help me that was uncomfortable.”

Athena almost choked on the water she was sipping, eyes wide when she slammed down the cup and allowed the polite demeanor to fall from her face. “Uncomfortable for you? I will smack you where you stand, Rathein.” There was a playful warning in her voice but it was the first time the entire that she showed how truly bothered she was by the Duke’s advances. He was known to be an honorable man but she knew from reading that there were gray lines he liked to dance between. She went to tuck a stray curl behind her ear and it was then that she realized her hands were shaking. She thought while clenching her fist at her side.

The Inquisitor smirked and nodded with her head towards the door, gesturing for all of them to file out and go to their respective rooms. Solas slid to her side again, looking over to her with a concerned glance. She could feel his magic pressing against her side, wrapping up her arm like a snake before squeezing around her skin. The question within it was clear and it made her smile. Are you alright? She could feel him asking silently as the group dispersed through the halls. Athena thought for a moment but nodded in the end, replicating his magical touch with her own around his hand and up his arm.

“You two think you’re being subtle, don’t you?” Dorian’s sarcastic voice rang out from her other side as he shot her a quick wink of teasing.

“You know just as well as I do, Dorian, that subtlety and I do not get along.” Athena responded with a coy smile on her face. Solas stopped in front of his assigned room which down the hall from hers. Before he entered the room, he paused, his hand hovering over the door while his gaze slowly trailed up to hers. He kept in with the façade and stayed silent, his lips twitching into somewhat of a frown before he disappeared behind the closed door. Before she could even have a moment to mourn his absence, Rathein grabbed her hand and pulled her into their own room.
It was large, luxurious, and full of fineries but both women instantly flung themselves on the bed that was large enough for both to fit on. Athena arched her back off the bed and released the ribbon that Solas has tied to give herself room to breathe. Rathein rubbed her face into a pillow while murmuring loud enough to hear: “You ready for tomorrow?” They both made the silent decision to fall asleep in their traveling clothes, Rathein reaching a hand out for her and Athena gladly taking it before answering:

“I’m ready for it to be over with already. I don’t think they are ready for us.”
The next morning began as a whirlwind. Before Rathein and Athena even woke from their sleep, Vivienne burst through the doors with a team of stylists and seamstresses at her disposal. Athena rose form her pillow with her palm facing outwards, a spell summoning within its center to fire at the people who barged into their room unannounced. The Inquisitor rubbed her eyes with a corner of the sheet, groaning and flopping her head back onto the pillow when she saw that it was Madame de Fer standing there.

“Inquisitor. You will be getting ready in here with Josephine going over the plans. Sorciere, you will be next door with Leliana. Baths are already being drawn and you two need to be prepared for what is to come in the evening.”

The crust from her eyes finally faded and she was able to see that Vivienne was completely prepared for the ball in a gown that resembled the one she wore the first night they met. The First Enchantress was mask-less for the evening, a subtle nod to her position in the Inquisition instead of Orlais. The Iron Lady did not allow for another second to go by before she used her magic to send a chill through the sheets and get both ladies up with small sounds of protest. An unnamed woman shuffled Athena into the room next door, pulling at the laces on her back to undo the corset. She could smell the perfumes in the air from the bath, her eyes darting over to Leliana who was in the deep blue formal attire with the silver buttons and trim. Thankfully the red had been eliminated and there was no sash either. The formal attire ended up looking acceptable and Athena recognized this with a small hum before being shoved into the scalding hot water.

“Sleep well, Lady Athena?”

The Nightingale mused from the opposite end of the room. Before the attendant could begin scrubbing Athena’s back she shooed her away, snatching the brush from her hand before lathering it up with a soap and exfoliating every inch of her body. There was a different soap for her hair and she took the small moments underwater to collect her thoughts and begin hardening her resolve for the day. Although Rathein and Athena had prepared for almost every detail of the ball, things were bound to happen outside of the plan. Corypheus knew her, called her Fade-Walker, did that mean Duchess Florianne had separate plans for her as well? The thought put a sick feeling in her stomach.
but the next time she came up she cleared the water from her eyes and looked over to the Spy-
Master.

“Traveling always exhausts me so it was very easy for me to nearly slip into a coma last night. How about yourself?”

The attendant did not leave her be, rinsing the soaps from her hair and gesturing for her to raise from the bath while wrapping a thick sheet around her waist. Leliana’s eyes flicked up to look at her for a second, a ghost of a smile on her lips before she shrugged. “I was up most of the night reading over letters from my ravens. I do not require much sleep to perform my duties.”

Athena was seated in front of a chair in a vanity and the attendant began wrapping her hair up in medieval looking curlers that had small runes etched into their sides. Everything was happening in such a whirlwind she couldn’t keep track of what the runes looked like or their origin. A small container of lotion was set in front of her, the helper silently gesturing for her to put it on while she collected the small containers of make-up and products provided by Madame de Fer. Leliana stood up and picked colors from the selection, focusing on golds and a purple to bring out the brown in Athena’s eyes.

By the time the foundation and lotions were applied, Rathein walked in with her hair freshly styled and a basic set of makeup applied. The Inquisitor wore a striking blue eyeshadow with an exaggerated eyeliner that brought out the feminine qualities in her face. The formal attire had actually been fitted correctly so it showed her toned physique as well. Athena smiled at the sight of her friend, reaching out for her head and squeezing it in a silent gesture. Rathein had her Inquisitor mask on early that morning, walking over to pulling out Athena’s outfit from the chest. It was difficult to see from the vanity but she was thankful to see long sleeves on it.

“That is different than Madame de Fer’s initial sketch.” The Nightingale mused, walking over to stand at the Inquisitor’s side while her hands ghosted over the fabric and designs of the dress.

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“Dorian and I came together to make something that would fit her a little better. Even if she is going as the Sorcière of the Inquisition, Athena is still in there fighting like the rest of us.” Athena nodded with an enthusiastic hum as something akin to fake eyelashes were set in place on the tops of her lids. With every stroke of the attendant’s brush, every small fix of her hair, the character was being set into place. It had been, what, months since she had worn any real make up? At home, she only wore it for special occasions and on the off day where she needed to feel better about herself, but what the attendant was putting on was a masterpiece. Was there even a slight contour? Athena sat forward in the mirror, ignoring the curlers still present in her hair to touch her face but the attendant slapped her hand and pulled her back into the seat.

Dorian slid into the room with two plates full of food and a goblet hanging from between his teeth.
He made a small gesture to Rathein to grab one of the plates and when he had an open hand he took the goblet from his mouth and set it on the vanity in front of Athena. “Try and eat, dove. You barely touched your dinner last night.” He leaned over and gave her a greeting kiss on top of the curlers on her head, dropping a small bundle of grapes in her lap while walking over to Rathein’s side. He picked up the dress, turning it over in his hands. It looked like he was tracing some sort of design in the back with his fingertip of it while the Herald watched but it was difficult to see when the stylist was jerking her head back towards the mirror so she could keep on with her work.

There was a soft vibration on her head which drew out a surprised yelp from a mouth full of grapes, her hand coming to her mouth while her eyes traveled up to the strange looking things in her head. One by one the attendant pulled them from her head to reveal dry, curled hair underneath. Athena ran her hands through the curls to loosen them slightly, agitating the roots to bring volume. It was something she had seen her mother do when she used to do her hair as a child. As an adult, her job did not allow many opportunities to dress up so the skills were lost through the years but they were slowly coming back now.

Looking in the mirror, seeing the foreign painted face that she now wore, it made switching into the Game that much easier. She rolled her shoulders back, slowly standing from the chair once she tucked the front curls behind her ear and smooth a product through her hair that was feather light upon the touch. Rathein motioned for her to come over, removing the top layer with the sleeves while motioning for her to step into the dress. Athena placed her hands on Dorian’s shoulder to steady her while she got into the dress, which was pitch black on the bottom, before sliding the matching navy blue silk top. “Huh. Leliana’s right. This is not what I initially thought.”

Dorian and Rathein shared a mischievous look, him standing to her back and tightening her laces almost a knot too tight. Athena looked in the tall mirror they were standing in front of at the friend at her back, seeing that his hair had been styled and his mustache freshly trimmed. “Looking devishly handsome as always, Dorian.”

He smiled, resting his hands on top of his shoulders while meeting her gaze in the mirror. “Did you expect anything else? You’re lucky. You and I are being introduced together, so don’t embarrass me, alright?” He kissed the top of her shoulder while looking back to Leliana, who was stacking up a bundle of letters while looking to him with a nod. “Are we almost ready to leave? How is everyone else?”

The Tevinter looked up to the sky to help with his memory, going through the list while making small checks in the air with his finger. “Bull and Solas are in the back carriage ready to go. Blackwall and Cassandra are next. I believe I saw Cullen playing with the wolf in the front lawn and Josephine was corralling the troops into place. Madame de Fer impatiently awaits us out in the front hall.”

The Inquisitor handed a small box to Athena and she pulled out two wolf-fang earrings, smirking at
the subtle nod towards her specialty with a satisfied hum in her throat. They were sharpened to a point and were the only thing on her at the moment that felt like a piece of home. The attendant handed her a brush with a red lip paint on it and she made a final pass over her lips with it before rubbing them together, using the tip of her now painted black nails to catch a small strip of paint that had escaped her lip line. The room emptied out and Rathein ushered Athena outside and into a carriage.

Before the door shut, she pulsed out with her magic to bring Kain into the carriage with her, even with a scoff of protest from Dorian. He sat next to as opposed to across, wrapping his arm around her and resting his head against hers. “How are you feeling? Excited for your first ball?”

Athena took in a deep breath and sighed, relaxing into his embrace, making sure not to smudge the stylist’s good work. “Nervous actually. I’ve seen this scene play out time and time before but nothing can prepare you for actually living it. All this back stabbing and subtle power grabs... I can’t quite wrap my head around it. How are you feeling?”

He moved his chest away from her for a second, bringing a flask from somewhere on his body to wiggle it in front of her. “Prepared but strangely feel at home. Don’t worry, I put enough in here for you too.”

The pair fell asleep against one another and did not move until the carriages came to a halt in front of Halamshiral. Dorian woke first, nudging her with his arm while opening the blinds with the other. Athena followed after him, shooting straight up into a sitting position. She used the reflection from the window to settle her curls and remove any makeup that had smudged underneath her eyes. A soldier knocked on their door, opening it with one hand while offering their other to help them get out. Dorian smiled at the soldier, winking at him before placing himself opposite of him to give Athena another hand in getting out.

Thankfully the heeled boots she wore were not the worst pair Vivienne had given her but they went all the way up to her knee and were made from a freshly polished leather. She looked to Kain, pressing her finger to her lips to keep him quiet before using both of the gentlemen’s’ hands to exit. “Good luck, Lady Athena.” She heard at her back, whipping around to see Loranil looking at her with a blushed smile. She was about to smile back but her warning from the night before quickly entered her mind. Athena stepped towards him, keeping her voice low.

“Can you get a raven out tonight?”
“Pick your fastest bird and sent a message to your clan. Tell them to follow the wolves. I fear they may be in danger, Loranil, and I do not want anyone getting hurt.”

The elf nodded, shutting the carriage door after giving Kain a welcoming smile. Athena sent a message to Kain once more, Be nice. The wolf yawned loudly before resting his head on top of his paws in the warm seat they had just vacated. Dorian linked arms with her, slowly taking her to the group that was forming in front of the gates. The Grand Duke was surely giving his lines to Rathein. Imagine what the Inquisition could accomplish with the full support of the rightful Emperor of Orlais.

Athena couldn’t help but sneer but she quickly received a jab in the side from Dorian’s elbow. He looked down at her with a final smirk, gesturing to the others with a quick wave of his hand. Everyone but the Inquisitor came into a circle with them and it reminded her of a football huddle. Solas came to her side and she relished in the fact that they were standing close to each other, probably the only time until the conclusion of the event. Dorian pulled out his flask and much of the group smiled, Bull pulling out his own and the two shared a wicked grin.

“Great minds, my friend, great minds.” The Tevinter teased, taking a swig and wincing as the bitter liquor went down. He then passed it to Athena who instantly remembered the drink he had handed her at the tavern a few nights before. It had tasted like gasoline but it got the job done. Bull had begun passing around his flask on the other side and Cullen nearly choked on whatever was in there, his face instantly flushing while the Qunari slapped him on the back to get him to swallow it.

Athena took a gulp from the flask and almost immediately regretted it but she figured it was a good practice to keep her face straight. That soon failed because whatever this drink was proved to be more potent than the last. The liquid sat in her stomach and it felt like molten magma. Out of habit her magic swarmed and created a barrier wherever it felt damage so the lining of her throat and stomach tingled with magic. She passed the flask to Solas, her face passive and her arms still crossed while she tried to figure out what to do with the drink. She could either let the barriers down and get quickly drunk or get rid of the drink. Vomiting on the courtyard of the Winter Palace would be in bad form, so there had to be something else.

Her eyes opened with a wicked idea, eyes flicking to the side to make sure there was enough room. She wasn’t sure if this had ever been done before but as Solas kept saying: You think, your magic follows. Already she could feel her magic swirling within the pit of her stomach so when there seemed to be a good enough try she pushed it up towards her throat, using the alcohol as a fuel to casually exhale flames from her lips. The stream didn’t go far and thankfully Bull was across from her because it took a lot to make him flinch. He raised his brows as the flames extinguished right above his horns but everyone else took a step back, save for Dorian and Solas.
“Damnit Athena, do you know how much this stuff costs?”

Athena wiped the remnants of a flame from her lip with the tip of her nail, smirking while pointing over to the Commander. “I’m assuming free because that tastes like it is the stuff we coat out boulders in before we launch them from trebuchets. Check your stocks, Cullen, they may be empty.”

The group laughed, the flask quickly going around to the rest of them and they all reacted with similar winces and grimaces. Vivienne was the only one who took it without flinching and Bull whistled in a slow sound of being impressed, taking the empty flask and stashing it in his large pockets. Solas took the opportunity while everyone was shrouded by the soldiers to quickly grab her hand that was hanging at her side. There was a calm wash of his aura over her skin and she sighed, closing her eyes and squeezing his hand in return. “Be safe tonight, Solas. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

He chuckled, releasing her hand and flicking a piece of ash from her shoulder. “I have seen many events like this in memories of the Fade. I am more concerned for your well-being. You know where to find me if you require my assistance?”

She turned and nodded, her gaze meeting his for probably the last time for at least an hour or so. “Absolutely.”

Rathein clapped her hands together, walking over to the ground. Dorian quickly put the empty flask away and gave the Inquisitor an innocent smile. “All ready, Herald. Let’s go in!”
“GET ON WITH IT.” The Seeker scoffed, shooting a fiery glare towards the announcer while taking slow steps forward towards the Empress. Athena stood behind Solas and Bull with her arm linked with Dorian's. He kept looking her dress up and down, poking different spots with his finger. Anytime she asked him what he was doing he deflected, stating he saw a wrinkle or a piece of wolf fur on her dress. They moved forward, Bull taking on a cocky walk as suddenly all of the eyes of the court were on him as he was announced. He was the only Qunari in the entire Estate and he was the kind of man that had even Chantry sisters talking back at Haven. She kept a coy smirk on her face because he was only fixated on the Inquisitor standing at the front of the dance floor.

The Iron Bull, leader of the famed mercenary company “Bull’s Chargers” as the name may imply.

Rathein had been the perfect player, doing exactly as they rehearsed. She had eavesdropped on the nobles, returned the ring, and collected the first halla statue. They had shared a look of annoyance when she found it up on the balcony. At the time Athena was with Dorian on the first level, speaking with nobles about the weather and their travels from Skyhold. The rumors had started early that evening because they did not hesitate to ask her if she rode wolves instead of horses to wherever she was going. Athena laughed in a way that was charming, bragging about Prince instead and how he could handle any terrain. They didn’t find that as entertaining but still appreciated the passion that she spoke about her animals with.

The Lady Inquisitor’s elven servant, Solas.

Athena clenched her jaw and steeled herself, using Harmony’s advice and training to reign in her rage and keep the fire burning within her stomach. Solas did not even flinch, walking forward while the gazes of the court suddenly seemed uninterested. Dorian caught the subtle change in her face and he smiled, squeezing her arm within his. “I was going to wait until later but this will be as good a time as any. When we are introduced, I’m going to spin you like a dance. You know how to do this, correct?” When he asked the question, she felt the heat of his magic against her, it resembling Solas's when he was trying to get her attention. She arched a brow, slowly doing it back to him in response and he smiled.

“Ah. Good. Do that but bigger when I spin you. Mask on, Athena.”
“Wait – what do you mean – “ She called to him but he pulled her forward down the stairs and she was forced to keep her face pleasantly flat, resting her hand on top of his as they descended the stairs towards the dance floor. Everyone but the Inner Council was ahead of them now. The night was about to fully begin. Athena took in a deep breath, looking to Dorian with a bit of pride as he was announced.

*Lord Dorian Pavus, member of the Circle of Varanchien, Son of Lord Magister Halward Pavus of Asariel.*

He bowed to the Empress, pausing about halfway through the dance floor before they introduced Athena. She could hear the whispers above them, nobles suddenly paused as they looked to the person that had the most mystery surrounding her.

*Lady Athena, Sorciere of the Inquisition, Hand of the Inquisitor.*

Dorian quickly whispered: “Alright, here we go” under his breath, pressing a hand on her back to help turn her. When he did, he flicked a finger against her back and the sensation felt like striking a match against a matchbox. Athena took a deep breath in and spun, pulsing her magic out and feeling magic tingle throughout her entire body. Designs etched into her back and the long sleeves of her dress dissipated into bits of sparkles in the air, revealing a strapless black corset top (that had somehow managed to get *tighter*) and from what she could feel left her upper back open. The black fabric on top of her billowing skirts lifted and disappeared, exposing multiple shades of red that swirled underneath the magic and appeared like flame moving in cloth. There was a small pressure against her chest and she looked down, containing her gasp at what was laying there.

A wolf bone necklace. *His* wolf bone necklace but on a single black string instead of the two leather ones he wore with it. It sat at the top of the swell of her breasts and instantly gave her confidence. She broke her facade and truly grinned, keeping her hand rested on top of Dorian’s as they finished their walk and bowed before the Empress. Celene’s gaze lingered over form for a moment, giving her an individual nod of acknowledgement before turning to the introduction of the Inner Council.

Athena was deaf to the other words in the air, her heart was beating in her throat and her skin felt absolutely electrified. It took every bit of will to bring her magic back into her heart, re-steeling her face in the meantime. It was almost broken when Solas glanced over his shoulder and flashed a mischievous smirk, his eyes taking in her form before turning back towards the front. The expression had the ability to drown her and melt her resolve but somehow she survived it, meeting his gaze for the briefest of seconds.
“I am delighted to be here, Your Majesty.”

Safe choice. She thought to herself, looking over at the Inquisitor. Rathein had hardened herself as well, her noble upbringing coming forward in her motions and the tone of her voice. The Empress and the Inquisitor went back and forth until the group split up. Everyone went to their assigned placed except Dorian and Athena. She looked to him with a slow and curious gaze, gesturing with her head out towards the garden where he should be.

“In due time. I do believe the Empress said she looked forward to us dancing and everyone else has left. That leaves the two most beautiful people in the room.” He stepped away from her but kept her hand in his, bowing to her with a grin on his face. “May I have this dance, Lady Athena?” She shook her head at his tease, walking at his side while they moved to the center of the dance floor. Other pairs filled in and the moment the orchestra started they took off. It was one of the most basic Orlesian waltzes so she relaxed, keeping one hand on her shoulder while he kept the other one softly in his grip.

“How did you pull that off, Dorian?”

He gave her a smug smile, doing a quick movement to lift her into the air before coming back down into the standard position. “The Inquisitor and I were tired of seeing Vivienne dressing you up in her form. We wanted you to feel a bit more like you tonight. You burn, my dear, everywhere you go.”

She couldn’t control her blush, moving with him mindlessly to the soft music of the orchestra. Her gaze then fell to the necklace. “What about. . . “

The Altus rolled his eyes, spinning her under his hand and bringing her back a little tighter so he could speak low to her. “Rathein knew you were nervous and was trying to see what would help you feel more grounded. This was his suggestion. The design on your back was mine.”

Her eyes widened and she tried to look over her shoulder. “What did you put on me?”

He laughed and the sound filled her with dread even though it had a joyous tone. “That’s my little secret. I promise you, you will approve.” He bent down on the next swirl and kissed her cheek over where she was blushing, sending a warm feeling into the center of her chest. The music ended and he bowed in front of her, taking a step back and waving. “Good luck! Come and visit me if you require a drink.”
Athena reached for him in protest but was soon met by another male noble wearing a blue colored mask with a curious smile on his face. “May I have the honor of having the next dance, Lady Athena?”

She greeted him with a curtsy, offering her hand while looking him up and down. “Only if the masked man will tell me his name, good sir.”

He chuckled and placed one hand on the hip and took her hand into his, bringing her slightly closer than Dorian had just had her. Her left brow twitched in annoyance but she kept the rest of her face passive. “Forgive me. Comte du Bachard, now you must tell me about yourself. We have all heard the strangest things.”

Dance after dance, grope after grope, Athena twirled around the dance floor without a slip of her ankle or a misstep in song. The songs were all fairly repetitive and she found herself entering a sober state of lull. The mask of the court was easy to keep on since every noble kept asking the same questions. Was she married? Did she sleep with wolves? Did she fall from the sky? So far her favorite question was whether or not she had slept with Dorian since the two seemed close. It was difficult not to laugh but she distracted them with comments about how she was still open. Some got the flirtatious comment that her bed was cold at night but such blatant lies put the taste of bile on her tongue.

It was about five songs until Rathein returned from her first investigations around the palace. Athena walked up the stairs and the two shared a knowing glance. “Are you enjoying the Winter Palace, Inquisitor? I am still in awe at its size alone.” The Sorciere feigned, standing in front of her friend with a pleasant and plastered smile. The short-haired mage returned a similar expression, keeping her voice at the same volume to dissuade any curious eavesdroppers.

“I find its fineries foreign and I am quite envious of its library.” That was the phrase indicated that she had done the first task. Athena smiled, touching Rathein’s shoulder before looking towards the door. “If you will excuse me, all of this dancing has left me parched.” The two parted and Athena barely had time to walk towards the door before she heard a familiar voice crawl across her skin.

“My my my, and I thought I would be the only witch at tonight’s event.”

It was almost impossible to not break character and wrap her arms around Morrigan in excitement. . . so she settled with a grin. “Lady Morrigan. I have heard so many wonderful things about you. It
is a pleasure to finally see you in person.”

The Witch of the Wilds hummed, looking her up and down while keeping her hands rested on the bottom of her low-laced bodice. “The feeling is mutual, Lady Athena. There is a certain comfort in knowing that somebody else appreciates the call of the wild.”

“I do enjoy a dance in the moonlight. But as much as I would love to discuss this with you, I’m sure you know there are other things that require my attention this evening.” Morrigan smiled and stepped to the side, allowing her to pass through the doors out into the vestibule. So far nobody else was approaching her so she took the moment of silence to walk into the mostly abandoned trophy hall, where Blackwall was standing at the base of the stairs. She had not interacted with the Grey Warden much. He had been a great sparring partner and gave her a few tips on her staff placement, but he seemed to avoid her specifically. If there was a group event, he would sit at the opposite end of the table and it was rare when he fully met her gaze.

Now would be the perfect time. She silently descended the stairs holding her skirts in her hands and approached him, looking to the statue that he was admiring with a sound of greeting in her throat. He stilled, looking her up and down before murmuring under his breath. “Lady Athena.” There was a hesitation in his greeting, fear almost? She resisted a sigh and clasped her hands behind her back, glancing over her shoulder to ensure that they were alone. Might as well be bold.

“You have no reason to fear me, Blackwall. Your secret is not mine to tell.”

His back straightened while he closed his eyes, hands clenched into gloved fists at his sides. It all was released in a large sigh and she smirked knowing her suspicion was right. “I was afraid of that. I suppose I must thank you for not revealing it at the tavern when you first spoke to us about...this situation.” He finally looked to her and she could see the burdens of his secret engraved in the lines around his eyes and mouth. He was a man trying to undo his unforgivable past. At first it was something that enraged her because he was living a lie, but after seeing how he was with the soldiers, after meeting him in person... He was doing his best to make things right and she had to help him.

“Like I said, not my secret to tell. I cannot control when you divulge your story, but may I offer a suggestion?”

The Warden chuckled and twitched his shoulders in a bit of shrug. “I suppose I cannot deny you here.”

Athena put herself with her back on the wall. The cold of the brick was a relief from the heat of the
dance floor so she sighed, meeting the burly man’s gaze with a soft smile on her face. “After tonight we will be in a better position with Orlais. The sooner you come forward with it, the sooner the Inquisition can help. I think we can make it work to where your sentence is serving the Inquisition since we are fighting Orlais’s battle by investigating the creature who murdered the Divine. It’s like ripping off a bandage, the quicker the better.”

Blackwall crossed his arms over his chest, making small sounds of consideration. She shook her head and touched his shoulder, leaning in with a coy smile. “Also, the sooner you tell people, the more time you have to make it up to Lady Montilyet. You two seem friendly with one another.” The Warden stammered, clearing his throat while looking around in a moment of paranoia. Athena chuckled and shrugged, leaving him with his thoughts in the hall of heroes while continuing onto the guest wing.

The moment she walked through the door she caught sight of Solas and her breath was caught in her throat. The navy blue formal attire that she helped design fit him much better than the abhorrent red. Plus there was no hat, so she was thankful. He was casually leaning in the shadows, taking in the conversations and interactions between the nobles. When she entered the room his gaze fell to her and he genuinely smiled. There was no facade in his features, no slapped-on mask like the one she had been wearing. He was oddly comfortable in this environment and a part of her was jealous.

Athena moved to walk towards him when she heard a shrill trio of voices. “Oh Lady Sorcière!”

The Empress’s hand maidens obstructed her view of her lover with giggling voices and hidden gazes behind their masks. “We just finished speaking to the Commander. He was telling us how lovely of a voice you have.”

She stilled, arching a brow while readjusting her posture with a small sway of her hips. “Did he now?”

“Would you please give us a sample? There is an area outside in the garden that would be perfect for such a performance. Please – follow us!” The emerald dressed women lead her out without another word and she was helpless to their cries.

Better give them what they want, she thought to herself, swallowing down a lump of nerves for whatever the women of the court had prepared for her while shooting Solas an apologetic glance.

Chapter End Notes
As always, thank you for your comments, kudos, and loving thoughts. :)
Songbird

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The trio of women escorted her out to the garden. One of them picked up a lute from where a previous minstrel had been performing, handing it over to Athena with a curious expression that poked out from her mask. She smirked, taking it into her arms before a small flicker of light caught her eye. The moonlight of the nearly full moons reflected off something that she had not noticed in the game. She doubted it had been there at all. It was akin to a piano’s shape, a large white instrument with vines growing up the side and through the wood. The keys were larger but they were individually carved from what appeared to be ironbark. Without even thinking about it she put the lute down on the ground and walked over to the ancient piano, her fingers ghosting over the wood and its edges while her lips remained eternally parted in awe.

“That thing? It makes the most terrible noises. Ambassador Briala assumes it is of elvish origin but we have been unable to confirm that.”

Their words were deaf to her as she pulled up the bench that was covered in moss and algae. They probably treated it as a decorative piece instead of taking care of it the way it was supposed to. She tentatively pushed a key down, wincing at the hollow, guttural noise it made that send a literal shock down her hand.

“See, Lady Athena. It is a waste. Empress Celene finds it beautiful so she has allowed it to remain here within the Winter Palace.”

Much like Ambassador Briala. Athena cursed to herself, arching a brow while resting her hands on top of the keys. There was a small vibration underneath her touch, an aching that she could feel within the innerworkings of the instrument. It was impossible to describe, but the closest she could come to was there was a small ember yearning for something to burn. The trio of hand maidens were bickering amongst themselves while she experimented, pulsing her magic down into the core of the instrument where she felt the small ember burning.

The result was unexpected and it felt like her magic coursed through the instrument, causing the keys underneath her fingers to vibrate while a small bit of ivy fell from the piano legs. “Hm.” She mused, repeating the motion while pressing a chord she knew down on the keys. The sound was perfection this time, the pleasant chord echoing through the garden and attracting a few of the Inquisition members. “You see, ladies. In the peak of the elves magic was like air.” With each press of the keys she flowed her magic through the piano, allowing it to almost bond with her while she started the beginning of a song. “It is only natural for something that was created in that time to require magic to breath.” The women awed, standing by the side of the piano as she took in a deep breath, closing her eyes to fall victim to the song she chose to highlight the sounds of the keys
under her fingers.

“Let me run through a field in the night.  
Let me lift from the ground til my soul is in flight.”

The vessel of music swirled underneath her touch, exchanging its enchantments to increase in volume and spread the sounds throughout the garden and the adjacent room.

“Let me sway like the shade of a tree. Let me swirl like a cloud in a storm on the sea.  
Wish me on my way... Through the dawning day.”

Inspiration’s blessing swelled within her chest, amplified by her recent contact with the spirit. Athena could feel the notes more confident underneath her fingers, her voice sliding through the notes with ease while she focused on powering her magic through the instrument underneath her.

“I wanna flow, wanna rise, wanna spill, wanna grow, wanna grow on the side of a hill.  
I don’t care if the train runs late, if the checks don’t clear, if the house blows down.  
I’ll be off where the weeds run wild, where the seeds fall far from this earthbound town.”

The maidens made a face that made her realize they could be equating her lyrics to Orlais. Earthbound town indeed. The nobles were focused on their parties, their masks, their petty personal objects. Being dragged from her home made Athena realize the importance was not in what you were surrounded by, it was who. The necklace around her neck brought a comfortable weight on top of her breaths, the article bringing her a small sense of self underneath all the painted make up, the corsets, and the lies.

“And I’ll start to soar. Watch me rain til I pour out! I’ll catch a ship and it’ll sail me stray.  
Get caught in a wind I’ll just have to obey time. Time flying away!”

With a small push the instrument reverberated through her body, creating a polyphonic sound within her throat that sounded like she was harmonizing and singing on top of herself, but the second layer didn’t completely sound like herself. It was lighter, younger almost, and immediately she smiled thinking of her friend Inspiration. She didn’t have the additional focus to look around, but she could feel that there were more eyes on her. Good. Hopefully this would also give Rathein time to breathe and do what she needed to around the castle. Even if it was for a few moments time, the Inquisitor deserved a break tonight as well.
“Let me leave behind, all the clouds in my mind I wanna wake without wondering why –
Finding myself in a burst of the sky!”

During the next set of extended notes, she felt a weight on the bench next to her. There wasn’t a presence of cold and she knew he wouldn’t be so bold, even though she wished that her wolf would come join her in public in front of everyone. He gave her confidence; he gave her strength even though there was an underlying fear of him realizing she knew who he truly was. At this point she wasn’t afraid that he would hurt her like Felassen. Leave her? Perhaps.

“I don’t know but maybe I’m just a fool. I should keep to the ground. I should stay where I’m at. Maybe everyone has hunger like this, and the hunger will pass, but I can’t think like that.”

She felt Dorian’s hand on her thigh and she sighed between verses, her hands dancing along the keys while sweat formed at her brow from the continued pulsing of her magic through the notes. The Tevinter smiled at her, gesturing with his head back towards the instrument while she nodded, turning back to the song for a final push. He kept his hand on top of her leg as a small touch of support and she was silently grateful.

“All I know is somewhere in a clearing, there’s a grain of sunlight on a river long and wide. And I have such a river inside!”

There was a soft howling out in the plains and the vibrations from the sound reverberated within her core, alighting her bond with the wolves and turning her mind white. Their strength, their combined kinship and trust fueled her magic and allowed her to reach the final notes in the ending climax of the song. The pack called for her, called for her form amongst theirs in the clear night air but she couldn’t. She was trapped like a bird within a cage singing on cue like some perverted mockingbird. Athena put her anger into her movements, her hands coming down upon the keys with such passion that the garden was now silent, entranced by her song and influence.

“Let me run through a field in the night, let me lift from the ground ‘til my soul is in flight. Let me sway like the shade of a tree, let me swirl like a cloud in a storm on the sea.”

With the final verse, she snapped her magic back into her body, the action taking her breath away and revealing exactly how much of the air she had been filling with her verses. The guests were stilled, their eyes on her while she almost whispered the final line, her fingers barely pressing down into the keys to vibrate the finishing notes.

“Wanna shift like a wave going on, wanna drift from the path, I’ve been traveling on. . .”
Before I am gone."

She finished with a sigh, resting her fingers on top of the keys and silently thanking the piano for a job well done. The magic swirled within it, fading away with every second until it lost its dull and returned to silence. She noticed that some of the ivy even reappeared on its legs and through the workings of the instrument. The trio of maidens clapped their hands together, the soft gloved sound sounding like a pitter patter that soon spread into something more as the people in the garden joined. She saw Vivienne give her an almost approving stare, tilting her chin up with a smirk at the corner of her lips. That would have to do from the Iron Lady.

Celene’s maidens remained, Athena clearing her throat and looking to them. “Might I have a bit of air, ladies? This instrument required more out of me than I expected and I will need to get something to wet my throat before returning to dance.”

They all curtsied in unison, disappearing through the crowds. The moment they were out of sight, she let out a breath she didn’t realize she had been holding in, resting her fingertips on top of the necklace on her chest. Dorian wrapped his arm around her, bringing her in for a kiss on top of the head that made her feel like family. “That was beautiful, Athena. You get better and better every time I hear you. Let me know when you need that distraction from me later.”

Athena grabbed his wrist, standing up to his side and wrapping her arms around him in a tight embrace. Fuck the character. Fuck the game. She needed a hug. He stilled, glancing around before finally returning it, resting his head on her shoulder since her heels gave her a height boost. “Thank you, Dorian.”

“For what?”

“Just... everything.” You are my family. You are my friend. You don’t judge me. The silent list in her head continued and she felt like somehow, he heard it. He smiled, bringing her tighter one last time before looking to a noble on the other side of the fountain.

“Anytime, Athena. If you will excuse me...” The flirtatious and charismatic Tevinter had returned in the blink of an eye. “There is a lovely man over there from Rivain who looks like he wants to talk to me.”

She giggled and pushed him towards his destination with a soft nudge on his back. Everyone had settled back into their conversations now that there wasn’t music playing in their ears so she used the moment of animosity to walk back inside. There were a few more people that gave her small phrases of praise or nodded their heads towards her in recognition but at that moment there was one
person in particular she wanted to see. It took a few conversations and redirection to make it through the large room, slowly stepping into the shadows by his side with her back pressed against the wall.

Solas placed his back against the column he was leaning against and there was something about his expression that stilled her breath. It was a mixture of confusion and shock, his jawline hardened while he looked her over. Before she could even ask what he was thinking about his voice fell low in a whisper, the sound clenching her chest and causing the sounds of the ball to swirl into nothingness around her mind. “Where did you learn to play that?”

“I – uh - we had something similar in my world. It’s been a long time since I have played, but it helped me remember. Do you know of it?”

He slowly nodded, an almost nostalgic smirk coming to his lips. His tone was baffled but thankful, his eyes falling from hers to the floor between them. “I have not heard that sound since some of my deepest journeys into the Fade. It is an old, old ancient relic whose sound has been lost in time. . . ”

Athena took a step to the side, bringing it to where the edges of her dress brushed against his legs. “It is beautiful, Solas. It is a shame that is wastes away here.” She clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth, settling her shoulders against the wall while crossing her arms. “Consider it yet another elvish relic this world has taken for granted and nearly destroyed.” There was spite in her voice and she did not hide it, flicking her gaze around to challenge anyone who overheard.

His face relaxed back to that of a passive observer, hands clasped in front of him while he crossed one foot over the other, using the column behind as support. She took that as a small cue to put their masks back on so she took a step from the wall and put her back to the people, catching his gaze before she left. He looked up to her and held it and the subtle hints of adoration in his features made her legs weak. There were small changes in the blue of his eyes and the corners of his lips; those little changes were just for her. The overwhelming urge to throw her arms around him nearly took over when she felt a hand at her backside, firmly grabbing a handful below her corset line before walking past.

Solas’s eyes went wide but she raised a hand to stop whatever reaction he was about to have. Athena closed her eyes to contain her fire, bringing the hand into a fist at her side. She was about to summon up words to say to the man but a better opportunity presented itself.

“Watch it! Lazy rabbit, I’ll-” The man was yelling at a passing servant who spilled champagne on his legs when he stormed past her. Athena turned on her heels and saw him raise his hand to the elf, who was frozen in place by fear. She jerked her neck to the side, feeling a satisfying crack before using magic to aide her step to bring her between the elf and the obviously drunken noble.
As his hand came down she caught it, bringing her painted and sharpened nails into his arm while using a considerable amount of force to push his arm down. He went to yell at her as she threatened to break his skin with her near-claws but she did not falter, steeling her gaze to meet his. When she spoke, her voice was pointed and she hoped it was in a tone that Madame de Fer would be proud of. “Now now now, sir. You seem to forget yourself not only once but twice in a matter of seconds. I believe you have set the record for quickest way to piss me off.”

Her blunt words brought a smile to Bull, who was a head above everyone else at the other side of the room. “Who are you – “

Athena ripped her gaze back to the drunk, looking him up and down before recognizing him from the ballroom. “I, Baron du Ghalad, am a guest of the Grand Duke Gaspard’s. You are a guest of Empress Celene and you think that gives you the authority to harm the people who work for her?”

She shook her head and tisked at him, continuing to use her strength from training with the various warriors of the Inquisition to push him to a knee in front of all of the gawking nobles in the room.

“You owe an apology sir.” He looked from behind a green emerald mask, meeting her eyes while attempting to stammer out an apology. She brought her nails down harder into his arm, shaking her head before gesturing to the smaller framed female elf behind her with a jerk of her head.

“To me, yes, but most importantly to her. It was her you were about to strike, no?” The thought of demeaning himself for an elf enraged him. He threatened to stand up from the ground, incoherent words and demands spilling from his lips. She was deaf to them and instead she used a show of force, summoning flames on her skin at her shoulder. There was a barrier underneath it so the flames wouldn’t harm her clothes or body, but the heat was real and she could feel its intensity. . . .so could he.

With each second of the ticking clock the flames moved down her arm in small twitches. The noble’s eyes widened in fear which only elicited a wolfish grin from her lips. “Here is the plan. You have roughly half a minute to give a sincere apology to the woman you so severely disrespected behind me. If you do not, you will lose the hand you have grown to be ungrateful for.”

He tried to twist out of her grip but she planted her feet firmly into the ground and held her stance, using a small bit of additional magic to strengthen her position. “Time is ticking, Baron.” The flame was at her elbow now and she could tell he was beginning to feel the flames since sweat was dripping from his chin. “Is your pride really worth losing your hand for?”

The Baron stammered, his eyes flicking back and forth between her and the elf who was now at her
side, holding up the platter as a shield just in case he decided to strike out again. “Apologies, Madam Sorciere! I meant no offense to you.”

Athena took in a deep sigh, dramatically rolling her eyes to look at the servant on her left. “What is your name, dear?” She asked kindly, making sure there was no venom in her voice when she spoke to the elf.

“S-S-Syla, my lady.”

“Syla? Named after Sylaise, the Hearthkeeper? Yes, her beauty shines through you, child. Now Baron! You forget who you owe an apology to.” The flames were at her forearm now and he was beginning to panic. His voice grew shrill, his other hand attempted to pull hers from him but as the flames reached her wrist he cried out:

“Apologies, Lady Syla! I meant no disrespect!”

The hall went silent and Athena released him, turning her wrist over to catch the flame in her palm. It danced at her will, extinguishing only when she clenched her hand into a fist. She bent down to one knee to get to his level, meeting his eyes with daggers in her words. “Do not forget yourself again, Baron. The next person you offend may not be as merciful as I. Now. Go.”

He nodded silently, standing up and exiting to the garden. The others made a path for him, parting and shooting various glances of surprise towards him. Once he was gone they all slowly fell back into their awkward conversations and different stages of the Game, pretending like the act just happened. Athena stood slowly and turned towards Syla, placing two fingers under her chin to examine her face for wounds.

“Are you hurt, Syla?” Her voice returned to one of sincerity, her eyes tracing her features, looking for any blemish or bruise that would prove he was successful in his strike.

The elf shook her head, taking a step back while bowing her head to her. “Thank you, my lady! That was unnecessary.”

Athena paled, waiting until Syla rose back up before asking: “Do you enjoy working here?”

A programmed response fell from her lips: “Why of course! The Empress is very kind and provides...”
me a great life.” She stepped in closer to the elf, dropping the volume of her voice while placing her hands on her shoulders to grab her full attention.

“I understand, Syla. Listen, tell your friends, if you truly seek happiness for yourself and your future, there are carriages in the front. I cannot promise you happiness and glory but I will find a place for you within our ranks where you do not flinch at every passerby. I promise you all the safety I can give and if anybody gives you trouble you lead them to me. There is an elf by the name of Loranil at the front of the gate and he will protect you. Do you understand me?”

Athena dropped her hands back down to her sides. Syla froze for a moment, slowly nodding before disappearing through the back doors that led into the back hallways and inner workings of the Estate. She hardened herself again, meeting the gazes of the nobles that looked to her with blank face. It disgusted her that people thought they were so much better than the others. Even though there wasn’t slavery in Orlais, there wasn’t freedom either.

She returned to Solas’s corner with tension in her neck and shoulders, a wave of anger rolling underneath her skin, egging her on to lash out again. “Why...-?” Was he serious? She scoffed, looking up the ceiling while closing her eyes, taking deep breaths through her nose to contain her growing frustration.

“Because it was right, Solas.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks as always for everything.

Song: Flight - Sutton Foster.

A hauntingly beautiful piece I highly recommend, of course.
Solas withdrew into himself and she could see it. There was a heat underneath her skin, a fire lighting her features. At this point she was barely trying to hide how she felt around the Orlesians. Fuck the Game. Fuck the masks.Fuck how they saw other people as things below them that they could take advantage of. It made her blood boil and knowing Kain was close by brought the urge to run close to the front of her mind. The night was barely halfway over and already she had threatened to burn somebody’s hand off. She rested her hand on her belly, taking in a deep breath before speaking again in a low tone.

“Somebody has to, Solas. I am not someone who can stand idly by while someone suffers under the arrogance of another.”

Her words twitched the corners of his lips into a frown. Did he that as a personal offense? Shit. She would not take it back out of fear of revealing that she knew him but before they could speak on the matter sooner Rathein appeared behind them, giving Solas a look that meant she was going to need him soon. Bull caught the glance as well because he made his way through the crowd over to them. Without saying a word to one another they were about to leave but Athena whispered under her breath: “Please be careful.”

They were getting to the point in the evening where they would be facing enemies. The Venatori agents would be infiltrating the castle and they would need to fight around the fountain and various rooms. They weren’t that difficult of enemies in the game, but this was the Game. This was also a universe where Corypheus knew about her and there were small details that completely threw her off of her concentration. Solas being attracted to her, wanting her surely was one. There were small moments when he looked at her. They were when his normal cold facade broke and there were smile lines in his eyes... she wanted to throw herself at him and scream I KNOW WHO YOU ARE.

Alas. For now, for tonight, for the near distant future, the show must go on.

Athena took in a deep breath through her nose, closing her eyes while rolling her shoulders to bring everything: her magic, her emotions, her patience, back into her chest. There still a few pairs of nobles giving her lingering gazes but she ignored them. She attempted to bring forth a front that Vivienne would be proud of before walking back into the ballroom. The dance floor was still swirling with pairs. Their movements were all in unison, their skirts swirling in time with the music. There was something entrancing about it all. The closest image she could get to this was the Masquerade seen from Phantom of the Opera.
The memory in the Fade with Solas brought a twitch of a smirk to her face. She glided on the floor over to the railing, gently leaning her body against the railing before hearing a mixture of voices to her right.

“Uh – please –“

“You must tell us, Commander! What is it like in the Inquisition?”

Their fluttering voices reminded her of annoying birds outside of her window at Skyhold. They would peck against the walls of the glass, attempting to come in. It might have been because of the calls she sent out to her pack that it attracted all kinds of wildlife, but they still weren’t welcome. . especially before sunrise. She took in a deep breath and pushed herself through the crowds, coming upon a scene that threatened a laugh in her throat.

Four Orlesian women nearly cornered Cullen. There was a permanent clenching of his jaw, his face struggling to stay straight while they barraged him with questions. Frankly put, he looked miserable. When she came into view he looked visibly relieved, his shoulders relaxing with his hands still resting on top of his sword’s hilt. “Keeping your sword sharp, Commander?” She teased, adding a breathy tone to her words to try and scare away the other women. It apparently worked because they giggled underneath their fans and he cleared his throat, looking down for the moment before smiling.

“I’m trying to, Lady Athena.”

She extended a hand to him, eyes twinkling almost in wicked glee at upsetting the other women. “I believe I was promised a dance tonight, Commander.” She lied, smirking at him while taking a step forward to assert some sort of physical dominance against the other women. Since her dress appeared as literal flames in the sea of golds and silvers, she stood out. He looked her up and down cautiously, catching onto her message with a small nod. He grabbed her hand and took no time in walking away from the group and down the stairs. There was a small flutter in her chest when he did it but she wasn’t sure if it was from the small physical contact or at the mischief in her mind.

Once they got to the dance floor he placed a hand on her hip and extended his hand to hers, asking permission before taking her to dance. She nodded, using her skirts to curtsy in the formal Orlesian standard before moving out with him. He was stiff as a dance partner, obviously trying to go through the steps in his head. His training as a soldier was obvious and she had to joke, squeezing his hand with hers to try and grab his attention. “Cullen, are you in there?”

He shook his head to come out of the fog, giving her a sheepish smirk before lifting her hand up
and spinning her under his grip. “Forgive me. This is the first moment away from *that* so I was collecting my thoughts.”

She chuckled at him, shaking her head before coming back into his grip. “I warned you, Commander. You will be getting inquiries of marriage after the ball has concluded.”

He paled, meeting her gaze to try and see if she was lying. “You are kidding.”

“Now why would I lie about that? Forgive the image but do you not see how they flock around you like wolves around a meal? I swear there is a puddle on the floor from where they’re drooling at the mouth.” He sighed and she smiled, glancing over at the women who were watching them like the predators they were. They dressed beautifully and attempted to act sweet, but their obvious intentions to marry up in the court was blatantly obvious. Athena had the urge to wave at the women to rub it in further but she kept it in, directing all of that energy into an icy gaze.

“I suppose I must give you my gratitude for – er – saving me up there. I don’t know how much longer I can last in those kinds of conversations.” There was now an obvious pink on his cheeks and she didn’t pay too much attention to it, using her feet to quickly spin with him in the same mechanical motion as the other dancing pairs. When she came back into their position she brought herself a little closer to him so that she could speak low without anyone else hearing.

“You won’t have to last much longer.” Athena dropped her voice even more, holding his gaze while they moved around the dance floor. “I did not wish to raise alarm by giving the Inner Council many details. The Inquisitor is already briefed on everything I know about this event, but the suspect we have been looking for is the person holding this ball.”

“Maker- You cannot be serious.” The hardened look of a soldier returned on his face and already she could see the gears turning within his head, thinking of different strategies and places to place his soldiers around the estate. There was also a slight delay in his dance moves and she squeezed his shoulder to refocus him, hardening his gaze on him. The pleasant orchestral song was drawing to a close and they would probably need to depart. Thankfully he would now have orders to give and tasks that would keep him distracted from the women that were fluttering around.

“I know it is hard to do but place your trust in me, Commander. The Inquisition will benefit from tonight. As repayment for me making you dance, consider myself in your debt for a game of chess.” Athena winked to him and he broke his thoughts to smile in returning, nodding before spinning her once more before they separated to bow and curtsy at one another.

“May I cut in, Commander?” The greasy voice ran down her spine, sending a subtle shudder over
her skin. The Grand Duke was at Cullen’s side, looking at her with a hungry gaze. There was almost something unrestrained about the look on his face. Last night they were at a formal dinner in front of all of her friends. Since the Inquisitor and the Inner Council were scattered: she was alone with him. The thought put the taste of bile in her throat but she smiled at him while raising up from her curtsy.

“I believe that is her you will need to ask, not me. Good evening, Grand Duke.” He paused, looking to her with a small nod. “Sorciere.” Her court title from his lips felt foreign, odd, but he was blending in with the environment. The Grand Duke took his place, bringing her uncomfortably close to him with a hand on her lower back. He could get away with this here. Their dancing position was still proper and it would be obvious if she jerked away from him or made a face of disgust. Instead she could feel her features hardening into something pleasant yet steeled.

“How are you this evening, Grand Duke?”

He scoffed at her, roughly bringing her through the dancing moves. It felt rough at least, she wasn’t sure how it appeared to everyone else. “I despise the Game, Lady Athena. Surely you know that. We spoke of rumors last night. . .” He leaned forward and spoke low near her ear, the hot puffs of breath from his words putting a flame of hatred within her belly. “I hear you know things that have yet to happen, Madame Fade-Walker.” When he stood back up into a full posture she remained silent, growing increasingly uncomfortable with his hand at her back. “Think, Lady Athena. No matter the outcome of tonight, it would benefit both Orlais and the Inquisition if something solidified the alliance. A marriage between you and I – “ He smiled and she did her best not to sneer. What he got was an unpleasant twitch at the corner of her lips that she had seen Solas do many times before. “Would do just the thing.”

She took in a deep breath, closing her eyes and anticipating the spin that he was about to do. Instead, he stepped forward and whipped her down into a bend, using the strength of his arm to literally put himself above her. Thankfully her corset remained in place but it pushed her breasts up and she allowed a sound similar to a growl to trickle from her throat.

Help? Kain could feel her distress from inside of the carriage, waking up from his nap with a whine. No. Not yet. She pushed back while never breaking Gaspard’s gaze. When she spoke, her voice was icy and cut through the music filing the space between them. He was holding her down for an abnormal amount of time, drawing attention from the people watching on the railings. “Tell me, Gaspard. How did it go with the Empress when you asked her that same question?”

The statement pulled a reaction from him and she smiled. She had read that he proposed to her in the Masked Empire as a proposal to end the civil war between them. It was also an answer to his question that yes, she did know things. He was an honorable man most of the time and held to the code of the chevaliers. But tonight, he did not wear his feather and he was using that to cross the lines of appropriate and not. He then chuckled and brought her back up to a standing posture,
nodding in response to her not-so-direct answer. She hated the Game as well but one had to play or else they would lose.

“I see, Lady Athena. I would still consider it. With these rumors spreading around about you... it may be more and more difficult to find a suitable marriage partner.” She nearly scoffed at him, letting a hopefully pleasant sounding chuckle trickle from her lips.

“No offense, dear. When there is a creature threatening to tear the Fade open, marriage is the last thing on my mind. I will keep your offer at the front of my mind, however.” He tilted his head towards her, silently bringing her through the next few verses of the dance. Gaspard did not submit his physical handling of her, his hand consistently pressed against her back with his eyes on her form. This dress fit her better. The colors matched her magic and the wolf necklace sitting atop her breasts brought her a small sense of self. She had yet to catch her reflection to see whatever design was traced onto her back but there were better things to worry about at that time.

Athena flicked her eyes over to see Rathein and Florianne coming down the stairwell. She tried to not show her frustration that the dancing would continue then since the organizer of the ball was there. Gaspard did not show any signs of letting her go so they switched stances to change into the group style of dancing where they would eventually go down the line in pairs. She could not shake the sense of disgust off of her. It was not within her nature to let somebody borderline manhandle her, especially one like the Grand Duke Gaspard. It was difficult to remember his military expertise and reputation when he acted the way he did the last two days.

She could see that Rathein and Florianne were talking back and forth and that alone made her feel somewhat better. The Inquisitor could put on a pretty face and act the noble part, but the two women were more alike than she let on. Rathein was made to be a Charger; she was sarcastic and willing to help anybody. In the brief moment she was trying to see if her friend was stressed or in distress but what she saw was the polite mask of Lady Trevelyan. Thankfully for her, Gaspard had said his peace and was not just content with showing her off to the rest of the ballroom like some demented trophy he intended to keep in the trophy room with the rest of the oddities and animals.

During one of her turns, she thought she saw a glance of Solas in the corner of the room but when she turned back he or whatever she saw was gone. The dance ended with the entire ballroom bowing to one another and when Gaspard finally released her there was a subconscious shudder to get the feeling of his hands from her. “Until later, Sorciere.” The Grand Duke murmured, Athena not even gracing him with a response before she traveled up the stairs and towards the Inner Council. They were meeting in a small circle towards the side and when she arrived Josephine’s face was in a state of shock.

“Leliana, we cannot do what you are suggesting. It would be madness.” Ah. Athena straightened her posture and stood next to Cullen, clasping her hands in front of her while looking the group over with a leery stare. They were discussing whether or not to let the Empress die. Rathein and
Athena shared a knowing stare before the Inquisitor cut in.

“It would not be a terrible idea.” The short-haired mage’s voice was leveled and unbothered. She had confessed during their talks at Skyhold that she did not care very much for Orlesian politics and that it was overdue for a revolution. It made Athena so happy that they agreed.

Cullen crossed his arms, shaking his head back and forth. “This could end terribly.”

“It could end terribly if we do not.” Athena’s voice was icy, cold. The Council looked at her and she simply arched a brow in return, looking to each of them. “The Inquisition is supposed to be about restoring the peace and eliminating chaos. How can we do that when we are considering allying with an Empress who burned an alienage just because they were asking for basic rights? It’s abhorrent.”

The Spymaster did not twitch but Josephine pressed a finger to her forehead, murmuring a small blessing to Andraste before Rathein cleared her voice. “Another thing, Athena. Florianne stated specifically that you should come help me investigate the royal wing.”

Athena scoffed before smiling at her friend. “Well she’s just going to have to get used to disappointment, isn’t she?”

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you for all of the love. :)
Athena left the ballroom, walking through towards the garden to grab Dorian. The Inquisitor and her party was about to fight the rift and its demons and she never knew how the attendees at the ball did not hear it. Plus, they needed to do something that would keep her safe from Florianne’s plans and being in the middle of the ballroom would help, especially if her best friend was there to help protect her. She walked into the room where Solas was turned away, slowly sipping on a glass of champagne while subtly munching on a sweet Orlesian pastry in the shadows.

With a quick glance to either side she walked towards him with a smile on her face, “I’m glad to see you were not harmed, Solas.” He looked up from his snack with a small shrug, finishing off the pastry by popping it into his mouth with a single finger. She couldn’t help but watch him and when he flicked his gaze up to hers she blushed, looking up to the ceiling while tucking a stray curl behind her ear. He placed his champagne on the windowsill and clasped his arms behind his back before resting his back against the wall.

“The fights were not complicated. The Inquisitor seemed to know a great deal about what was going to occur.” He gave a curious look and she chuckled with a simple shrug.

“It must be wonderful that our leader is so well prepared.” She finished with a wink, confirming his suspicion. He nodded and looked out to the crowd, gesturing to a group of them that acted like he didn’t even exist.

“What do you think of tonight’s event?” Athena instantly clenched her jaw and attempted to make a controlled response.

“I . . . .may not appreciate the intrigue and danger as much as you do, Solas. It is difficult for me to enjoy something where you are just manipulating other people’s emotions and plans. Even though I am doing it myself tonight, it makes me feel so uncomfortable” She kept her voice soft between them with no mask of trying to be polite or formal. He caught onto this, bringing his hands to rest on the tops of his thighs, which her eyes fell down to for a second because thank goodness, the seamstress had been attentive in her measurements.

“That is probably a good thing.” They looked to one on another and eventually she caved, giving him a full smile before Dorian walked in from the garden. He patted her on the shoulder, gesturing his head towards the dance floor in an invitation for her to join him. Solas shot him an icy look when he turned his back and she laughed, taking a step towards him and nudging his shoulder with her hand.
“Solas. . .” He flicked his gaze up to her and the look broke her heart and continued her chuckle. “Do not fret. At all.” How could she tell him blatantly that Dorian was gay without potentially outing? It was not her secret to tell. He looked to her once more, holding her gaze for an extended moment. She contained the gasp in her throat even though her pulse was probably visible on her neck.

“Oh! Can you help me with something?” She snapped back to focus. He looked her up and down once before nodding.

“Of course, with what?”

She turned around and brought her hair over her shoulders, trying to look over her shoulder to get a look at her back. “What exactly is on my back because Dorian and Rathein won’t tell me but I saw them drawing a design on my first dress this morning.” He looked to the sides before stepping forward and she felt his fingertips on her back. Instantly she shuddered at the small amount of his touch on her back, keeping her head forward while clutching the fabrics of her skirts at her side. He looked over it quickly before stepping back with a satisfied smirk on his face.

She turned to him and subconsciously rubbed the string of her necklace, biting the inside of her cheek. “What! Please tell me its nothing obscene. I swear when I get my hands –“

He smirked. “It’s a wolf, Athena. The design looks elvish but it is a wolf’s face in a temporary black magical tracing.”

Athena released an uncontrolled sigh, rubbing the back of her neck before she felt a pull on her shoulder. Out of frustration and her annoyance at the night, she almost slapped the person but she saw it was Dorian who was summoning her. “The Inquisitor is looking for you, Solas. Now you, my dear, you and I have a mess to make!”

She rolled her eyes and walked behind him, feeling Solas trail behind her before breaking off and joining Rathein. The party members all grouped up to go and investigate the royal quarters, leaving Dorian and Athena standing by the railings looking over the dance floor. He nudge her with his hip, looking over her features with a soft smile on his face. “How are you holding up, sweetheart?”

“Night isn’t over yet, Dorian. Don’t be asking me that yet. But on a scale of nug to darkspawn? I’m feeling about a brood mother right now.”
He laughed at her fully, not holding back his happiness while rubbing his hand through his hair. “Yeah, I suppose that sounds quite awful.”

She crossed her arms while leaning on the balcony, casually watching the people dancing beneath them. It felt like a never-ending ride of bodies going through the same motions repeatedly. If she watched it for too long she would soon grow dizzy so she shook her head and looked to her friend, resisting the urge to rest her head on his shoulder.

“Where did you get the design for my back ink?” He chuckled and snapped his fingers, shaking his head with a mischievous smile.

“Damn you found out. Rathein found it in book on ancient elves before we left. Something to do with one of their old Gods, I don’t know. The design looked interesting so she copied it down and I traced it onto your old dress with some of my own magic.” He wiggled his index and middle fingers to show how he did it. Her eyes widened and she suddenly felt flushed, her hand resting on the wolf bone necklace resting on her chest.

“Fen’Harel?” She asked, her voice soft and almost broken.

“Yeah! That’s the one. Some wolf something or other. You’ll have to look in a mirror later. I’m quite proud of my handiwork!” There was a hum that coursed through the air, sending her hair on edge and silencing their conversation. The others around them paused but continued onto the Game with a slightly more curious tone. Dorian and Athena looked to each other, nodding in knowing at what the feeling was. It was the sensation that something was wrong in the air, a break in the Veil where there was not supposed to be one.

A rift.

Wordlessly he grabbed her hand and led her by the orchestra, whispering something to the conductor while dropping some gold coins into his pocket. The man smirked, tapping his baton on top of the music stands and instructing the players on what would happen next. Dorian brought her into the center of the ballroom, in the middle of all of the paused people who were working their way off of the dance floor due to the ceased music.

The Tevinter looked down to her, grabbing her chin with his hand to bring their gazes together. “I already know you're familiar with this, right?” He asked, pulsing his magic against her skin. She arched a brow, using her magic to wrap around him like a hug and he smiled.
“Fantastic. That will make it easier. Now when you asked me for a distraction I was at a loss until I had this lovely dream with a young blonde woman. My dream was just dancing and it reminded me that I know just the dance that will grab everyone’s attention.”

Athena’s eyes widened and she broke into a laugh, bringing her body close to his while assuming the position for the Rivainese Tango. . . that Inspiration and Solas had been teaching her in the Fade. Dorian looked down to her with a surprised expression but soon the music started. The orchestra’s music swelled in tones that brought her hair on end, her eyes closed as her and the fire-mage danced. It was a slow, typically sensual dance. His hands ghosted over her arms, waiting until the final moment to place a hand on the back of her neck. She leaned into his touch, her body following and placing all of its weight onto his hand so he could dip her down, bringing him below her.

It was different than Gaspard. Dorian was kind, a friend, and they were doing this dance together. With the Duke it felt like she was simply at his mercy because of his title and her position. Her friend slowly brought her back up to a standing position and it was then that she saw some of the more tanned-skinned nobles came from the crowd. Their dresses were thinner, lacking some of the volume that made up the fluff of Orlesian skirts. They joined Dorian and her within their dance, catching up instantly on where they were left off.

The pairs moved in unison. The music was full of tension in the form of long, drawn out notes that left them in a constant state of anticipation. Before there were any moves where Dorian would need to place his hands on her he looked to her, gently arching a brow for permission. She smiled, shaking her head back and forth before allowing him. The dance itself was sensual, hands ghosting over features with their faces close, but she was having fun dancing with him.

There was a silent shared knowledge between them that anything they did was harmless, which made it all the more freeing. The more comfortable they were with one another, the more interested glances they received. At one point Dorian had his hand on her thigh, using his other hand to grip her chin and smile at her with their faces mere inches apart. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Grand Duke Gaspard looking them up and down and it took everything within her to not use Dorian to deter her potential intended.

The thought almost made her dry heave on the ballroom floor. The dance ended in a move where Athena had her hand on Dorian’s neck and they were resting their foreheads together while they tried to catch their breath. The Rivainese nobles walked over, tapping on their shoulder while singing their praises in a language that sounded reminiscent of Spanish. She smiled and shook their hands, taking one of their handkerchiefs to tap the sweat from her brow before keeping the fabric to herself for later. Florianne reentered the ballroom and Athena grabbed Dorian’s hand gently, bringing him towards the Inner Council that were all meeting together.
“You have impressed the foreign nobles, Lady Athena.” Leliana mused with a smirk on her lips. Athena responded with a sarcastic curtsy, bowing her head forward with a wolfish grin.

“I try my best, Nightingale. Has the Inquisitor returned yet?”

They all shook their head and suddenly she felt a pit in her stomach. Did it normally take this long? During the game, she was in the point of view of the Inquisitor it moved as one fluid time frame. Waiting for them to return was torture. She looked to the doors of the ballroom when Josephine’s voice cut through her thoughts.

“What happened, Lady Athena?”

She fiddled with the wolf bone, looking back to them. She tried to control the worry that was try to set in on her face. “From what I know, Lady Florianne somehow gets a rift summoned and praises her connection to Corypheus.”

The Inner Council all paled, Cullen pinching the bridge of his nose while letting out a hiss of a breath. “Rathein has closed rifts before, this shouldn’t be a problem, but I-I-I was expecting them to be back by now.” Dorian placed his hand on her shoulder to calm her and she instantly put her hand over his, squeezing it while glancing to the ballroom door. It slowly opened and Rathein entered with her hair in somewhat of a disarray. The other four followed behind, and Athena let out a small growl in her throat when Solas came in moving one hand over the other arm. She could recognize a healing spell when she saw one.

The Inquisitor came over with her official “mask” on, standing to Athena’s side before looking to Cullen who immediately started. “Thank the Maker you’re back. The Empress is about to make her speech – “

Rathein, who had hardened features with a knit brow, looked to the Commander and nodded, cutting straight to the chase with no hesitation. “The Duchess will assassinate Celene personally. Wait for her to strike. Then grab her.”

Cullen seemed displeased but he nodded, “As you command, Inquisitor.”

He turned to give his orders and the Inner Council, dispersed, leaving the Inquisitor and Athena alone. “Are you sure about this, Inquisitor?” She kept her voice formal, forgoing their typical casual nature since her friend seemed on-edge.
Rathein nodded, tightening the gloves on her hands while keeping her gaze on the area where the Empress would soon give her speech. “Abso-fucking-lutely.” Even though her friend’s face was flat, Athena had to smirk at how she responded.

“I just wanted to make sure you were alright before going forward.” Athena turned to stand by her side, their shoulders touching as they waited.

“Actually, Athena, there was something else. You know Florianne wanted you there?” She nodded, using the corner of her nail to wipe under her eye and clean off some potentially smeared make up. “There were a lot more demons than we had initially talked about. I think they were trying to take you this time. Do you really know something that Corypheus could use?” The Inquisitor looked to the side, Athena clenching her jaw while nodding again. She knew the Well of Sorrows and the sentinels tasked to protect it. She knew the pass-code Briala had set to use the eluvians. She knew the identity of two elven Gods walking the earth. With all those things combined, he could gain a terrifying advantage if he captured her.

“Unfortunately, Yes. I can’t tell you some of them though. You understand?” Rathein dropped her hand to her side and Athena instantly took it into hers. The two women both closed their eyes and took in a deep breath in unison, squeezing each other’s hands before steeling themselves to move forward.

“Let all gathered attend! Her Imperial Majesty will now address the court.”
Chapter End Notes

As always, thanks for all of the love.

If you're curious, the song I tried to imagine when writing the tango was El Tango de Roxanne from Moulin Rouge.

Art Commission of our two best buddies created by sunshinemage on Tumblr!
“My friends! We have lost much. We have seen a child, a lover, a friend consigned to the flames. The darkness has closed in around us, but even now there is light.”

The crowd was enraptured by the words, every eye in the room on the Empress as she spoke. For a flicker of a moment, Athena felt guilt. This would be a moment that nobody would forget in history. This would be something where unfortunately her name might show up in a tome on Orlesian history.

“We must be that light. We must lead our people safely through these troubled times. We must be their guiding star.” The crowd began their applause, Rathein and Athena slowly moving towards the front while keeping a pleasant smile on their faces. The Empress was an eloquent and simply put an amazing public speaker. Her mastery of the Game was evident and yet again Athena was reminded that these were no longer characters that she could be detached from. She was here, in Thedas. These were now real people and the blood of Orlais would partially be on her hands.

“Tonight, the war dividing us must end!”

The Empress gestured to the Duchess Florianne and she could feel that Rathein stiffened. The Inquisitor dropped her hand and jerked her neck to the side to crack it, preparing for the upcoming battle. She then spoke under her breath: “Those harlequins we talked about are going to be hard to spot. We don’t have an assassin with us. If only we have someone who could sniff them out. . .” The Herald flicked a mischievous glance to Athena, who paused before breaking into a wide smile.

“If only we did, my friend.” She pulled in on her magic, feeling it swirl within her body and allowing it to bathe her mind in a hot white feeling. Rathein looked back up to Florianne, who had begun speaking as the host of the event.

“My friends, we are here to witness a historic moment. A great change is coming for all of us. Isn’t that right, Gaspard?”

Athena looked down to the Grand Duke who was tilting his head in confusion at his sister, who with almost too much ease drew her dagger and plunged it through the back of the Empress. They ran forward towards the front of the ballroom when Athena saw Brialia paralyzed with shock in the corner. She stepped to the side, grabbing her shoulder while meeting the Ambassador’s eyes. “Go
“Florianne, what have you done?” The shock in the Duke’s voice sounded almost genuine but at this point their words were swirling in the fog of deafness that came with her adrenaline racing. Rathein had her staff at her back but Athena did not bring hers. With the way she was training with her magic she found she did not need it as much, using the movements of her body to fuel her attacks.

“Don’t be coy. It went just as we planned. I did this for you, brother!” By this time Rathein was pushing through the crowd, looking to the other side of the room where Cassandra, Blackwall, Bull, and Solas were running to the front with their weapons drawn. Athena looked over her shoulder and saw that Dorian was joining them as well, any signs of intoxication absent from his face as he moved like water through the crowd. It appeared as if the Madame de Fer was keeping her hands clean, because she stayed in the back with a curious expression on her face towards the whole thing, slowly sipping her drink from a flute glass.

“Me? Have you gone mad?”

Florianne’s harlequins were already attempting to attack the Inquisition soldiers but thanks to her heads up with Cullen there were more troops on the inside. The Commander himself had his blade drawn and jumped over the rail down to the ballroom and out of habit Athena flicked her hand out and cast a barrier over him before turning her sights onto Florianne.

“What a terrible guest you are – “

“Shut the fuck up, Florianne.” She cut through with a pointed and icy tone, turning on her heel to follow the Duchess off of the balcony. As Rathein vaulted over the railing she took another route, planting her heel on the rail and pushing forward. While Florianne rolled out of her dress and appeared in a more rogue appropriate outfit, she launched a ball of flame towards her, landing better than she anticipated on the ball of her foot while using her hand on the ground to stabilize her. Solas was immediately at her back and she could feel the cool tingling of his barrier on her back, closing her eyes and taking in the sensation. Unfortunately, the pleasant feeling was broken off by the Duchess drawing an arrow and pointing it directly at the Inquisitor’s chest.

“I should thank you. You played your part marvelously.” Rathein didn’t even flinch, slowly looking down to the arrow with a smile.

“I was about to say the same thing to you, Duchess. You realize, Florianne, that we have an asset who alerted us of every step, every battle, and almost every word of this evening?” The Duchess
moved her arrow from the Inquisitor to Athena. She twitched her lips into a frown but shrugged, crossing her arms and acting like the threat to her life was no more than a gnat flying around her face.

“Your master has failed here, Florianne, and will continue to fail as long as we are here.” The Duchess shook her head, taking a step back while pulling the string on her bow tighter.

“You think I would come all of this way without an escape plan?” When she fired the arrow Athena took a step to the side with a surprising amount of speed before snarling back:

“No, Duchess. We planned on it!” The Duchess turned over the final railing and the party was on her tail. The warriors all ran down the stairs while Athena launched herself from the rail, falling victim to the pulse of her heart and the thrum of the pack within her mind. She landed on the ground as a white wolf and her aura pulsed around in a white, wispy flame coming from her fur. Rathein started with her spells on Florianne as a rogue-created fog set in on the area.

Athena took off through the environment until she came across a smell she did not recognize. She pushed forward in a lunge and bit her fangs into the leg of a Harlequin, using her strength to throw the assassin in front of Cassandra. The warrior came down with her sword into the clownishly dressed person’s chest, looking to Athena with a glance of gratitude. The wolf nodded and dispersed herself in the fog, keeping an eye on Florianne who was perched on top of the fountain with her bow and arrow. Solas was on her other side battling with a harlequin, trying to freeze them in place with his spells but falling behind.

She felt her magic pulse and she pushed from the ground, breaking into a fade-step to jump and tackle the assassin to the ground. Before the stunned woman could grab her daggers, she bit into her throat and felt her fangs dig through vessels and flesh. With a violent tear, she ended the woman’s life, panting over her body, and resisting the urge to vomit as the taste of blood washed over her tongue. Wolf she may be, it was still an odd feeling to kill somebody with her claws and mouth.

“Thank you.” She heard behind her, looking over her shoulder to see Solas drinking from a small lyrium vial with an almost proud twinkle in his eyes. Athena turned and responded with a nod, making an awkward motion to wipe the blood from her mouth onto her paw. He stood in front of her while she did, spinning his staff above to his head to shroud them both in a barrier. Florianne’s fog was dissipating and all three warriors took upon her but she still managed to out maneuver them and try and strike them with her daggers. With another throw of smoke she scrambled to the top of the fountain, her eyes searching for something.

Sure enough, when the Duchess’s gaze fell on Athena, she smiled and drew her arrow. “Bitch.”
Athena didn’t have time to look at Solas and instead took off, bouncing back and forth through the area while avoiding arrows that were flying around her. Her mind was so focused on running and weaving through people she barely noticed the sharp pain in her left leg. There were more of Florianne’s soldiers’ bodies on the ground so hopefully the battle would be ending soon. Solas struck the archer with a ball of frost, knocking her from her perch just in time for Bull to come upon her and place his axe against her throat.

“Bull, wait.” The Inquisitor called, running to the Duchess’s side and disarming her of her daggers and arrows, glaring at the woman the whole time. When she was disarmed the Qunari lifted his axe, allowing Florianne to roll onto her stomach and attempt to crawl away. There were wounds on her legs and arms from Athena’s allies and the stench of blood was high in the air.

“Somebody fetch Gaspard and Brialia.” The Inquisitor ordered. Athena stalked Florianne, stepping on her back with her massive paws before pressing one into the middle of her pack, pinning her to the ground before bringing her maw down and snarling in her ear. Much to her satisfaction the woman stilled, a panicked gasp coming from her throat. Already she was fighting her instincts because she wanted nothing more than to reach down and tear out the back of her throat. But the haze of battle was slowly lifting from her mind and she looked up to see Gaspard and Brialia descending the stairs.

Athena shifted back into her human form, using the paw that was previously on the assassin’s back to move up and grab her hair so that by the time she was standing her throat would be bared to the future leaders of Orlais. She could feel that blood was still dripping from her mouth so she withdrew the kerchief that the Rivainese noble had given to her earlier to wipe her lips and chin, knowing the blood was probably still coloring her lips but she paid it no mind.

Dorian teased her, standing behind her while sheathing his staff on his back. “Down, girl.”

She smiled, pulling up harder on Florianne’s hair until she heard a soft cry of pain come from the dying woman’s lips. Rathein stepped to the front of the group, gesturing back towards the Duchess with a formal stance and tone.

“Grand Duke Gaspard, Ambassador Brialia. We present the traitor of Orlais, the murderer of our beloved Empress Celene and conspirator with the murderer of the Divine, Corypheus.”
The Inquisitor gave a sturdy bow but Athena could feel the subtle sarcasm in it all. Thankfully the two women agreed completely on the situation. At first the initial idea of letting the Empress die did not sit well with Rathein, but the more they talked about it what it could mean for the future the Herald ended up confident in her decision.

“In our custom, the punishment for such a crime would be death, but we will allow you to proceed.” She then pulled a dagger from a sheath on her thigh and handed it grip outwards towards the two people.

Gaspard stilled, looking between the dagger and Athena with hate in his gaze. “How . . . You.” He stared down the Sorciere with a venom filled stare and she returned a mirrored glance, pulling up to bare his sister’s throat even more.

“I take it the marriage proposal is no longer on the table?” Bull let out a snort in an attempt to hide his chuckle but she said it through clenched teeth, speaking with nothing less than ichor in her voice. The Duke scoffed in response, his hands shaking at his side while the ideas bounced around in his head one what to do next. He was a strategist who was put in the most awful of situations: Kill his sister, or be proved a coward. Athena knew the line separating the two was thin since he allowed a possessed mage to wound one of his battle opponents once, but he would deny knowing it. Just as he denied the orders that got Blackwall in so much trouble.

Briala took a step forward wordlessly, taking the jeweled dagger into her hand. She assessed its weight, moving it between her hands before kneeling to Florianne’s level. The two women shared a silent glance before the elven Ambassador slid the dagger over her throat, ending her life quickly since the Duchess was already suffering from severe blood loss. The masked woman then dropped the dagger and Athena did not hesitate in letting go of her hair, using the clean parts of the handkerchief to remove the blood from her hands and fingers.

“What do you hope to gain, rabbit? You can’t claim Celene’s empty throne for yourself.”

Athena did not contain the anger in her face, but the expression was interrupted by a shooting of pain in her left arm. With a raised brow, she looked to the appendage, smirking when she saw what had pierced through it completely. She gripped the arrow, taking in a deep breath before ripping it from her arm and throwing the bloodied object at the Duke’s feet. Briala stood next to Athena with a confident posture, pointing at the man who wanted to be Emperor. “No. But I can keep it from you.”

The Inquisitor stood between them, giving Athena a nod of acknowledgement before pressing on. “With everything I’ve found on Gaspard, I’m sure Briala can effectively rule the empire.”
Gaspard scoffed, gesturing to the group like they were an annoyance. “I doubt anything in the world, let alone inside the palace, could put the rabbit in power.”

Rathein took in a deep breath, naming both the additional troops and the mercenaries they found as reasons to defeat Gaspard in the court’s eyes. While she was doing that Athena made the not-so-subtle move of pressing her heel into Florianne’s back, meeting his gaze when he looked over to her. She raised a brow, crossing her arms, and resisting the urge to smirk at him while she dug her heel into his sister’s corpse.

“You’ve made your point. What are your demands?”

While Briala and Gaspard spoke back and forth Athena looked to her arm, frowning as blood trailed down her arm and the sharp ache that was synchronized with her pulse throbbed within her arm. Dorian was at her side, looking at the wound before clicking his tongue behind his teeth. “You have a terrible habit of not letting people know when you’re hurt, dear. Solas!” He called, grabbing Athena by her injured arm and pulling her from the back of Florianne’s body. She groaned under her breath, closing her eyes to keep from slapping her friend.

“Reckless as usual.” Solas commented with a pointed tone. Athena opened her eyes and meant to chastise him but she saw the subtle teasing in his features and sighed. He nodded to Dorian and took her arm into his hands, eyeing the wound before sending his magic into it. The chilling feeling in her arm held so many memories with it she had to close her eyes and fight a smile, clenching her opposite hand into a fist at her side while she felt his magic work within her wound. His healing magic worked quickly so it didn’t take long for her to look over and see only a small scar roughly an inch long. “You are getting better with your shifting. It appears you even managed to use magic while in your wolf form.”

Athena raised a brow, meeting his eyes. “It is still my mind, is that so abnormal?”

He gave a small smirk. “If you have to ask, Athena, you know the answer.” She rolled her eyes at him playfully, looking back up towards the future Marquise of the Dales and the Emperor of Orlais with the Inquisitor standing in between them.

“The elves of Orlais will make great gains under our new emperor. Wait and see. From the sounds of it... your Sorciere will be a great ally to us.”

Chapter End Notes
Ahhhh, fuck Florianne. This was another one of those things I had thought of since the beginning. I have these flashbulb images in my head that are crystal clear and I hope I can communicate them into words for you.

For me, Athena with a bloodied mouth bearing Florianne's throat is just so powerful.

As always, thanks for the love.
Athena looked to Briala with a smirk on her lips, nodding in respect while wondering exactly how far the former Ambassador’s reach extended. Did everyone see her stumble into the Dalish encampment after running with the wolves all day? Gaspard had already hinted that he knew of her trade set up with them, was there more? She had threatened to burn a man over his mistreatment of an elf, but it just felt right to her. It made no sense to treat somebody else different just because of their race, especially in the case of elves. They came first. There was a time when the only race in Thedas were elves. If anything, they should be superior to man, dwarf, and Qunari alike but history had not been kind to them.

The Dread Wolf’s sin had not been kind to them.

The Inquisitor, the Emperor, and the future Marquise turned and went to address the crowd. The other party members slowly trickled behind, leaving Solas and Athena out in the courtyard alone. She walked over to the fountain, sitting on its marble side while cleaning off the kerchief to clean the blood from her arm and face before they reentered the ballroom. He looked down to her and sat next to her on the fountain, watching as she slowly cleaned herself up. “You look stunning, Athena.” She had to laugh considering she was cleaning blood from her face, a blush still coming to her cheeks. The moment the ballroom door closed and she couldn’t smell anymore Orlesians, a fading side effect of being in her wolf form, she turned towards him on the fountain and wrapped her arms around him, burying her face into his chest while holding back a sob.

He did not even still, instantly resting a hand on her back while bringing his other hand under her chin to bring her gaze to his. “Are you all right, Athena?” Solas asked, examining her face for any signs of distress but over the course of the night she had grown partially numb and hid everything. She tilted her head into his touch, letting out a heavy sigh while answering him.

“I hate this fucking place.”

He paused for a moment before chuckling at her language, shaking his head back and forth before bending down to gently kiss her. She released a soft cry, bringing a hand up to grab his while completely sitting up. The music restarted in the air behind them, a cue that Gaspard had addressed the court and announced his new role as Emperor. The Empress’s blood would have been cleaned from the floor and hopefully Briala had a place to bring her body to give it respect instead of being sprawled at the top of the ballroom.
“Dance with me, Athena.” He asked against her lips, opening his eyes to meet hers with a sincere smile on his face. His words brought a tightness to her chest and she was helpless to his request, nodding with a creeping smile on her face. The mask she had been building up the whole night began to melt away as well as the stress building up in her neck and shoulders. They stood from the fountain in unison, him holding her hand gingerly, preparing to bring her into a dance.

“Can we dance inside? I’m . . . tired of hiding tonight. I need to be myself around my friends, with you.” There was pain in her voice, something that accumulated over the night after being grabbed by several strangers and physically intimidated by Gaspard. The idea of marrying such a man put a taste of acid on her tongue and a shudder down her spine. Solas noticed this, walking at her side with his hand resting on her lower back, his thumb stroking the soft fabric. He looked to the design, smirking somewhat, pulling her hair back to get a better look at it.

The light touches made her throat tight but she smiled, looking over at him. “Dorian told me where he found the inspiration for that piece of work.”

He hummed, letting the hair fall back over before helping her ascend the stairs. “They found it in an elven book in the library, said it was a drawing of one of their Gods.” She moved her gaze from him to the stairs in front of her, a playful smirk at the corner of her lips. “Fen’Harel, the Dread Wolf.” There was a sound of acknowledgment from him as they reached the top of the stairs. She looked down to her dress and saw that at some point in the battle the thicker material that made her skirt appear to have more volume had disappeared. What was left was red and orange fabric pieces that fell around her legs like a silhouette, slits in the fabric revealing the skin of her thigh as she walked.

“Do you believe in the elven Gods, Athena?” She felt like the question was loaded, especially coming from the lips of an elven God. It could either be fishing for compliments or a genuine inquiry as to her beliefs in this world.

“In my home, we had a smattering of religions, more than there are here I feel. I never found myself to be fully committed to any of them. There it was difficult for me to even acknowledge a higher power but I couldn’t dismiss the idea entirely. Here. . .” She paused outside of the door leading to the ballroom, turning in his touch to meet his gaze. “There is visible, palpable proof of something larger. I still gave a token to a statue of Fen’Harel when I was recruiting Loranil. The Keeper had said something about the Dread Wolf catching my scent.”

There was a passive look of intrigue in his features and she wondered how hard he was trying to hide his expressions or if it was just reflex to not react after all these years. “And how do you feel about the idea of an ancient elven God hunting you?”
He took a step forward and opened the door for her and she gave him a playful smile, purposefully walking close enough to where her shoulder would brush against his body. “I did not think you would be one to be worried about Dalish curses, Solas. Should I be worried?”

Solas looked her up and down, arching a single brow with a smirk on his lips. “The Dalish have misinterpreted many things over time. I would not be concerned.” Athena could barely contain her smugness, turning the feeling into a roll of the shoulders with a smirk on her face. He came to her side and wrapped his arm around her, his hand resting on her hip while they looked to the ballroom. It was mostly full of Inquisition members and soldiers now. Emperor Gaspard and the Marquise of the Dales were on opposite edges of the room with their own people. Rathein and Iron Bull were already in the middle of the dance floor, a smile of pure euphoria on the Inquisitor’s face as she danced with her lover out in the open.

The music swelled and she couldn’t wait any longer, looking to Solas with a smile before switching to where she was grabbing his hand and leading him down the stairs. He followed silently with a strong posture and at this point she didn’t care that Gaspard was shooting her a glare from his side of the room. It almost made her more confident in her strides, coming next to Rathein and Bull at the end of the dance. Solas brought her close to him, placing a hand at the small of her back while looking her up and down. There was a subtle smile on his face while he used a finger to loop under the string of the wolf bone necklace and drop his gaze to the relic at the top of her chest.

“This suits you, Athena.” He complimented with a low tone, his eyes caught on the sight of the necklace against her skin atop the curve of her breasts. She could feel her breaths becoming shaky under the weight of his gaze, her stomach growing tight while she attempted to swallow down a lump of nerves forming in her throat. When she responded, her voice was breathy, lids hooded as she rolled her gaze up to meet his.

“I suppose I have you to thank for this. You were correct in your assumption that it would. . .. well, make me feel more like me.” The music started and he took one of her hands into his, their gazes locked as their bodies began to move on the ballroom floor. She could feel his magic pulling at hers, challenging it to come to bear like his. Athena smirked, letting out a controlled breath while letting her inner walls fall down. Her magic manifested like a tingle on her skin, rolling over her body and spreading to him through their shared touch. He tilted his head towards her and she could feel a small twitch in his body that was akin to a shudder.

They didn’t speak with words during the dance. There was no need for them. Their auras pulsed, wrapped, and moved at their wills through one another. It was a game between them, trying to get a reaction out of the other while their bodies stayed committed to the dance. She would move hers in a wave up his back or around his thighs and he would respond by brushing his up the front of her body, curving around her breasts and swirling around her waist. She gripped his shoulder, using more of her arms to try and keep her body upright. There was an evident flush to her skin and the more they went back and forth the dizzier her thoughts became. It had been so long since she had been someone with the want was overwhelming. It made her stomach feel light, anxious, and she was lucky that he was holding her up because she felt like she was surely going to fall.
At one point in the dance he spun her out and she could feel the fabric that remained of her skirts swirl up, creating the illusion of a flame before she came back to him, crushing her chest against his. He placed his hand on her back again, using his free hand to trace her jawline with a single finger. She arched her head up towards him, lips parted as he led her through the dance with small pulses of his magic wrapping around her and guiding her movements. The practice in the Fade helped but her mind was helpless at this moment, completely entranced by his gaze and the pressure of his magic against her body.

All she knew was that she was lost. Every emotion was in spinning in her head so she allowed herself to fall victim to the music and to his lead. Even when they were not wrapped up within one another there was a thick tension in the air. There was a movement where the dance pairs broke apart and walked in a circle. The two stalked each other like prey, their true nature showing in their movements and the weight of their gazes. They then took a step towards each other and brought their right arms up, raising them until the elbows were at eye level and grasping hands. There was a look in his eye, a hunger within his presence that nearly devoured her. To see him looking at her like that, to see him wanting her to openly, she was his completely.

As the song came to a close they rejoined, their bodies as close to one another without melding and their eyes locked. Their breaths rose and fell in a shaky unison. Her heartbeat was visibly pulsing in her neck and there was a glistening layer of sweat on her brow, neck, and chest. The orchestra’s sound faded into silence. They were cherishing the final moments together when she heard someone clearing their throat. “Come on, you two. Time to head to Vivienne’s for the evening.”

Rathein was standing with her arms crossed near them, arching a brow while giving Athena a mischievous glare. Bull stood at her side, looking pleased for whatever reason. “As you wish, Inquisitor.” It was difficult to remove the lust from her voice but somehow it worked. With a small sound of regret, she moved her hands from Solas’s chest and back, finishing the dance with a curtsy. She made a point to make the gesture low so that he would be in the perfect spot to view how his necklace threatened to fall in between the crux of her breasts.

Solas extended his hand towards her to help her up and she took it gingerly, praying that he could not feel how close she was to trembling at his presence and touch. They followed behind the Inquisitor and walked out to the carriages. When Loranil opened the carriage door Kain bolted out, running up to her and jumping so that his paws would rest on her shoulders. She wrapped her arms around him instantly, putting her face into the fur of his neck to take in his scent. “Okay? I heard hurt.” The wolf asked and she nodded, patting on his side to get him down. He sat in front of her loyally, looking to Solas with a small tilt of his head. The elf smirked, extending his hand so that the wolf could sniff it and then lick the center of his palm.

“Go to Cullen, Kain. I’m sure the Commander could use a distraction.” The black wolf nodded and turned on his paw, running into the open carriage of the Commander. Athena heard a “Maker! Hello!” come from inside the compartment before the door was closed. Solas led her into their own
carriage and he went in first. Athena paused, putting her hand on the door while looking to Loranil.

“Were you able to get the message out?” The elf warrior nodded, leaning in to her with his face as blank as a canvas in terms of emotion.

“I sent two just in case the Duke’s people are intercepting messages. I picked the fastest ravens from the bunch. Do you think my people are in much danger, lethal’lin?” The Dalish asked with a trace of fear in his voice. Athena clenched her jaw, hesitating before answering.

“After tonight I do not know. I will not allow any harm to come to them, Loranil.” He helped her into the carriage and then closed the door behind her. She sat opposite of Solas, letting out a heavy sigh while resting her head in her hands.

“What burdens you, Athena?” He was sitting with his arms relaxed in his waist, caring eyes looking over her form with his voice low.

“I did not like Gaspard’s subtle threats at dinner last night. The Dalish clan in the Exalted Plains are now tending to the Golden Halla. His threat towards it makes me worry he means to advance on them so I had Loranil send a message to his home telling them to move. I told Kain last night to have the pack herd the clan out closer to Skyhold so they can be safe and out of the now Emperor’s grasp.” With a soft groan, she pushed herself up to a sitting position, looking over at him with exhaustion in her eyes. His still held heat from their dance, a dangerous look playing at the corners of his eyes and lips. Looking at him, she suddenly found herself breathless and wordless. The carriage began to move with a small lurch and it threw her forward. She placed a hand on his knee to stabilize herself since she was now on her knees on the space between them.

Her gaze crawled from the floor to his face and she found that he was leaning down towards her with an amused smirk on his lips. Athena wanted to tease herself, call herself clumsy and play the action off as a joke. Instead she used her grip on his knee to pull herself up to where she could come to straddle his lap, placing her hands on his shoulders to keep herself steady. She relaxed onto him until they were at eye-level with lips parted and her breath held. Her hands moved from his shoulders to cup his face, her thumbs stroking on the tops of his cheekbones. The soft touches brought a moan from his throat and it was clear he was restraining himself, allowing her to lead and set the pace.

Blight it all.

In a quick motion, she pushed him against the back of the carriage and captured his lips for her own. The Keeper said the Dread Wolf had caught her scent but she knew now, in this moment, that
she had caught his instead.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thanks for the love. <3

I'm glad you all enjoyed the last chapter like I did! It was certainly a trip.
With the carriage door closed Athena’s walls came crashing down. There was a safety there in his arms, especially after being thrown around from noble to noble. She knew it wasn’t the Inner Council’s choice for that to have been her night, but knowing the Nightingale and Vivienne it wasn’t an idea she could dismiss entirely. A single mystery woman from another world up for grabs in the largest Orlesian soiree in years? The idea was too tempting to pass. She knew that from her limited experience in the Game. They could secure resources with probably the mention of a date or tea with the Sorciere of the Inquisition. The idea of being used made her sick. How Vivienne loved it she would never know, but in that moment, she just wanted that night to be gone from her mind.

Solas smiled underneath the initial kiss, bringing his hands to her thighs and gripping through the fabric. The strength of his hands made her weak, heat shooting up her back and drawing a muffled cry from her throat. He captured it, stole it from her lips as she moved a hand to the back of his head to bring him closer, flicking her tongue across the surface of his lips as an invitation to open the kiss. Her mind was hazy to every touch or movement on his end. He drew her bottom lip into his mouth and bit down gently, pulsing his magic into her body in a wave of chilly ice. Instantly goosebumps coursed over her skin, causing her to nearly writhe against him, nails digging into his shoulder and the back of his neck. Their innate auras were so opposing in nature when they clashed - they exploded, burst in an overwhelming sensation.

He was such an expert at manipulating his aura. They pulsed with his movements, adding accents and additional pleasure to whatever he was doing. He moved his hands through the already ripped strips of fabric of her dress to put his hands on bare skin, slightly digging his nails into the flesh that was there. He pulled her down more into his lap and she responded in kind, pushing her hips down onto his and trying to put as little space between them as possible. Her magic came unbridled, uncontrolled compared to his. It flared off her skin in visible wisps of flame, dancing with her pulse and shaky breaths against him. Solas began to move his hands up her thighs and then paused. Her eyes fluttered open under hooded lids and they separated for a moment.

There was something about the Dread Wolf restraining himself for her that pierced her heart. It was seeing the caring side, seeing the side that the game did not depict for her, they were the moments she cherished. There were only two or three scenes that a Lavellan lover could see and it never went beyond a kiss. Here there was heat. Here there was something that had her addicted to the taste of champagne on his lips and her name on his tongue. She trailed kisses across his cheeks and down his neck, bringing the lobe of his ear into her mouth and flicking her tongue across it. He instantly groaned through clenched teeth, moving his hands to her backside and finding purchase to raise his hips up against hers.

She was then very thankful that someone had packed finer silk smalls for the ball. Her path in
conquering his neck was halted by his formal attire, the thick collar obstructing her further. He chuckled at her, nuzzling his nose into her neck before starting his own trail from the tip of her ear down to her collarbone. Athena opened her neck for him, resting her head against shoulder while trying to control her heated panted breaths. “Is the invitation still open?” He mused against her skin and she could feel the mischievous curl of his lips. Yet again she did not have the words to answer him so instead she nodded, moving her hands to the front of his attire to try and undo the buttons that were keeping her from touching his skin.

Without hesitation, he rained kisses upon the skin above her collarbone, smirking before bringing a small bit between his teeth until she reacted accordingly, drawing in a hiss of a breath mixed with a whine. It was almost like he harnessed magic between his teeth. With the bite came a wave of pressure over her skin and it felt like her belly was so tight it was going to burst. Her shaky hands could not undo his buttons and she groaned in frustration.

He chuckled against her skin, the hot puffs of air teasing her already sensitized skin. He moved his own hands from her backside to her back, pausing at the top of her corset laces. Solas sat up to meet her gaze, using a free hand to trace the angle of her jaw line. “May I?”

Athena had to grin, relaxing her hands-on top of his chest. “Creators, yes.”

The elf arched a brow, using a long gesture to pull the bow at the top that had been fastened that morning. He smirked, “You did not say if you believed in the Elven Gods yet now you utter their name during a time of passion?”

She paused and matched his expression by arching a single brow, a playful smile on her lips. “That isn’t a turnoff, is it? There is one painted on my back so it only seemed appropriate.”

He went to answer when the carriage came to a halt, both of their gazes flicking to the side. She let out a groan of disapproval, looking back to him before nearly laughing. Her lipstick had smeared everywhere her lips touched, creating a trail from his lips, up his ear, and then down to his neck. Athena covered her mouth with her hand, stifling a chuckle while using the other hand to tear a piece of cloth from the fabrics of her dress. He was already beginning to lift her by her thighs to prepare for the door opening when she started to wipe where she could see the lipstick. “Hold on, hold on. If I don’t clean up they’re going to think I mauled you.”

“Well that wouldn’t be far from the truth.” She smacked his shoulder with the fabric in her hand, licking the cloth to get a stubborn smear from underneath his ear. The touch caused his eyes to roll back in his head and she couldn’t help but smile. *They’re sensitive. Good to know.* Once he looked acceptable, she slid from his lap and sat at his side. He casually wrapped his arm around her and she tried to feign that they had just been peacefully relaxing on the carriage ride over. A different attendant than Loranil opened their door and she moved first, using Solas’s lap to push from while
steadying herself on the soldier’s hand. The pair exited the carriage and looked at the estate.

It was just as pristine as she could imagine for Vivienne’s lover Duke Bastien. There were large marble pillars in front of the mansion and from what she could see of the lawn it was cut perfectly. Vivienne stood at the door, directing people to where their rooms were. The rooms were all spread out through the estate. Solas and Athena’s room were on opposite ends of the building and she had to resist glaring at Madame de Fer for the not so subtle insult. There were two hallways and Athena was down the left, Solas up the stairs and to the right. She turned towards him, grabbing his upper arm while meeting his gaze.

“Will I see you soon?”

He tilted his head slightly to the side with a hungry look in his eyes, bending down to whisper into her ear: “If that is what you wish.”

Athena smiled and nodded, squeezing his shoulder before turning and finding her room. It was large, close to the size of Rathein’s room back in Skyhold. She let out a low whistle at the sight, taking in the large tub and bed at her disposal. She walked over and instantly began to use the enchanted knobs to start a hot bath, walking over to the vanity and to look at herself in the mirror. Most of the makeup had stayed in place. There were a few places underneath her eyes and at the edges of her lips that had been smudged, which she quickly fixed by licking a finger and tracing the messy areas.

A few attendants were bringing things into the room and she took note that none of them were elves, thank goodness for that. She had found a silk robe on the back of the door that went down to her knees before going back in front of the vanity. Someone had brought in a tray of fruits made of grapes, strawberries, and blueberries. She popped one of the grapes into her mouth, sighing at its sweet taste before running her fingers through her curls.

There was a knocking at the door and she called out: “Come in!”

Vivienne sauntered in the room, doing a slow golfer’s clap with a smirk on her face. “Well done, my dear. Well done indeed.” The Enchantress had a wicked tone in her words and the sound sent a chill down her spine.

Athena went back to the mirror and removed the wolf earrings, placing them on the vanity surface. The necklace stayed in place and she touched her fingers to it to summon a small bit of confidence. “What do you mean, Lady Vivienne? The glory tonight belongs to the Inquisitor, not I.”
“Why yes of course. But you performed magnificently. You remind me of myself when I was younger. You play the Game well.” Vivienne was standing at the back of her chair now, resting her hand at its curved top while meeting her gaze in the reflection of the mirror.

“I played no Game. I merely tried to survive. You and Leliana can keep it; I want no part of it.” Athena responded curtly, picking up a brush and working out the knots in her hair while keeping a loose curl in her locks.

“You are in it now, my dear. First you teased the Grand Duke and kept stringing him alone like a dog with a bone at the end of a string. I heard you danced with him quite well.”

She contained her eye-roll, focusing with all of her might to ignore the woman at her back. “Then you saved that elf servant in front of everyone, subtly solidifying your alliance with the elven people and bolstering the Inquisition’s support for Briala.”

Athena’s eye twitched and she snapped through clenched teeth. “That is not why I did it. She was about to be hurt by a drunken fool who could not contain his power.”

“And so, you did it for her. That one elf does not explain why we have nearly two dozen in my rooms downstairs. Then you continued on your elven theme by playing the instrument outside and showing an affinity for ancient elven artifacts that even our Empress did not recognize. And then there was your dancing with Dorian. . . . What a dance. You were practically rubbing Gaspard’s nose in the fact that you were unmarried with the way you and the Tevinter were with one another.”

Athena could feel her power coming to bear, trickling across the surface of her skin as she forced herself to rebuild every wall Solas had torn down in the carriage. She stretched her neck to the side until she felt a crack near the base, putting hatred in her gaze as she looked up towards Vivienne, who only smirked before continuing. “You then literally bared the throat of Orlais and allowed Briala and Gaspard to feel like it was their choice. But you knew all along who would grab the dagger, did you not?”

That part was true but she did not show it. There would be a moment where she anticipated that Gaspard would hesitate. It was his own sister after all and Rathein had suggested on holding off the final blow to give whoever would lead the power boost of killing the person who murdered the Empress. Then everyone in Orlais would know who truly saved the country and they would be at the Inquisitions’ mercy. “Then my personal favorite piece. After humiliating the Grand Duke with the refusal of his marriage proposal, empowering the elves, and taking the country away from him. . . . you danced the final dance with the announced Inquisition’s elven servant. They will be talking
about it for ages.”

“You know damn well that is not what it was!” Athena rose from her chair with a snarl, whipping around, and challenging the mage with an icy glare. Her aura threatened to manifest in her palm and Vivienne raised a brow, looking her up and down before suppressing a scoff into a hum of amusement.

“I am not judging you, Sorciere. I am complimenting you. I knew you had potential and you just let it blossom tonight. You have the potential for a great future ahead of you, dear. Simply you must see that?”

She could barely see past the haze of anger in her mind, her breath coming in controlled movements while her hands gripped the top of the chair on the other side of Vivienne’s hand. “The only thing on my mind, Madame de Fer, is ridding the world of Corypheus, the Tevinter Magister who is threatening to tear the world asunder.” She was surprised at how well she was able to reign in her tone, never breaking from the other woman’s gaze.

“Indeed, that is the larger threat.” The First Enchantress placed her hands on Athena’s shoulders, looking down with an amused look in her eyes with a soft smirk. There was a power play between them, it was evident in the room. The air around them grew thick with the saturation of magic. She half expected Vivienne’s flavor to be like Solas’s, icy and chilling in its nature. Instead, it was more like a pressure, just a never-ending presence that loomed over her. It was intimidating but she surrounded herself in an invisible ethereal flame of aura to protect herself.

The opposing mage did a quick exhale of breath from her nose, removing her hands from Athena’s shoulders with a small sigh. “Now now, my dear. Things are going to be very trying in the future.” She then leaned forward until her mouth was close to her ear. “And women like us need to stick together to survive it.”

Athena felt her mind shatter, eyes widening as Madame de Fer walked towards the door, pausing before leaving. “Good night, Sorciere.” The door shut with a subtle slam and she could feel the hot pulse of magic that normally triggered a shift running through her mind. Her hands shook at her side, slowly releasing the robe as her breaths increased in rate, her mind washing over in a dizzying amount of haze.

Women like us.
As always, thank you for the love. :) 

As an aside: I have an outrageous amount of respect for Vivienne OOC, but like Sera says: "She's a bitch and she knows it."
Athena froze in place as Vivienne slammed the door, her body finally catching up with everything that Vivienne had said. She had compared the two, stated that they were equal. Women like them had to stick together. Madame de Fer was a champion of the Game, someone that was to be feared and respected. It was why she had such a passion for fashion and how to be presented amongst others. She knew how to command power and she did so without batting an eye. The servants and people who were not in the Inquisitor’s inner party avoided her line of sight at all cost, treating the First Enchantress like she was some sort of queen. Inwardly, Athena knew that was why people feared mages. If she had not intervened, the Marquis would have been murdered at her soiree for disrespecting both her and the Inquisition. . . and nobody would have said a thing. If she considered them to be on the same level for players of the Game. . .

“Oh god.”

She whispered, feeling her resolve and strength shatter like weakened glass within her chest. Her chest rose and fell in quick, shallow breaths. Sweat beaded on her torso and neck and it wasn’t from the steam rising from her drawn bath behind her. She stepped forward, body nearly collapsing as she slammed two hands down on the surface of the vanity to find some sort of purchase to keep her from falling. Her painted nails clawed the sanded wood, her frenzied and wide gaze looking into the mirror only to see a stranger staring back at her.

She had been raised different than this. Victoria had been raised different than this. Her parents. Her parents. She let out a cry of grief, clasping a shaky hand over her mouth to stifle the noise. If they could see her now. . .they would be devastated. They had raised her to be a kind, caring person. She was a healer in her past life. She was someone who would sit at the bedside of the dying and hold their hand as they faded into eternal darkness. She was someone who loved everyone no matter their race, creed or religion. Here, that meant so much more but she still tried to apply that to everyone. Dwarves, elves, qunari. . . that did not matter to her. They were all beautiful creatures that she found even more fascinating because they did not exist in her world. The world shamed the elves but she believed they deserved so much more.

If her parents could see her now. She could kill a person in self-defense and not even flinch now. The first person she had killed, the attacker in the Crossroads, the paralyzed face of grief he bore in his death haunted her for days. Now she could shift into a bestial form and tear out the throat of a Harlequin while wanting more. She had fallen victim to blood lust. She had to be held back from biting the back of the throat of Duchess Florianne. With blood and flesh falling from her maw, in
that moment she had wanted more. Athena had been drunk on power, drunk on the feeling that she held Orlais within her paw and she knew it.

This new person. This character that she had fallen into. It was someone she could have never dreamed of. Her features were sharper, this painted face in the mirror, it was someone she never thought that she could become. But now, if she were to be on the same level as Madame de Fer, would that mean that soon she would be feared? There were commoners that already feared her because of her foreign nature and her ability to know the future. But they were slowly warming up to her because of her campfire songs and obvious want to help the Inquisition. Would this recent change, this ascension in the game, separate her from the common within Skyhold?

The thought terrified her. She was not someone to be feared. She wanted to help. She wanted to help bring people to an equal playing field while bettering Thedas with the knowledge she knew. Corypheus would hold no claim over them. Mythal would no longer come in with her cryptic messages and apathetic attitude. Fen’Harel would not tear the sky asunder and end the lives of millions. Her breaths were now at the point of hyperventilating, pupils constricted to a pinpoint while one hand nearly clawed at the curve of her neck, looking for something that could have been closing off her airway. There was nothing, save for the loose wolf-bone necklace that nearly hummed atop her breasts in response to her frenzied emotions.

The other hand moved to her back, trying to find the ribboned knot at the top of her corset. It was growing tighter, she felt. The expansion of her chest grew more shallow and the darkness of her panic closed in around her vision. Hot, silent tears fell down her cheeks, the sounds of her sobs silenced by her cries of frenzy. The sound of the door opening fell deaf upon her ears, her hands clawing at her clothes to find some release to help her. It felt like her chest was going to explode, her pulse pounding away at a near uncountable rhythm in her neck. Athena’s breath fell in hot, shallow pants and she knew that soon she would faint. Her body nearly fell around the vanity, the strength of her upper arms and elbows holding her up when she felt a hand at her back.

The hunger in Solas’s eyes faded away into one of concern, his gaze looking her over like a healer for any wounds or things he could fix as he came to her side. “Can’t... breathe.” She managed to whisper out between panicked breaths, her nails digging into the shallow curve of her neck. It felt like she was suffocating on the burden of her new position. There was a sudden tear at her back under her robe and out of response she took in a deep gasp of a breath. Solas had hardened the tips of his fingers into ice, creating a blade from his magic to tear up the back of her corset and dress. The dress fell forward and he caught her from falling by placing a hand on her stomach, quickly bending down to pick her up with an arm underneath her knees and the other under her shoulders.

“What happened? What – “ He tried to ask, searching for her gaze but she was lost within the haze of her anxiety.

“I can’t. Solas – I can’t.” He balanced her on his knee while his foot rested on the chair of the
vanity, ripping away her dress with his free hand. The robe fell like a silhouette on her body but she could not care less at what was covered and what was not. She was helpless in his grip, his magic wrapping around her like a comforting blanket.

Then suddenly things were warm... very warm.

The new sensation snapped her from her endless fog, her eyes looking around to see where they were. He had lifted them both up and into the bath. The water raised past the top of the edge, falling onto the floor in a puddle. Instantly she reached out towards the edge, looking over it. “Solas, we’re –“

“It can be fixed, Athena. Tell me what is bothering you. I could feel you from the other side of the estate.” There was a pointed edge to his voice but she recognized it was anger towards whatever had triggered her to get like this. She sighed, allowing her body to curl up against his in the safety of the water that washed over her skin.

“Vivienne said I was like her. She said ‘Women like us need to stick together.’ I... am terrified of becoming like her, Solas.” Athena rested her head against his chest, her body remaining in the somewhat fetal position. With every passing second with him there her magic came back within herself. She could feel that it was nearly pressing against the walls, threatening to become a flame and burn the place down. Her breaths were still fast but with his presence and magic things were slowly clicking into place. Tears still streamed down her face, her hands gripping the front of his formal attire that he had apparently not changed out of yet.

He stayed silent, allowing her to continue speaking while resting his cheek against the top of her head. The panic, the frenzy, had faded down into silent sobs against his chest. “She was using my actions against me, saying that I danced with you to even further humiliate Gaspard. Saying my help for the elves was all some sort of play.” His grip tightened around her for a moment and she could feel his magic come to bear.

“The First Enchantress knew how to wound you with words, Athena. She has been doing this for many many years. You did what you had to tonight and what you did, you did wonderfully.” She couldn’t help but laugh between sobs, the sound broken and hollow. He looked down to her in curiosity and she shook her head into his chest.

“I don’t think I had to shift for that battle but it just felt right. I don’t think Gaspard is ever going to forget me standing over his sister’s body like that.” Solas chuckled, bringing her closer to him by tightening his embrace around her.
“No, I do not think our companions are going to either. You have become a formidable fighter since you first arrived here. Does our Inquisitor approve of your specialty choice?” Even when she was almost a puddled mess in the bath he managed to sound academic. She chuckled, giving him a shrug while somewhat attempting to sit up in the bath, rubbing her eyes with her hands. When she opened them, she saw exactly how much make up she had just smudged all over.

“Ah shit. I still have all of this fucking paint on me.” Athena cursed, using the now completely soaked robe to remove the eyeshadow and eyelash enhanced ink from her hands. Solas reached to the side and grabbed a cloth from the edge of the tub, dipping it into a small cup filled with an oily soap.

“Perhaps I can help. Here, face me.” He insisted, using his other hand to help guide her to where she was facing him and she was nearly straddling him in the tub. Every movement they made caused more water to overflow onto the floor. She got an almost sick kind of glee knowing that they were ruining Vivienne’s room but as he had said before, it could be fixed. “Close your eyes, Athena.” His voice felt to a whisper, restraint showing in his voice since she was now facing him with a partially open robe and nothing else but her smalls and bandings. Athena arched a brow at him before nodding, letting out a soft sigh before closing her eyes.

With gentle care, he used the cloth to wipe away the make up on her face. He started at her forehead, working away at the easy parts that only had foundation or lotion on them. His other hand would stabilize her shoulder or help keep her hair out of the frame while he worked. The dried tears were wiped away, as well as the thick blush that they had carved a path through. After rinsing and re-lathering the cloth he used a small corner to clean off her eyelids. Athena felt her thighs tighten around him, her lips parted in anticipation for his touch. Even if he was helping to clean her up from her near collapse, the small actions and touches were maddening.

Athena went to speak, to even say his name but he shushed her, moving his hand from her shoulder to cup her cheek. “Almost done, do not move.” He used the cloth to wipe the paint from her lips, passing over multiple times until a soft cry fell from her throat. Once every ounce of the Sorciere was removed from her face, he stroked his thumb over her bottom lip with a soft groan in his throat. “Ar lasa mala revas. I finally found you under that mask.” The familiar phrase brought tears to her eyes, a hand coming up to rest on top of his that was cupping her cheek. She placed a soft kiss against the surface of his thumb, eyes slowly opening to meet his gaze.

The hunger had returned to the deep blues of his eyes, clothes completely soaked and clinging. Athena moved her hands to the buttons of his top, having a bit more dexterity and focus to undo the sterling silver buttons of his top, her eyes never leaving his as she did it. She noticed his breaths growing deeper, more controlled as his hands fell to the top of her hips to steady her. When she was finished undoing his shirt she smoothed her hands over his bare stomach, fighting to stay in control of her movements and not start shaking like a leaf. He closed his eyes in response to her touch, increasing the strength of his grip on her hips while letting out a soft hiss. She took in his features and realized exactly how much he was holding himself back. His jaw was clenched and his aura was skin-tight, which normally only happened when he was trying to hide something. She shook
her head back and forth, bringing a hand up to his face while keeping the other one resting against his bare chest.

“Solas, why do you restrain yourself so much?” Her voice was breathy, heated but she allowed there to be space between them. He knit his brows and let out a sigh, opening his eyes to meet hers.

“Considerations.” His answer was curt and strained, which only brought a smirk to her lips. “I do not wish to pressure you, Athena.”

In response, she tightened the grip of her thighs on his lower half, pulling her hips down to grind against his where she could feel his obvious need. “You aren’t.” He let out a soft gasp as she grabbed one of his hands from her hips, kissing the inside of his palm while never allowing her gaze to break from his. There was a subtle twitch of his fingers against her skin. He arched a brow at her, asking silently while a feral hunger settled in the edges of his gaze and face: Truly?

Athena nodded silently and he looked to her for a moment more before pushing up from the bottom of the tub with his legs, wrapping one arm underneath her thigh while the other supported her lower back. She let out a yelp of surprise, instinctively wrapping her legs around him for support while he stood from the tub and walked over to the bed, a dark yet mischievous smirk on his face. Halfway to their destination she took his face in her hands and began kissing on his cheekbones, trailing the light gestures down to his jawline. With a surprising amount of grace, he made it to the edge of the bed, laying her down on the edge and keeping himself between her legs.

Solas shrugged off his soaked top, throwing it to the side before looking down at her. She had fallen against the bed unceremoniously, the wet silk robe clinging to her skin and sending a shiver down her spine. He sat up, quickly tracing a rune in the air between them with his index finger before flicking it to the side. All of the water in her hair and clothes followed the movement, leaving her and the bed underneath them thankfully dry. Even with it gone, she found herself slightly shaking in anticipation. He bent down to her, one hand pulling her thigh upwards so he could position himself as he pleased.

“Are you nervous, Athena?”

She couldn’t help but smile with a shrug, tucking a stray hair behind her ear in a gesture of anxiety. “Rusty, so, yes.” He chuckled in return, bending down to where the tip of his nose touched against hers.

“Allow me to help you then.”
Chapter End Notes

First of all: WOW! 10k hits. I'm super duper flattered and kind of blown back by the continuing positive response I get from my work.

Secondly: This is the start of new territory for me, well, us. Like I've said before romance writing is not my forte and it's something I haven't done in a long time. Hope you like it!

Thank you all as always for the love and continued support.
Let Go*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was no soft introduction, no chaste beating around the bush. He took her face into his hands and captured her lips with his, devouring her with long, tortuous kisses that left her breathless. She was helpless to him, victim to his touch as he brought small cries from her lips. His satisfaction in her response was obvious. For every small whimper, he would smile underneath the kiss or break off and trail kisses up and down her neck. He murmured lines of ancient elvish and the low tone of his voice combined with the unknown language set a knot in her lower belly, want setting her skin on fire as she arched her back against him.

His hand gripped her shoulder, then her upper arm, before sliding it over the top of her chest bandings. To stifle her cry, he conquered her mouth again, sliding his tongue over hers in unison with pulses of his magic that felt like a cold flame igniting in her chest. One hand gripped on his back, trailing over the different muscles and lines that were found there. The other came to the side where her bandings were tucked in, finding the last piece of cloth to pull it free. He picked up on her cue, gripping the fabric in the center of her chest and pulling down with a single movement. The cold breeze of his magic against the skin of her breasts drew a sharp gasp from her, goosebumps bursting along the surface of her skin. His hand caressed over the surface of one of her breasts, flicking his thumb against her already hardened nipple to bring a cry from her throat.

Every nerve was sensitized to his touch. His magic pulled against hers to bring light their bodies afire. Their kisses grew deeper, filled with wordless groans of need as their hands roamed. With a sound almost akin to a growl, he broke from her lips and kissed down to her collarbone, brushing his lips over the forming love mark that he created earlier in the carriage. He did not stop, kissing with small flicks of his tongue against her skin until he reached the center of her chest between her breasts, underneath his wolf-bone necklace.

Solas paused, looking up to meet her gaze and what she saw brought her beast to bear in a white-hot wave of desire. His wolf was showing behind the windows of his eyes. There was a carnal hunger in his gaze, calling for hers to match. She didn’t know what he was waiting for so she nodded to him, bringing her touch underneath his chin. “Please, Solas.”

He made a moan low in his throat as he brought his mouth down to the top of a breast, kissing, teasing with hot breathy acts until he finally drew her nipple into his mouth. Athena nearly broke, arching her back off of the bed and crying out. He moved his hand behind her back to keep her close to him, his tongue drawing circles around the peak of her breast and flicking it across like it were a piece of candy. She clung to him, wrapping a leg around his backside to bring him down closer to her with a grind of her hips. He instantly reciprocated, growling against her skin and moving his hips down to pin her against the bed with a pulse of magic.
From their session in the carriage to now, her want had begun to coil like a knot within her. She did not know the last time she had release. Even in times by herself she was unable to find the mindset because of the circumstances. Corypheus, Haven, the Ball, none of those created the best circumstances for her to find a right time. Here, with him, it was all coming to life. She ached between her thighs and the sensation was borderline pain, increasing in intensity every time he moved against her. He moved to her other breast, using his magic to stimulate the one he left behind until she was nearly bucking against him in a wave of overstimulation.

He slowed in his kisses, flicking his gaze up to hers to catch the want underneath her hooded lids and parted lips. The hand that wasn’t on her back moved to her belly, pausing above the line of her smalls and slowly caressing a finger along her lower abdomen. Athena let out a mewl of frustration, bringing a hand over his while murmuring, begging to him. “Please – Solas, please.” She pushed on his hand to go lower and he did, flicking his tongue against her nipple before hovering his mouth over her chest. He slid his hand over her sex to cup it, bringing pressure against it until she moaned and rose her hips to his touch.

“Lay back.” He instructed, leaning forward with her in the bed until his face was over hers. Without moving his hand, he dipped down to kiss her gently, using the free hand to trace her jawline before breaking from the kiss to look down at her body. He looped his thumb underneath the silk smalls and pulled down. She assisted by lifting her hips from the bed and with a quick movement he removed them and threw them onto the pile where his still soaked formal jacket was.

When he looked back, he froze, eyes widening in awe while his lips parted. The moonlight came in through the window, illuminating her body with the aid of the candles around the room. For the first time, she was bare before him. Normally she would have shrunken in and covered herself but the look in his eyes made her feel confident, made her feel desired. “You are so beautiful,” he managed to whisper, his gaze trailing up from her sex, which thankfully was still smooth from Rathein’s red concoction.

When his eyes met hers she leaned up, bringing her lips against his while cupping his cheek in her hand. There were small, passionate cries from both of them, his hand returning between her legs and stroking against the outside with the back of his fingers. The small touch nearly undid her, her legs twitching while her kisses deepened against him. She trailed her tongue along the bottom of his lip, drawing it into her mouth and using her own magic to surround him, drown him like his did to her.

Solas groaned, sliding a single finger down the middle of her folds until he found her already slick with arousal. He then brought it up, tracing around her bundle of nerves, coaxing small whimpers from her lips. She could feel her body tightening already, heat rolling off of her body in waves. Her throat was dry, pulse quickening as the pressure began to build within her belly. He did slow, lingering movements around her until he dipped his finger lower and pushed it against her entrance.
Out of reflex her legs opened slightly to him, eyes fluttering open to look at him with a gaze filled with desire for only him. He looked to her, pressing his forehead against hers before sliding his finger into her heat. Instantly she cried out, her body flexing around him as she fell back against the bed. He remained elevated above her, watching her reactions to his movements and touches. He completely sheathed his finger inside of her, bringing it up and stroking against the spot that made her uncoil.

With him inside of her his magic intensified, shooting up through her sex to wrap around that coiled pressure in her belly. With every stroke and moment, it blossomed like a flame, filling up her core and threatening to burst from her body. Her breaths grew short and nearly panicked, his strokes increasing in intensity to match hers. His name fell from her lips and he brought his free hand to her face, tracing his thumb across the surface of her lips. She reached forward, bringing his thumb into her mouth and flicking her tongue against it.

Solas gasped, bringing his now wet finger to her nipple to tease it back where he wanted. The combination of his hands on her breast and inside of her made her wild, her eyes rolling back to a close while she bucked her hips down against the rhythm of his hand. It was growing faster now. He had zeroed in on the perfect spot that made her squirm and was pulsing his aura in it, spreading it out to fill her in between strokes. The tension in her body was growing to a peak, her mind nearly white with pleasure and anticipation. Whimpers and cries fell from her lips, a hand gripping his shoulder to find some sort of weight to reality.

He brought another finger inside of her and her body tightened around him in kind. He moaned, replacing his hand on her nipple with his mouth. With great expertise, he synchronized the strokes of his fingers with the flicking of his tongue across her nipple. Athena was lost, hand clawing into his shoulder as she felt herself quickly fill with a hot sensation, sweat beading on her skin as her chest rose and fell in a pleasured frenzy.

“Solas –!”

He broke off from her chest, bringing his lips to her ear to whisper, no, demand: “Let go, Athena.”

The climax tore a cry from her lips, her body writhing with the waves of ecstasy that his touch brought from her. He continued his strokes of his fingers, crushing his lips against hers to silence the cries that fell never ending from her mouth. It felt like her body was on fire, her magic billowing uncontrolled from her core, intertwining with his until she nearly passed out. With the final spasm of her sex he pulled his fingers from her, wiping the slickness of her desire on his pants before kissing the tip of her nose. She was working on finding her words and breath. They were both lost behind the haze of her orgasm and she truly felt spent.

Gently he lifted up the blanket and covered them both with it, aligning himself at her side while
facing her. She turned towards him, finally able to open her eyes. He was looking at her with pure adoration, his features softened from the feral beasts that they had been on the edge of becoming. She reached up to cup his cheek, meeting his gaze with nothing but care in her heart. The other hand trailed down his chest, resting and pressing against the swell of his own desires. He sighed in response, slightly grinding against her touch before shaking his head within her hand. “Not tonight, ma’fen.”

“But, Solas. . . “ She fought, falling victim to the crushing fatigue that had come from the day and the release that had been building up for months now. He chuckled, kissing the inside of her palm.

“You are terrible at hiding your exhaustion. Do not worry about me. You need your rest.” Silently she nodded, unable to fight him as the threat of sleep invaded her mind and body. He moved to position them for sleep when she paused, placing a hand on the center of his chest.

“Hold on.” With a quick movement, she brought his necklace over her head and placed it back around his neck. He smirked, running his fingers across the object.

“It suited you well, Athena. I hope it brought you comfort throughout the evening.” Athena hummed in answer, returning to her normal position where his arm supported her head and her hands gently rested on top of the wolf-jaw.

“You have no idea, Solas. It was almost like I could feel your presence radiating from it. That combined with the apparent markings on my back, it felt like I was with the pack.” Her voice was losing its strength, fading to a whisper as she yawned in between words. He chuckled, kissing her forehead while bringing her close. He nuzzled into the top of her head and inhaled her scent, using his free arm to bring the blankets up to around their necks. Athena sighed and relaxed within his embrace, fighting off the urge to drift into the Fade with him. Surprisingly, for her at least, it took effort to project herself into the Fade and control her movements. A dreamless sleep was easier, especially now when she was spent in all matters of the word.

She could feel his breaths deepen, his magic pulsing in and out like ripples on water indicating that he was traveling within the Fade. His grip on her was tight, protective in the ruins of the room of the estate. He had dried their clothes but they had yet to fix the water that had puddled and overflowed from the tub. There was a trail of destruction starting at the vanity that burst outwards, leading to them in the bed. There was a bit of pride in her chest at that fact. Vivienne had come in expecting to shatter her. Well, she kind of succeeded. Athena closed her eyes and rested her head against Solas’s chest, her hands wrapping around the wolf bone as an anchor to the real world and all of the great things he brought into it.

Even with the trepidation of his identity in the air, Athena felt secure. There were so many more experiences here to base her emotions on as opposed to the three somewhat chaste cut scenes that
the game provided. Here, there were small nuances like a smile across the room or the way he would readjust his grip in the night to make sure she was still there. All of the things combined just made her feel wanted, desired. It had taken months but the insecurities of her past life were fading away and her growing confidence was blooming.

Hell, she had nearly burned a man’s hand for grabbing her ass. It was something that she would have never considered before, but now? She was experimenting, challenging herself to be daring and do things she had never done before. In Thedas, Victoria was becoming a distant memory... and Athena was coming into her own.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thanks for the love!
The sun began to peak through the window, falling in a blanket of light onto Athena’s face. She knit her brows together, letting out a groan while absentmindedly reaching in front of her. There was only air. Thinking it was a mistake she did it again, stretching her hands out as far as they would go only to feel the cold sheet. She rubbed her face into the pillow to rid herself of the drowsiness setting in on her face before opening her eyes. Sure enough the bed was empty besides her, the side Solas was sleeping on freshly made. She sat up and slipped from bed, tying off her robe that she had fallen asleep in while searching for her smalls.

There was no longer a trail of destruction in the room. The water had been removed from the floor and there was a pile of new clothes on her vanity. She arched a brow. Had an attendant or worker for Vivienne come in and cleaned while she was asleep? She lifted the black silk bandings from the top of the pile and began to wrap them around her breasts. There was a benefit to wearing them over bras. She could adjust how tight they were and there were different fabrics to choose from. She did miss her sports bra at times but that had been lost in their various travels. She had a sneaking suspicion that Josephine or one of the seamstresses burned it in a fire when they were filling her wardrobe with different outfits.

There was a matching pair of smalls that she slid on, sitting down in the vanity chair. Thankfully whoever had put out clothes had chosen something a little more for her style. There was a pair of slim-fitted black pants with light weight tanned boots that laced up to the knee. She quickly put them on and as she was finishing lacing up the boots she heard the door open and shut quietly. With a quick flick of her gaze, she saw Solas attempting to sneak back into the room. When he turned to meet her, she arched a brow at him with a small smirk, eyes dropping to see a small tray of fruit in his hand.

“You are awake! I was hoping to return before you did.” He broke whatever passive face he had and smiled to her, walking over and placing the tray in front of her on the vanity surface while kissing her cheek. She put a hand to the back of his neck, holding him in place so she could turn and brush her lips against his in greeting. He let out a small sound of acceptance, holding her to him for a second longer before standing up from her.

“I see you have been busy this morning, Solas.” Athena gestured with a flick of her head to the bath and everything around it. He nodded, walking over to sit at the edge of the bed.

“There were quite a few things that needed to be corrected.” He sounded so academic but there was a wicked look over his gaze that made her smile. She pulled a clean green colored shirt over her head, looking at it in the mirror while running a brush through her hair. The shirt felt like a blend
of cotton and silk and surprisingly enough there were no sleeves. There was a part at the top of her cleavage to tie the fabric closed so she made a small bow, pulling her wavy locks to the front of her shoulders with a small nod to herself. She looked acceptable enough for the travel home.

“The rest of the party is gathering for breakfast before we depart.” Athena looked over to him and nodded, noting that he had switched out her straps on the wolf-bone necklace for his own. She walked over and traced her fingers over the object, smirking before she widened her eyes and cursed under her breath.

“Shit, where’s Kain?” She rolled her eyes back and fell into her consciousness, pulling at the bond that connected the two. The wolf was lazily laying underneath the breakfast table near Cullen. When he felt her calling, his tail began to absentmindedly begin to wag. Sorry. Friend. Food. The wolf called back and she snorted a scoff, rolling her eyes while coming back to where she was in front of Solas with her hands on his shoulders. “Him and Cullen, I swear. They’re going to get into trouble.”

“The Commander seems quite taken with your companion.” He said almost pointedly, causing her to look down with a sigh. She leaned forward and kissed the elf on the forehead, rubbing her thumbs on the top of his shoulders.

“From what I know from my world he likes dogs. I figure I can’t take Kain around on all of my adventures until we train together and the Commander rarely leaves Skyhold. If he would quit feeding him table scraps, we would be a bit better off. . .” Her voice trailed off and he squeezed her hips, pulling her a step further between his legs so he could kiss the center of her chest. She smiled, bending down to meet his gaze. He stood in a smooth motion and grabbed her hand, kissing the center of her palm before leading her out of the room.

It was almost like magic. The moment the door shut servants from the hallways went into the room and began bringing out their belongings to pack up and put on the carriages home to Skyhold. He led her down the long hallway into the dining room, which was one of the largest things she had ever seen. The table was incessantly long and decorated with white and blue china with a smattering of food on the center. People were walking around it and grazing, Bull of course nearly filling his plate to the brim with the breakfast meats and breads.

The sight of her Skyhold family was heartwarming and last night’s crisis was becoming a distant memory. Blackwall and Josephine were talking at the edge of the table. The Warden looked to her and nodded in greeting, the Ambassador turning and waving with a girlish smile on her face. She hoped that he would come around with his choice sooner rather than later. Living with a secret like that could not be healthy; it was hard enough being around Solas with what she knew of him. The two took a seat across from Rathein and Bull and Athena scooped strawberries with toasts and jam onto her plate, eyes nearly growing to the size of saucers from all of the food.
“Goodness, darling, you look famished.” Dorian slumped down into the seat next to her, sipping on a glass of champagne.

“Yeah, the nobles from last evening did not give me much opportunity to eat like some.” She looked him up and down with a fake judgmental stare, plopping a strawberry into her mouth. Solas smirked, not hiding the fact that he was eating a pastry with his breakfast which was the typical light fare. Rathein leaned back in her chair, stretching towards the back wall with a groan.

“How did you sleep, Athena? Man I miss my bed.” The Inquisitor lamented, looking at her friend with a weary gaze. Bull looked to Athena, arched a brow, and then smiled.

“Looks like she has slept better than she has in a while.” He then shot her a playful wink and she paled, picking up a grape and lobbing it at his eyepatch and barely missing. The fruit bounced off his horn and he went to grab a piece of sausage to respond with when Vivienne cleared her throat at the end of the table, eyeing the Qunari with a steeled gaze. He groaned, rolling his eyes while dropping the meat back on his plate.

“To answer your question, Rathein, just peachy thank you.” Dorian looked over to her, taking another sip from his flute before leaning down to whisper in her ear.

“I thought I felt your magic last night, everything alright?” The Tevinter had a cocky front on most of the time but she was beginning to see more and more of his sappy brotherly side. She sighed, rubbing the back of her neck while leaning over to him and whispering back.

“Vivienne just got under my skin last night. I didn’t go... overboard yesterday, did I?”

He scoffed, fighting the urge to glare down at their host while shaking his head. “No. You were fine.” She sat back up and felt Solas’s hand on top of her thigh, sending a small pulse of his magic to comfort her. Athena placed her hand over his in a subtle movement, lacing her fingers through his while using her other hand to plop what appeared to be a piece of pineapple in her mouth. They all worked through their meals, passing pleasant conversation back and forth until a messenger came through the entryway door.

Athena was completely ignoring them, assuming the message was for the hostess or one of the other Council members. But to her surprise the man stopped by her chair and cleared his throat, bending down to catch her gaze between Dorian and her seats. “Lady Athena, I presume?” He glanced to her back and she realized the tank top she was wearing had a swooping back, still
showing off the wolf markings Dorian had put in. She nodded, looking the man up and down with an arched brow.

“You have a message. . .for me? From who?”

“Don’t know, ma’am. It was at the front door and without a seal.” He handed her a plain white letter folded in half. When she took it from his hand he bowed to her and exited the room without another word. The table waited in anticipatory silence, watching her as she opened the letter and quickly read its contents. There wasn’t much, but what she did read made her blood run cold.

_I will be serving Golden Halla tonight._

The letter was unsigned but she knew _exactly_ who had sent the message. Dorian and Solas had kept their space and not eavesdropped over her shoulder but they were both able to pick up on the subtle changes in her posture and facial expressions. She pushed back from her chair, looking to the rest of the table. “Council? Inquisitor? A word.” Even with her other friends looking to her she was focused on keeping her pulse and magic low. They betrayed her though so with a clenched jaw she left the room and waited in an empty room across the hall.

Slowly the Inner Council and the Inquisitor joined and she was thankful that Vivienne hadn’t decided to eavesdrop on their conversation since she was the host. Perhaps it was an apology from the night before? _Definitely not._ Rathin crossed her arms and looked to the letter, gesturing a small jerk of her chin. The morning frustration had faded and the role of the Inquisitor had come forward. “What’s in the letter?”

Athena opened the letter and handed it to Leliana first, knowing she would understand the message. The Spymaster let out a small sigh, handing it over to Cullen and Josephine next. “It appears we, well, Athena more specifically has bruised the Emperor’s ego. He plans to strike against people she has specifically made trading agreements with.”

Cullen read the note then sighed, rubbing the back of his neck with his spare hand. “Are we sure? The Emperor is a chevalier, a man of honor. How do we know this does not refer to something else?” There was hope in her voice but Athena had no time for it. She shook her head and snatched the letter back from him.

“The Golden Halla is a sacred animal that showed itself to the Dalish clan of the Exalted Plains when we were there. I helped lead it to them. The other night at dinner I told my wolves to help escort them out when Gaspard made a passing threat towards them. This only confirms it. I think it is his last order before Brialia fully takes control.”
Josephine had brought her clipboard into the room, instantly jotting down notes. “We will need to send a small group of soldiers. Cullen, do you think they could make it in time?”

Athena cut through, throwing her hands in the air. “If you have to ask the answer is no, Josephine. Cullen, I’m assuming any extra guards are going to be preoccupied assisting the new recruits we’re bringing back?” He confirmed her suspicions with a quick nod and she allowed a flurry of curse words to fall from her lips. She turned on her heel and groaned, looking to the sky with her hands in fists at her side.

“I can go. Alone. I can travel faster if I don’t have to worry about anyone else. The clan was already notified by Loranil’s raven last night so maybe they have moved towards Skyhold. . . “

“Where do you plan to put them, Athena? We do not have the room at Skyhold.” The Commander asked, his authority and position leaking into his voice. She turned back towards them, determination hardening her features.

“The woods between the castle and the Imperial Highway along the base of the mountain. It puts them close enough to Lake Calenhad for there to be wildlife and they can be close to the highway if they wish to partake in trade. We are also close enough to keep them protected just in case Gaspard strikes out again. I can be responsible for setting it up and their connection to the Inquisition, just like I will be helping with all of our new recruits so it does not fall solely on your shoulders.”

The group was silent but Rathein was the first to nod, clapping her hands together. “Okay, what do you need?”

Athena thought for a moment, snapping her fingers and pointing towards her friend. “A pack, not too large. As many lyrium potions as you can fit and some of that bread Vivienne’s got down at the end of the table. Cullen?” She flicked her eyes to the Commander, who straightened up in his posture and put his hands in their comfortable spot on top of the hilt of his sword.

“Can you continue to take care of Kain? He trusts you. My mount will trust you as well if he sees you with Kain. Prince is a good ride, just don’t bark orders like you do to your soldiers.” She then gave him a wink and he nodded in return with a small smile. Almost like he was summoned the wolf walked into the room, instantly walking up and jumping to put his paws on his shoulders.

Danger? He asked, licking her face and pressing his nose to her chin. She responded by placing her
forehead against his, breathing in unison with him for a few moments before responding silently through the bond they shared.

*Yes. People need my help and you aren't ready to come yet. Keep them safe on the way home.* The wolf whined, kissing her cheeks a few more times before resting at the Commander’s side with obvious sadness in his posture. Leliana uncrossed her arms, looking her up and down with her trained steeled face. “Be careful, Sorciere. Your denial of the Emperor’s proposal obviously humiliated him so he will be unpredictable.”

Athena had to chuckle. “Was it that or me nearly sticking my heel through his dead sister’s back? I can’t keep track?”

Cullen paled. “You did what?”

Josephine cut him off with a sharp jab of her elbow. She was surprisingly calm about the whole thing, writing down the necessary details while remaining the mediator when she needed to be. Rathein stepped forward and wrapped her arms around her, squeezing tightly while trying to comfort her. “They’re going to be okay, Athena. You’ve done everything you can to give them time for you to get there.”

She responded in kind, bringing her friend in as close as she could. “I just hope it will be enough.”

Chapter End Notes

Alright, folks! Back to plot. I love the fact that Vivienne is really the only person that can stop Bull in his tracks. If you haven't listened to their banter from the game, I highly recommend it.

As always, thanks for your support.
Journey Through the Plains

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Council broke off and she ran to her assigned carriage, throwing potions in a bag while grabbing her traveling jacket. It was covered in Kain’s fur so she shook it out with pulses of magic, ridding the article of his itchy hairs before sliding it over her tank top. She was so caught up in her head with the planning she didn’t hear Solas come outside. “You have a mission?”

She stopped, looking to him with an apologetic gaze. “One I could not possibly ask you to come on.”

The stubbornness of the Dread Wolf came out. He handed her rolled up bread before clasping his hands behind his back, his analytical gaze nearly piercing through her. “And why is that?”

Athena returned his challenge, dropping the bag to her side while taking in a deep breath through her nose. Their gazes battled in silence, her jaw clenching to the point where she felt like her teeth were going to burst. She broke first with a frustrated sigh, bringing both arms through her bags straps and securing it. “My actions at the ball apparently angered the former Grand Duke, now Emperor. The message this morning was a threat towards the Dalish clan’s safety, specifically mentioning the halla I told you about.” Her words were fast, pointed, but not towards him. The entire situation was frustrating and she was regretting her decision to not kill Gaspard after his wretched sister.

Maybe later.

“I do not see why this means I cannot help you.” He did not falter from her words, taking another step closer to her to where they were almost standing chest to chest.

She tried to break the tension with a smirk: “I know you are not the largest fan of the Dalish, Solas.”

He arched a single brow. “And this means I would let them suffer?”

Athena scoffed, rolling her eyes while looking back to him. “Gah- you know what I mean! I do not want to drag you into this to help clean up the mess I made. It was my pride, my stubbornness that got them into this so I should be the one to get them out.” There was a desperation and regret in her
voice that he caught on to, his features softening while he nodded.

“I understand, but your stubbornness might be the very thing that hurts you if you do not allow help, Athena. You have a tendency to be reckless.” He said the last statement with a small bit of adoration in his words, his hand reaching forward to rest on her shoulder. She leaned against his hand, letting out a frustrated sigh that was accompanied by a groan.

“Fine. Tell me, how far can a person Fade-step?”

He looked out on the plains, furrowing his brow while examining. “A great distance, but it will take a great deal of energy.” She reached into the back of her back, wiggling a lyrium potion in front of his face.

“Got that covered. Think we can do it?” He nodded and she smiled, thinking for a moment before shrugging off her pack and handing it to him.

“Here, we can share this. I won’t be able to wear it. Do you need to grab your staff?” Again he nodded wordlessly, turning off towards the estate before giving her a mischievous grin over his shoulder.

“Do not think you can run off alone. I will catch up with you.” Athena chuckled and winked at him, turning to quickly give an explanation to Prince. The horse was frustrated but he let out a whinny of acceptance, butting his head against her chest before watching her walk onto the road. She stretched her arms high into the sky, feeling the sun on her skin. She used that comfortable sensation to fuel her magic and shift down into her wolf form. It felt odd to be in it in front of the white marbled estate, but they had the whole day ahead of them.

With a push of her paws she took off down the road until she could see the plains, magic fueling her step and slowly increasing her speed until she was a white blur on the side of the Imperial Road. There was an exhilaration the moment she her paws dug into the earth of the plains. There was a natural magic in the earth there, a type of serenity that could not be denied. She threw back her head and howled, the sound being interrupted by the near gallop of her movements. There was a communication in her sound, it twisting up into the wind and traveling across the plains through the mind of her pack.

*I’m coming.*
The tall blades of dead grass obscured her movement but she pressed on, using her knowledge of the area from her travels and the location of her pack to help guide her movement. At her pace, it would probably take a day or two to reach them but already she could feel herself getting weary. A blast of cold at her side caused her to flick her gaze over, giving the elf a wolfish grin when she saw him running with her strides. His staff was on his back and her pack looked a little fuller than when she had given it to him. He probably had his own supplies that he traveled with but she felt better having him there nonetheless, even if her stubbornness had denied him at first.

He looked over to her and smirked, bending down mid-stride to run his hand through her fur. The feeling of his magic combining with hers electrified her steps, bringing forth the wispy flames coming from her fur. It didn’t take long before she skidded to a stop, breath coming in quick pants while she leaned against a rock for cool shade. He stopped at her side, smiling with a wicked expression.

“Are you spent already?” He teased, pulling out the pack and drawing forward a lyrium potion for them to share. “If you weren’t in that form it might be easier to conserve your magic.” He looked down to her, raising a brow before offering the potion to her. In between pants she rolled her eyes, shifting back into her human form with a shudder of her spine. With each shift she was getting better at keeping her clothes in tact. Josephine’s seamstress she assigned to her would be pleased. She leaned against the rock and took the potion, shooting it backwards down her throat like it were one of Dorian’s mystery shots. Thankfully this went smoother, tasting like mint and tingling everything it touched.

Athena sighed, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand before handing the empty vial to him. He did not appear fatigued, storing away the vial without taking any lyrium for himself. “Do you not need any yet?” She asked, moving to where the side of her arm was touching his body. He shook his head, wrapping his arm around her before bending down to place a kiss on her sweated brow.

“I have had much more practice with my magic than you have.” She leaned into his embrace, taking in slow deep breaths to still her heart after the shift.

“Careful, hahren, your age is showing again.”

Solas paused before chuckling, gesturing with his hand in a flicking motion back towards the plains. “Are you ready to continue?” She shrugged, looking over her shoulder to the endless landscape that they would have to go through.

“I suppose so. We have a great distance to cover, better not keep it waiting.” He bent down to brush his lips across her cheek before disappearing into the air with what sounded like a crack of thunder. There was an ethereal blue trail in his wake and with a hum of acknowledgement to his
challenge she took off as well. In a stream of red she followed his trail, quickly catching up to him with small pulses of energy. Instead of remaining at his side she tapped on his shoulder and then burst in front of him before he had a chance to react. From her back, she heard him laugh, the sound echoing through the trees of the small patch of forest they had entered. On the branches of the trees she saw his figure bouncing, his obvious racial grace coming into play before he jumped down in front of her and tapped her shoulder, halting her movement completely. She skidded to a stop with her jaw clenched in focus, pushing on his chest with a playful scowl. He smirked and bent down to try and kiss the top of her head but she pushed off with her foot and took off before he could, channeling her magic into the pulses of her feet to put distance between them.

As a wolf, she felt more agile. The trees were not obstacles, they were friends. Whenever she shifted back into her human form things just felt awkward in comparison. Mid-stride she twisted her mouth to the side in consideration, pulling on the bonds of her pack to wash over her mind. However she did not shift, just used the scent of the forest and the thrill of her run to pull forth the drive that typically put her into a place to shift. The greens of the forest almost crystalized and she could hear distant water running. There were traveling merchants to the side and with a quick glance she realized they were farther off than she could see. Her senses felt heightened. She approached a fallen over tree and with a push of her hands she vaulted over it with ease.

Leaves caressed her skin and she surrendered her body to the lands, closing her eyes and putting trust in her magic that pulsed around her like a second skin. Athena was able to move forward for a few more long strides before her magic grew tired. She stopped on top of a hill, hands resting on top of her knees while she took in deep breaths. Solas stopped right behind her, a smile playing at the sides of his eyes. “Wh-what?” She asked in between pants, turning and flopping onto her backside to catch a break.

He sat down next to her, pulling their pack into his lap while bringing out bread from the morning wrapped in a cloth and two lyrium potions. “What were you doing just then? You were almost dancing through the trees.” He ripped off half of the bread and handed the other half to her. She took it and grabbed the spare lyrium potion from his lap.

“I was getting jealous of how you were moving on the branches back there. I pulled on my wolves and just, I don’t know, let go.” Without waiting another moment, she took a bite of the bread, eyes rolling back in euphoria when she realized it was still somehow fresh and warm. There were nuts and bananas cooked into the loaf and it tasted like something she ate when she was little. He made a small noise of consideration while drinking a sip from his potion.

“It appears your spirit denies the form you were given. You move differently than most.”

She arched a brow, looking over to him slowly. “Than most what? Shem like me?” Athena nudged him with her elbow and he shook his head, shooting her a glance that was in between playful and analytical.
“Than most anyone. Perhaps it is just the wolf in you guiding your steps. You have changed so much from when you first fell from the sky.” He turned towards her and cupped her face with his hand, bringing his lips to her cheek. She blushed with a soft smile, turning towards him and brushing her lips against his. Solas moved to where their sides were flush, trailing soft kisses from the corner of her lips to her cheek than to her ear.

She sighed, gripping the grass behind her to keep herself up. Her eyes threatened to roll backwards and she couldn’t help but smile at him. “I didn’t realize the threat of battle turned you on so much, Solas.” He stopped in his movements and she could feel the look he was giving her. Brow arched, smirk on his lips, he continued on and kissed her collarbone lightly, drawing a shudder from her spine.

“You are beautiful when you move through the plains, Athena. I would be a fool to deny that.” She brought a hand up to rest on the back of his head, eyes looking out towards the horizon. Already the sun was about to set and a pit of dread formed in her stomach. Her body stiffened and he noticed, pulling back with a concerned expression.

“When did it get so late? Gods I thought it was going to be barely past noon.” Solas followed her line of sight and nodded with a hum in his throat.

“The spell we are using to travel works by weaving the energies of the veil around us. As fast as we are traveling, the day has escaped us faster still.” Athena groaned and rubbed the back of her neck, looking over her shoulder towards the land ahead of them.

“Do you know anywhere around here to rest for the night? I would love to push through the darkness but then I would have no energy to do whatever it is I’m going to do to Gaspard’s men.” He looked to the side for a moment, losing himself into thought before looking to her.

“I think I know of a place; I have seen it once in my travels in the Fade. I may need to revisit it to refresh my memory. It should not take long.” He went to sit up straight to put himself in the Fade but she shook her head with a chuckle, lifting up the potion before patting on her lap. She brought a hand up to rest on the back of his head, eyes looking out towards the horizon. Already the sun was about to set and a pit of dread formed in her stomach. Her body stiffened and he noticed, pulling back with a concerned expression.

“Stubborn man. Relax a little, we still have a long run ahead of us.” He looked down to her lap with a soft smile. They both turned to where she had her legs crossed and he rested his head in her lap, his hands resting on top of his chest. It did not take long for him to fall into the Fade and she was left leaning back on her hands, taking in the view of the Exalted Plains. The small portion she was able to see in the game was full of death and dark magic from the body pits. Outside of that, in the actual Dales, she realized how beautiful it was.
The wind blew across her cheek, it created a small howling sound within her ear. The silence was beautiful but at the same time she was missing her lute or the piano from Halamshiral. She looked over both shoulders to verify that they were alone before summoning her magic into her palm, pushing it outwards in a barrier with wards to keep them safe. She hummed softly, allowing her hand to fall and cup his face. He twitched but did not wake, his features even relaxing more underneath the comfort of her touch.

“See the pyramids along the Nile. Watch the sun rise of a tropic isle. Just remember darling, all the while, you belong to me.”

Her voice was soft but it felt right, the wind acting like a passive listener and swirling dead blades of grass around her. She rolled back into her mind and could tell that Fang and the Plains pack was not terribly far off. They had made great distance but they needed to use some of that spare time to prepare for whatever was going to happen. Friends safe. The alpha whispered in response to her prodding and she nodded, continuing her song through humming and words.

“See the marketplace in old Algiers. Send me photographs and souvenirs. But remember when a dream appears, you belong to me.”

His magic tingled through their shared touch and she smiled, bringing her gaze down to look at his features. This was how they had been sitting when he had come to her following Wisdom’s death. He had been burdened by all of the grief, his features heavy and sharp. Now, there was a relief to him. He acted with only a small guard around her. She noticed he was even growing to be more touchy and a part of her wondered if that was his wolf in him answering her call.

“I’ll be so alone without you. . .maybe you’ll be lonesome too.”

Athena sang in an almost whisper, fighting tears in her eyes as her chest swelled with adoration for the elf in her lap.

“Fly the ocean in a silver plane, watch the jungle when it’s wet with rain. Just remember til you’re home again, you belong to me.”

There was a soft stirring in her lap but she was busy looking out at the setting sun, eyes closed while enjoying the heat on her skin. He reached up and touched her face to bring her gaze back down to his, a soft smile in his features as he brought himself from the Fade.
“That I do, Athena, and you to me.”

Chapter End Notes

Song: You Belong to Me - Jason Wade [Yes it's from the Shrek soundtrack, what of it?]

As always, thank you for the love and discussions in the comments. They make my day. <3
Athena couldn’t help but grin at his words, rising with him from the ground to stand. He bent down and collected their things, pushing her lyrium potion into her hands as a gentle reminder to drink it. Even though she felt revitalized by his words she consumed the potion, cringing at the taste of titan’s blood on her tongue before sliding the bottle back into the pack herself. He extended a hand towards her and she took it gently, looking at him with anticipation tingling her nerves.

“Run with me, ma’fen.”

They stepped forward in unison then swirled with their magics intertwined, taking off together through the plains with the sound of cracking thunder on their backs. It almost felt like flying. Through their touch their magic combined, the chilling cold of his presence wrapping around and accelerating her movements. The stride and air between each step brought a smile to her lips, their bodies effortlessly gliding over the grass and over the obstacles when they arose. He even turned towards her during one stride, bringing one of his hands into hers and the other to her lower back. She resisted at first, unsure how to work their fade-steps in time with the position but he assisted by pulling her more into his grip and taking control. He knew their destination for the night and she had to relinquish her command to him, rolling her eyes with a chuckle before nodding. Their bodies were in perfect alignment, every step and push happening in unison with pulses of power. With a gleam in his eye, he brought her into a dance. It was a basic waltz, something they could accomplish in their travels without requiring too much more thought. When he first started, she had to throw her head back and laugh with happiness, resting her head against his chest to contain her giggles. He did not break, pulling her hand back up and pulling her close enough to where her chest was crushed against his.

Athena looked to his gaze, her breath stilling within her throat when she saw and felt the heat coming from his features. The look in his eyes threatened to devour her, her nerves tightening within the base of her belly at the sight. Every time the pushed from the ground he moved them, spun them like steps in a dance. She thought back to their time at the ball, how carelessly they had danced in front of the entire court of Halamshiral. At the ball, there were what felt like a hundred eyes piercing through them, judging and memorizing every detail to spread to the masses later.

Here, in the plains, they were alone for the first time. Alone without another party member close by to eavesdrop. Alone without the walls of Skyhold singing their secrets. Even alone without a curious spirit like Inspiration popping up whenever she desired. It was just him, her, and the moons.
They waltzed through their travels and soon she could feel the exhaustion setting in on her mind. Magical exhaustion was different than physical exhaustion. It manifested in some of the same ways like fatigue, muscle aches, and some breathing difficulty, but when her mana was depleted she literally felt like part of her essence was gone. She would get a hollow sensation within her chest and the small flame that she visualized her magic to be was nothing but an ember. A soft cry of strain came from her lips without her realizing it, brow furrowed as she struggled to keep her grip on his shoulders. He looked her up and down once, instantly recognizing the signs before enfolding her with his magic. He took on the strain for both of them, leaning down to whisper in her ear: “Almost there, hold on, Athena.”

She nodded and looked at the path in front of them, pulling on the last bits of energy to keep in stride with him and push off of the next rock they landed on. He then bent down and picked her up, wrapping an arm around the back of her knees while the other supported her upper body. The magic around them ceased, both of them skidding to a stop. The moonlight flooded in through the open trees and she was able to make out some elven looking ruins that led down into a tunnel or sorts. There were different sculptures of halla and wolves that had been degraded over time. Solas slowly released her when he judged that she could stand on her own.

Athena steadied herself against his chest, letting out a broken chuckle while looking up to him. He nodded, acknowledging that she could stand, before kissing the top of her sweated brow. “Head inside; I’ll set up wards. We should be safe camping here for the night.” He brushed his lips against her cheekbone before handing her their pack, gesturing with his hand down the tunnel. She arched a brow at him, looking into the dark archway before shrugging in defeat. Her shaky feet managed to get down the first couple of stairs before she saw empty torches absent of flame. Like she had seen so many mages do in the games, she waved her hand over it and pulsed her magic into the object.

Green veillfire danced at her will, the magic illuminating the entire length of the hall until she could see a light at the end. A golden light peaked through the end and so her curious mind took her down. Her fingers trailed on the tile walls, tracing the different shapes while feeling the ancient magic that still resided within it. Elven magic, like the piano, had a tendency to carry a shred of its original might. The ruins, even the shattered statues of Fen’Harel, glowed with a ghost of its past. As she traveled down the hall she felt a chill over her back alerting her that Solas was casting his barriers and wards. How did he still have the energy to draw up magic?

Fucking Gods.

There was a warm glow to the light at the end of the tunnel and it fueled her steps. She pushed into half of a jog in the last stretch and almost fell over when she finally reached her destination. It was a clearing, an elven bathhouse of sorts with an open ceiling that showed the crystal clear starry skies. The two moons were in the sky, one full and one in its new stage. There were a few scattered trees along the edge, their wispy moss creating a drape over the bath. The thing that was creating the light glimmered in the moonlight, a tall wall of golden tiles sparkling in the night. Athena was drawn to it like a moth to a flame, eyes wide as her feet took her towards the clear waters of the
There were runes etched into the wall and at the base of the water; that much she could feel from the magic they put off. The sheen of the tiles reflected the moon’s light around the area and besides Solas’s wards she could tell it was a safe place. Absentmindedly she dropped her pack on the ground and walked to the water’s edge, noticing that the tiles and work put into the walls and bottom of the pool had barely been touched by time. The day’s magical and physical work had taken a toll on her. Her bandings were drenched with sweat and she knew that meant the rest of her body was as well.

Athena was quick to remove her outer clothes, throwing them over a low hanging branch to dry overnight. She took a step down into the water, hissing in shock as the runes activated and instantly warmed the water to where it was almost scalding. With a quick glance over her shoulder she could feel that he was still fortifying the area for them at the end of the tunnel, a mischievous smirk playing at the corner of her lips. She removed her bandings and smalls, throwing them back towards her pack without a care before diving underneath the heat of the rune-enchanted water.

Already she felt revitalized as the day’s work was washed away. She found a smooth stone at the bottom of the bath, kicking off from the tiles to resurface in a shallower part of the bath where the water came up to her hips. The shallower the water was the closer to the golden-tiled wall she came. A curious gaze fell over the wall, her hands tracing over where an inactivated rune lay. Like Dorian had done to her dress at the ball, she struck her finger over it like a match. The wall nearly shuddered under the pulse of her magic, a stone at the top moving to the side and allowing fresh water to fall over the surface of the tiles. It wasn’t a waterfall, but it created a sparkling illusion of sorts of the wall that reflected the gold-reflected moonlight even further. She could feel the light play on her skin, a smile coming to her face as she used the stone to scrape away the grime of the day.

The warm water pulled on her magic, enhancing her natural heat that fueled her magic while swirling around her. The steam cleared her sinuses and just made her feel relaxed, cleansed in a sense. However Solas knew of this place she was grateful. She could hear a soft gasp behind her and she smiled, playing ignorant to it while keeping her front to the wall and her back to him and their small campsite. She pulled her hair off of her back and over her shoulder, running her fingers through the wet locks while simultaneously exposing the fading black wolf mark on her back to him. Even with the new ripples in the water she did not turn to him, closing her eyes, and looking up towards the sky while letting out a soft sigh.

Athena counted in her head, the count ending with when his hands gently resting on her hips from behind. Her eyes fluttered open while she made a small hum of acknowledgement that he was there behind her. He moved forward until his chest was flush with her back and her eyes widened in
realization that he had truly joined her in the bath. It was his first time being completely nude before her and she fought the urge to just turn around and stare. Instead, she swallowed the hard knot in throat and leaned back against him, relishing the feeling of their bodies pressed together. His hands slid over her belly and wrapped around her, bringing her closer so that he could bend down and kiss the skin of her neck.

She wanted to crack a joke, say something in greeting but the words were lost in the haze of the steam and his touch. His arousal was pressed against her lower back and out of response she pushed her hips back into him, head swimming. She was thankful that he was holding her because the sudden explosion of sensations from the water and his touch threatened to consume her. His lips and tongue trailed up to her ear, her hands gripping onto where his arms held her to keep her mind and body afloat. Already she could feel a knot developing within the base of her belly, thighs clenching together at the feeling of him on her back. There was a soft moan in a kiss against her ear lobe and she shuddered against him, letting out a soft sigh while moving to turn to face him. His arms held her still. He hummed against her skin, shaking his head back and forth while hardening his grip against her.

Already her body was on fire, her magic coming from her pores in waves that lined with her heartbeat. He had her trapped within his guarded touch, his mouth raining down gestures of affection upon whatever skin he could find while his arms kept her held in the water. There were no words between them; they were unnecessary. Their bodies spoke to one another in a silent language that only they could hear. One of his hands broke from the guard, fingertips trailing up her abdomen until he traced the area around her breast. The touch of his hand nearly undid her, a desperate cry falling from her lips as he took her earlobe in between his teeth.

At the time of her cry he completely covered the surface of her breast with his hand, kneading into the tender flesh with gestures that aligned with the grinding of his hips against the flat of her back. Her breath came in pants in his arms, body quivering with every flick of his tongue against her skin or the movement of his hand on her chest. Time stretched out in between movements, her body tightening with anticipation of wherever his touch would lead. One hand firmly held against her breast to hold her against him while the other moved down in between her legs. The tip of one of his fingers ghosted over her folds and she couldn’t contain it anymore. She a hand up behind his neck, holding him in place for a change while tilting her head up to meet his gaze.

He was like her, hungry, needing the touch of her against him. He was stunned at her quick escape from his grip, lips parted as his breaths fell in ragged movements like hers. With a soft cry, she pushed up from the bottom of the bath and captured his lips, almost spilling over from the anticipation that was building in her body for something as simple as a kiss. He moaned against her mouth and instantly the kiss deepened between them. Their auras intertwined, his hand in between her legs pushing through and stroking along the curves of her sex.

There was a thrill in being trapped between him at her back and his hand at her front. No matter which way her body writhed there was something pleasurable to be found. While his hand tortured her by stroking the bundle of nerves in between her legs she moved against him, her hand coming
to stroke his cheek while she kissed him. He took her cries from her throat, responding with small sounds of his own as their magics fought within her core.

He had a heightened awareness of what he was doing to her at all times. He spaced out his movements to barely give her time to breathe, leaving her wanting more with each gesture. With a wave of his magic flaring against her heat she was undone, crying out into their kiss while her body nearly collapsed against him in climax. Solas smiled underneath it all, whispering against her lips an elven phrase she couldn’t even begin to break down as her mind put itself back together.

“Lasa ar’an alas’nira aron fen’en.”

Fen she recognized in the words, turning in his grip until she was pressing her bare chest against his. She stood on her tiptoes against him, looping an arm around his neck to keep her at a good enough height to kiss him. The other hand pressed against his chest, her palm feeling his heart beat against his ribcage. It was racing, much like hers, and the fevered sensation under her touch left her hungry even still. Her hand trailed down, over his abdomen, pausing above where she felt him against her stomach. With a flick of her tongue against his lips she wrapped her hand around his length. He hissed against her lips, brows furrowed as his body bucked against her light touch.

His reaction to her touch put a swell of confidence within her chest, a dark hunger setting in on her face as she slowly backed away from him towards the stairs at the shallow end of the bath. She held his gaze to hers while taking slow, deliberate steps before turning away from him when she ascended the stairs. The ground outside of the bath was cool but there was enough magic pouring from her body to heat them both. With a quick glance, she saw that he had laid out a bedroll before getting into the bath so she walked over and stood at the edge, rolling her gaze over to see him following her. It was difficult to not look down but she kept her confidence, keeping to his eyes until he came in front of her, stroking her cheekbone with the back of his knuckles. He kissed her lightly, his other hand taking one of hers into its own.

Solas descended towards the bedroll, bringing her with him until they were both facing each other on their knees. Water dripped off of their bodies, skin nearly glowing in the moonlight. The words she wanted to say formed in her throat but instead she smiled at him, cupping his face in her hand as she lay back on the bedroll. He looked down to her, kissing the inside of her palm, while his eyes trailed over her form.

“You are so beautiful.”

Chapter End Notes
"Lasa ar’an alas’nira aron fen’en.” - Translation : Let us dance as the wolves do.

Thank you to FenxShiral over at their Project Elvhen work! I will be relying on it heavily in the future and it's a great resource for breaking down the DA elven language.
Athena lay back on the bedroll in the abandoned elvish bathhouse, her breaths shaky yet silent as she brought Solas down on top of her. He still held her hand, keeping it to his chest while he cupped her face in his free hand, kissing her forehead and trailing down to gently brush his lips against hers. She sighed against him, squeezing his hand as tears threatened to form in her eyes. Something just felt right about all of it. There were no long, redundant explanations of love, no song or rhyme. She didn’t even know if he felt that for her yet, but in that moment, she felt complete with him above her. He rested in between her legs, his need for her pressing against the inside of her thigh. She arched her back to reach his mouth, drawing in light kisses until he stroked her cheek with his thumb, bringing her eyes open to meet his.

The hunger was still there, but she could also see adoration in his eyes, a soft kindness that rivaled what they had just done before in the bath. He tilted his head down, arching a brow slightly to ask the silent question that fell between them. Past the point of no return. She heard the words echo in her head in song, a smile coming to her lips as she arched her back so that she could kiss his cheek gently with her answer. He turned his head towards her, catching her lips in a kiss while dropping her hand so that he could move his now free hand to her hips, anchoring her as he moved his body down. With a soft whimper of need she moved her hips against him, allowing her magic to roll across her skin in waves that set her hairs on end.

Solas moaned against her lips, gripping onto her and slowly bringing himself into her. She cried out against him, clenching down while wrapping her arms around his back to pull him towards her. He paused, breaking the kiss to catch her gaze to make sure she wasn’t hurting. It took time for her body to adjust but when it felt right again she brushed her lips against his. He took every small sound of pleasure from her, moving gently until he was fully sheathed within her. A whisper of a moan fell from his lips and she flicked her tongue against his to catch it, tightening her muscles around him while moving her hips underneath his body.

The rhythm started slow, aching, tender as he withdrew and plunged into her again. Their lips did not part as they were drowning in each other’s touch, her hands digging into his back and his gripping against her thighs to bring her even closer to him still. With each pulse of his hips came a wave of his aura. It wasn’t as jarring as it normally was. The cold had faded into just a feeling of pressure, extending into her chest and mind, bringing her further into the haze of his touch. It felt like there was no ground beneath them and that they were alone in the universe. She rose her hips to meet every thrust, their bodies moving in a silent unison.

Already her pleasure began to grow again, like a bud within the pit of her core. He broke from her lips, trailing his gestures of affection to the crook of her neck. The feeling of his hot, panted breaths on her neck brought a moan from her throat, eyes fluttering. Through the haze of her mind, all she saw were stars. Solas flicked his tongue against a spot on her neck before bringing it in between his
teeth, coaxing a shudder from her body against his hips. His movements were long and tortuous, bringing her to the peaks of anticipation and arousal before thrusting into her again. The feeling of him was near overwhelming, a hand moving to the back of his neck while the other still gripped onto his shoulder. She could feel him smile on her neck, his grip on her tightening as the speed of his movements increased.

Athena began to explore his neck and shoulders with her lips, almost mirroring his movements and playfully biting on the spot where he marked her. She then moved her kisses up towards his ear, remembering how he had reacted to her just wiping her red lip paint from it the day before. Pulling down on his neck to get a better angle, she kissed the lobe of his ear, smirking in between panted breaths as he shuddered against her. He pressed his magic flicked and turned from the gentle pressure to an unrestrained cold, swirling within her body and wrapping around the bud that was her growing desire. He hissed against her skin, letting out an uncontrolled moan that tightened the heat between her thighs. The noises he made; they were for her and that fueled her desire. She literally had a God between her legs, bucking at her movements and moaning in pleasure against her skin. That fact gave her confidence, urged her fueling arousal as she continued on with her torture, sliding her tongue down the curve of his ear before she took the lobe into her mouth.

Solas moaned her name into the crux of her neck, manipulating his magic to where it was pressure on her body that coincided with his thrusts, particularly on the bundle of nerves between her legs that he had already tormented before in the bath. Eyes widened, she felt her body grow white hot, the bud within her core unraveling while being victim to his touch and arousal pulsing within her body. She wrapped her legs around him, bringing him down further while small, whispered cries fell from her lips with each thrust. He could feel her tightening around him and in response his magic grew stronger, wrapping around her and igniting every nerve within her body. Thrust after thrust her heat grew, sweat beading on her chest and neck, until her magic burst in a peak that left her breathless.

She gripped onto him, turning to find his lips to stifle her cries. He was doing the same and he moved a hand to her face, cupping it gently while he crushed his lips against hers. He drank his name from her mouth, coaxing small sounds from her as his hips increased in speed, his rhythm lost as he himself fell victim to the joining of their bodies. With a stifled cry against her lips he thrust into her a final time, his body twitching inside of her while the product of their passion spilled into her. She cupped his face with both hands, kissing him relentlessly until they broke apart to breathe.

Their breaths rose and fell in hot, shaky pants. He stroked the curve of her face, smiling down at her while he kissed the top of her forehead. She let out a happy sigh, pressing her forehead against his to catch her breath. “Are you all right?” He broke the silence to ask, still remaining inside of her while they both recovered in mind and body. She nodded against him, wetting her lips to respond in a whisper.

“You have stolen my words from me, give me a moment.” He chuckled, shaking his head back and forth before moving his hips downwards to remove himself to lay at her side. He gently stroked the
backs of his knuckles along her upper arms, eyes glossing over her body. She opened her eyes to look at him, instantly smiling while leaning up to kiss the tip of his nose.

“How is it that I can never have a complete bath when I’m around you?” She teased at him. He paused, furrowing his brows in amusement, before laughing, drawing her close to him in an embrace.

“I think that is something we can do.”

They were able to get back into the rune-etched baths to clean. He grabbed two cloths from their pack, using the heat of the water and a nearby stone to remove the sweat from the day’s travels and their more recent expenditures. There was a lightness between them now, a physical chemistry that allowed her to be playful and free of their responsibilities for the next day. She caught him examining the rune against the wall to break him from his trance she splashed water at him, using a bit of magic to create a wave that went up and over his head. He immediately turned with a mischievous grin, fade-stepping through the water to come up from behind her and wrap his arms around her. There was a smile on him that made her weak. Within the curve of his lips there was a new unbridled energy that she hadn’t seen before, and she still couldn’t get over the fact that it was just for her.

He gestured towards their bedroll and she could tell from the angle of the moons in the sky that they should get to bed. With a sound of reluctance, she pulled herself from the bath, using the rune she had seen him use to dry her hair and skin. The water of the bath left her feeling energized but she knew how much they both needed the sleep. They had traveled probably three days of normal travel over the course of a single afternoon. Their lyrium bottles were empty and now there were only three left in the bottom of the bag. He required them less frequently than she did and she wasn’t sure if that was because of his divine status or just the fact the he was more experience with magic than she was.

He was on her trail, using the same magic to dry himself. They both remained nude; it just felt unnatural to get back into clothes for sleep. Her body craved his touch still, just wanting his warmth around her. There was a small part of her that knew her choice in shifting to a wolf was rubbing off on her. Her sense of smell was sharpening and she could pick up on ambient animal noises in the forest that she hadn’t noticed before. She knew that most shifters had multiple animals to choose from but now she was happy with the one. They both slid under the top of the bedroll, assuming their normal sleeping positions with lingering smirks on their faces. She nuzzled into his
chest, gently stroking designs onto his bare chest while synchronizing her breaths with his. He hummed, looking down to her with an arched brow.

“What is your plan for Gaspard’s troops?”

She groaned, hitting her forehead against his chest with a light *thud*. He chuckled but she continued in her lamenting, shrugging before sitting back to meet his gaze. “If the Dalish clans are far enough ahead, I will just help them get to their new encampment. If his forces have already met with them, I don’t know. I do not wish to kill any of them on the chance that Gaspard will use his power as Puppet Emperor to declare some war against the elves. We already heard him call Briała rabbit so his opinion of them is loud and clear.”

“They will be coming for blood already on their master’s orders, Athena. You should prepare yourself for the possibility that it may come to that.” His voice was slowly returning to the pointed academic but now there was an edge of softness in his words towards her.

“I’ll think of something. I’m more worried about keeping my friendship with the Dalish. I feel like my knowledge of the elven culture could fit into a thimble. I understand how patronizing this must look.” She stiffened her shoulders and assumed a false voice of a village crier. “Here comes the human to save the day!” He hummed in amusement and she dropped the facade, toying with the wolf necklace around his shoulders.

“The people that it matters to see your true intentions, Athena. You are perhaps one of the first to recognize the worth of a culture that many of your kind have just cast aside.” She winced, eyes widening when she finally understood how Solas felt. He tightened his grip on her back, pulling her back into the conversation with him.

“I’m sorry – I just realized I think I know how you feel. Human I may be, yes, but my people exist in a separate world. My people are who I choose, who make me feel most like me when I’m feeling like a foreigner in a land of unknown things.” Her eyes were dropped to his chest when she spoke but when she was finished she looked up to him to see an expression she could only define as awe. He moved his fingers underneath her chin, tilting her face up so he could lean down and give her a gentle kiss.

“You continue to surprise me, ma’fen. I could help fill in your knowledge of elven culture, if you wish.” She immediately nodded, tilting into his touch with a small smile.

“The Dalish honor their Gods, do you know them all?” He asked and she couldn’t help but feel a small bit of smugness in her words. Maybe she was just looking into it, but he was a master at
remaining discreet considering he had spent years traveling alone without attracting attention. She bit her bottom lip, trying to think before listing them off, counting on her fingers one by one.

“Elgar’nan, God of Vengeance, Partner to Mythal. Mythal, the Great Protector.” He hummed, giving her a slight nod before she continued.

“Andruil, Goddess of the Hunt. Sylaise, the Hearthkeeper. Fen’Harel, the Dread Wolf. Can’t forget the one on my back.” She gave him a coy smirk but his face did not break, but she saw a glimmer of pride in the corner of his gaze.

“Falon’Din, Guide of the Dead, and his twin brother Dirthamen. Shoot. I always forget the last two.” She pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to come up with the last two names. With a sigh she shook her head and shrugged, looking up to him to fill in the last two. He reached down, pulling up the remaining two fingers while naming off the one she had forgotten.

“June, God of Craft. Ghilan’nain, Mother of the Halla.” He tapped the last finger before looking to her. “They will probably see you as a blessing from her if you are arriving to defend Hanal’ghilan within their encampment.”

She couldn’t help but snort with a small laugh, gesturing to her back. “They probably might get scared by the mark on my back, won’t they?” His gaze flicked to where her fingers pointed, shrugging softly.

“Depends on the clan.” Athena twisted her lips to the side, losing herself in thought for a moment. She then broke into a quiet laughter, which only brought a puzzled look to his face.

“I guess it does not matter. They’re going to have to get over the fact that I can communicate with the pack of wolves that have been herding them for the last day or so. That will be a tough pill to swallow.” He arched a brow when she realized her use of the modern phrase.

“Uh- figure of speech from where I’m from. Medicine has advanced to where we can combine our herbs and ingredients into small pellet-like things that we swallow as opposed to drinking it in a bitter tonic or tea. Sometimes the pills come in a large form so. . . ”

He clicked his tongue against the back of his teeth, nodding in realization. “A tough pill to swallow. I understand.” She smiled, nestling into his grip while the darkness of sleep threatened to consume her. Athena yawned, taking in his scent, and allowing it to roll over her mind like a
blanket of familiarity and protection. He instinctively held her closer, resting his head on top of hers. Their magic intertwined on their skin and in their breaths, pulsing out to bring them closer to the Fade. Before she allowed herself to fall into the darkness of the night she twitched into consciousness, looking up to him and smiling at the sight of him stilled in sleep above her. She arched herself up to kiss him softly on the lips before returning to her place against his chest.

He roused, knitting his brows before looking down to her with a smirk. “What was that for?” He asked quietly, sleep already weaving in his words.

“Just for a good-night, Solas.”

He brought her close again and she could feel the pounding of his heartbeat underneath her touch on his chest. There was a rumbling chuckle through his throat in response to her kiss and she closed her eyes to prepare for sleep. Right before her mind faded into the darkness she heard a whisper from the top of her head.

“Good night, ma’fen.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you as always for your patience and love with my crazy life. <3
The Dales

Chapter Notes

Translation:
(On dhea’laman, lethal’lan. Th’ea?)
Good evening, friend. How goes it?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sunrise woke them the next morning, its radiant heat warming their skins as they remained in their curled position facing one another. Athena woke first, squinting her eyes at the sun and sitting up from her place on the bedroll. He did not wake from her movements, his face perfectly content as his mind drifted throughout the Fade. She smiled, reaching over and resting a hand on his hip while pushing herself up to a standing position. The bath was just as beautiful in the day as it was at night. Her clothes that she had cleaned before bed the night before had dried and thankfully did not smell as if she had been running around in them the day before. She put on her smalls and tightly wound her bandings around her chest.

By the time she had put on her bottoms and her boots she heard him turning on the bedroll, a small round of realization coming from behind her when he realized that she wasn’t there. Athena tightened the laces on her boots, turning to see him looking up at her. The only thing she had left to put on was her top, which she carried in her hand while glancing over at him. The sun fell almost perfectly on the line of his body, the bedroll stopping just above the line of his hips. She found herself openly gawking, a coy smile playing at the corners of her lips.

“Good morning.” He mused from his place of sleep, knowingly stretching tall and arching his back in her line of sight with a wolfish expression on his face. Her eyes traveled downwards to where the bedroll was barely clinging before shaking her head to clear herself from the fog, an embarrassed blush coming to her chest and face.

“That it is. Sleep well?” She asked, sliding the green tank top over her shoulders and adjust where it lay so her back would be visible and the tie in the front gave her a small amount of modesty. He completely stood from the ground, walking over to her and kissing her on the cheek in greeting. She sighed under his touch, wrapping her arms around his bare back to bring him closer to her. He hummed in answer to her question, touching the tip of his nose against hers to bring her eyes open.

“Come into the Fade with me next time; the spirits miss you. Inspiration in particular has been finding me to try and seek you out.” Athena nodded, bringing one of his hands up to her face so she could kiss the inside of his palm.
“I will. I know it has been too long... I have just been looking forward to the quiet sleep after these last few weeks. It hasn’t been the easiest time.” He looked down to her with a look of concern, nodding before kissing her forehead and separating from her. As he walked over to fetch his own clothes she couldn’t help but turn and watch him, her gaze memorizing every feature of his backside and legs. He looked over his shoulder at her and she instantly turned her gaze away and began to work on wrapping up their bedroll and things that had been left out overnight. While looking through the bag she noticed one more small wrapped roll of bread so she brought it out, breaking it in half and handing one to him.

Solas finished putting on his shirt before taking it from her, ensuring that the wolf-bone necklace rested in the right place. “How far away is the clan?” He asked before taking a small bite and she raised a finger, asking him to pause. She closed her eyes and rolled her mind into the set of the pack, feeling that they weren’t too far away but it was hard to gauge exactly how far. Instead she walked towards the edge of the bath, cupping a hand around her mouth while letting out a magic-infused howl that traveled across the plains. The sound echoed into silence and she waited, eyes closed, listening for a response.

It came quietly from Fang and the pack, their voices singing within the air. Solas gave a sound of acknowledgement between bites, smirking at her methods. She made a small sound of consideration before adding: “We should reach them by nightfall if we only use our fade-steps about half of the time. We only have a few lyrium potions left so we should probably save our strength.” She then began to nibble on the bread. At the first drop of food her stomach roared within her belly, reminding her that she hadn’t had a complete meal since dinner two nights before. There wasn’t enough time to eat breakfast since she received Gaspard’s meal and the announcement didn’t leave either of them much time to pack rations for their travels. Athena made a mental note to hunt something for them in the afternoon that had some sort of protein in it. A fox or ram would be plenty for the both of them.

“I agree. That will give us some time to prepare as well. Have you thought more on what you would like to do?” With a groan, she shook her head, rolling her shoulders to rid herself of the uncomfortable feeling of not having a solid plan in place.

“At this point I’m going to wing it. My magic works best when my emotions are high so maybe it will go better if I’m unprepared.” The doubt and anxiety was obvious in her voice because when she glanced to him he was giving her a look of bewilderment. She shook her head while clearing her throat, gesturing with her head back towards the tunnel. He followed her silently, obviously waiting for her to continue on with some elaborate master plan. For many other events in the game she had them nestled in the back of her mind. But for this? Something that was an original “quest” or sorts just for her? She was at a loss. It didn’t help that she knew how many people’s lives depended on her in this scenario.

The clan had put its trust in her when they allowed Loranil to leave. He already was looking up to her, telling stories about their times traveling back from the plains and how she emerged from the largest pack of black wolves unharmed and confident. *Being brave sucks,* she thought with a small
groan, glancing over to her shoulder to see Solas taking a larger step to be at her side, hand pressing on her lower back. “I can feel your nerves, Athena. Whatever you decide; it is going to be enough.” He sounded so confident in her she could only respond with a hollow sound of sarcastic laughter.

“I’m glad you feel better about this than I do. I need to distract myself with something. I believe you said you would teach me elven culture? What about the language?”

He smiled, looking forward to the end of the tunnel, using small flicks of his hand to extinguish the veillfire torches as they walked. “Are you sure? It is a complicated language compared to Common.” He teased at her, shooting her a sideways glance before receiving a sharp jab in the side from her. She arched a brow at him, muttering and probably butchering an elven curse she had heard him use in the games.

“Fenedhis, Solas. I can at least try!”

His eyes widened before he fell victim to laughter, wrapping his arm around her waist and bringing her into a sideways embrace to where he could kiss her cheeks. “I see that, ma’fen. You do know what that term means?”

“My wolf.” She leaned her head against his shoulder at the term of endearment, her heart warming at the title. “I know bits and pieces of the language; I just probably could get someone killed if I had to communicate officially.”

Solas nodded in agreement as they left the small bathing area and came out onto the landscape of the plains. “Let us start with greetings since we will be coming upon the clan soon. On dhea’lam would be more appropriate since it will be evening.” He looked to her, leaning forward on his dominant foot as a gesture that they were about to fade-step together. She moved to where they were just holding hands, leaning forward with him with a smirk playing on her lips. In the same push of magic they took off into the plains. Their magic combined into a shared pool that they borrowed from. She would feel him pulling on her at points and in times of exhaustion she leaned on him. In between held breaths they would go back and forth with the language and her heavy Common tongue made it difficult to get the accent around certain words.

The teachings were a great way to pass the time. By the time they had only one lyrium potion left in the bottom of the bag she stopped their spell, stretching her arm across his chest to halt them both in their tracks. Fang stood in front of them, the view of the aravels and the moving clan at his back. The black wolf had a swell of pride in his chest, his eyes leeringly looking over to the elf at her side. Friend? He asked with an arched brow, cockily scoffing while turning his nose up. The alpha of the plains pack reminded her of biker type of personality, cocky and willing to prove his strength within seconds if someone challenged him. She dropped to one knee, bringing the wolf’s head into her hands while pressing her forehead to his nose.
“Yes, yes, friend. Thank you for helping me out, Fang.” She spoke out loud for Solas to hear, rubbing the back of the wolf’s ears with both hands. He fought the gesture at first, letting out a small growl of protest. But within seconds he was whining and leaning his head into her touch, eyes closed in happiness as his tongue slowly fell out of his mouth. When he looked as satisfied as a happy puppy she let go, patting her thigh to gesture for him to walk by her side. The trio approached the clan, who was camping against a large rock formation. Athena put a finger in her mouth to whistle at them, waving quickly at the Keeper who was at the front of the aravel.

The older elf squinted at her and then broke into a smile, nodding his head in greeting before flicking his gaze over to Solas. Here goes nothing. Athena whispered to herself to attempt to bolster some confidence, bowing her head in respect toward the Keeper before raising and clasping hands with him.

He spoke first: “On dhea’lam, lethal’lan. Th’ea?” The language rolled off of his tongue and she couldn’t help but feel a pit of jealousy at how beautiful it sounded coming from their lips. All of the days’ teachings suddenly left her mind in a wash of nerves. She broke from his hand and shrugged, pointing to the area behind them.

“We’ve been traveling a great distance so it has been a exhausting two days.” She could feel Solas smirk behind her and she resisted the urge to elbow him in the stomach. Keeper Hawen didn’t notice, arching a brow at them before bringing a letter from his waist. His gaze kept going back to Fang at her side and she realized none of the other wolves were near the aravel. They were on the outskirts of the camp, sticking to their duty as the herders of the aravel.

“We received this yesterday evening. A single raven made it here before it nearly collapsed from exhaustion.”

Shit. Single raven? She glanced at Solas who caught on as well, letting out a sigh while pinching the bridge of his nose. Athena didn’t waste any time, keeping her voice low while looking out to the plains. “Yes. I am sorry to approach you like this but some of . . . my actions at the Empress’s ball at Halamshiral angered the now Emperor of Orlais. He – “ She could feel her guilt catching up with her, lips dry while she tried to confess what she felt like were a multitude of sins. “Propositioned me for marriage and I declined in a rather grandeur fashion. He now takes that out on you since he knows I assisted your clan and have a trading connection established with you. Have you seen any troops?”

The Keeper shook his head, turning his gaze out towards the darkness of the night. “You remember, lethan’lan, how I said the Dread Wolf has caught your scent? I fear it has caught up to us, and you as well. Before we received your letter we were nearly attacked by a large pack of wolves.” Athena instantly bit her tongue and looked down to Fang, opening her hand for him to
sniff into her palm.

“If I may, Keeper... The pack is not a sign of Fen’Harel... but they are mine.”

The hahren nearly paled, eyes widening. “Yours?”

She nodded, letting out a sigh while closing her eyes and leaning her head back. She had her hand on top of Fang’s head, using him to connect with the pack and summon them closer. Slowly at the edges of the camp they came, their furred bodies coming uncovered from the landscape. The elves of the clan began to panic but Solas raised a hand, calling out to them: “Do not fear. They are friends. They mean no harm.”

That settled them only a little since it was coming from one of their own, even if his face was unmarked. All of the wolves looked to Athena without a magical haze over their eyes. They were all connected now. One heart, one pack, one breath. She opened her eyes with an almost confident sheen glowing in them, hands open in a gesture towards the dozens of creatures at her back. “Yes, Keeper, Mine. My gift of magic comes in the form of flame and fur. The reason I emerged unharmed from their depths the day we met is because, well, they’re family. I have a pack back at Skyhold as well. They urged you to move from your encampment at my request and Loranil sent the letter as well. I did not wish for you to be dragged into this but I wanted to come in person to defend you from whatever Gaspard ordered to send.”

The clan grew instantly quiet, their eyes slicing through her like sharpened arrows. The Keeper rested a hand on his chin, not meeting her gaze while she could feel her heart beating in her neck. The camp was set up in a position she did not quite like. The rock walls cornered them, put them at a disadvantage for oncoming troops. It probably was a safe place to rest for the evening since having the walls at their back gave them some benefits and safety, but for a well-trained Orlesian troop... it would make it too easy. Out of the corner of her eye she noted a group of children peeking out behind the legs of their mother’s and father’s and instantly she felt a pit in their stomach.

If things went wrong, it would be their blood on her hands.

“I knew we could not last forever on the plains that the shem promised us. Their reach far extends the polished walls of our people at Halamshiral. Very well, Athena. We have entrusted one of our own to you and we will trust you now. What do you require of us? And, who is he?” The Keeper looked to Solas. “Are you one of the people?”

She wanted to instantly turn and give him a warning look but he responded too quickly and too
pointedly for her to do anything. “No. I am not Dalish.” Athena was thankful that was all he said but the tone in which he said it threatened to bring a frustrated groan from her throat. The Keeper with all of his years caught on, giving the flat-ear a leery stare before gesturing towards the camp. “You may stay here for the evening and we will move in the morning. We thank you for your help, Lady Athena.”

Athena nodded, looking over her shoulder towards Solas and jerking her chin towards the camp. His face had hardened back into what she had seen when she first fell from the sky. Although they had been lost in the throes of passion the night before, now it had all been lost under his distaste for the Dalish and their ‘misguided’ beliefs. Fang fell back and tugged on Solas’s pants, sensing his mood and trying to pull him towards where Athena was walking.

Just as they were crossing the line past the aravels they heard a cry come from the edge of the plains. The three turned on their heels and looked at the distance to see two elvish scouts carrying a comrade who had an arrow protruding from his leg. The wounded’s face was painted for Andruil and she could see the Goddess’ fury in the expressions on his face. “Fucking shems!” He shouted in common, Athena paying no mind to the insult that could have been thrown her way.

Howls erupted through the night and she closed her eyes, listening in to the cries of her own scouts. *Metal men. Marching. 50 or more.* The wolves language was broken but the longer they were connected the easier it was to understand them. She nodded, looking at the clan while a thousand different thoughts ran through her head. The Keeper cursed under his breath and she held up a hand to him, dropping her pack from her back and bringing out the last lyrium potion.

Hawen looked to her, his face hardened and his voice low with anger seeping into the edges. “What are we to do, lethal’lan?” Good, he still calls me friend. She nodded, taking in a deep breath through her nose while handing off the pack to Solas.

“Solas, you’re the healer. Can you help him?” He hummed in answer, throwing the pack over his shoulders while she looked to the Keeper.

“You still have three mages including yourself?”

The hahren nodded, bringing his staff from his back while gesturing to his First and the other mage. They came silently at his call. “What do you need for us to do?”

Solas broke in as well, his voice softening for the first time since they came into the camp. “What do you intend to do?”
Athena turned her back to them, her hair falling forward to reveal the wolf on her back. She called in her pack to the clan space, urging them to get out of the plains and out of sight of the soldiers. “We cannot defeat them in battle. We need something big, something that will shake them from their orders.”

She swallowed down a lump of nerves before smiling a wicked grin, popping the top of her lyrium bottle off. “Something reckless.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you as always for the love and support.
Athena led the mages to the edge of the encampment with the entire clan and the pack of wolves at her back. The wind blew over her skin and further exposed the wolf marking on her back, a low growl forming in her throat as the sounds of metal boots marching in the ground reached her hypersensitive ears. Solas had quickly stabilized the injured scout, running behind her while touching her shoulder. “What are your planning, Athena?”

She shrugged out of his grip, looking to him with a smile on her face. She spoke loud enough for the Keeper and his mages to hear her. “I’m just going to need a lot of energy. I’m going to show them something they can write home to Gaspard about. They will not harm a single soul tonight; that I promise you.” He furrowed his brows before nodding with a flash of frustration across his face for her vague answer, pulling out his staff and standing in the middle of the others. The Keeper gestured for the mages and then slammed their staffs into the ground, reminiscent of the ritual used to empower the Herald so she could close the Breech.

Solas waited last, twirling his staff in one hand before gently placing it on the ground in front of him. The three elves knelt in their gesture but he remained standing, his gaze glued to her as she rolled her shoulders almost in pleasure of the magic flowing through her. With a quick movement, she downed the lyrium potion and threw it to the side, glass shattering against a stone as she walked forward in slow deliberate steps.

She pulled on the strength of her pack both here and at Skyhold. Kain perked his head up from Cullen’s lap in their carriage and whined but she silently called out to them in their shared tongue. Family. I need to borrow your strength. May I have it? There was a mixture of whines and howls from the camp. She felt her spirit fortifying. The sensation left her breathless as her magic began to solidify in ethereal flame around her. She clenched her hands into fists at her side, eyes nearly glowing from the sudden burst of raw mana. Her mind turned white, threatening and pushing for her body to shift with the call of her pack. Instead, she held off, rolling her wrists and moving her hands above her head to gather energy.

Athena took in a deep breath, bringing all of the magic into her core. She held the breath, allowing the combined magic to swirl within her heart and soul. The intention of the people around her hummed like music in her ears and it felt like her spirit was going to shatter from their combined support. She used that feeling, that stress, that drive to push her magic outwards and manifest it into flame. The flames erupted like a dance around her, pushing Solas and the mages back until her body was shrouded in the fire.

She urged the flames to reach higher and wider. There was a thin barrier sparkling on her body but
the majority of her will was going into the spell, hands twisting and turning in guided movement to morph the large bulk of flame into the form she most desired.

With her body occluded by the white and blue burst, she designed a wolf of flame. She stood underneath its belly, hands coming forward in a delicate posture as she crouched in a position to control it. The wolf was her spirit extended, its fur shining like the sun in the depth of the darkness. The troops rounded the corner, its leader raising a hand to halt their movements. Already she could hear curses fall from their lips and she laughed, the sound dark and twisted by magic falling from the maw of her creation. The wolf shook its head and assumed a defensive stance, paws digging into the earth and scorching everything it touched.

“WHO SENT YOU.”

When she called out her voice was twisted, polyphonic like her singing at the ball but this time it held a darker tone. The magic of the elves and the land fueled her call, fangs of the wolf bared in a gesture of power as she herself smiled underneath it. The General marched forward and cupped a hand over his face, his voice nothing close to confident.

“The rightful and now true Emperor of Orlais, Gaspard!”

Athena snarled, stepping forward and bringing the wolf a step closer to them.

“Fools. You march and attack blindly like puppets on a string. You have no honor!”

The soldier was silent while raising a horn to his lips, signaling the first wave of attack. Her eyes widened in shock, not realizing that they would still try and attack with a flaming wolf sizing up to two stories standing in front of them. The first line of warriors paused, looking to their General before slowly moving from the formation of fifty men with their swords drawn. Before they could even move Athena pushed from the ground and jumped in the air, pushing her hands in front of her while directing a stream of flame from the wolf’s mouth onto the ground in front of them.

Instantly the soldiers took a step back, realizing that their efforts would be fruitless with her standing there. “This land is protected! Return to your master. These people shall not be harmed!”

The Orlesian General removed his helm and she had to respect the fact that he wasn’t wearing a mask underneath. “Who are you to issue such a promise?”
Athena called on her wolves, using one hand to hold her spiritual essence above her still as she walked forward. The barrier flickered on her skin and she could feel the flame eating away at her clothes. Her feet were bare and she wore only bits of her pants and her bandings, eyes appearing like ethereal wisps of flames as her figure came into view. Claw and the pack appeared at the side, their bodies glimmering in her extended barrier, completely obscuring the clan from the soldiers’ eyes. The General’s face slacked, eyes wide at the sight while a single name fell from his lips in a whisper.

“Sorciere.”

She nodded wordlessly, twitching her fingers to bring the towering wolf forward. It came at her command but she could feel her energy levels depleting, her barrier on her body coming in and out of existence. The wolves around her rubbed their bodies against her, sharing their heat with her as the soldiers considered their movements. “This is a promise from me, gentlemen, not the Inquisition. If Gaspard moves to harm the elves again, he will be hearing from me personally. No Game. No lies. I will keep my promise. Now. Leave.”

With a step forward the wolf above her lunged forward and snarled, pure mana dripping from its maw and sizzling into the ground. The General called for a retreat and the group of soldiers disappeared around the bend. She held her stance, held the fiery wolf, until the sounds of their boots could no longer be heard. One of her pack members ran to scout and confirmed that they left with a short, sharp yelp. Instantly Athena dropped her guard, the flaming wolf disappearing into a stunning silence. The sudden absence of light brought in the darkness around her, her body falling to her hands and knees as an exasperated sigh fell from her lips.

Soot and scraps of clothes barely covered her body, her limbs shaking as they attempted to keep her up. With a flash of magic Solas was at her side, eyes scanning her like a healer while he used small pulses of magic to mend minor burns on her skin.

“A-a-are they gone?” She whispered, her jaw shaking as she fell into his grip. The world was spinning in her gaze and the licks and whines of her pack barely kept her conscious. Solas nodded, tucking hair behind her ear to reveal her face to him.

“That was. . . reckless, Athena.” He smirked, bringing his face down to rest his forehead against hers. She laughed, weak and hollow against him as he stroked her cheeks, caring not that the Keeper and his mages showed up behind them. There was an undeniable comfort in his arms, a soft sound of exhaustion coming from her lips.

“I. . I don’t think I can walk, Solas.” The elf hummed, picking her up effortlessly like she weighed nothing at all.
“You have exhausted your mana reserves. You need rest, ma’f-“

The world went black around her before she could hear him, her body going slack in his grip. The last thing she saw were the two moons dancing in the sky before her mind drifted into the Fade for the first time in days.

The swirling green of the dream world was a pleasant surprise. She looked down to her body, gripping her hands reassure herself of where she was. With a quick pulse of her aura, Athena realized she could not feel Solas in the Fade. There was normally a sweet yet biting cold that greeted her when she slept but now its absence was alarming.

“He is tending to you in the waking world. You were impressive, girl.” Command’s voice was icy, her form armored in dragonscale. This time her hair was down, silver and blonde locks falling in front of her shoulders. Athena could not deny the spirit’s beauty but the deafening feeling of her power was more distracting than her looks. She nodded, rubbing her hands up and down on her arms.

“Yeah – I couldn’t think of anything else. They saw me as a wolf nearly biting the life from the Duchess, why not use a wolf to defend the people I swore to protect?”

The spirit nodded, gesturing over to a path that appeared in the Fade. There was a map drawn out on a table but it appeared three dimensional, mountains coming from the paper while clouds moved over the landscapes. “You did well. You use the influence of spirits as well as the bond of your army. I have thought of the task I need you to complete for our bargain. Are you prepared to accept this?”

Athena twisted her lips to the side, looking down on the map while wringing her hands together in a movement of anxiety. Inspiration and Harmony were nowhere to be found. Were they afraid of Command? Silently she didn’t blame them. With a soft sigh, she nodded, crossing her arms over her chest while examining the map. “What do you require of me, Command?”

The spirit pointed to a place on the map South of Haven in the Wilds. The location zoomed in on a cave location that she was unfamiliar with but the place on the mark stuck in her mind like a flashbulb memory. “There is a creature, like you, who received my blessing in the past. However,
he has wasted its potential, turning only to selfish and dark desires. I need you to eliminate him. Do not think I would lead you astray, Witch. This man’s morals disagree with both of ours on a darker level than I can describe.”

The warning from the spirit sent a chill down her spine but she nodded, tapping on the map. “Must I do this alone? Or may I bring assistance?”

The spirit turned her nose to the side with a scoff, resting a hand on her hip. “Do not bring the wolf.”

Athena hummed in confusion. “Kain? Why-“

“Do not play me a fool, Athena. Do not bring the wolf. You may bring who gives you comfort and they will not detract from your deal to me. Are we agreed on the terms?” Command turned back to her to meet her gaze, her own piercing silver orbs looking through her ethereal form and sending another shiver down her spine. Still, Athena nodded, extending a hand and shaking the spirit’s in agreement. “I will do it as soon as I return to Skyhold. That may be a week from now since I need to help the clan relocate.”

Command chuckled while releasing her hand. “Your army grows, Wolf. It suits you well.”

“You are mistaken. I did not use magic to influence them, spirit.” Command clicked her tongue on the back of her teeth, placing two fingers under Athena’s chin to lift her effortlessly from the ground. “My blessing is not only magical. It bolsters the hidden gifts that have been inside you the whole time. We spirits cannot give things that did not exist in the first place. We only strengthen what is already present. Give yourself some credit and do not dismiss our magic so lightly.” The spirit then disappeared and as she fell she felt two arms wrap around her and help her to the ground.

“You’re back!” The two spirits cheered in unison, Inspiration spinning her in an embrace while Harmony smirked from behind them. Athena smiled, laughing in the midst of the spin to wrap her arms around her spirit friend. The two women settled down and when they finally stopped Harmony clapped his hand on her shoulder, giving her a subtle nod with a hum of greeting. He was always more withdrawn, but there were small gestures and give-aways that showed when he was happy. Much like Solas, but the spirit’s purpose for her was to help harness her powers and strengthen the mental bridge between her emotions and her magic.

She took a step back from them and wiped her clothes, which in the fade was the outfit she was wearing before she set everything on fire, and looked to them with a smile. The female spirit could not contain herself, spouting off a recent summary of what she had seen. “Oh you sung
marvelously at the ball! And that dancing!” Athena stepped in, flicking Inspiration on the shoulder with a wry smirk.

“Did you peep into one of my friend’s dreams? Dorian said he had danced with a young woman that sounded an awful lot like you.” The spirit didn’t even hide her grin, nodding before swirling her hand to summon up logs for them to sit on.

“You two are close. I can tell. He dreams of you sometimes. I’m glad you were able to find some solace in him during the ball.” Harmony cleared his throat, walking around to the front of the gnarled and petrified looking log his companion had summoned for him to sit on.

“I was impressed with how you handled yourself. You were remarkably reserved for someone who normally wears every emotion on their sleeve.” Athena shrugged, crossing one leg over the other.

“It was certainly an experience. I wish I had you guys there in person to help me. I just feel... calm here. Controlled, I think.” Harmony nearly scoffed, picking a piece of dirt from his horns and flicking it to the side.

“Well you are from here first, are you not? It would only make sense.”

Athena’s eyes widened, her teeth subconsciously biting at the loose skin on the inside of her cheek. Inspiration noticed, pushing from the ground, and sliding over on her log chair as if the floor were made of ice. “I – I – I guess that makes sense. I came here first before the rift, right?”

Inspiration nodded, placing her hand on top of Athena’s thigh. Is this what Cole meant when he said they were alike? She wasn’t a spirit. She had her physical form from her old life, scars, moles, and all. Did it make that much of a difference that she fell into the Fade first? The thoughts were obviously weighing on her mind because Harmony nudged her with the end of his foot, arching a brow to try and grab her attention.

“Did you really only think of that now? Inspiration and I have been speaking of it. You burn, Athena.” He said and that brought her out of her funk enough to roll her eyes, tucking a stray bit of hair behind her ear.

“Yeah, everyone keeps saying that and it gets more frustrating every time I hear it. Do you think that is also why I was able to try and help Wisdom when I did?” The spirits nodded in unison with added hums of agreement. She leaned forward and rested her head in her hands, letting out a
mixture of a sigh and a groan. There still wasn’t any cold presence in the Fade so she figured he was still in the waking world dealing with the aftermath of her outburst against the soldiers.

“While I have you guys alone here. . . “ She sat up, looking to the side at her first friend, squeezing her hand on top of her thigh before looking to Harmony. “What do you guys know about the Nightmare demon?”
Thank you for the love and support as always! <3

Art commissioned by antivancorvo on Tumblr.
So with my school semester coming to an end I wanted to give a sincere thank you to all of my readers, commenters, and lurkers.

In the last three four months I have switched jobs and specialties, started graduate school, and started this fanfic. Things have been really, well, hard for me juggling all of this while also planning my wedding and struggling to lead a normal semblance of a life. Pity-party aside I am so thankful for all of you guys who bring joy to my days by reading my story. Writing has been my daily therapy during these stressful times and I am so glad that I can share it with you. 200k words is, quite frankly, a shit-ton and there are a good many of you who have been there since the first chapters.

So, from the bottom of my heart, thank you all.

Inspiration and Harmony visibly flinched and that gave her the answer she needed. The demon was one of the things she wanted to change in this world with her here. After meeting Hawke, it would break her heart to see her die but Stroud was also a vital part in rebuilding the Wardens. If they could both be saved, Athena would feel accomplished and like she made a difference. Right now, she felt like she was simply repaying a debt to the Dalish since she was the one who got them in trouble in the first place. If it wasn’t for her teasing of the Grand Duke - now Emperor, they wouldn’t have needed defending to begin with. But how Gaspard acted in person, she couldn’t dismiss the idea entirely that he would have attacked them anyway as his first act of power as Emperor.

“I will be fighting it at some point. I don’t know when, I don’t anticipate soon, but if I can kill it. . . that would be something I can do. Wisdom told me to do something with what I know and killing that monstrosity would help so many people.” The horned spirit leaned back, tapping a finger against his chin in deep thought. Inspiration remained silent, fear etching itself into her features. It must have been a side effect of the spirit’s influence, but when Athena was around her she constantly felt song playing through her head from her world. The spirit had a fascination of the arts from her world but it made her feel somewhat insane having two or three songs playing at once within the walls of her mind.
“The Nightmare demon grows stronger on the fears of others. If you are to face it head on, you will need to be completely steeled off from everyone but yourself. Your mind will need to be an indomitable fortress that it cannot penetrate. Even then, it is strong, but if you continue to train like you have been you might have a chance. Will you be fighting it alone?” Athena shook her head, standing up and stretching her hands out to create a type of whiteboard on the Fade in front of them. A dry-erase marker popped into her hand and she began to draw diagrams that looked like a football strategy board with a giant stick-figure sketch of a spider in the middle.

“The Inquisitor and whoever she chooses to bring will be here.”

Inspiration cut in, eyes wide. “In the Fade? Physically? Like you?”

Athena nodded, looking over her shoulder. “Yeah... It’s going to be a complicated time for everyone. Thankfully I’ve gone through it before.” She gave her friends a thumbs up in pseudo-confidence but then smirked at her regardless. “So has Rathein, but she doesn’t remember because the Nightmare demon has her memories of the Fade. She was probably only here for a matter of minutes, not day – “ She paused, looking to Inspiration for validation of her time before continuing. Inspiration looked up the sky, counting on her fingers before nodding.

“A few, yes.”

“- So she will for sure not be as comfortable. I’m going to try and gear her party from people who will not completely panic being in the Fade. We need our best team if we’re going to weaken this thing.” She circled the spider on the fade-board with her crude drawings of the party around it. Bull was a stick figure with horns and everyone else were pretty much stick figures with one trait to help them stick out. “This fight isn’t going to be easy but I figure we have plenty of time to prepare.”

“Will you be doing this after completing my task, girl?” Command showed up in a shimmer of power, standing behind the other two spirits with a quizzical look on her face. Athena responded with a hum of acknowledgement, leaving the drawing up for them to reference if they needed. If the spirit of Command kept checking in as much as she did, the target in question must be someone dangerous. There was a pit of dread in her stomach but she had already agreed to take out whoever Command ordered. They said that they had committed horrible acts so there would be no guilt on Athena’s part in killing them, but the idea of hunting someone down while keeping it from Solas made her uncomfortable.

That reminded her. Walking over to Inspiration she flicked the spirit on the lobe of the ear with an annoyed expression on her face. “Oh yeah! Why do you keep letting him listen in on me when I
sing or perform?” The spirit flinched away, using a hand to cover her ear while sticking her tongue out at her friend. Inspiration shimmered and reappeared behind Harmony, using her friend as cover.

“It is my purpose to inspire and help others! That is exactly what I was doing.” Athena laughed with a blush, looking down at the ground and to the side. It was strange that he hadn’t shown up yet but time was always skewed in the Fade compared to the waking world. Harmony stood from his log, waving his hand to dismiss the fade-board and the unnecessary things from the area around them.

“If you wish, we could begin training now?” The spirit was rolling up the sleeves of his white long-sleeved tunic and she nodded, rolling her eyes slightly while summoning a ribbon to tie her hair back in a high pony tail. The two stood with a few paces in between them. She stood with her legs shoulder-width apart and her hands clenched into fists at her side. Harmony gave a dark smirk and she got a flashback to his time as Rage, swallowing down a sudden lump of nerves before giving him the cue that she was ready.

“Keep me out, Athena. I’m going to try and bring up things that the Nightmare demon would feed on and use against you. You are safe here. Are you ready?” Underneath the darkness there was a general look of concern that instantly made her soften physically. Mentally she was trying to place up wall after wall to keep him out but she knew that no matter what kind of defense she set up beforehand, it would be a completely different story once he began to break through them. The main experience she had with mental prodding was when Lynette the Templar searched her for demonic possession. It was like a fire in her veins, burning away at any shred of the Fade before coursing through her mind.

Once she was there she was lost within the flames, eyes wide and body cold as the cool magic of the lyrium completed its task. If the Nightmare demon was anything like that, she had some serious work to do. Without warning Harmony took a step forward and extended his hand, reaching through into her mind to try and find something to work with. Athena steadied herself, already feeling pressure in the front of her head. The walls held through but with a pulse of influence from Harmony she cried out and reached her hands up to her temples. Memories flashed through her mind in small bits.

The memories were from Thedas, not the time before. He was focusing on things that she loved, things that she so desperately needed to protect. There were the moments when she first met everybody. She saw when she first met Solas and she could feel her stomach tighten as the sensation of butterflies excited and nervous twittered in her abdomen. A montage of memories where she was embracing her friends passed through and Harmony broke off with a growl. “You aren’t trying. Remember, if you can see these, so can the Nightmare demon. You will only make it easier if it knows how influenced you are by your loved ones. What is your biggest fear, Athena? Think on that and know it will try to manipulate that until you are a broken shell of what you once were. Now again.”
They went back and forth for hours, or was it days? Athena could feel her mind tiring but it felt like she was getting better every time they practiced. She was able to defend most of the superficial memories but once Harmony began to pull up memories from her life before she panicked, guilt shutting down her mind and body to where she could not fight back. Harmony ended it before she had a chance to. He walked over and helped her stand up straight, looking down at her while patting her shoulders with both hands. The gold of his horns reflected the false sun of the Fade and she had to squint to look at him. “You did well. Believe it or not you are getting better. Have faith in yourself, okay?” He lifted her chin with two fingers before ruffling her hair, disappearing into the Fade with Command at his back. Athena arched a brow at the pair leaving before chuckling, straightening out her shirt which someone got disheveled in her training.

“Come on, friend. You need to relax before you wake or you’re going to fall right back asleep again.” Inspiration cooed at her, bringing her over and summoning up a new scene. It was a campfire, something pleasant and calming. The sound of the wood crackling within the flames and the wind on the night washed over her in a sense of peace. She closed her eyes, sitting down on a sideways log while extending her legs towards the fire. Even if it was an illusion the heat felt good on her body. She didn’t know what happened in the waking world but she felt exhausted physically. There was an odd taste of lyrium and a health tonic on her lips so somebody must have woken her to drink something. There was a sudden weight in her lap and she looked down to see a lute resting there, Inspiration holding one of her own with an expectant smile.

“Without any warning? Goodness what shall we do?” The spirit chuckled and gestured with her head for Athena to start. She looked down to the instrument, picking it up gingerly and placing her fingers on the strings. The song was soft, something relaxing as a finisher for her dream for the night, or how many nights she had been there. She knew before she passed out that she had almost exhausted all of her mana reserves creating the two-tower tall flaming wolf that snarled at Gaspard’s troops. Athena extended the intro of the music, wetting her lips before singing softly.

“*I was a quick-wet boy, diving too deep for coins.*

*All of the street light eyes, wide on my plastic toys.*

Inspiration was beaming as her hands subtly plucked along on her own matching lute. Hers was more ethereal, like her, and the music notes flowed visibly from her strings. Athena had to smile, knowing that all of this was a dream but the spirit’s presence still made her feel abnormally calm.

“*Then when the cops closed the fair, I cut my long baby hair.*
*Stole me a dog-eared map, and called for you everywhere.*”

She beat on the surface of the lute as a drum, leading up to the chorus before harmonizing with her friend who was singing on perfect pitch underneath her.
“Have I found yooouu? Flightless bird, jealous, weeping or lost you? American mouth, big pill looming.”

There was a look of absolute joy on Inspiration’s face, hands gently strumming in the gently rhythm on her lute. There was a pulse of energy from the spirit and Athena arched a brow, wondering if she was yet again sharing her music with the elf on the other side of the Veil. If she was, he probably needed it and she was in no place to argue. Cole also liked hearing her sing. He said it helped his hurt and she made a mental note to herself to practice her lute playing in his attic-like space above the tavern.

“How I’m a fat house cat, nursing my sore blunt tongue.

Watching the warm poison rats, curl through the wide fence cracks.

Pissing on magazine photos, those fishing lures.

Thrown in the cold and clean Blood of Christ mountain stream.”

They both knew the song, and her dream, was coming to an end so their raised their voices higher. The music swirled around them and in that moment Athena was absolutely lost, revitalized in the energy of the Fade and her spirit. There were no thoughts of relocating the Dalish clan or the future events of the Inquisition. It was just her, her first spirit friend, and their music.

“Have I found you? Flightless bird, grounded, bleeding, or lost you?”

The words fell from her lips as a whisper, her mind slowly fading back into consciousness. She was laying down, that much she could tell. There were heavy blankets on top of her and with a quick look under them she saw that she was still in her bandings and underclothes. Nothing more. There was evidence of healing magic on her skin and she thought she smelled a tonic for burns on her arms and legs. With a small groan of protest, she sat up and looked around. The small movements made her realize that she was sleeping inside one of the aravels. It was around afternoon by the heat of the sun through the cloth. There was a pile of clothes at the end of her bedroll and she crawled to them, reading a note that was on top.

“Your other clothes were burned in the defense. I’ve sent word to the Spymaster and am at the front of the group. Rest well.”

The letter was unsigned but the near perfect script made her heart sing, eyes watering as she looked to the clothes. They were elvish in origin. That much was for sure. With awkward angles due to her constraints in the aravel she slid on a pair of dark brown pants that went to her knees and a tank-top
type light green shirt similar to the one she was wearing before except it covered her back. Her eyes darted around looking for shoes but fell upon the foot wrappings at the bottom of the neatly folded pile. She wrapped them tightly, trying to make sure they didn’t look absolutely awful. They left her toes uncovered but she figured that was the point. It was almost September – no – Kingsway in this world, so there wouldn’t be too deep of snow on the way up the mountain. The differences between the worlds was getting her confused. At least the days of the week stayed the same.

Athena took in a deep breath before pulling back the curtain of the aravel, eyes squinted while she tried to take in what was happening. The entire clan was moving with her wolves mixed in between them. There was still some animosity and sideways glances towards the creatures but there was a shared tolerance from both sides. A pressing on her mind brought her gaze to the side where she saw Fang walking next to her aravel. Better? He asked gruffly in her mind and she nodded with a chuckle, jumping down to the ground with a small wince of pain in her back before coming to the wolf’s side. “How long have I been out, friend?” She asked the creature who looked down to the ground in a moment of thought.

“How long have I been out, friend?” He answered out-loud and her eyes widened that she was still able to understand him through the barks and the growls of the wolf language. Three days? Shit I must have been tired. She rubbed the back of her neck before hearing a ravenous roar erupted from her stomach. Fang looked up to her and knit his brows together, nudging her side and leading her over to a smaller wagon that had food on it.

Chapter End Notes

Song: Flightless Bird, American Mouth- Iron & Wine (It's such a peaceful song; I feel it really puts their campfire scene in a perfect picture).
There was a small girl sitting on the back of the wagon, kicking her feet off of the edge. Her face had not been painted yet with her chosen God. It was strange seeing a bare-faced elf within the Dalish clan but Athena smiled to her, waving softly.

The girls eyes lit up in awe, clapping her hands to her mouth. “Oh! You’re her! You’re awake! The Keeper told me to-“

“Sh sh, not yet child. Do you have anything I can eat before I get back to adult business?” The girl nodded with firm understanding, turning around and digging through a bag before bringing out a hearty bread and an apple. Athena walked with the slow pace of the wagon, small sounds of happiness falling from her lips as she ate. “What’s your name, sweetheart?”

The girl straightened up her posture, some mixture of fear and excitement settling in on her features. “Lev’adin. You can call me Leafy! Everyone does.” Her feet kicked up in excitement and Athena laughed, leaning forward and messing up the girls wild blonde hair.

“Leafy it is. Want to come with me up to the front? You seem lonely out here.” The girl turned around to her duties, biting her bottom lip in consideration before answering with a small “uh-huh.” Her eyes fell to Fang and her jaw nearly fell to the floor.

“That can I ride him?!” She exclaimed, hands reaching forward towards the wolf who responded with a curt scoff under his breath. Athena chuckled and shook her head, running her hand along the wolf’s back. “He’s not too open with people yet. If you’re so keen on riding something you can sit on my shoulders?” Before the words even finished leaving her mouth Leafy was standing up in excitement, doing a small dance of shifting her weight back and forth before Athena turned around and crouched down. Leafy climbed onto her shoulders with her feet hanging on her chest. Athena rested her hands on the girl’s legs and walked forward through the clan.

“Where are your parents, da’adahl?” The child squirmed in glee at the endearment, pointing over to a tall, dark-skinned looking elf.

“My older brother is over there. Falon’Din took my parents when we were younger.” She said it so bluntly without any hurt in her voice. Athena paused, looking up at the girl.
“I’m sorry, Leafy. I didn’t know.”

Leafy snorted, kicking her feet against her chest. “It’s okay. Oh! The Keeper’s there! KEEPER HAWEN! Fen’Elgara’s awake!!”

The title brought her eyes wide, mind instantly running through all of the things it meant. Wolf was obvious, but Elgara? Shit Solas had taught her that world a few days ago. Sun? Yes. Sun Wolf. Fan fucking tastic. Athena sighed with a smile, shaking her head back and forth before joining the Keeper. Solas was immediately in front of him, turning on his heel with a look of concern on his face. When he saw Athena he instantly softened, smiling to her with a nod of greeting. He was back to being his quiet and polite self around the Dalish but she would look forward to their alone time.

Keeper Hawen chuckled low in his throat, gesturing towards the girl. “Please forgive her. The children are quite amazed with what you did the other day and made up that title. How are you faring?” He asked, looking her up and down, obviously noting her Dalish garb. Athena could feel already that her feet were going to cold but she shrugged even with the little girl on her shoulders.

“I figure I could be worse off. I did not mean to sleep for so long. I’m eternally grateful for your hospitality.” The Keeper dismissed the statement with a wave of his hand, eyes turning back to the path at hand. Athena could see the mountain path that led to Skyhold so she knew they were close to where the Dalish would settle for the foreseeable future.

“You avoided bloodshed while protecting my people. You owe us nothing. Your companions have served as worthy protectors in your absence. They have been hunting with my scouts and have kept a perimeter around the clan.” She blushed at the compliment, looking down to Fang with a look of pride.

“I am glad they didn’t cause too much trouble. Fang here runs a tight ship. We are close to the new encampment location, yes?” The Keeper and Solas hummed in unison. Solas pointed away from the highway towards Lake Calenhad.

“Past the trees there. Not much farther. The Keeper has extended his hospitality for the evening and then you and I leave for Skyhold in the morning.” There was a bitter point to his voice at the mention of the Keeper but she noted it for later, squeezing her friend’s legs as the child squirmed on her shoulders to get a better look of where they were at.

“No more problems from the soldiers, I trust?” Athena was hesitant to ask but she didn’t see any
wounds or wounded in the crowd of elves that she walked through. The scout with the arrow
wound was a few lines behind them talking with his companions in a low voice. Solas shook his
head, looking over his shoulder with a small smirk on his lips.

“They did not return.” There was a subtext of “they did not return after that reckless display” but
she ignored it, catching his gaze for a moment as a blush formed on her chest. They pulled the
aravels through the trees until they reached a small clearing. It would take until nightfall to unload
and set everyone up in their tents so she tended to Leafy and her wolves. The pack kept a perimeter
in the forest but she could sense that they wanted a good hunt. She waited until the Golden Halla
and his herd were locked away before getting Leafy off of her shoulders, patting her on the head.

“Keeper, is ram okay for supper?” He looked her up and down with a cautious nod and she saw
Solas fight to hide a smile as he was pulling the ropes to tighten the top of a tent. She turned and
disappeared in the midst of the wolves, her body easing into the shape of a wolf in a smooth motion
of magic. The pull on her mana pool was obvious but she ignored it with a shake of her head. A
shudder started at her nose and traveled down her spine and afterwards she shot a glance over
towards the Keeper. A string of elvish curses fell from his lips but Leafy was too excited to be held
back. She ran fearlessly through the pack until she threw her arms around her body, burying her
face in the fur.

Her brother, Tad’alin, called out from their place in the camp and she could see fear in his eyes as
well. The white-furred wolf nuzzled the girl with her nose, prodding her back to the camp with
small gestures. “Fen’Elgara... Can I ride you?” Athena had to laugh in her wolfish tongue, rolling
her eyes and bending her back down so the girl could throw herself over the back. Leafy gripped
onto fur between her shoulder blades to hold on while she trotted over to her brother, delivering her
silently before turning on her paws and disappearing with her pack.

They moved like a furred storm over the plains, the colors of their fur standing out from the dead
grass and wheat of the area. The rams were helpless to them. They had to hunt a few to satiate their
own appetites before collecting a few for the elves back at the encampment. It felt good to lose
herself within the hive-mind that the pack obtained when they hunted. They relied on one another
for the subtle change in movement and their target. Athena stayed towards the front of the pack
with Fang as their alphas. Her eyes were peeled on their final hunt for the evening and with a lurch
of motion she pushed off with her paws, using a bit of magic to fade-step and tackle the ram from
the side.

The creature moved to kick her with its hooves but in a single motion she bared her teeth and
planted them in the side of the ram’s neck, twisting until the target became lifeless. When the
others approached, she let off a warning growl, alerting them that she was not done with her hunt
yet. They all paused, eyes watching her in a noted obedience to her position. Athena let go of the
ram when she was positive it was dead and she could no longer feel its pulse pumping through her
mouth. The wolves then grabbed a hoof and dragged it back through the plans to the edge of the
camp. She shifted back into her human form with a tired sigh, wiping the blood from her mouth
with the back of her hand.
Her eyes searched for Solas in the area and she felt a pull of his magic from the edge of the camp. She looked to him and instantly smiled, blood on her teeth and all. He already had a flagon of water for her and a cloth, pointing to a part on her cheek where she had missed cleaning. With a small chuckle, she took both things into her hand and finished washing her face before supper. “I’m assuming you rested well?” His voice was cool yet calm as they spoke in the shadows at the edge of the camp. She nodded, rubbing the cloth on her neck and she noted his eyes were wandering where her hands went. Just to tease him she allowed her hand to trail to the top of her breasts before laughing, swatting at him with the cloth. He chuckled with a blush on the edge of his ears and that only made her laugh more.

“Really, hahren? Goodness I’m asleep for three days and you’re already starved.” She looked at him and noted there were subtle hints of exhaustion in the lines of his face and in his posture. All joking fell and she suddenly was looking at him up and down, pushing on his shoulder lightly. “Solas. . .did you sleep at all?” He looked up to her gaze and she got her answer in the guilt on his face. A sound of frustration fell from her lips before she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him, resting her cheek on his chest. He paused and chuckled, resting his hands on her back in response.

“It had been a long time since you had seen your friends. I did not want to take any of their time. The entire clan was making sure you were undisturbed, even by the ‘flat ear’ that traveled with you.” There was a pit in her gut when she said that, hands gripping onto the back of his shirt. Athena stood straight up still in his grip, raising her eyes to meet his. There was a hurt in them from being kept away from her but she shook her head, letting out a sigh. “One of my favorite parts of the Fade has always been that you are in it, Solas.” There was a sharp intake of air above her and she was glad she could get a reaction out of him with her words. Even though she had slept for three days straight, the sleep wasn’t as good unless he was there to help warm her bed. When they slept, they breathed in unison, hands clutching at each other as a constant reminder that they weren’t alone. Even just hugging him now made her realize how much she had missed him. Would they be able to do this back in Skyhold? Halamshiral had been kind of an escape for them both. Back in the Keep there were daily duties to tend to and not as much free time to just be in each other’s company.

“I take it you have been getting along with the Dalish swimmingly, right?” She teased to him, looking up to his gaze again. He looked down with an arched brow and she could just feel him saying ‘you’re kidding right?’ She laughed but he did not seem to drop his expression. Athena let out a soft sigh, matching the look on his face before looking back to him. “Have they been that awful?”

“They have met my expectations.” She clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth in knowing of exactly how low those expectations were. They must have spoken on ancient elven history or the pantheon for him to be this cold and pointed.
“That says a lot coming from you, Solas. Would you like to dine with them for dinner? Or should we start heading back to Skyhold a night early?” She offered him a way out but he shook his head in refusal.

“I think the Keeper might be offended if we refuse his hospitality for tonight. Besides, we would not want to steal Fen’Elgara from the children, now would we?” He teased her and she rolled her eyes, dropping one hand from his back to pinch the bridge of her nose.

“Oh Creators not you too. Three days – three days!”

“It’s ample time for the children to make their stories. That was... reckless, Athena.”

She instantly retorted. “I know but something – “

Her words were caught off by him dipping his head down to capture her lips with his, a hand gently tilting her chin up to him. She yelped underneath his touch but eventually melted, using her free hand to cup his cheek. He broke from them, keeping his forehead resting against hers. “I did not say I disagreed, ma’fen, just that it was reckless. What you created was beautiful and it is something that they nor I will ever forget.”

Athena smiled, genuinely smiled and rose on her toes to kiss him lightly again. “I figured they needed something big and flashy to distract them from attacking. They already saw me fighting as a wolf in Halamshiral, why not here?” He nodded with a hum, pulling her close in an embrace. There was a sound of someone clearing their throat behind them and she looked over his shoulder to see Tad’alin looking at them with crossed arms. The tanned elf looked them up and down before announcing.

“I did not realize he was your vhenan, Fen’Elgara.” Damnit some of the adults were using the nickname as well. She rolled her eyes and grabbed Solas hand, turning him towards the elf.

“I did not realize that was your business, lethal’lin.” She said pointedly, drawing up on how she had heard Solas sound many times before. “We will join you for dinner in a moment’s time. I will not insult our host by keeping him waiting.” The elf made a small nod of his head before turning back towards the camp. Solas squeezed her hand, pulling her gaze back to him. “Forgive me, I realize things might get lost in translation and we did not cover that word in our lessons during our travels. Vhenan. It means-“
“My heart.” She stopped him with a small smile. “I know that one, Solas. My knowledge isn’t completely lacking. Just about 95% of the language and my horrid pronunciation.”

He chuckled as she pulled on his hand and led him towards the camp, an embarrassing blush on her cheek as her heart pounded in her ears. As stupid as it sounded, she wouldn’t be the first to say it. Athena knew that this was a difficult thing for both to venture into. If she were the first to say the dreaded three syllables, it might scare him off. But she knew, she was hooked. There was a comfort in his touch that she couldn’t imagine living without and it was easier to breathe when he was around. They came into the camp fire area where the clan was finally settled and eating a root and ram stew.

Leafy struggled to carry three bowls but managed to bring one for Athena and Solas before plopping down on a log, patting next to her on the seat. She sat obediently, gesturing for Solas to join her with a quick jerk of his head. The child blew on her soup before eating it and the Keeper laughed, motioning over to her. Hawen asked pleasantly: “Do you have children of your own, Athena? You are a natural with that one.”

She nearly choked on her soup, controlling the food in her mouth while coughing into her hand. Leafy looked up confused and patted her on the back in an attempt to help her. Once there were enough tears in her eyes she shook her head with a weak smile, finally swallowing the first bite of soup before answering. “Uh – no. The pack is my family as well as the friends I have made here.”

The Keeper smiled, nodding while glancing to Solas. “They say you are from a different world. Is that true?”

The camp suddenly went quiet and she placed her bowl in her lap, rubbing the back of her neck. Would they be terrified if she answered honestly? “Yes. I was brought in through a rift and found myself in the Fade for a few days. When the opportunity presented itself, I was able to escape through the original rift made by the Breach.”

Still, silence. Solas had already heard this story so he was still eating slowly while keeping a careful eye on her and her reactions. The Keeper pressed on, “If that’s true, then you must also know some things about the future as well then?” She felt like she was back at dinner with Gaspard’s except she was supposed to be surrounded by friends. Solas caught onto this, flicking his eyes to the Keeper.

“Is this an interrogation?”
Keeper Hawen raised his hands in surrender. “You must understand, lethal’lan. We are not caught up in the gossip of the shems so we hear things second hand from traders and merchants that pass by our aravel. They seemed almost too unusual to be true but now I’m starting to reconsider everything I’ve heard on the road.” This made the group chuckle and Athena smiled, taking down a sip of broth and sighing in happiness before continuing.

“It’s hard to explain how but yes I do.”

Another elf piped up from the background. “How much? How far?”

She hid her wince well, steeling herself like Harmony had taught her while trying to think of how to phrase things to make Solas not suspicious. He didn’t know how this was going to turn out. He didn’t know how longs things would take or if Corypheus was even going to be stopped. Athena nodded to herself before looking to the man who asked and the Keeper. “A few years at least.”

Chapter End Notes

HAH! Gotcha with that title. Thank you all for the constant love. <3

Translations:
da’adahl - little tree
For much of the meal she answered basic questions about her world before pressing them on theirs. Every time there was an answer Solas didn’t like she could almost feel him bring up another mental wall separating himself from the conversation. This particular clan held the three-mage belief, which Athena would never be able to understand, and made most of their income off of trade from passing shems. Hawen did mark that since they connected with the Inquisition things had been better off.

“And how is he doing?” Athena asked, gesturing over to the Golden Halla that was assessing her from the open area where the halla were roaming. She had given strict instructions to her wolves not to hunt them so they were pouting on the opposite side of the plains closer to where her and Solas’s tent was.

The hunter Ithiren smiled on the log across from her, gesturing his head to the creature. “Hallas travel well and they were not harmed, thanks to you. Hanal’ghilan is nervous about the wolves, but they keep to you enough. I think it trusts you, so trusts them.” She nodded at his answer, sitting back on the log and closing her eyes to gather her breaths and process the soup she had almost inhaled in the breaks of conversation. Three days without food had really caught up to her but whatever root they put in the stew tingled on her tongue. It probably had some magical properties she wasn’t aware of. Man, it’s time to study things like an actual mage.

Music poured from the back of the area, two elves bringing out lutes. The other elves were quickly cleaning up their bowls and pushing the logs aside as Athena slowly leaned over and nudged Solas with her elbow in his ribs. He hummed, leaning over to her as she asked: “What’s going on?”

He smirked. “The clan survived a large move across the Plains, I suppose they are celebrating.” Leafy cleared their bowls and literally threw them behind a tent instead of putting them in the proper place. Athena couldn’t help but laugh. The older child came in front of her and put her hands out expectantly.

“Dance with me!”

She froze and went cold, looking at all of the others that were already casually pairing up. The dancing appeared more informal and she was instantly reminded of a scene from a movie where there were fancy dinner parties and balls upstairs, but downstairs is where the real fun was. She could only hope this was the same and there wouldn’t be as many judgmental eyes on her. “Alright, da’adahl. You will have to teach me the steps though.”
Leafy looked confused as Athena picked herself up and found her balance after sitting on the log for so long. “Steps? For dancing? We just dance, lethal’lan.” She looked to the others and noticed that as well. There was much more physical touching in their dances and everything appeared almost carefree. She twirled with the girl around the campfire, finding her own beat within the music and combining small movements from all of the dances she had learned plus things from her own world. Out of the corner of her eye she caught Solas trying to sneak away so she lashed out with her aura in a single string, wrapping around his ankle like an ethereal chain.

He looked down to his foot before turning and looking back at her. Although Leafy was laughing, she was giving him a cold, hard look that screamed: “Don’t you even dare.” Solas blushed in embarrassment with a small and guilty smirk. He nearly glided on the ground through the small crowd of dancing elves to her side, wrapping an arm around Athena’s back on her open side while looking to Leafy. “Can I cut in, lethal’lin?” He asked sweetly. There was a picture there that froze like a snapshot within her mind. Her and Solas in each other’s arms holding a child. She tried to not get tears in her eyes so instead she shut her eyes and waited on Leafy’s answer, a permanent smile now stuck to her face.

Could Elvhen Gods even have children? The thought had never occurred to her until the Keeper asked about her and how many children she had. In her former life, she hadn’t found the person she wanted to have kids with. Now... Ah. Another time with that then. Leafy scrunched up her face before patting Athena on the shoulder, cueing for their dance to end. The young girl looked up to Solas and met his gaze bravely. “Be nice to her. She’ll burn you if you don’t.”

Athena couldn’t help but laugh as Solas came in front of her, a playful yet wicked smile curving his lips. They assumed a more relaxed dance position and he spun her under one hand, bringing her close as they moved around the fire in time with the other couples. “What was dancing like in your world, Athena?” She let out a scoff and shook her head, gesturing to everyone else. “There were more elaborate forms but I did not know them. A lot of it had degraded into things that were just...” She was trying to find a more polite word to describe people grinding on one another in a dark lit room with fog and techno music. “Primal?” He arched a brow and she waved the thought away. “I’ll show you tonight.”

He gave her a grin and she realized how her words could have been received. With a small pinch on his shoulder she corrected herself. “In. The. Fade.” He broke into laughter and the sound brought her a swell of joy, taking a step closer to him during their dance. They continued until some of the couples began to break for bed. She found the Keeper and bid him good night, swerving through the tents until they found theirs at the edge of the camp. Fang was already on guard sleeping against a tree when they bent down and got into their sleeping place. There was only one large, wide bedroll and she looked over at Solas with a raised brow. He shrugged innocently, taking his shirt off in one smooth movement while leaving the necklace on.
She fought to not be a teenage girl and stare immediately at his bare chest so instead she did the same, fighting for a second to get the somewhat tight shirt off before throwing it to the side. “I suppose I have you to thank for commandeering some clothes for me?” He smirked, gently folding his shirt, and laying it on their pack before climbing under the bedroll.

“I tried to get what would fit. How are your feet?” He asked like a healer would. Her eyes instantly dropped down to her feet and she wiggled her toes. Only now was she noticing how they ached and how cold the ground was.

“Honestly I had forgotten until you said something. Did I really burn all of my clothes?” There was a wave of embarrassment manifested as a blush on her chest and neck. He nodded with a chuckle, patting on the bed next to him. Obediently she sat next to him, matching him in clothes by still wearing her pants and foot wraps. He put an arm around her while they were sitting up, looking to the front of the tent and closing it with a wave of his hand. The way he used magic was so fluid at times, it amazed her.

“You nearly depleted your mana stores. You’re lucky I was able to get a few drops of lyrium potion on your lips before you passed out. I tease and call you reckless, but you need to start watching out for yourself, Athena.” He turned to the side and met her gaze and she could see the small lines of worry deepen on the sides of his face. “Do you believe yourself to be so dispensable?”

She dropped her gaze to the ground, hands gripping onto the fabric of her pants before sighing and speaking plainly, honestly. “It’s... difficult not to be reckless when I know that the story- your lives would continue on fine without me. I have seen the end result of this and I am not a part of it. I guess a part of me is still waiting for the bottom on this to fall out and I’ll wake up in my bed at home like nothing happened.” She had been there for months but it still felt so unreal. Traveling happened in the blink of an eye in the game but here? It took a week just to travel to the Hinterlands, let alone other places. Time was speeding by so quickly and she was grasping for signs of reality, especially considering the fact that she had already bedded and fallen for the elven God.

Athena shook her head and went to continue but she looked to him and had to hide the gasp that wanted to come to her throat. There was a flash of pain across his face and she could feel his arm drop from her back to the ground behind them, supporting himself as he continued to sit up. He rubbed his temples with one hand and she could feel his aura flare against his body. She positioned her body to lean against him, reaching for him. “Solas... “ He let out a shaky sigh and looked to her, hardened sharp, gaze piercing her very being.

“Athena – you must know you have impacted the lives of the Inquisition in a way that cannot be
reversed. If you were to disappear, or worse, die in some reckless act!” His voice had an edge of anger on it and she remained still, silent. “Whatever world you know, whatever you think you know!” He turned towards her and positioned his body above hers, taking her face into his hands and tearing her gaze from the ground to his. Tears already began to form in her eyes at the hurt and worried expression on his face, her hands coming up to touch his. “You change everything.”

Even though it was expected he drew the breath out of her when he crushed his lips against her. She sighed against him, sitting up to feel his body on hers but he pushed them both on the ground, positioning himself between her legs and supporting her back with one of his hands. Tears flowed freely down her face now, her spirit slowly anchoring itself to him and his touch on her body. He broke the kiss, hands holding her head to his as if she were going to slip away into the Void. Their breaths rose and fell in heavy unison moments, his eyes shut in a wince of pain. She hadn’t meant what she said to be so heavy; it was just how she felt. Even though she had been here for months and witnessed key events in the Inquisition. . . it was still surreal that all of it was happening to her. She knew it as fiction after all.

She wet her lips to speak, hands gripping his forearms that were still rigid and holding her in place. Athena opened her mouth to apologize but he silenced her with a gentle brush of his lips against hers, shaking his head back and forth silently. When she opened her gaze to meet his he wiped the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs, laying small gestures of affection on her forehead and temples. “Never think yourself invaluable or replaceable again, ma’fen. Please. . . ” The tone of his voice brought a gentle nod from her, tears forming at the corners of her eyes before Solas sighed, his body visibly relaxing over her.

“Arlath ma, vhenan.”

He opened his eyes to her and from what she could tell it was like a physical weight had been lifted from his body. There was a ghost of a smile on his lips and there was nothing but care and adoration in the sharp blues of his eyes. Immediately the tears began to flow again and she covered her mouth in a gesture of shock but she was smiling underneath, finally throwing her arms around him and burying her face into his neck with a laugh. He returned the gesture, embracing her tightly with one arm while supporting the two of them with his other arm on the ground. She attacked him with small kisses on his neck and cheek, drawing a chuckle from him until she could pull herself away to look him in the eyes.

“I love you too, Solas. You have no idea. . . “

Solas brought her down to lay flat before lying next to her, supporting his head with one arm while using his free hand to trace down the bare skin on her arm and side. “Never before have I ever met someone who could draw my attention from the Fade. You are. . . unlike anyone I have ever met.”
Athena had to hold back a scoff of laughter, bringing his hand to her lips to kiss the inside of his palm. “To be fair, I am unlike anyone you have ever met. Unless you have a handful of woman from another world in your back pocket somewhere.”

He laughed, stroking her cheek and neck with the backs of his knuckles. “As entertaining as that may be. . . I do not.”

Nearly glowing with happiness Athena snapped her fingers and pointed towards him, scooting her body a little closer to his as the sound of their neighbors in the next tent reached her ears. She then cursed under her breath realizing they wouldn’t be able to celebrate their exchanges of love in person but there was plenty of time in the near future for that. “Speaking of the Fade, Harmony and Inspiration shared an interesting theory I thought you might like to hear.”

He hummed, arching a curious brow while his expression fell back to that of the scholar with soft traces of adoration at its edges. Athena continued, her hands playing with the necklace around his neck. “They think my magic and such might be different since I technically came from the Fade. My body was there first before I fell here. It is where I learned magic and I befriended spirits before actual people.”

He was obviously thinking it over, brows furrowing while brought his hand up to itch a spot on the side of his temple. “That would make sense. Ah – that could most certainly be it.” He smiled and looked to her. “People, including I, have made comments that when you cast magic, you just think it and it happens, correct?”

She nodded silently, resting her palm on top of his bare chest while controlling the ever-growing need to touch him further. Even if they were speaking academically, it was difficult to ignore the broad-shouldered half naked elven God sitting across from her on the bedroll who had just said he loved her. “Most mages design their spells to pull energy from the Veil and the Fade, taking whatever scraps they can hold onto to cast their magic. But if what the spirits say is true, you might not need to ask, the Fade and the Veil might just give it wordlessly without asking since it considers you kin. Perhaps that is why you also use the spirits’ blessings more effectively than others do.” Athena’s mouth formed into an ‘o’ shape, understanding clicking in on her features.

“Cole said we’re alike but I’m not like him.” The elf nodded, a sort of excitement coming into his voice.

“Exactly. You are not a spirit that found a physical form. You had a physical form in the Fade already but strengthened your spirit there. This clarifies a great many questions I had.” She arched a brow and playfully pushed at him.
“And none of these you deemed necessary to ask me?” He laughed and shook his head, scratching the back of his head before giving her an apologetic shrug.

“You had not studied magic before this, yes? I found you probably would not be able to answer technical questions of magic you are still discovering. Unless you have a horde of manuscripts in your back pocket on the foundations of magic and casting?” He teased back with a wolfish smirk. In response, she leaned forward and kissed him with a smile playing on her lips. He went to deepen the kiss between them when yet again she could hear murmuring coming from both sides of their tent from the people on the other side. She let out a frustrated growl, rolling her eyes while laying back flat on the bedroll. He chuckled and slid his arm underneath her neck, bringing himself closer to his side while whispering in her ear.

“Why don’t you show me this ‘primal’ dancing from your land you spoke of?”

Chapter End Notes

I'm trying to clarify things to be more possible instead of just "-poof- she is in Thedas make it work."

As always, thank you for all of the love.
They appeared in the Fade side by side and instantly a nervous blush passed over her chest and neck. He wanted to see dancing... from her world. Normally to even dance well enough to show in public Athena had to be two shots of tequila in and surrounded by good friends. He looked to her expectantly and she couldn’t help but give a shy shrug. “Hold on a second, I have to think of the scene I want to set.”

“And the music!” She heard Inspiration shout from somewhere in the Fade even though the spirit was nowhere to be found. Athena batted the statement away like it was a gnat flying around her face, closing her eyes and trying to think of a place where she could lose herself into dancing. There were the normal clubs with the cover bands she had been to that typically consisted of a bunch of people standing around and awkwardly bobbing their heads while sipping on an overpriced drink. But then there were the clubs where there was barely room to breathe and the music was so loud you couldn’t hear your inner voice shouting its cries of shame.

The latter would do.

She took a deep breath in and pushed her hands away from her head, summoning the scene. Instantly the lights of the fade went out and they were brought into the entryway of a club she had been to in Vegas. There were two small windows in the doors leading to the club and she could see the flashing lights and the mass of people in front of a stage where there were scantily clad dancers entertaining the crowds and pumping them up with their own dances. Athena instantly felt a small twinge of nostalgia and missed her home but she pushed it aside, looking down at her Thedas garb. This would not do for the scene she created so with a snap of her fingers she changed her outfit.

Instead of the Dalish outfit she had been wearing, a short black dress appeared with a teasing neckline and an open back. She wore heels that were comfortable yet tall and her hair was styled with more volume than she could achieve in Thedas. She smiled and instantly felt a little buzzed just from the knowing that she was about to dance. Then she looked up at Solas, gesturing to his ‘unwashed hobo apostate’ attire with a smile. “May I?” Athena asked nervously. He looked to her and then put his hands up in surrender.

With a wave of her hand she summoned up a modern outfit for him that took her breath away. Instead of his usual wear he was wearing a slim-fitted dark navy suit with a white collared shirt underneath and a black tie. While he was looking over the clothing she stepped forward and tightened his tie, her hands smoothing out the fabric of his shirt while she whistled a low tone. “Looking sharp, vhenan.” The word rolled effortlessly off of her lips and there was a smile on her face as she said it. He looked completely down his body with an amused expression.
“This is the fashion of your world?”

Athena couldn’t stop looking at him, eyes practically glued how his form fit in the outfit. “Absolutely. This- “ She gestured from his top to his bottom where she had a pair of black dress shoes on him. “-is considered formal wear in my world.”

“And you need formal wear to do this ‘primal’ dance you were speaking of?” There was a hint of play in his voice and she smiled back at him, pushing open the doors while answering.

“I won’t lie, most of it was for my benefit. I wanted to see how you would look in it and I am quite happy with my choice. Now . . . watch first. This is how I used to get rid of my stress after a rough patch of weeks from work. Usually there was some inebriation involved but we will have to improvise.” He nodded silently and she completely pushed the double doors open, smiling at the familiar smell of sweat and alcohol that permeated the air. There was something freeing about this kind of place. Most of the time people did not judge you for your dancing and the clubs her and her friends chose were placed where they were not going to be creeped on by random strangers. It was a safe place where she could just truly dance.

_Na na na come on._

The lyrics echoed through the room in a synthesized boom, a glowing smile coming to her lips. Already her body was falling victim to the music, hands running through her hair as she slid her tongue over her red painted lips. She trailed her hands down her body, slowly swaying her hips to the music while swerving through the crowd. Most of the faces were blurred from past memories but she tried to solidify them, pulling on her strength to make the environment as real as it could be within the Fade. She wasn’t sure how close Solas was following her or if he was at all so she just hid within the crowd, somehow knowing in the back of her mind that he was watching her regardless.

She stopped in a group that was supposed to be her friends, closing her eyes and letting her body sway and pop with the beats. The song itself was sexual enough which made it even easier to drop her body down and slide up with a roll of her hips. One of the ethereal female bodies in front of her grabbed onto her hips, coming between her legs and locking her body with Athena’s. There was a playful smile on her lips as the two danced in rhythm with the bass, eyes locked as their hips moved against one another. She threw her head back with a smile, shrugging her shoulders and moving her hands through her hair with a flip.

_I may be bad but I’m perfectly good at it. Sex in the air I don’t care I like the smell of it._
There was a pressing of a body at her back and she knew from the lack of cold it wasn’t Solas. She quickly glanced around to find him but didn’t see him anywhere. There was a tingling sensation on her skin so she knew he was close. Knowing the ever-perceptive elf, he was probably in the corner of the stage watching from an elevated position, trying to take in all of the details of the thing she called dancing in her world. She knew there was more to offer like swing dancing and jazz but she had never done it herself so it would be difficult to show him. The song continued with her dancing between two of her old friends from work at home. There was a flash of a frown on her face as she moved with them, hands gripping onto the memories that were now left behind. It was hard not to think... what were they doing now? How much time had passed? Did they still remember her?

The song changed triggered her to snap out of her self-pitying haze, brows arching as the crowd around her cheered at the new bass beat. Her body adjusted to it, placing her hands on the hips of the person in front of her while she looked around. There was only a blur of bodies but then her gaze fell on him and her breath caught in her throat. He was sitting on one of the long couches on the side and the room went cold. Even though there were ‘people’ at his sides he looked like he was the only person on the piece of furniture and in the room. His stark ivory skin contrasted from the black of the couch fabric and she couldn’t help but feel drawn to him.

I’ve been around the world don’t speak the language.
All I really understand is when you talk dirty to me.

There was a devilish smirk on his lips as their gazes met. He leaned back with legs partially open and his arms resting in his lap and in that moment, she felt like she got a glimpse of how he would sit on a throne. The confidence, the wolfish smirk, the absolute look of hunger in his eyes. The Dread Wolf nearly broke through his facade as the background observer. Creators she loved both sides of him. With the bass of the music fueling her movements she slid in between the dancers with her gaze never breaking from his. He chuckled and shook his head at her while she approached, pressing his hands against the couch on the sides of his thighs.

“I thought the balls I have seen in the Fade had immeasurable amounts of intrigue and sex but I was mistaken. You were correct in your word choice of primal.”

Athena nodded wordlessly, leaning onto one hip while extending a hand towards him. “Will you not join me?”

He grabbed her hand, pulling it towards him so he could place a breathy, warm kiss against the inside of her palm. Instantly her hairs stood on end and she failed to fight the shudder than ran down her spine. “I think I get the point. Is this how you were before you came to Thedas?” His eyes flicked up to hers and she swallowed down a lump of nerves while her abdomen tightened into a knot. He pulled on her hand and brought her forward to where she was standing between his
legs while he trailed small kisses around her hand and wrist.

“Like I said...there was alcohol required to get me like this. I – I cannot concentrate with you doing that.” She whispered in a heated breath, unable to fight as he pulled her closer to where she was straddling his lap. He kissed up her arm and chuckled against her skin, glancing up to her.

“That does not my answer question. What were you like before the Rift?” She arched a brow at the familiar conversation before letting out a hiss of restrain as he flicked his tongue against the soft skin of the inside of her wrist. He trailed up her arm until he reached her jawline, using a hand to capture her chin while he looked up to her gaze.

“Has it affected you, do you think?” He kissed the side of her neck, using his free hand to hold her in place on her thigh while pushing her dress up. She whimpered, leaning down to try and catch his lips but found she was firmly being held by his hand on her chin. “Has it changed you in any way?” His words were hot against her skin lighting her afire from the inside. His magic was stronger here, less restrained than in the waking world. It was pulling at her, applying pressure along her backside like it were an extension of his body. She let out a sigh through clenched teeth, gripping her hands on top of his shoulders to keep herself anchored without growing dizzy.

“Your mind, your morals, your spirit?” Each question was separated by a lingering kiss on her skin and the magic pouring from his body left each spot tingling, wanting more. When she was left speechless by his touch, he pulled back and released her chin, setting his hands on her hips while waiting for an answer. She released a feral growl of frustration from her lips, rolling her eyes open to meet his gaze. He smiled, pressing his thumbs into the curves of her hips. “Do you know your eyes change when you do that?”

“Do what?” Athena asked, blinking a few times before arching a brow at him.

“Pull on your pack. It is like you shift only part of the way. You are unlike anything I could have ever expected.”

She hummed in amusement, bringing her hands to the side of his face. “I think that answers your questions then. And because I know you are more stubborn than I am.” She removed her hands into an ‘I surrender’ position while answering quickly and almost pointedly. “Yes, I have definitely changed, in all of the ways you just said. My morals have been broadened, my spirit has been strengthened, and my mind is now capable of things I only dreamed about. To top it all off my body is finally how I’ve wanted it to be after years of trying every stupid fucking training, thank you very much.”
He chuckled and she was the one to put a finger to his lips this time. “Now kindly, shut up, vhenan.” There was a teasing gleam to her eye as she cradled his face in her hands and captured his lips with hers, drawing a surprised and satisfied sound from his mouth. In turn his grip tightened on her hips, pushing his hands and the ends of her dress up around the curve of her backside. Immediately her hands fell to the latch on his belt, thankfully remembering how clothes worked in her world while breaking from his mouth to whisper breathily into his ear: “Lasa ar’an alas’nira aron fen’en”. Even through their lessons she didn’t understand what the phrase meant quite yet but the words combined with her taking his earlobe into her mouth brought a strangled moan from his lips. He moved his own hands from her skin to quickly finish the work on his belt, opening his pants and sliding them down his hips to where she could feel his bare desire against hers underneath the dress.

Solas used his hands on her hips and she put hers back on his shoulders to balance herself, sliding down on top of him in rhythm with the song still blaring over the speakers in the scene behind them. The faces of the people were beginning to blend since her only focus was the man underneath her, his magic nearly mixing with her blood or whatever pumped in her veins while she was in the Fade. Her heart threatened to tear from her chest with its rapid pulse, her body already beginning to tighten and flex as a response to his presence inside of her. Her magic crashed into his without warning, a scalding heat erupting from her skin with threats to drown them both. Their wills battled one another while she rode him, rolling her hips down as he guided her motions with his grip on her thighs.

Each small motion brought a soft cry from her throat, muffled either by her lips on his neck or his mouth on hers. As his magic attempted to unravel her from the inside she pushed hers through to burn him, melt all of the cold that felt like he was trying to freeze her. They were battling a clash of minds and flesh, his nails digging into the curve of her thighs to bring her down harder against him. She took his mouth hungrily, quickly ripping the tie loose and opening the buttons of his shirt so she could feel his bare chest underneath her hands. He brought her to her peak by surprise, a biting and electric wave of his magic and body curling up within her body and pushing past the subconscious walls she had put up in their battle of stubbornness and minds.

Athena pressed her forehead to his, not holding back her mewls and cries as he continued to move within her, searching for his own release as her body was not fully recovered from her own. Everything within her was hypersensitive, her hands fumbling before returning to clutch his shoulders for purchase, whispering nearly incoherent pleas against his crown. He tilted his head up and stole her words from her, bringing a hand from her hips to the back of her neck to hold her against him in a kiss as he reached his peak. It was like something clicked within him and suddenly her entire body was filled with his presence, eyes wide and breath snatched from her lungs as her head fell to his shoulder. He leaned his own head down and gently bit her shoulder to stifle his own cries. In between the breaths of their own recoveries he began to speak a trail of elvish and she weakly hit a hand against his chest, rubbing her forehead on her shoulder in a gesture before speaking.

“I’m not. . .that good. . .at elvish. . .yet.” He smiled, kissing the spot where he had just gently bit before lifting her up from his lap. He looked down at the zipper with an arched brow and she had
to laugh. It took a second for her shaky hands to concentrate but she helped to restrain him within the modern clothes before sitting up and pulling the extra strands of hair from her face. Yet again there were traces of her dream-like lipstick on his neck and white-collared shirt but there was something about the added accessory to his outfit that brought a swell of pride within her. Even if they were the only ones in the dreamed area, they were marks that he was hers and the mark on her shoulder proved that she was his.

“What was that?” She asked, gesturing to her chest and stomach in an attempt to describe the feeling of his magic pushing through what felt like every organ and wall within her body and soul. He sheepishly chuckled while resting his hands on her hips, thumbs gently stroking over the fabric of her dress.

“Apologies – “ She instantly interrupted.

“Don’t apologize for that.” He smiled, nodding before continuing.

“Things are different in the Fade for – ah- moments like this. Stronger mainly, especially for dreamers like us.” Like us. She nearly sighed like a swooning school girl when he said it but she had to tease him.

“You have many moments like this in the Fade, vhenan?” He scoffed, jokingly moving to push her off of his lap with a roll of his eyes. She gripped onto his shirt, pulling herself in to kiss the tip of his nose.

“I tease. But you better watch out, you’re going to get asked that question by somebody other than me one of these days.”

He blanched, rubbing a hand across the top of his smooth head before answering with a reluctant tone. “From. Who?”

Athena shook her head with a beaming smile, her magic slowly returning to a normal burn within the inside of her core. “Blackwall. We have plenty of time to think of a witty comeback that will leave him speechless!”
Chapter End Notes

This was one of those chapters I was tempted to just scrap altogether and rewrite a million times.

Thanks for the continued support as always.

Songs for Dancing:
S&M - Rihanna
Talk Dirty - Jason Derulo
The sun had barely begun to rise when Athena was ripped from the Fade by a cry. It sounded young, panicked and she jerked from sleep to sit up in bed. Fang was whining outside of the tent, pressing on the opening with his nose while calling out to her. Trouble. He whispered into her mind and without delay she grabbed her shirt and was out of the tent flap, leaving Solas who was just rousing from his sleep at her movements. The clan was already risen and dressed, standing in a circle as she pulled her shirt down over her head and tried to get a peek at what was in the center of their attention. They were all speaking in Elvish and she could barely pick up bits of the conversation. Dreams. Mage. Those were the ones most repeated and the tone was dark. She quickly weaved through the crowd to hear an excited greeting at the center of the circle.

“Fen’Elgara! Look!”

Leafy stood in the middle of the circle, sparks flying in between her fingers. Around here was a circle of scorch marks where her magic had already touched and instantly Athena’s eyes widened. Keeper Hawen was behind the young girl with his staff drawn, keeping a barrier around the girl to contain her magic. Athena went to step forward through the barrier but the Keeper strengthened it, the magic pushing her back a step.

“Careful, lethal’lin. Lev’adin began to have the dreams last night and her gift has begun to blossom. It is time she must prepare for – “

She winced, pushing herself on the edge of the barrier while keeping her voice controlled and low even though she wanted to bite back at him. “I am aware of your customs, Keeper. I noted your number of mages the other night when you assisted me. Let me speak with her, please. Does she know?”

Leafy’s face fell into one of neutrality, an almost programmed response falling from her lips. “To protect the clan I must leave. If I stay the clan may be vulnerable to possession.” There was a hiss of sound behind the crowd and she could only guess that her sleeping companion had joined in on the conversation. Athena looked to the Keeper with a warning glance, pushing through the barrier until she was crouched on her knees in front of the girl. Electricity sparked all around her, biting out and pinching different areas of her skin in small attacks. With a quick glance, she could see small burn marks flaring up wherever the young elf’s magic touched.

“Da’adahl. Can you feel what you’re doing, my little tree?”
The girl opened her palms in front of her, flexing her fingers with a shake of her head. “Not really. I just feel tingly all over. Oh! I had the strangest dreams last night.”

Athena was fighting tears at the situation, keeping a smile on her face and maintaining the young girl’s gaze. “You can tell me about them later. What I need you to do is listen to me, alright? That tingle you feel? Where it feels like the air is dancing on your skin? That is your magic. I need you to bring it in here – “ She poked the center of the young girls’ chest. “Right here. Can you try and do that for me?”

The novice mage closed her eyes, clenching her hands into fists. Whatever she tried to do fueled the magic more, a stray bolt of power barely missing her cheek and hitting the wall of Hawen’s barrier. “Not that, my girl. Listen to my voice, focus on it. Take a deep breath in and out. Feel the air as it enters your body and how it makes you feel.”

She looked around and saw that the energy was beginning to decrease with the little girl’s focus, hope finally lighting up Athena’s features as she took a crouched step closer to her. Her brother Tad’alin was watching with a tear-stained gaze past the barrier. He knew. Soon his sister would be gone, nearly banished from the tribe just for getting the gift of magic. The area of static around the girl dissipated with each breath and once it was contained she threw her arms around Leafy, whispering praises into her ear before lifting her off the ground in a spinning hug.

“Where do you plan to go, my dear? You’re off on some big adventure now!” Since Leafy’s gaze was facing aware from her she took the chance to meet the Keeper’s eyes, trying to show her disapproval in the quickest of glances before looking to the girl’s brother. “I’m assuming you are packed since we just moved?”

“Yes, serah!”

“No, serah here. You know my name is Athena. Go, grab your things. We’ll be leaving after breakfast.” She put the girl on the ground and instantly her face lit up, eyes widening in realization.

“I get to come with you?!” Her excitement was uncontainable and Athena thought she saw the flicker of a charge coming from her aura. She put her hands on her shoulder and pushed some of her own energy around the girl to contain it and quell the new magic.

“Is that against your custom?” She looked to both her brother and the Keeper and they both shook their heads solemnly. She turned Leafy towards her own tent and patted her on the back, standing
up tall with a smile on your face. “Go get your things then rush back to me. We’ll grab breakfast then head on the road.” The girl nodded with enthusiasm before running off, excited and high-pitched elvish phrases fading in volume as she ran away from the group. The clan had begun to disperse through their morning duties but Keeper Hawen remained, walking towards her. Tad’alin walked forward first and threw his arms around the unexpected woman. She froze, glancing to the Keeper with an arched brow before patting his back. Tad’alin brought her in tight and murmured low into Athena’s ear:

“Please watch over my sister. She is all I have. You said you would take care of Loranil. . . will you watch her too? The two were friends. She might find solace in his company.”

He took a step back to clasp arms with her in a common elvish gesture and she nodded, squeezing his hand with a hardened gaze. “You have my word, Tad’alin. I will do my best to keep her safe. You have placed so much trust in me and given me so much of your hospitality. I do not know how to repay your kindness.” Apparently Harmony’s training had paid off because she was fighting the urge to get in the Keeper’s face and chastise him on old practices that should be disbanded. There were stories from her land about young children at the age of ten going off on adventures around the world with magical creatures. This? This was a time of war and Leafy couldn’t be older than eleven. She was too young to leave the clan alone to face the world and the Fade at the same time.

Athena swallowed down a lump of nerves before turning to the Keeper. Solas was now at her back, wordless, but she could feel the anger coming from him in small subtle twinges of his aura against hers. Perhaps it was because they had become intimate, but she felt like she could read him better than she could before. Either that or he was opening himself up to her, trusting her to read his true emotions. The Keeper put his staff on his back before making an open armed gesture. “There is no debt. You have saved us and provided opportunity through trade and this new location. Please, you are welcome to visit at any time, Fen’Elgara.” There was a playful smile on the old elf’s face and she couldn’t help but smirk back at him, nodding her head while turning towards their tent with Solas at her side.

She waited until she was a few steps out of earshot before letting out a frustrated groan through clenched teeth, turning and kicking the closest tree and leaning her head against it. Solas came to her side, leaning against the tree on his side while crossing his arms over his chest. “I see the Dalish continue to meet my expectations.” There was a dark tone in his voice while he looked to the camp and she sighed, her body relaxing while she continued to hold herself up with her forehead on the tree alone.

“There are some things worth preserving, Solas, but that is not an argument I want to get into with you right now.” She glanced over to him and he nodded in silent agreement but she thought she felt him prickle in agitation at her words. He already had their pack on his back but he looked to her with a chuckle, shaking his head back and forth. Athena arched a brow, turning towards him and leaning against the tree to face him. He was still almost laughing, turning his gaze from her. She pushed against his shoulder, “What? What are you laughing for?”
“You obviously were in a hurry to get dressed this morning.” He then gestured to her shirt and her eyes slowly fell down to where she saw the Dalish top on backwards. The high back obviously fit incorrectly as well as the mid-cut front that was now on her back. She rolled her eyes and pulled it over her head, not caring that they were on the edge of the encampment. It had always been a rule of her that if it covered the same amount of skin as a swimsuit there was nothing to fret over. The black bandings held tight as she corrected it and pulled it snugly over her body, adjusting the fit before gesturing to Solas to make sure it was to his liking.

He nodded, reaching forward and pulling her to his front before kissing the top of her head. “How many new members did you single handedly recruit in this venture?” She laughed and looked up to him with a playful gaze, shrugging before taking a step back.

“Oh you know, probably over 2 dozen if they didn’t pick up anymore on the way. Plus this amazing girl right here!” Her voice changed to a teasing pitch as Leafy came into view with her own small pack. The girl did not have a staff yet which was appropriate since Athena did not carry hers. Keeper Hawen and Tad’alin were at her back. Her rogue of a brother had his arms crossed, meeting her eyes in understanding before nodding. The Keeper muttered an elvish farewell, waving his hand before turning back towards the encampment. Athena looked down to Leafy, opening her hand to have the young girl hold it. Instead, she shook her head, gesturing to Fang, who was waiting patiently at the side of the camp.

“Can I ride a wolf?”

Athena looked to the pack and shook her head. They were going to return to the bulk of the Plains; she could feel it in their body posture and the thoughts buzzing through their head. A small group of them were going to stay to protect the elves but Fang was not one of them. The wolf came over and pressed his nose against her palm, making a soft noise of farewell before turning and joining the pack. Lev’adin looked up with a cheeky smile, arms crossed over her chest.

“I guess there is only one wolf left.”

She didn’t miss a beat, pointing her thumb towards Solas with just as cheeky of a grin. “I don’t think hahren has the back for it.” She then playfully hit her palm against her forehead in mock realization, looking to Solas who had noticeably twitched in some reaction of her slight jab and comment of being a wolf. He hid it well with a devilish smirk before shaking his head. She turned towards Leafy and continued. “Oh! Wait! You must mean me. You can for a little bit but once my back hurts you’re walking, okay?”

With a deep breath through her nose she shifted into large form of the white wolf, gesturing with
her nose onto her back for the girl to climb onto. It was difficult with her first getting on but thankfully her elven frame was light and they were able to trot in a smooth pattern with Solas. He and Lev’adin talked back and forth for the first part of the trip up the mountain. He asked her if she knew different old stories from Arlathan and they exchanged children stories. At one point Athena was numb to the conversation, her eyes peeled on the path while listening for intruders or bandits on the side.

“I can’t wait to tell Loranil about Fen’Elgara!” She then kicked against Athena’s ribs. The wolf instantly made a noise of curiosity, tilting her head to look back at her passenger. Leafy only nodded with a grin, patting her hands against the top of her thighs. “The wolf lit up the sky, using its flames to scare away the shem invaders!” There was already a tone of storytelling that Athena could tell she was going to dread. She overdramatically rolled her eyes, bumping her off of her back before shifting back into her normal form. Instantly she twisted and cracked her back. The release of tension brought a hiss from her lips, eye twitching in a wince. Solas looked over to her with a small nod of acknowledgement, smirking at the young girl between them that was mourning her bruised backside from being unsaddled.

“Don’t go telling stories like that, you little liar. You’re going to confuse the others.” Athena chided her, scrunching her face up in response to the girl sticking her tongue out.

“But its true! That’s what the other kids were saying too. It was so amazing, Athena!” Solas let out a sigh, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Now I see how Varric’s books became so popular.” The groan of frustration from his lips brought a laugh out of hers. She continued to twist her body and stretch out her back, getting small pops up through her chest and neck. Once it was over she looked into the sky and saw that it was nearly noon. Traveling by foot would take probably another day if they were to ascend the mountain. Luckily with Skyhold becoming the keep of the Inquisition it made several paths up and down the mountain for merchants and nobles, but the elevation increase itself was taxing. But with the work of three mages.

Athena nudged Solas with a wicked smirk on her lips, gesturing to Leafy behind them. “Think we can make it by nightfall with a little boost?”

He looked to the girl, contemplating, and obviously doing some sort of calculation in his head with their shared magic. “If you carry her it will exhaust you faster but you can pull on my reserves if you need it.”

She clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth, spinning on the ball of a foot while keeping his gaze. “Such a gentleman. Darling!” Leafy looked up from her position in the back of the group, her hands gripping onto the straps of her pack. Athena instantly picked her up and turned her to
where she could sit on her shoulders like she was doing the day before. She stabilized the girl by holding her legs against her chest, looking up towards her with a smile. “We’re going to use a bit of magic to get to Skyhold quicker. It will feel funny at first and it might tingle, but just remember those deep breaths I told you about, okay?”

The girl silently nodded, touching her hair the tight braids on the side of her head that kept her hair out of her face. Solas and Athena looked to one another and with a small smirk they held hands. With the combined touch and pull of their respective auras they were off like bullets through the wind. The young mage on her shoulders cried out in surprise but they moved like blurs through the paths. They made sure to stay out of view of merchant carts and scouts on their way home from their shifts. Athena’s aura was exhausted by the time they hit the edge of the bridge, her hands grasping onto the stone tower to keep her up as her breath rose and fell in pants.

Lev’adin slid off of her shoulders, eyes wide in awe as she looked at Skyhold for the first time. Solas had straightened his posture, clasping his hands behind his back and she just knew he would be more sheltered since they had returned home. The frequent touching, the generous smirks and teases... they were just for her when they were alone. In the Inquisition, he was still the advisor of the magical and the Fade and she was the Sorciere. They had their parts to play during the day and their duties to attend to. Once she caught her breath she extended her hand to her new friend, leading her over the bridge while Solas gestured to the castle.

“Da’len, Welcome to Skyhold.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the love! <3
The moment the trio passed through the gates of the castle duty bombarded them. The Spymaster stepped from the shadows with a glimmer of a mischievous look on her face. Athena pretended to not notice her, squeezing Leafy’s hand and keeping her close to her side. The elven child was completely in shock by everything she was seeing. There were healers’ tents on the left and the surgeon was tending to each of them with great care and dedication. There were groups of people looking at them with curious gazes and she was wondering why until Dorian came into view with a snarky grin.

“Now you two cut right to the chase didn’t you. How long is the gestational age for elves?”

Oh. Right.

Slowly her gaze dropped the girl beside her and Solas rolled his eyes instantly. “Hello, Dorian.” He said through nearly clenched teeth and she chuckled, keeping her eyes on the now soft-spoken girl who was clinging to her side. She arched a brow, dropping down to a crouching position while nudging her.

“Hey, Leafy, you okay?”

With wide eyes the girl nodded, looking up to Dorian silently. “Lev’adin, this is my best friend, Dorian.”

“Best friend? I’m touched. Nice to meet you, darling.” He wiggled his fingers at the little girl and she further tucked herself into Athena’s side, whispering out a soft “hi” that made her heart melt. She stood and extended an arm to bring Dorian into a sideway hug. He kissed the top of her head with a smile.

“We can catch up when you have a chance. You’re quite popular now in a certain community.”

She looked to him with a curious expression before clicking her tongue against the back of her teeth in acknowledgement. Solas shot a glance over his shoulder towards her, angling to walk back towards the safety and comfort of his rotunda. Before he left he nodded towards her with a ghost of a smirk, shooting a quick glare towards Dorian back before walking away. She knew she would see
him later but there was a small part of her that was saddened by how quickly they were wrapped up within their own duties. Leafy continued to hold onto her hand, obviously frightened by the many shems swirling up around them. Athena rested her arm around Leafy's back to put her hand on her shoulder, rolling her eyes when she heard Lelianna clearing her throat behind them.

“A word, Lady Athena? I believe you and I have much to discuss. Alone preferably.” The red-head glanced down to the girl and instantly Athena hardened in her posture, her grip tightening around Leafy on her side.

“What we can discuss can be in front of her. I have yet to bring her to Mother Giselle and this is all a bit much for her. Right?” She looked with a soft gaze to her friend who nodded, eyes wide staring at Leliana. The Spy-Master nodded and they turned and walked up the stairs towards Athena’s tower.

“We’ve received many letters since you have left Halamshiral. Many of them are praise. The Rivainese nobles that were in attendance were particularly pleased with you and Dorian’s dancing. They considered it an homage to their culture and have sent – “ Athena opened the door, letting out a groan as she saw that there boxes upon boxes stacked in between her bed, the walls, and the wardrobe. “Gifts. You will find more in the upstairs space as well. Can you tell me what happened with Gaspard’s troops? Solas had sent us word after it happened.”

She couldn’t hide the blush at the sound of her lover’s name and she knew the other woman delighted in things like that. “There are rumors of a large flaming wolf being seen in the Plains. I am assuming that was you?” Athena nodded wordlessly, setting Leafy on the bed while feeling a pull on her mind. Kain burst through the door and nearly knocked down Leliana in the process, jumping on the bed and sniff-inspecting the newest arrival. Leafy instantly softened, her hands reaching out and wrapping around the wolf’s neck while nervous giggles fell from her throat.

“Nobody was harmed. I simply gave them a demonstration of what I was capable of. Any promises made were made under my name, not the Inquisition’s. I tried to be very clear of that.”

“Good. Maker help us if we’re split in two wars.” Cullen’s voice cut through the conversation and she chuckled, turning on her heel and spinning towards the door to see the two members of the Inner Council leaning in it. The soldier shrugged and gestured with a nod of his head towards the wolf. “He nearly dragged me up here. I think he could smell you.”

Athena tapped her temple with a smile. “Hear me is more like it.”

Both Leliana and Cullen’s eyes widened. The red-head did not hesitate to muse with an almost
excited inflection of her tone. “You can communicate with them silently? That is spectacular. And useful.” Cullen was obviously ruminating in his Templar thoughts, silent with a clenched jawline.

“It is very useful to know where the clan was located since I am connected with the pack in the Plains. Kain and I have the strongest bond. He was my first, and the best.” She glanced over to her companion with a wink. He gave a high-pitched bark in response before continuing his playful assault of the ten-year-old girl.

Cullen let out a sigh of defeat, shrugging and relaxing his hands at his sides. “Can you just explain it from the top? Perhaps I am familiar with the soldiers you came across.” Athena nodded and began to go through the tale step by step, leaving out the obvious intimate portions between her and Solas. While she was doing this, she climbed to her wardrobe and pulled out a tank-top looking shirt, silently thankful that the seamstress had come through on some of her requests. During her day to day life back home, jeans and a tank top were a must. It was basic and flexible. For now? The tank top and a pair of black pants to the knee would do. When she was changing, Cullen blushed and looked out the door but Leliana paid no mind.

Being in different sports activates and having a sibling made Athena numb to being partially naked around strangers. When Cullen was obviously embarrassed she paused her story to scoff and roll her eyes, pulling the top over and nudging him with a small pulse of magic when she was “decent”. She kept on the foot wrappings and tightened them to fit the style that Lev’adin was wearing. After walking in them for two days they were feeling more comfortable and it allowed her to pull on some of the natural magic around her when she casted. Internally, it made her feel like an earth bender but that was something that nobody would understand. Once she arrived to the description of the General they faced Cullen nodded, humming in realization of who it was.

“General Cristophe. He is one of Gaspard’s higher ranking men. I’m surprised he was the one at the front of the force. I’m glad he was able to see reason and not attack.” He looked with a small amount of hope in his gaze before Athena shook her head, pointing a finger at him playfully.

“You didn’t let me finish, Commander. He did launch an attack. But I was able to persuade them otherwise with a small show of force.” He let out a sigh with a shrug.

“Nothing too persuasive I trust?” This brought a wicked smile to her lips and Leliana smirked with as much emotion as her mask allowed.

“It was effective. The clan now resides at the bottom of the mountain and our trade route persists. Where are the recruits from Halamshiral? Have they been given proper accommodations?” Leliana nodded, gesturing out towards the direction of the gardens. She explained how there were extra rooms near where the orphans were staying and it made some of them feel more comfortable to be near such a peaceful place. They had been assigned tasks and jobs based on interest and skill set.
Cullen remarked that many of them were interested in fighting.

He smiled before looking to Athena. “They say they were inspired by your fighting in the courtyard. My recruit Loranil has a terrible habit of beguiling people with stories in the tavern.” Leafy perked up from the back at her kinsman’s name, hope lighting up her features.

“Can we see him? I want to tell him everything that has happened, Fen’Elgara!”

Athena winced at the nickname, shooting a playful glare at the girl. “You two are going to get me in trouble, I swear it. Yes, we will see him once we’re finished. Which – ” She looked back to the two Council members with an arched brow. “Are we finished here? I assume there will be a proper War Table meeting later with the Inquisitor present?” They nodded and left together, Leliana lingering for a moment with a playful smirk on her face Athena had seen used for gossip.

“You and Solas seem closer than when you left.” How can she tell we haven’t even so much as hugged?! She was silently screaming inside her mind, clearing her throat with a gentle smile.

“How observant of you, Lady Leliana. It is good to know you are the Keeper of Secrets here. Actually, since he left I do have a favor to ask of you that might interest you.”

Leliana nodded and Athena took a step closer to her, trying to think of how to best phrase things while keeping her voice low and out of the reach of the playing pair behind them.

“I do now know if she is aware of it yet but there is a contract against Josephine’s family located in the House of Repose. If we do not act soon one of her messengers will be murdered and there will be an attack on her life within the walls of Skyhold. If we destroy the contract before anything happens, I believe we can save more lives than we might lose during the extraction and destruction of the contract in the House of Repose.” Leliana took all of the information in and then nodded with a genuine smile.

“I see you are finally using all of that knowledge you have. It is well appreciated and I’m sure this will benefit our Josie immensely. Thank you. I will leave you to whatever you have to catch up on.” She turned to leave and then paused with a hum. “Oh! There is another gift for you in the main hall. We couldn’t fit it anywhere else.”

The door shut behind her, leaving Athena in the room with her curiosity starved. Leafy had begun to snooze on Kain’s side which gave her the opportunity to go through some of the boxes that were
left by the nobles. Each had small notes of appreciation on them and she found many marriage proposals in the mix of cards. Those were placed in a separate pile on her bed. The Rivainese nobles had sent something that matched the tone of her dance: Underclothes. Formal underclothes. The silk chest wrappings came in mostly colors of red and black but there was an emerald green in the mix that caught her eye. All came with pairs of matching underwear and she was shocked to find something that resembled a thong in the mix.

There were wines, cheeses, and chocolate piling up and she moved those downstairs to be enjoyed with a bath later in the evening. It took around an hour but eventually everything was put away and there was a large stack of crates on the wall outside of her door facing the battlements. Hopefully the empty things could be re-purposed but she was getting the urge to burn them just from the memories and words that came in some of the letters. Athena bent down and picked up the young girl, being very careful not to rouse her too loudly and using her strength to lean the girl towards her chest so she wouldn't fall. “Come on, little tree. Let’s go find Mother Giselle and Tobi.”

Leafy yawned, rubbing her eyes while still trying to sleep. “Who is that?”

“Mother Giselle is a Chantry Sister who takes care of some of the children. Tobi is another boy, close to you in age. Falon’Din took his parents too.” Leafy nodded in acknowledgement of her words before falling asleep against her chest. Athena bent down and placed a kiss on her head while walking across the ground, giving small waves to people who called to her. Kain stayed at her side, constantly giving her small messages of Missed you. Kin. Home. His breath mysteriously smelled of the morning’s breakfast meat and she couldn’t begin to guess which Inquisition Commander had snuck it to him underneath the table.

When Athena came into the garden she caught sight of Mother Giselle and Grand Enchantress Fiona as well. Perfect. She woke Leafy up and placed her on the ground, walking her over to the two women. “Ladies! A moment, if you will.” They both looked up to her from their conversation before their eyes dropped to the girl. Mother Giselle smiled, her smooth accented voice flowing smoothly with curiosity.

“A-ha. Who have you brought to me today?” She crouched down and extended a hand towards Leafy who gently placed hers within the Chantry sister. 

“A-ha. Who have you brought to me today?” She crouched down and extended a hand towards Leafy who gently placed hers within the Chantry sisters.

“Lev’adin. . . Fen’Elgara brought me from the clan!” Fiona arched a brow, recognizing the title before looking to her. Athena sighed and gestured helplessly, looking to the Grand Enchantress first.

“Lev’adin began to show certain gifts at a young age. Due to the clan’s practices. . I brought her with me. Since we allied with the ages I figured this would be a safe place for her to learn magic, especially under your tutelage if you were willing, Enchanter Fiona. Of course I will tutor her as
well to give her a broad range of teaching but since I will be called away frequently with the
Inquisitor I wanted to give her something stable.”

The elven mage made a face of contemplating before smiling, looking down to the young girl. “I
think we can manage that in the morning. Would you like to learn magic, my dear?” There was an
obvious matronly tone coming from the mage and Athena was saddened that she was never able to
truly raise her own child, King Alistair. Leafy looked to Fiona with more happiness, finding
comfort in her own kin with a smile. The girl nodded to Fiona’s question and turned to leave with
the two women. Athena could feel her eyes tearing up as she did. Even though they had only been
together for a few days she felt ultimately responsible for the girl. She had promised the clan she
would keep her safe. Not just, Leafy, but all of them.

The girl was the symbol of that promise. She was yanked from her thoughts by a small collision
around her thighs and stomach and she realized Leafy had hugged her, burying her face against her
clothes with a smile. “Thank you, Fen’Elgara. I will see you again, right?” Athena fell to her knees
and hugged her tightly, smiling into her neck.

“Of course, darling. You and I are family now.”

Leafy gave her a final hug. “Fen’mae!” Athena choked back a happy sob, hiding her face from the
girl as she ran off with Mother Giselle and Fiona. Before she left the garden, she felt a tug on her
pants leg and she almost wanted to snap at the young girl playfully but instead found herself
looking down at Tobi, who had a large smile on his face.

“I’ve missed you, Athena. You can make it up to me with a campfire story tonight.”

Athena let out a laugh, ruffling his hair. “How can I refuse a request like that, my little prince?”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Fen’Mae - Wolf Mother

Thank you all for the love!
A Gift from the Marquise

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Athena dragged herself from the gardens and into the main hall, colliding with a rather large object covered with a thin sheet. She shook her head, looking down at with an arched brow while Dorian came into view. He had a mischievous grin on his face as he gripped the sheet with his hands. “This came from Halamshiral. Do you know what it is?” In the haze of confusion, she shook her head while he sighed with a shake of his head. “Let’s see, what is big and loud and something that you were quite fond of? Don’t say Bull.”

Holy shit.

She beat him to the punch and ripped the sheet from the top of the object with a childlike glee. The piano, freshly polished and cleaned, nearly glowed underneath the sheet. She could feel its magic humming. It was a gentle call that felt pulled to, her body rushing around the side of the instrument and quickly taking a seat on the bench. It was located across from the door of the rotunda. Varric was sitting in his normal chair, shooting her a welcoming glance with a twitch of his quill. He called out to them without looking up from his scrolls that appeared to be nearly drowning him.

“Welcome back, Walker. What do you have there?”

Athena beat her hands lightly against the keys, making sure the tough was light enough without making a sound. That action showed her the letter that had name printed in a cursive script on the front. She opened it quickly before answering Varric’s questions, her mouth silently speaking the words on the letter.

Sorcière,

Your actions at the ball have helped my people in ways you cannot imagine. I have heard about Gaspard’s last play with power; I formally apologize. It will not happen again. As a gesture of my gratitude, I have decided to send the object that inspired so many. Nobody has made it sing like you did. Hopefully it will fill your hall with beautiful music. We will be speaking again.

Marquise of the Dales,
Briala

She had already heard of the attack against the Dalish? Solas didn’t mention sending a letter to her
Ah. Eluvians. Already the Marquise’s network was spreading wide. She understood why obtaining the eluvians was so vital to Fen’Harel’s plans. Her fingers ran across the keys and she sent a small pulse of power into the object, a greeting of sorts. It instantly responded to her touch like it knew her magical signature. The keys vibrated in anticipation and Dorian even jumped back from his leaning position on its top.

“Maker! What was that?”

A soft laugh fell from her lips, eyes glued to the keys as she slowly began to play. The music swelled underneath her and she closed her eyes, hands pressing into the keys and producing an almost jazz-like rush of music that nearly made the main hall silent. Those of them who had seen her play at the ball simply smiled and tried to continue their conversations. Everyone else was in awe, eyes glued to her. Dorian slowly resumed his leaning position against the piano, weighing his options and soon realizing it wasn’t going to hurt him. The song had lyrics but she chose to forgo them, allowing the string of notes to tell a story through the hall as she wore an almost permanent smug smirk on her face.

I’m in a New York state of mind.

The song made her feel nostalgic for home and nostalgic for him. It had only been hours but she was feeling cold in the absence of his touch. She found herself humming the words with her eyes closed, body slowly bobbing to the beat of her song. In her head, she heard the fanfare and background music and she did her best to incorporate that into the piano. It was like the instrument could feel her dismay. It vibrated and nearly sang with her magical pulses and she had to wonder what kind of craftsmanship was required to make such an instrument. So much was lost from the times of Arlathan; she understood some of Solas’s grief.

It was difficult having a head full of memories of literally another world. It was something she could sympathize with. Even though she could describe her world in detail and everything it had to offer, her friends would never know its beauty and what it meant to her. Perhaps that is why she was drawn to her elf so much. If anyone could understand her loss, it was him. Unfortunately, that would have to be a silent thing they had in common, at least for now. She ended the song with a pleasant sigh, running her hands across the keys in gratitude. It gave her the energy she needed to go to the Inner Council and alert them of her personal trip she was going to take to the edge of the Korcari Wilds.

Dorian tapped her on the shoulder and gave a look that she interpreted as “We’ll talk later.” He smiled and walked through the rotunda towards his chair in the coziest part of the library. Varric chuckled and picked up his quill, mumbling loud enough for her to hear. “Good to have you back, Walker.” Athena scooted back from the bench and made for a brisk walk to the War Room. The moment the large door opened Rathein dropped the scrolls in her arms and brought her friend into a tight hug. She barely had time to take in the view of the war room table before the Inquisitor
threatened to break her ribcage with a tight hug.

“They told me you were back! Whhhy-“ The muscular mage picked Athena off of the ground and leaned back, stretching out her words before drooping her back on her feet. “Didn’t you tell me?!“

The Council chuckled at their ever-energetic leader, leaving Athena slightly winded with a sore ring around her chest. She let out an overdramatic sigh, pushing all of her weight onto one hip while winking towards her. “Oh you know, official Inquisition business and whatnot. You would never believe what some of those nobles from Halamshiral sent me. I think I have enough underclothes for every day of the month now.”

Cullen paled while the other two chuckled. The Commander pinched the bridge of his nose, making small muffled comments about things being inappropriate while Rathein smiled. “Yeah. That dancing of yours made you quite popular. I received very stiffly written marriage proposals and some enchanted gear. But we can talk about that later at the tavern. We are here for business, yes?” The Inquisitor and Athena turned towards the war table where there were already markers set up around the Western Approach.

“I’ll be leaving for the desert tomorrow morning with Vivienne, Varric, and Blackwall. If the Wardens are involved, I’m going to want him with me. You’re coming along too, right? Maker help me if I have to go through that desert blind.”


The Council and the Inquisitor all arched a brow in unison. The tension in the room tripled while she cleared her throat and pointed south on the map towards the Korcari Wilds. “I have my own mission I need to finish as soon as possible. I was hoping to bring Dorian and Cole with me. We will probably return the same time as you.”

Rathein crossed her arms over her chest, leaning against the table. “I hadn’t heard anything about this. Care to share?”

She met her friend’s gaze before rolling her eyes, picking up the three markers that would be her party before putting them on the targeted location. “Remember the spirit friend we tried to save in the Plains?” The Herald nodded so she continued, occasionally glancing to the Council. “Well, I might be able to save her if I take care of a problem in the Wilds. There is a dark creature there drawing spiritual energy that I need to get rid of.”
“Will you require Templar assistance?” The question was unexpected and drew a hum of consideration form her lips. She looked to Cullen and shook her head but smiled to him in thanks.

“I would not want to endanger anyone else considering I do not know exactly what we’re facing out there. I’ve just been told it’s dark and has the power of Command at its back.” The Council did not understand what that meant but the short brunette’s eyes next to her widened.

“Wait. Command? The spirit from Crestwood? With the rage demon?” Athena let out a nervous chuckle, fiddling with one of the wooden markers that stood for a wolven unit. They were freshly carved and she had to wonder if Blackwall had made them for the table. They were scattered all around the plains and outside of Skyhold. Leliana had made quick work to include the new units as part of their head count.

“It’s just something I have to do, okay? I promise you. I will fill you in on everything I know in the Approach. With what I know it should cut down your trip by a few days. If you go out with the appropriate resources, you will be able to access areas that would take weeks to cut across. Josephine, you ready to take all of this down?” Athena looked to the Ambassador with a gentle smile. Lady Montilyet nodded and quickly dipped her quill within her bottle of ink, gesturing for her to continue.

“Alright everybody. Let’s begin.”

It took hours to go through the details that she could remember. The Western Approach was a vast area but there were basic things that she focused on to cut down time. There were the locations of the dragon manuscripts, the corpses they would need to examine, the bridges that would need to be created to cross the toxic wastes to reach the darkspawn, and the dragon itself. Rathein decided then to bring Bull on as well or else the Qunari would probably refuse to speak to them for weeks if they killed a dragon without him. The sun was beginning to set as they finished. They all wore varying expressions of exhaustion and at the end of it Cullen let out a sigh.

“The Wardens. . . This is a lot to believe.” He had a wide-armed stance while leaning against the table. His gaze took in every piece of the board and Athena could see him breaking it all down. She pointed towards the direction of Adamant, letting out a soft groan of reluctance.

“Yeah – just prepare for the battle afterwards. That one will be a doozy. I know it has been a while, but you sent out letters to Therinfal Redoubt when we were back at Haven, right? Did anything
ever come of that?” He nodded, standing back up with a quick wince. She instinctively took a step towards him and she wondered if it was a headache or just his back being stiff from standing so long. He didn’t notice, rubbing the side of his neck.

“We received a few stragglers but they were unable to report exactly what happened. Do...you know, Athena?” There was an edge of sadness to his voice she wished she could erase but there was no point in lying now. She was doing her best to include the Inner Council on their own futures so that things could just end better. Athena swallowed down a lump of nerves, nodding solemnly before quickly explaining.

“An envy demon was masquerading as Lord Seeker Lucius in the Templar Keep.” That was all she had to say and the Commander cursed under his breath. He looked back and forth before shaking his head, excusing himself from the table and moving to leave the room. She grabbed his arm and stopped him, tearing his gaze from the door to her own. There was only hurt and regret on his face and she could tell he was blaming himself for their fate. She felt a pit in her stomach, knowing what she was about to ask would probably only make him feel worse.

“Are you familiar with the Littany of Adralla?” She knew the answer but his cut through her like a knife.

“More than I would like to be.” For a moment, she saw a flash of his younger self trapped behind a barrier keeping himself from demons. Athena ignored the others in the room and sighed, squeezing his shoulders before continuing. “We need it. It will come in handy in the future. If we can gather a large enough group of templars it will help us in the coming fights. Can you do this?” Cullen paused, nodding to her before finally leaving through the door. Instinct said to follow him and try to cheer him up but there were some demons that even she could not fix.

With a sigh, she turned back towards the other women, looking at the map for a final time before nodding. “I believe that is all I can tell you. Anything else, my ladies?”

They all shook their head and Josephine came to her side, smiling genuinely with a small laugh. “I look forward to your story tonight. Cassandra and Leliana tell me they are wonderful!” The Spymaster and Ambassador left together, leaving only Rathein and Athena left. The Inquisitor wrapped her arm around her friend and walked her past Josephine’s office.

“They tell me you showed up with an elven kid? Working a little fast there, huh?”

Athena rolled her eyes and scoffed, elbowing her friend in the ribs a little more than playfully. “I swear you and Dorian both. Yes, I brought her back with me from the Dalish clan. She’s a mage,
Rathein. You know the Dalish rule on mages?” The Herald suddenly paused in realization, a grim expression coming over her face. There was a silent solidarity amongst mages in Thedas that she really liked. They understood hardship. They understood persecution from all angles. So, when one of their own was abandoned they couldn’t look away.

“I get it now.” They were walking past Varric and into the rotunda and she silently thanked Rathein for leading her towards Solas without making it obvious. When they entered Solas looked up from his desk, a warm smile coming to his face.

“Ah. Inquisitor. How can I help you?” He sounded surprisingly energized and Athena wondered if he had just taken one of his midafternoon trips to the Fade. The Herald shook her head and pushed her to the side, walking up the stairs while waving to the pair.

“Nothing! Just making my rounds. I’ll make sure you have everything you need before you leave tomorrow, Athena!” The Inquisitor disappeared and Athena winced because Solas’s face instantly fell.

Awww shit.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks as always for the love!

The song is New York State of Mind. Gave her chops a break and just let her play this one out because its so pretty on the piano.
Solas snapped the book he was reading shut with one hand, his eyes never leaving her as she held her hands up in surrender and walked towards him with a feeling of dread sitting in her stomach. There hadn’t been time to tell him that she was leaving on a trip and she couldn’t even bring him with her. Command didn’t say anything about not telling him about the mission, but since she was doing it to bring Wisdom back there was a large gray area of confusion that she found herself in. Athena walked over to his side and rested her forehead against his shoulder, childishly hiding her gaze from his. He looked down to her while setting the book down on his desk.

“Where are you leaving to?” His voice was soft, concerned as he put two fingers underneath her chin to bring her eyes to his. She was helpless to the look he was giving her. It was a mixture of hurt and confusion and either emotion made her feel equally as guilty. She finally stood up, pinching the bridge of her nose with a sigh. When she spoke, she did it through clenched teeth because they had just returned and already she was having to turn around and leave again.

“The Korcari Wilds?” He hissed in response and from above she could hear Dorian laughing. Solas shot a glare up at him while the Tevinter leaned over the railing.

“That sounds awful! Why are you going there?” Athena instantly smiled, looking up while pointing to him.

“Don’t tease me. You’re coming with me, mister. Consider it a camping trip with your best friend!” The Tevinter mage instantly paled, pushing off from the railing with a flurry of curse words in a language she could not understand. He audibly slumped onto his chair and he called out to her:

“You’re awful, you know that?!” Even though he couldn’t see her she scrunched her face up at him in teasing. When she turned towards Solas her heart broke a little more. There was a sadness in his features, something that urged her to wrap her arms around his hips and rest her head on his chest. He let out a sigh, succumbing to her touch before kissing her on top of the head. Even though the touch was simple, it filled her chest with warmth and brought a smile to her lips.

“Am I to sit back while you risk your life going to the Wilds?” There was an edged point to his voice and she flinched to it, tightening her grip around him before turning and walking over towards the couch. It reminded her of the kind of luxurious couches that were depicted in therapists’ offices so she spun and flopped onto it, resting her forearm across the top of her head while her eyes looked at the murals he had already painted.
“As much as it pains me, **vhenan**, I cannot take you there.” He walked over and sat on the side of the couch, bringing one of her hands into his as he looked her up and down.

“Why is that?”

Athena sighed, rolling her eyes back to a close before answering. “It is another mission for Command and the terms of said agreement are that I cannot bring you.” His gaze only hardened but he nodded. Thankfully he was somebody who would understand the bonding contract given from a spirit to another so she wouldn’t have to explain it to him. He brought one of her hands to his mouth to kiss her palm. The gesture was becoming a regular thing of theirs and it brought her immeasurable comfort. “I’m sorry, Solas. I’m not terribly excited about this venture but it must be done.”

He chuckled, looking over towards her with a small shrug. “I will not lie and say I am not displeased that you are leaving so soon on a venture without me.” There was something about the last two words that pulled on her heart and she found herself wanting to say “**But I won't be alone, Dorian will be there!**” The two always bickered and she wondered if the foundation of it all was that Solas tended to be a slightly jealous type. Stubborn wolf. He must have read her mind because he shot a quick glance up towards the balcony in the direction where Dorian sat. She sat up on the couch, placing a hand on his chest with a small teasing smile. “**Vhenan,** please. I will be fine. Oh Dorian?” She called out with sarcasm in her tone.

“Yes, Madame de Fur?” She laughed while playing with the strings around Solas’s neck, ignoring the curious expression he was giving her. “Did that noble ever write to you after the ball. The Rivainese fellow? We never had time to discuss it.”

Thankfully the mage wasn’t shy about certain things in his life, especially ones she had already heard him talk about with other party members openly and loudly while drunk in the tavern. She heard him turn a page of whatever tome he was reading, probably on necromancy or forbidden magic, before calling back out to her. “No. **He** decided distance would be too difficult. That’s his loss.” Athena nodded with a smirk.

“That indeed, my friend. Will I see you at the tavern later?” He scoffed, turning the page again.

“I will need some way to cope with your unexpected mission you dropped into my lap.” His words fell into mumbling and she rolled her gaze down towards Solas, who already had a smirk on his lips in realization while letting out a chuckle. All traits of doubt melted away as he leaned back into her while openly laughing, palms covering his eyes as he laid his back across the tops of her thighs. She shook her head, flicking his chest with a small chuckle of her own.
“I will not be gone long, vhenan. But... I would be lying if I said I was not nervous. This quest, this task, is not something in my scope of knowledge. It... did not happen in the world I know.” He looked up from her lap, reaching up to touch her face with a smirk.

“Much like you then, I suppose. I have something for you. I meant to save it for a later date but considering it will be of use now.” He gracefully pushed up from her lap and walked over to his desk. He rearranged scattered papers until he found a small parcel wrapped in a type of brown paper. Solas returned to sit by her side on the couch, handing the parcel over to her.

“I noted you do not use your staff much anymore in your casting. The benefit of a staff comes in the form of enchantments and harnessing energy. But if you can get those benefits from other means.” He gestured to the package and she opened it up, finding a small silver ring with a carved wolf’s head on top. She instantly slipped it on her right hand, her dominant staff-wielding hand, and found that it fit her middle finger. There was an excited smile on her face she flexed her hand to determine the fit.

“It’s warm.” He hummed while running a finger over the top of it.

“It has an enchantment that helps to strengthen spiritual energy. You were able to summon a staff of your own once and I determined this ring would help that and make it easier to summon. Try it now.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her from the couch, moving to where he was leaning against his desk. He gestured for her to try with a curious smile on his face. She looked to her hand, turning it over once or twice before opening her palm and concentrating her pure energy into it. It felt quicker to do now, the energy sparkling like lightning and stretching out to a staff that was slightly taller than her. Once it was the length she wanted she closed her hand around it and hardened the summon into something with a tangible shape. It was a bright white creation with red edges, responding to her touch only.

Athena spun the staff above her head and quickly did a few test movements while moving in smooth motions around the rotunda. When things felt right she flexed her hand around the staff and dismissed it into a burst of magic in the air. He smiled confidently as she walked over to him. “Solas, it’s beautiful. Thank you.” She rested a hand on his chest before leaning up and gently kissing him in gratitude. He nodded touching his hand to her face to catch her gaze. Athena glanced to the candle indicating time on his desk and cursed under her breath, instantly putting a hand to her forehead while groaning.

He hummed to ask her what the occasion was and she beat him to the punch. “I told Tobi I would do a campfire story tonight. Shit – I’m just going to have to throw this together. Do you mind if I take a power-nap on the Fade to try and remember some details of the story I want to do?” He gestured towards the couch and she quickly laid down and rolled her mind back into the Fade. She
was surprised at how quickly she was able to do it, guessing it was probably due to Solas’s ring as well. The story played in her mind on a type of fast-forward and it only took a few minutes before she jerked up from her sleep. Solas had barely had time to open his book before she stood up and clapped her hands together, nodding to herself before walking over to kiss him on the side of the head.

“Alright, story time. Will I see you later?”

He looked over his book at her and shrugged, turning a page slowly while a creeping smirk played on the corners of his lips. She flicked the top of his book and poked him with a teasing tone. “If you don’t come and Inspiration tells me you were listening in anyways I’m cutting you off, mister.” Solas had a slight tinge of pink on his ears when she said that but he pretended to ignore her, flipping through another page of his book as if she hadn’t just called him out on somewhat spying on her from the Fade. If it was just through Inspiration for her songs she did not mind. If there were other things he could tell from her dreams... it would probably be safer to be conscious in the Fade instead of letting her mind potentially wander uncontrolled.

Athena chewed on the inside of her cheek as she walked towards the campfire, rubbing her hands together to summon up the confidence to tell yet another story. It was getting more difficult since more and more people kept coming. At first it was a thing she did to cheer up the children during the travel to Skyhold. Now there were more people and expectations. Gossip spread like wildfire throughout the Inquisition and it probably didn’t help that she used the same magic to summon illusions in her show as she did to summon the wolf in the Plains. They would want a taste of that mystery. When she reached the campfire, her eyes widened at exactly how many people had wanted to get a taste of that magic. The seating area was nearly filled and the usual audience members were there. Varric was sitting near the front with quill and an empty scroll in his lap.

She arched a brow towards him, waving at the crowd before ducking down and nudging him. “Mixing work and play, are we?”

The dwarf batted the feather of his quill on her nose with a smile. “Somebody ought to write down the stories you are telling. You know, Walker, you could make a killing with these other-worldly tales of yours.”

She smirked and shook her head and he cut her off before she had the opportunity to talk. “Yeah-yeah I know, not without your permission. Hey, just think of it though: Tales from the Campfire by Athena the Other Worlder. Hey – do you have a last name? Or are you like Chuckles with the one?” Athena rubbed the back of her neck and let out an awkward chuckle.

“Um. Not in this world I guess. Athena will do, you know, for this hypothetical series you are talking about.” She ended the awkward exchange with a quick wink, now wondering if she should
of thought of a last name for this world. There was something equally as amusing as having a one-
name title like Solas, or Beyonce. She stood from her position with a smirk on her lips, bringing 
her body in front of the campfire. It was like they were waiting because the moment she had an 
expectant look on her face the crowd quieted. The children were in the front row and centered, 
Leafy in the middle of all of the orphans.

The elven child excitedly waved towards her and Athena wiggled her fingers back at her. She 
cleared her voice and called out towards the crowd. “We’re going to continue the theme of love 
stories for now. The particular one I am going to tell you tonight is called Sleeping Beauty.” She 
headed to the crowd with a smile and started off the story as any fairy tale story should:

“Once upon a time, there was an imaginary kingdom far away from here. The King and Queen had 
given birth to a beautiful daughter named Aurora and everyone had been invited to celebrate. There 
were fairies in attendance that had granted their blessings on the child and her prosperous future. 
There was one person that had remained uninvited, one very powerful person that the King and 
Queen forgot.”

With a small wave of her hand she brought the flames to her head to create a set of horns on her 
head, the flames also falling around her in a cloak of sorts. There was even an imaginary crow 
perched on her shoulder flickering in the flame of her creation. “They had forgotten about 
Maleficent. Maleficent was the strongest of the fairies and to punish the kingdom for forgetting her 
she laid a curse on the child.” Athena moved forward towards Leafy and the children around her 
parted in fear of her guise. Thank goodness Leafy was either brave or dumb founded because she 
did not move, eyes wide as Athena poked her nose with the tip of her finger.

“Before the sun sets on this child’s sixteenth nameday, she will prick her finger on that of a 
spinning wheel and die.” The children gasped and Leafy clapped her hands to her mouth. Athena 
allowed the fiery cloak and horns to fall as she moved around the campfire, eyes glazing over the 
crowd as the story continued to develop. Anytime she looked to Cassandra, the Seeker was 
enthralled and nearly sitting on the edge of her seat.

“The King was furious! He burned every spinning wheel within the country and sent her daughter 
away to be protected. The fairies took care of her in a wooden cottage and gave her another name, 
Briar Rose.” There was a pull of magic from her right and she felt a blush creep up into her neck. It 
was hidden by the dancing light of the campfire but she saw Solas swerve through the crowd and 
sit next to Cole who had appeared as well at the empty end of a bench. “Briar Rose grew up 
protected and safe but disconnected from her family. Then one day, on her sixteenth name day, she 
was sent out to gather supplies for supper.”

Athena released her hair with a pull of the ribbon that kept it on top of her head, the wavy length of 
her locks bouncing around her shoulders as she dawned the look of Briar Rose. “Who else would 
be in that forest if not for Prince Phillip? The two had been betrothed in their young age but were
tragically separated because of the Witch’s curse. When they met in the forest, it was true love at first sight. They of course did what any couple would do in a love story from my world and broke into song.” There was a teasing chuckle around the campfire from the adults but she looked to Tobi and extended a hand to him. He clapped his hands together in realization of his roll, adjusting the invisible crown that a prince would wear on his head before coming to where she could bow to him and bring him into an awkward dancing posture since he was taller than Leafy but he was too big to pick up. She began to hum the notes of the song that the two betrothed sang to one another while bringing him into the basic steps of a waltz that Tobi could follow.

“I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream.
I know you, that look in your eyes is so familiar a gleam.
And I know it’s true that visions are seldom what they seem.”

She brought her face in to rub the tip of her nose against Tobi’s. He tried to hide his chuckle. He was very dedicated to his role of the Prince, keeping his back straight while trying to mimic the dancing posture he had seen people practice in the great hall. Her eyes glanced to Solas and he wore the mask of the elven scholar with a slight break at the corner of his eyes, the secret smile that was meant for her. She held his gaze for a moment longer than she should of, tearing it away to come back to Tobi and singing with him as the young boy hummed along.

“But if I know you, I know what you’ll do.
You’ll love me at once, the way you did once upon a dream.”

When the dance ended, she gestured for the crowd to clap for Tobi as he walked back towards his seat with a blush on his face. Leafy patted him on the shoulder and gave him small whispered praises which only reddened the flush even more. Athena then continued through the story, getting nearly to the end of it without any further use of magic. She was trying to focus more on her words and the way she interacted with the crowd, using their reactions as a gauge for continuing. They tended to like the love and action more as opposed to the silly details like the fairies, which was something she would not for the future. The end was arriving and she wanted to finish it big, gesturing for Tobi to come forward as the brave Prince Phillip fighting the dragon.

“He broke through the thorned wall only to be met with Maleficent in her most dangerous form: a dragon!”

With the announcement of the dragon she quickly downed a small lyrium vial form her back pocket, using the rush of magic to jump into the middle of the campfire. There was a barrier on her skin keeping her and her clothes intact but she used her influence of the flame to morph the already existing fire into a dragon form. It was only slightly taller than her own body and greatly smaller than the wolf she had made in the plains, but the crowd’s eyes were as wide as saucers.
The children recoiled back in fear but Tobi swallowed down a lump of fear before extending his large stick that was supposed to be the Sword of Truth. Athena took her cues from his attacks, keeping a good distance between them so they wouldn’t get burnt. She used magic to manipulate her vocal cords, pulling on the bonds of her pack to twist her growls into something more believable. This also, according to Solas, changed her eyes and gave them a golden hue within the body of the dragon. The battle continued until she announced that Phillip overcame it. The stick flew through the fire and struck her in the chest, causing her to step out of the campfire.

The moment she did the dragon summon disappeared and the campfire resumed its normal quiet glow. Athena rubbed a hand through her hair to rid it of soot before coming to the front of the fire, smiling at their reaction before continuing. “Prince Phillip rushed up to Aurora’s side and revived her with true love’s kiss.” She dramatically spun on her heel and gently fell against the ground, eyes closed as Tobi looked over. Kain whined from the side next to Varric which added a sense of urgency to the scene. Tobi came up, suddenly confused on what to do, before planting a quick peck on her forehead.

Athena instantly sat up and wrapped her arms around the boy. She picked him up with one arm around his waist, holding him to her side while finishing: “And of course, the two lived happily ever after.” She flicked her gaze to the side to see Varric furiously scribbling with a smile on his lips. Athena bowed with Tobi in her arms, instantly beaming at the children’s screaming and clapping. They were the most important audience to her. The rest were just seat fillers. She fell to her knees and opened her arms to them. They all ran and were nearly jumping up and down.

“That was amazing!”

“I’ve never seen a dragon before!”

“Tobi – You were so brave!”

Leafy came to the front and wrapped her arms around Athena, whispering into her neck. “Fen’Elgara. . . thank you!” She hugged the young one and kissed her on the cheek, dismissing them all to Mother Giselle who was waiting by the door. Once the children were out of sight she turned to join her Inquisiton friends who were waiting on the sidelines.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your continued reading and love. I am absolutely flabbergasted still and thankful.
After bidding the children farewell, she walked over to the side to the forming group of party members. Bull and the rowdier half were preparing for a night at the bar while the others were quietly trying to find good reasons to leave and go to bed. Solas and Cole were a part of the latter group, trying to have their own conversations on the side. Athena took the quick moment when they weren’t looking at her to smile at her Inquisition family. They were all so unique in their own way and she was thankful for the odd opportunity to have met them in person. Bull and Rathein were in the middle of the group and the Inquisitor was doing her best to interact with every person talking around her, ever the socialite and leader. The Herald’s eyes glossed through the group before landing on Athena, who silently cursed under her breath before taking a large step closer to Solas and Cole.

“You made a dragon?” The spirit-boy’s voice was confused as he looked to her and she nodded in return, making a flippant gesture as if the summoning were nothing even though she could feel her spirit dragging along the bottom of her mana well. Cole touched a finger to his chin and there was a light pressure on the inside of her mind. Solas looked to the side and she wondered if she could feel when Cole was “helping” as well. The ring on her hand nearly hummed while the boy nodded.

“Dragons. Flaming. Shifting. No, can’t do it. You don’t want to be like her.”

Athena fought and kept her voice passive even though on the inside she was screaming. To keep him from going further she quickly flipped a mental wall up and pushed the boy out. She let out a nervous chuckle before adding: “You mean Maleficent? Of course, I don’t want to be like her, even if everyone around here calls me Witch.” The boy remained quiet, catching her warning glance with a small and softened “oh.” She felt bad, but if Solas knew that she knew the identity of Mythal it could only lead to other assumptions. Cole wasn’t wrong, however. Athena did not want to be like the supposed All-Mother. From what she knew and saw of Flemeth, the old Witch of the Wild used others to only further her own future.

Morrigan had already been victim to that, and Athena had no doubt that Solas had as well. Solas took a step towards her and brought her out of her thoughts. She smiled, shaking her head back and forth before stepping to him as well, leaving little space between them. She went to reach out and touch him but there was the sound of someone clearing their voice from the side. Athena winced, rolling her eyes to look at the crew of Rathein, Bull, Dorian, Varric, and Sera gawking at them with sarcastic glances. Rathein had a single brow raised, smiling at the pair while Bull was musing something over.

“Something’s different about them, don’t you think?” The Qunari teased while nudging Varric and
gesturing to the couple. The dwarf nodded with a smug grin, crossing his arms over his chest with a snicker.

“Oh yeah, *something* all right. Dorian?” He looked to the Tevinter who had his arm resting on Sera’s shoulder. Athena was bristling in discomfort and before her friend had a chance to speak she gave them a pleasant smile while looking to her feet.

“Oh how kind of you all to notice my new foot wrappings. The Dalish provided them when I burned my clothes off.” Sera let out a sound of obnoxious laughter, falling forward and causing Dorian to lose his balance. Rathein remained quiet, obviously wanting to know the more intimate details of their trips through the Plains. The elven archer slapped her knee and pointed to Athena while rudely announcing:

“Yeah, we can see you’ve got elf things *inside* and out! Ha ha ha!” Solas scoffed and made a comment about her being childish under his breath, turning to leave towards the safety of his rotunda before Athena grabbed his sleeve. He looked to her with a bewildered stare and she could nearly hear this thoughts: *You wish to remain here and be chided?* Athena rolled her eyes and smiled, pulling him back while talking to the group with a look of her own: *They’re harmless. Family.*

“We’re still on for the tavern, yes? I won’t be able to stay for long because I have to leave in the morning but I figure we can catch a drink before I head to bed.” The group made a joint grumbling before heading off towards the direction of the tavern. When they were out of ear shot, she rubbed the back of her neck and turned to Solas with a soft blush on her cheeks. “I mean, that is, if you would join me for a drink at the tavern? I know it isn’t your typical place to relax but – “

He interrupted her with a chuckle, touching underneath her chin with his index finger. “I will not perish from one drink at the tavern, ma’fen. Even if the company is a more... animated than I would care to be around tonight.” She laughed, finally walking up and wrapping her arms around his waist while leaning her head against his chest. The smell of him brought a wave of serenity over her mind, clearing all reminiscent anxieties from her performance and the jitters that came from thinking of the next morning. He stilled underneath her before bringing his arms around her. They took in a deep breath in unison, their auras twisting around each other in a spiritual and physical embrace. When she released the breath, her magic lingered on his skin, trying to take in every feature before he nudged her on the top of her head with the tip of his nose. She looked up and smiled at him, gesturing towards the direction of the tavern with a small jerk of her head.

Solas smirked, leaning down to gently bring her up for a kiss. It silenced her and for a moment she was considering forgetting the tavern and going back for a night alone with Solas. When he broke off he let out an exasperated sigh, shrugging and leading her towards the tavern with a hand on the small of her back.
When they arrived, the tavern was already in full uproar. Rathein had secured a table on the second floor for the lot of them. Dorian had two drinks set aside for the two of them and all of her instincts from her former life told her never to consume a drink you didn’t see made screamed within her mind. Athena sniffed the edge of the mug before drinking from the ale, sighing in relief when there weren’t any additional flavors. Kain whined underneath the table, muttering in wolven that he had been waiting for her and having to put up with them accidentally kicking him under the table.

She chuckled and looked underneath her chair, pouting towards the wolf before speaking aloud to him. “Oh I’m sorry, were they not paying enough attention to you?” The table’s volume grew softer as more eyes turned to her, Solas chuckling under his breath before taking his first sip of his drink. Dorian was the one to nudge her across the table, gesturing with his smaller drink towards her. “What was that?”

Athena arched a brow, clueless. “What was what?”

Varric laughed and kicked his feet up on top of the table. “You just sounded like a wolf, Walker. Did Kain understand that?” The wolf gave a shrill bark from underneath the table to answer his question. The dwarf laughed and took a drink of his dwarven-grade ale. “Magic, man.” The group made a general groan of agreement before falling back into conversation. Dorian and Solas had even begun to speak of their typical topic of different uses of magic. Athena sat back in her chair before she heard from behind her shoulder.

“You asked for a horse for me.”

She nodded and turned around in her chair, smiling at Cole. “Of course I did. I didn’t want you having us forget you were there the whole time. There’s a reason I want you to come.”

He hummed and pulled his hat up a bit so she could meet his gaze. “To help. If you told him he would understand. Command said he couldn’t come not that you couldn’t tell him.” This time her eyes widened and she flicked her gaze towards Solas and was thankful that he was talking to Dorian while slowly nursing the one cup of ale.

“I know I can – I . . . this is just new to me. This mission didn’t exist in my world so I don’t want to get people’s hopes up if I end up failing.” Cole shook his head, leaning his body on the back of his chair. Nobody else as looking at him so maybe he was making himself invisible to everyone but her? That was a reason why he was one of her favorites. He was able to pick the right moments to be there for people, even if half of the stuff he said was borderline inappropriate or embarrassing.
“You will not fail; you want to help. Dorian and I will help. I – could you – bring your music? It . . . helps still.” Athena smiled, leaning back and kissing the boy on top of the head over his hat. The spirit blushed and disappeared into the air around them and there was a familiar haze over her mind that tended to come as a side effect to his power. Solas was looking at her with an amused expression, gesturing to the air behind her. She clicked her tongue on the back of her tongue, smiling back at him.

“Cole. What are we all talking about?”

Bull put his finger in his mouth and pulled on the cheek until it made a loud popping sound. Athena instantly groaned, rolling her eyes while pinching the bridge of her nose. You could go to the tamassarans like seeing a healer. -Pop- Thank you see you next week. The words were all too familiar in her head and she did not have a doubt in her mind that was what the Qunari was referencing too. Solas arched a brow and she shook her head to dismiss the thought, clearing her throat while looking to Rathein who had an all-too expecting smile on her face.

“So. . . what exactly happened in the Plains? I’m curious to know how our Witch here fought against fifty armed men by herself.” Bull’s eyes instantly went large in excitement, his fists pounding on the table.

“That sounds bad ass!” Varric’s hand itched and she could tell that he was wanting to write this down as part of a story. They shared a knowing glance with a small chuckle before she glanced at Solas with a smirk. He was still sipping on the ale-concocting Dorian had set out for them while taking in the conversations around the table. She ran a hand through her hair, leaning back on her chair until the front two legs were off of the ground.

“It – it was foolish really.”

“Reckless.” Solas cut in and she had to laugh. He gave her a teasing smirk before gesturing for her to continue.

“Gaspard’s feelings were hurt so I wanted to give them something his soldiers wouldn’t forget so they wouldn’t make the mistake again. Sorry – it’s hard to tell a story when I don’t know the mechanics of exactly how I did it in the first place. It was like this.” She opened her palm and brought to life a small flaming wolf within her hand. It danced around in the heat, bounding around in her palm like it wanted to play. Smaller, delicate summonings were getting easier with practice. It was still a wonder that she was able to summon something so large without promptly dying. “Only much much bigger. It may have breathed fire near them as well.”
Sera gave her an odd look before nudging Blackwall and murmuring something like, “Fookin’ magic, right?” The Warden smirked towards her and nudged her back but his gaze remained on Athena. Dorian took the last swig of his drink before looking to Solas.

“Any explanation from the expert end for those of us that are magically inclined?” The Tevinter’s charm was getting steadily stronger as he drank. There were moments where she wondered what the Inquisition would be like if he were straight or open like Bull. It would probably be filled with many more broken hearts with those two on the prowl. Bull, much to the kitchen workers’ dismay, was making flirtatious winks and comments towards Rathein that caused the Herald to blush. Athena observed them out of the corner of her eye while Solas actually smiled towards Dorian and nodded.

“It appeared to be a spectral creation; she pushed out her spirit and used that movement to draw energy from the Veil itself. The Dalish and I assisted with our mana pools but that only kept her afloat. The manipulation of the wolf came from her movements and, frankly, her spirit. I haven’t seen anything like since my journeys into the Fade.” Dorian hummed and accepted the explanation for now while kicking her underneath the table.

“For someone that didn’t know magic when you fell from the sky you seem to be picking it up naturally. No wonder Vivienne doesn’t like you. Self-trained apostate and all.” He smiled at her and she tensed her jaw at the thought of Madame de Fer, fluttering her eyelashes and leaning forward to rest her head on her hand.

“I do not know what you are talking about, Dorian. The Enchantress and I are absolutely bonded. In fact she is coming along on the trip with us as well.” She gave him a quick wink and he scoffed with a roll of his eyes.

Sera made a confused face before standing and leaning her body over the table until she could see nothing but the elven archer. “Wha? Where ya going now, elfy?” Athena flicked the back of her own round ear with an index finger before smirking.

“It’s – uh – a personal mission of sorts. It’s just something I have to do. You probably wouldn’t like it Sera.” She knew the archer wasn’t fond of magical or strange things but apparently, her curiosity was even greater than that.

“Oh come on! Something has to be more interesting if you’re willing to leave Elven glory behind!” Solas bristled and she instantly dropped a hand to his thigh underneath the table, keeping Sera’s gaze on her by letting out a forced exasperated sigh.
“If you say so... A spirit companion is asking me to do something for her on the edge of the Korcari Wilds.” Sera instantly reeled back in disgust and shook her head back and forth, nudging Blackwall again. The Warden hummed in consideration before laughing, meeting Sera’s gaze before looking to Solas.

“We were talking before. We need you to settle a question for us, Solas.” Athena’s eyes widened and she gripped on her lover’s thigh while trying to stifle an admittedly childish chuckle. Solas flicked his eyes over to her before groaning.

“If it involves you two it must be offensive in nature.” The soldier didn’t even hide his laugh while muttering a quick “Yeah – sorry.” He then cleared his throat and looked to the table before continuing with his question. “You make friends with spirits in the Fade. So – hah - are there any that are more than just friends?” He then gave a suggestive eyebrow wiggle that caused Sera to nearly hyperventilate with contained laughter. “If you know what I mean.”

Solas reeled back and she could feel his body tense up underneath her touch. “Oh, for – really?!”

“Look, it’s a natural thing to be curious about!” The Warden couldn’t fight the blush on his cheeks as he laughed and the rest of the table began to snicker as well. Solas spat back, heat rising to a color on the edge of his ears.

“For a twelve-year-old!” Athena couldn’t help but chuckle as well and she squeezed his thigh again but thankfully this time he dropped his hand to rest on top of hers. He didn’t squeeze back tightly as she anticipated him too. Instead, he stroked his thumb across the top of her hand softly. Blackwall pressed on: “It is a simple yes or no question.”

The elf’s lip twitched in agitation, especially when Dorian began to snicker to himself. “Nothing about the Fade or spirits is simple, especially not that.”

The Warden nearly rose from the table with a smile while Sera pointed a finger at Solas with a laugh. “Aha! So you do have experiences in these matters.”

Solas groaned. “I did not say that.”

Athena instantly quipped with blush on her cheeks before taking a sip from her cup: “Or else you would be lying, my dear.” He looked to her with a stern look and she winked back at him. If he could out their relationship at the tavern able she was allowed to hint at the fact that they were
intimate in their dreams. Solas announced to them both: “Ass.”

Blackwall laughed, slapping the top of his knee. “Now who is twelve?” Solas’s face hardened, his gaze turning wicked while he looked at the Warden and the Red Jenny at the end of the table.

“Tell me, Warden, surely you’ve woken from a dream that was of the nature you speak of? Am I wrong?”

The bearded soldier let out a sound of discomfort, grabbing his ale as if it were a security blanket. “Of course – any man has.” Sera added on from her side of the table: “And woman!”

Solas’s lips twitched into a wolfish smile and Athena egged him on by gripping onto his thigh. Her gaze held a similar darkness and like her pack she enjoyed watching her mate close in on the hunt. “Who are you to deny where those dreams come from? There are many spirits who spend their time pleasuring mortals as they dream at night. You could have woken from a dream that was actually quite a real experience in the Fade.”

The Warden paled as did Sera. The whole table went quiet for a second before Dorian and Rathein laughed. As mages, they were more familiar with the Fade and knew that what he said was true. Athena herself glowed with pride, looking to Solas with a beaming smile and a look that said: See, I told you he would ask. But thankfully the Dread Wolf had conversational maneuvers to keep his pride intact.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the love as always!
The conversations could of continued until the morning but around midnight Athena pushed from the table and bid the party farewell, giving Dorian a warning that they were going to be traveling in the morning on horseback down the mountain. He pushed her off with a scoff, quickly downing his bitter drink just to spite her. She shrugged with a smile while her and Solas left the tavern and walked through the bitter cold at the top of the mountain. As her magic grew, the natural flame in her aura kept her warm as she walked. Even though she was only wearing a tank top, pants, and leg wrappings: she was surprisingly comfortable. Solas opened the door for her in her room and gestured up to the top area where she rarely looked.

“Come with me, there’s something I want to show you.” There was a playing smile on his face and she followed him wordlessly, climbing up the stairs and ducking her head down in attic-type area that had a blank canvas of a wall with a few boxes pushed against it. There was a large window facing the canyon in front of the castle that Solas opened. He crouched his body down and extended a hand to her while resting one foot on the stone outside of the window. She paled, biting down on the inside of her cheek while hesitantly giving him her hand. He chuckled and brought her close. “Are you comfortable with climbing? The steps are easy - just follow me, ma’fen.”

She swallowed down a hard lump of nerves and nodded, creeping out to follow him outside of the window. There were jutting out stones from the wall that made it easy for him to push off of from his feet and climb the side. The top of her tower was thankfully flat and not slanted. He made a few pulls and pushed himself over the top. When he looked over down at her he chuckled at her fear. “Afraid of heights, Madam Sorciere? Surely someone who fought off fifty men single handedly can manage a climb?” Athena let out a haughty scoff, pulling up imaginary gloves on her hands before securing her foot on a jutting stone. It took a second but soon she was out of the safety of her window and facing the wall with her back to the canyon.

It was in that moment she regretted not choosing an animal to shift into that could fucking fly.

Her hands gripped against the stone and she pushed her stomach against the comfort of the wall. With a quick flick of her gaze she found the next place for her hands and quickly followed in his steps. When she threw herself over the top her breath came in heavy pants, hands shaking as she attempted to smooth out her wind-blown hair. Solas chuckled at her, guiding her into his grip by placing his hands on her hips and pulling her towards him. “You did well, Athena. Now, look.”

Athena turned towards his line of sight and gasped at what she saw. The view of mountain and the Bridge of Skyhold rested right in front of them. The moons looked close enough to touch and their light bathed down on the keep. All of her fears melted away and she smiled, leaning into his
embrace with a soft sigh. “Solas – it’s beautiful. How did you find this place? Have you been snooping around my room?” She teased him with a quick wink and he surprisingly blushed in response.

“The night I returned from the Plains. . . I was waiting on you for some time. I tried to dream up here in one last attempt to find my friend and ended up hearing your performance in the tavern instead. The spirit of Inspiration was trying to help the best she could in that time.” Athena turned towards him at the touch of sadness in his voice. She knew he kept most of it down and never let her see how truly sad he was about the whole thing. Who knew who long he and the spirit had been friends for? She remembered a bit of banter in the games where he said what he saw before was worse. Athena had seen her physically ripped from the Fade; he must have been able to see the afterparts where they bound her to their will. The memory put a bitter taste in her mouth. She turned to wrap her arms around his back and rest her head against his chest. In kind, he wrapped his arms around her as well. She could feel him looking down to her so she slowly rolled her gaze up, rubbing her cheek against his chest to memorize his scent.

Even tonight with ale on his breath, he smelled of the woods. “How long do you anticipate to be gone for?” The sadness had not left his voice and she could feel her heart breaking. With a soft sigh, she shrugged, tightening her grip on him as their gazes met.

“Not as long as the Inquisitor, that’s for certain. With just the three of us going we should be able to move quickly. My concern isn’t the travel it is what I’m going to find when I get there. I’m only slightly familiar with the Korcari Wilds but the Wilds I know were from the Blight. If that is where this creature is residing it certainly can’t bode well for me.” Athena spoke with fear in her voice, eyes dropping from his face to his chest in a moment of insecurity. If Command’s blessing allowed for her to connect with an entire pack of wolves across the plains and Skyhold, what could another person use it for? The spirit spoke as if it weren’t even a person at all. She swallowed down a lump of nerves as he cupped her face with one hand, stroking his thumb along the ridge of her cheekbones while wearing a concerned expression.

“You and I jest, but please do not be reckless in this Athena.” He gestured towards the edge of the rooftop and grabbed one of her hands with his. He was much more graceful in his movements as they descended the wall and it took her a moment to summon up enough mental courage to make the first step down. Once she did there was a momentary flicker of panic but she used that to push herself down the wall and through the window of her room. He instantly shut the window behind them and she let out a sigh of relief. She turned towards him and her breath caught in her throat, pulse quickening to the point where she nearly went deaf from the roar in her ears.

He was leaning against the window giving her a mixture of a look. There was the normal hunger he wore when they were alone combined with the sadness of her leaving in the morning. Both things tore her in two inside and she found herself drawn to him, walking up, and resting her hands on his shoulder. “I will find you in the Fade when I can, Solas. I will try something every day? A pulse, a message, something to let you know I’m okay?” He nodded and cupped her face in both of his hands, bringing her up to kiss her gently.
She could feel his restraint and longing in the brush of a gesture, a smirk playing at the corner of her lips. Her hands ran along the edge of his pants and she moved under his shirt until she could feel his bare back against her skin. He took in a sharp breath and kissed her again, this time finally leaking through some of his emotion in the form of his aura sliding on her skin. In between kisses she smiled at him, catching his gaze while putting a hand on his chest. “I may leave in the morning but we still have many hours before then, vhenan.” The sadness broke and he gave her a wicked smile, gripping his hands in her hair and pulling her back closer to him.

The pair made their way down the stairs and ended up, thankfully, in the bed to perform their acts of love. The morning came earlier than she had wanted and Kain was quick to jump on the bed and push his cold, wet nose onto her face. Athena groaned and pushed the wolf off playfully, shooting him a one-eyed playful glare as Solas tightened his grip around her waist. She turned around to face her God and had to hold in an elated sigh at the sight of him sprawled out carelessly on the bed with his arms around her. He was trying to come to terms with the morning as well, rubbing his face on the sheets before blinking his eyes and looking to her.

“Good morning, ma’fen.” He leaned up and kissed her side then whatever bare flesh his lips could find. She let out a hum of approval while running a hand over the top of his head down to the back of his neck.

“Good morning, sleep well?” He nodded before rubbing a palm over one of his eyes to clear the morning dust.

“Yes, very. There was something odd in my dreams last night.” Athena arched a brow while sliding out of bed and walking over towards her wardrobe. She decided to pick the emerald green bandings and smalls and while she was wrapping the smooth silk around her chest he sat up in bed and explained.

“I went to visit the resting place of my friend and there was a strange swirling of energy I had not noticed before.” Athena fought not to still but her hands paused when tucking in the bandings, eyes looking onto the back of her wooden wardrobe as her thoughts raced. Command was probably preparing for whatever ritual they would need to do in order to restore Wisdom to her former glory. Was he that observant that they wouldn’t be able to do it with him watching? She made a small hum to show that she was listening before bending down and sliding on her smalls.

“That is strange. Could you determine its origin?” In the corner of her vision she saw him shake his
head with a small sigh of defeat. Internally she was pleased but she turned towards him and bent down on the bed to kiss his head. His lips twitched into a smirk and he raised his head to catch her lips quickly.

“Unfortunately, no. It could just be a remnant of her passing. Energy doesn’t just disappear; it must have a place to go.” As he was talking she pulled out black long pants and slid into them with a small jump at the end to pull them up as high as they could before she laced a belt through and tightened them. “I could run some tests, but what is done is done.” Athena gave a curt nod, looking over her shoulder with a sympathetic gaze.

“I’m sorry, vhenan. Is there anything I can do to help?” She crawled to where she was kneeling in front of him on the bed and he shook his head with a small chuckle.

“I must endure, Athena.” She instantly leaned forward and kissed him on the brow while whispering against his skin. “Yes but you aren’t alone in this anymore. I’m here for you, Solas.” He reached up to wrap his arms around her and they sat for a moment with his head resting against her chest and her hand drawing small designs onto the surface of his back. He let out a sigh against her chest, hands dropping from her back as he playfully pushed her towards the edge.

“I’ll help you pack, get ready for your trip.” She nodded with a playful wink before turning back to her wardrobe. She chose something similar to a tank top and slid it over before topping it with her thick jacket that would give her some protection from blades. Plus, it had pockets, so that was always a plus. Solas had only put his pants on and was smoothly buzzing around her room. He grabbed potions that had been stocked and an extra pair of foot wrappings that had appeared at some point in the day before on the chest at the end of her bed. She mentally made a note to tell Josephine to only allow certain people into her room, Solas being one of them. By the time she had her foot wrappings on and boots over them he was holding out her pack to her with a soft smile on her face.

Athena swung the bag over her shoulder before arching a brow at him. “Are you not coming down?” He gave a small shake of his head before looking back to the bed.

“I was going to return to the Fade and investigate what I told you about, just one more time. I . . . can do it somewhere else if that bothers you.” Something about him sleeping in her bed when she was gone made her smile. She shook her head and cupped his face with one hand. “Stay here as long as you need. I’m going to try and take him on this mission so you will have the room to yourself.” Kain perked up from the corner of the room and obediently came to her side. Mission? Hunt? Athena hummed in response while keeping her eyes on her elf. He kissed the inside of her palm before using her touch to bring her in closer for a tight embrace. She leaned up on the tips of her toes and wrapped her arms around him tightly, burying her face into his neck while fighting back the tears that wanted to come at the thought of leaving him.
“Ar lath ma, vhenan. Please be safe.” He whispered into the crook of her neck and she leaned back to give him a gentle kiss on the lips.

“You can always find me in the Fade. Rest well, my dream. I will be back sooner than you think.” He gave her a smirk that was mixed with sadness before opening the door for her. Kain bounded out and she stepped through, giving him one last lingering look before shutting the door behind her. She took in a deep breath and let out a shaky sigh before bounding down the stairs where Prince was waiting for her by the gate. Dorian was loading up his horse and she caught a glimpse of a familiar purple potion on his waistband.

Before she even had the opportunity to ask where Cole was he appeared on top of a brown spotted horse. The boy was running his hands along the creature’s mane with a small smile on his face. Dorian slid himself onto his mount with a groan, rubbing his eyes while mumbling incoherent Tevene curses. Athena ignored him with a smirk, gracefully pushing from the ground to slide onto Prince’s saddle. As she was checking her pack and tying it to the rest of the supplies she heard a sharp yelp to her side. Kain had nearly tackled Cullen to the ground and was giving him his version of a farewell. Cullen dropped breakfast meats from his hands during the assault and Athena arched an accusing brow towards him.

“Perhaps I can get him back to his lean weight while we’re gone since he will be not eating that.” She gestured to the meat that even she could smell from up on her horse and Cullen gave her a sheepish green, quickly tossing the wolf the treats before standing up and walking over to Prince’s side.

“It is about time he got some field experience. I can tell he has been itching for something other than Orlesian carriages. Are you all set to leave?” He looked the three horses and she could tell he was assessing with a Commander’s eye. She rolled her eyes and kicked off from his shoulder lightly.

“Yes, sir. I cannot give you a time estimate but hopefully we will return before the Inquisitor does.” Prince let out a small noise of impatience before walking forward without warning. She tightened her thighs against him and gave Cullen an apologetic glance before turning and loosely holding the reigns in her hands. Dorian looked to the Commander with a flirtatious wink.

“Do try to keep the castle from crumbling while we are gone. We know there won’t be much to look at with us gone but keep your chin up, Cullen.” The Tevinter nudged his horse out of the soldier’s sight with a small chuckle. Cole kept to their side as they crossed the bridge and Athena took in a sharp breath from her nose. She looked over her shoulder at the rooftop where she was the night before, a lingering smile playing on her lips.
“Are you guys ready? I ca-” Dorian cut her off with a wave of his hand accompanied by a scoff.

“No need for inspirational speeches, darling. Let’s just get this over with.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the love as always! <3
The ride down the mountain was quick enough, filled with long periods of silence interrupted by Cole attempting to “help” with all of the thoughts flying through her head. Athena could not stop thinking about what they were about to face and how fucking unnerving it was to not have a clue about what was going to happen. There was something thrilling when playing the game for the first time. You could start over if you needed to, reset the difficulty, rearrange your party. Here? This was something that had the lives of her and her friends on the line and it felt like it was on Nightmare mode. Prince and Kain could feel her distress because they were calling up to her in a language that she could only understand. Internally she was just calling it the language of the Wild because the two animals would make quips back and forth at one another.

She’s worried. Kain whined weaving in between Prince’s legs with a small growl. Prince let out a gruff of a sound, twitching his back to jerk Athena from her thoughts.

I can feel it, fur ball. She had to smirk at the two of them. Dorian finally had recovered from his hangover and was sipping on some of his water. He glanced over to her with a curious gaze before smiling.

“I’m still trying to wrap my head around this. You can actually understand that?” He gestured with his flagon to the two animals and they looked back to him with an almost offended gaze. Either they were becoming more expressive or she was just noticing more traits due to their shared link. She let out a small chuckle before nodding and patting Prince on the side of the flank.

“I thought I was going crazy hearing all of these voices in my head but it started to click. They each have an individual voice and attitude. This one in particular with the attitude.” She squeezed the horse with her thighs and he whipped his head to where part of his mane flicked across her face. Prince enjoyed going out of Skyhold; the mountain fortress didn’t allow the horses to sprint and get their exercise. Demmet was good at taking small groups of them across the bridge to run but they still had to go in waves. Athena was half tempted to set the horses at the bottom of the mountains near the Dalish but the halla were proud creatures. They probably wouldn’t get along too well on shared land.

Athena fell back into thought, particularly focusing on what Cole had said the night before. You don’t want to be like her. She tried to cover but she knew he was speaking of Mythal. There were so many mysteries surrounding the shapeshifter mage/Goddess/thing it made her head spin. What differentiated the spirit of Mythal from Flemeth? Were they one in the same? The woman had a way of putting her fingers in as many world-scale events as possible without directly helping. She would normally give her cryptic messages and leave; this story was no different. There was a small
part of her that wondered if she could learn how to turn into a dragon so they could keep the Well or allow Abelas to destroy it.

After seeing so many things tarnished in her world, watching the fate of the well always made her uncomfortable. The options were either give it to a non-elf that was educated in ancient magics or give it to an Inquisitor that could not use it to its full potential. Athena didn’t know what she would do if Rathein asked her to take it. Part of it felt wrong, taking such a large piece of someone else’s culture. She would be akin to the Inquisitor’s and probably squander the gift. Not to mention the rift it would put between Solas and her. Cole looked over and caught her wringing the reigns in her hand and he adjusted his hat on his head.

“You see so many different worlds, different outcomes in your head. They constantly fly back and forth like gnats. How can you tell which ones are real?” Her eyes widened at Cole’s complete, coherent sentences and the bluntness of his question.

Dorian slowed his horse down to where they were striding in a triangle-type formation. “What does he mean different outcomes? Do – wait – !” His eyes lit up like a child receiving a present on Wintersend day. “You know how different choices play out!” Athena slightly winced at the words as she tightened her grip on Prince’s reigns.

“It’s difficult to explain. There are many different key choices that play out. The most obvious one is we could have chosen to go with the Templars instead of the mages and you would have had to fight through a sea of Venatori to try and warn us. You would have been at the gates instead of Cole.” The Tevinter nodded and held his chin in his hand while clicking his tongue on the back of his teeth.

“And I suppose there are more things like this to come?” She gave him a nod, slowly looking up to him with an apologetic gaze that she couldn’t divulge more. Cole made a small hum of realization.

“You can trust him.” Cole stated plainly and Dorian looked over his shoulder at the spirit boy that was in the back of their formation.

“I’m not one for sentiments, but what he said. Is there anything you need to talk out?” The men were both looking at her and she let out an exasperated sigh while relaxing her arms by her sides. She looked into the sky for guidance before biting on the back of her lip in anxiety.

“Ah – I mean. Fuck it I don’t know of how to avoid this but this stays between all three of us. Cole? This goes especially for you.” They both nodded and she pinched the bridge of her nose. “After the Inquisitor returns from the Western Approach we will prepare to march on Adamant
Fortress. It is where the Wardens are kept up and they are under Corypheus’s influence. At one point...the Inquisitor and whoever she brings with her will be dragged into the Fade. Physically.”

Cole winced and crossed his arms over his chest. “That’s bad. Very bad. We shouldn’t be there.”

Dorian on the other hand looked more amused than ever, planning out different theories in his head with a wicked smile on his face. “Fascinating. You know as mages we often visit the Fade in dreams, never thinking what would actually happen if we were there physically. Do you think the Inquisitor would take me along? Could you sneak in a good word for me, Madam Sorciere?” He wiggled his eyebrows at her and brought his horse alongside hers to nudge her with his foot.

She rolled her eyes at him, looking to him with somewhat of a bewildered expression. “Let me get this straight, you’re asking to go into the Fade and fight demons? You’re missing the bigger problem here. In the Fade, there is a demon. It’s one of the largest ones I’ve ever seen and I’ve kind of made it my task to kill the thing.” Her voice came panicked, low, and she could feel sweat beading up on the back of her neck at the thought of it. Spiders weren’t her biggest fear. There was a mixture of things that topped that list: wasps, the deep sea, a creepy girl with long black hair that crawls out of wells. Facing a creature that could use any of those things against her terrified her. The look of fear must have been obvious on her face because he nudged her again to pull her gaze to his.

“Do not worry, Athena. We can help. Well, that is, if you tell the Inquisitor to bring us.” He gave her a playful wink before looking over his shoulder at Cole. They were beginning to get to the mainlands and there was a familiar cool chill that let her know that they were approaching the end of Fall. The phrase *Winter is coming* passed through her mind and she chuckled to herself while Dorian fell back to bring himself next to the spirit boy.

“You’re not possessing a human body? You actually . . . look like that?” The mage was curious and cautious and Athena took the time to look down at Kain, giving him the silent message to go forward and scout for them. The black wolf took off like a bullet down the path in front of them and she could feel their connection in the back of her mind as he went out of sight. It made her nervous to bring him on the trip but he was still a wolf. She needed to focus on his hunting abilities to assess for the potential to bring him on further battles. The Emerald Knights always fascinated her; the fact that elves used to always have a wolf at their side while fighting. . . it was just astounding to her.

Cole perked up at the question. “Yes?”

“But a spirit’s true form is always monstrous, or at least unnatural.”
Athena scoffed with a minor eye roll. “Maybe the one’s you have seen.” Cole nodded and added on.

“The world doesn’t make sense to them. It’s too real. That’s why they look wrong. Like Command in Crestwood! She looked, broken, not her true form.” She looked over her shoulder at him and nodded with a small smirk. Dorian looked Cole up and down before gesturing with his hand.

“And... this is how you want to look?” The vain side of him was showing and she had to smile while digging through her pack to pull out her flagon of water.

“I want to help. Looking doesn’t matter.” Athena nodded in agreement with him, perking her head up when she felt Kain bark out that the coast was clear for them. She nudged Prince with her feet before gesturing with her head towards the other people in her party. Her party. That was strange.

“Kain says the path is clear. Let’s give the horses and a good stretch and we can make camp.” They both gestured for her to lead the way and the three horses took off as the sun began to set.

Whoever had packed their packs were generous. Cole had found some salted meats and breads for them to enjoy as Athena set up the fire. Things were much easier with magic so she made a stone circle like she had learned in the Girl Scouts but then set the wood on fire with a snap of her fingers. Dorian was finished setting up his tent and smirked at the fire, tying the last knot on his tent while Athena tended to the horses and ran a brush through their mane. They trusted her to do their care since they could tell her what spots they needed itched and where they were hurting. She knew minor healing spells, nothing close to Solas’s, but they soothed the mount’s aches well enough.

“Do you need to eat, Cole? Or sleep?” He motioned to Cole’s till packed tent and the boy shrugged while sitting by the fire.

“I thought I had to. But I don’t. The Old Songs can pull me.” Athena recognized this as being a potential reference to the dwarven Titans but ignored it, making soft cooing noises at Cole’s mount while kissing the horse in between the eyes. The three horses were content with their care and they turned into a circle to sleep for the evening.

“That’s something. I don’t know what, but it’s something.” The mage paused for a moment, sitting
next to him while chewing on what looked like a piece of salted pork. “What about when you’re injured? Why do you bleed? Is it because you think you have to?” She laughed and walked over to the fireplace, looking inside the tent and realizing her and Dorian would be sleeping next to each other. She smiled, looking over to her two travel companions with a small feeling of adoration in her chest.

“Is that why you bleed, Dorian?” Cole asked with an innocent tone while he poked the fire with a stick.

Dorian held a finger up to retort but then instantly put it down, shaking his head back and forth. “I – well – yes. You have me there. You are certainly an interesting person, thing, spirit! I had no idea something like you was possible. No wonder Solas likes you.” The spirit hummed and looked over to Athena with almost a knowing look. Even though it had only been roughly twelve hours she missed the elf already. She took the moment to roll back into her mind for a moment, pulling on that connection to the Fade. She didn’t fall enough to full go asleep but she projected a single word into the area for her lover to hear: Safe.

Cole looked back to Dorian. “I’m curious about you, too!” The mage clapped his hands together and smiled his charming smile.

“You can ask me questions, if you like. I’m not sure why’d you want to, but-“

Athena brought herself back with a laugh, rubbing the back of her neck. “You might regret that, friend. He tends to blurt out personal things on a whim.” She looked to the boy and touched the tip of his hat. “No offense, honey. I know you’re just trying to help but you know it can be jarring for people, right?”

The boy nodded. “I just want to help, but sometimes they do not want help. Like you, you shut me out sometimes.” She winced in embarrassment and nodded while breaking off a piece of bread to chew away at her anxieties.

“I – uh – you have me there, Cole. There are just some things you can read in my head that people shouldn’t know yet. “ He cut her off, his face going blank in the expression that he wore when he was reading people.

“Whole world left behind, peoples, faces, that nobody will ever know.” She let out a sigh and hung her head low. “Yeah - exactly like that, sweetheart. Great example.” He paused and reached over to touch the top of her knee in and awkward and nearly forced gesture. She smiled at him and put her hand over his, squeezing it with a small laugh. “You help, Cole. Don’t worry. Are you sure we
can’t set up your tent for you? I don’t want you sitting out here all night.”

He looked to the open area and shook his head. “I will be fine. If it hurts you to think of me out here I can make you forget.” Dorian’s eyes widened and she just shook her head.

“Try to use that ability as little as you can. People need to learn from experiences, Cole. If they forget everything, how else will they change for the better?” He fell into silence, his eyes trained on the fire as he fought through all of his thoughts. He nodded in response, pulling his knees to his chest to relax. She assumed that was his way of relaxing so she leaned over and kissed him on top of the head over the hat, patting his shoulder as Dorian stood from his spot as well.

“Good night. If you want to switch let me know and you can sleep in my bedroll.” There was a small twitch of his had that she interpreted as a nod so she crouched into the tent after Dorian. He instantly undid a clasp on his jacket and shrugged off the apparent Tevinter styled garment. She wasn’t surprised to see he wore a thin tank top-type undershirt and she gave him obvious elevator eyes, clapping her hands with a smirk as he took that off as well. The game wasn’t wrong. He was a well sculpted man but thank goodness, he was not attracted to women or else she would have had her hands full with decisions.

“Good for you, Dorian.” She slid her own tank top off and smoothed out the bandings that were rolling uncomfortably under her ribs. He looked down at himself before playfully throwing his jacket at her.

“Don’t let the secret get out how devilishly handsome I am or I’ll never get a moment to myself! Good to see you didn’t wither away and learned how to eat. You’ve toned up a bit since Haven yourself, dear.” He grabbed a hand and spun her in a dance and she pushed away from him with a laugh, playing bashful and covering her torso up.

“Behave. Or – “

“Or you’ll sick your boyfriend on me? Please. I’m absolutely terrified.” He teased before sitting on his bedroll and peeling his boots off. She followed suit and kept on the foot wrappings before sliding underneath the blankets of her bedroll. She turned and blew out the candle that rested between them before setting back on her pillow. The Fade was only moments away when he smirked and reached out to poke her with hand.

“I am glad you are happy, dear. It looks good on you.” She reached out and squeezed his hand in return and didn’t let go until she drifted off into the darkness of sleep.
I posted this right at the stroke of midnight in my time zone!

Happy New Years, everyone. Thank you for your continued support. I'm thankful for each and every one of you.
She kept clicking in and out of the Fade during the night. Part of her wanted to stay partially awake to keep on watch. Kain was sleeping out by the fire next to Cole and would give her small mental nudges of what he was hearing or smelling. Most of the time he simply said *Rabbit* or *Fox*, but at one point he thought he caught onto a stray scent of human. The thought of having to fight someone in the depth of the night kept her slightly on edge. Dorian slept like a corpse and he didn’t even roll over to readjust his position in the night. When she did fall into the Fade, Command was the first one to pop into vision. Athena’s visage flickered in between sleep and consciousness and it was reflected in her form in the dreamscape.

The spirit looked her up and down quickly and realized exactly how thin her connection to the Fade was that night. “I see you have begun my mission. Who did you bring with you as your companions?”

Athena shrugged before stating plainly: “Compassion and a mage like myself. They are my friends.”

Command let out a small “humph” of approval before gesturing for her to leave. “You are headed in the right direction. The creature you seek is on the edge of the wild. A former Witch of the Wilds refused his presence within the thick of the Korcari Wilds but did not slay him herself.”

Her eyes widened and her jaw nearly dropped. “Wait – are you saying she *couldn’t* slay him or she didn’t even try?” The spirit gave a wicked smile while tapping a finger on the side of her head.

“The latter, girl. It was not worth her time but she banished him to the edges of her territory.” The spirit summoned a map with a wave of her hand and reinforced in Athena’s mind where the cave was located. She let out a groan of reluctance, walking forward and touching her hand to it while nodding. Command let out a scoff while looking to the side with an almost snarl on her lips. “He looks for you, even here.” There was the familiar look chill through the Fade and she let a soft smile come to her lips, trying to hide it from the spirit by covering her mouth with her hand in an attempt to look pensive while examining the map.

“I will not argue your terms for this quest, Command, but he did not agree with him so much. I will return to the waking world. Thank you for this.” She tapped her hand onto the map before bowing her head to the spirit. She could feel Solas’s pull from the Fade and she knew if she allowed him in she would be tempted to stay asleep or break and tell him what completely was happening and what Command’s specific words were as to why he couldn’t come. Athena sighed upon waking,
rubbing her eyes with the corner of her hand before sitting up and sliding her shirt back on. Dorian was making small noises of protest, supporting himself on his forearms in a poor attempt to get up.

She looked over to him and smiled, scratching her hair before using a ribbon around her wrist to pull it up into a messy ponytail on top of her head. “Good morning, darling. You look smashing.” His hair was skewed to the side and his normally perfectly groomed mustache was in disarray from being pressed against a pillow all night. He arched a single brow at her with a smirk.

“Don’t I always? You get the lucky privilege of seeing me in all of this glory.” He gestured to his face and hair which drew a chuckle out of her. She adjusted her bandings before walking out of the tent. Cole was playing with Kain the best he could. The wolf was bringing what looked to be a bloodied rabbit’s bone to the boy and he would throw it. It was a morbid game of fetch but it had Cole in a good mood so she couldn’t complain. Kain instantly looked to Athena and his ears perked up. Hunt? Food? Cole looked to her with a wry smile.

“He wants to run with you.” Athena tilted her head with a small hum of musing.

“You can listen to animals as well?” Cole gave a mixture of a nod and a shrug.

“You two are connected. He helps you and you help him.” She rubbed the back of her neck before calling out over her shoulder. “Dorian! Any requests for breakfast?” From within the tent she heard him rustle around before calling out in the most sarcastic tone she figured he could manage that early in the morning.

“Eggs from a menopausal dove, ham cut from the hide of an award-winning hog, and some of the greatest wine from Minrathous. That ought to do, thanks!” Athena rolled her eyes before looking to Cole who only shrugged in response. Kain was nearly hopping around at her side and she broke into a bit of a jog with him before shifting. The two were stark opposites hunting: his fur pitch black and hers a stark white. They weaved through the trees without having to send messages and cues as to where the hunt was heading. He was the first creature that had really bonded with her and it wasn’t through magic. She had raised and fed him during the Hinterlands and on the long journey home. Even though the Haven pack had raised him in the wild when she was gone, it was her home he returned to every night. Claw had confessed that the pup slept in his small bed that was outside of her hut whenever she was gone. She had her adopted elven child and apparently a furred one as well.

The pair brought pack a few hares within their mouth and Kain had a fox hanging from his maw. He unceremoniously dropped it at Cole’s feet but the boy didn’t mind. He reached forward and scratched the wolf behind the ear even though there was fresh blood dripping from his mouth. The assassin then drew out his blade and began to skin the fox while humming a song that was like a song she had sung before around the campfire. Athena shifted back and chuckled when she
realized she was still holding a rabbit between her teeth. She opened her mouth and dropped it into
her hands just as Dorian was finishing up packing up the tent.

He didn’t hide the instant look of disgust, scoffing while taking a step back. “I don’t think I’m ever
going to get used to that. You have a little something here, dear.” He motioned to the entirety of his
lower face and she laughed while bringing a cloth from her pack to clean her face. They ate and
were back on the road.

The further south they got, the more the landscape began to twist in a way. It was nothing that she
had really seen before. The days passed on just like that. They would rest, hunt, and continue on
while making awkward talk through the days. Sometimes Cole would make himself disappear and
Dorian would fall asleep sitting up on his horse so it was just Athena talking to Prince and Kain in
the Wild tongue. Surprisingly, they had not come across many bandits or enemies along the road.
Athena choked it up to the Wilds being sick as Cole explained it. The Blight had moved in and left
its scar upon the world. Many of the Darkspawn originated in the Korcari Wilds; that was the
reason Ostagar was so heavily devastated. Every day that passed increased the dread that was
sitting at the front of their minds. Athena constantly felt like she was being watched but every night
she sent the message of “safe” to her love back home.

One night before camp they had decided to set up their tents by a gnarled statue of something
ancient. The creation looked to be made from jade and the creature it was modeled after had
hooves for feet. Its body twisted up towards the reeds growing behind it, hands covering its face in
a pose of eternal suffering. Athena arched a brow at the thing, transferring her weight to one hip
while whistling a low tone. Her lute was on her back since Cole was requesting songs the closer
they got the wilds. Dorian jumped down from his horse and winced at the statue, throwing his
hands into the air with a sarcastic smirk.

“Yes, let’s camp next to the terrifying statue in the middle of nowhere. Fantastic idea, fearless
leader.” She kicked some dirt in his direction and used pulses of magic to remove sharp rocks from
their sleeping area. They had created a quick routine for setting up camp so she could explore the
Fade and converse with Command about where they were headed. The creature, or whatever it
was, was always in the same place so she had to be thankful that they weren’t chasing it around the
Wilds. There was also a lingering though in the back of her head that it knew they were coming and
was setting up a trap.

Either thought brought an anxious twist to her belly that could only be soothed by a sip of wine that
Dorian had packed in his bag. It was of the sweeter variety and she wondered if he packed it for her
since it was the kind he frequently found her drinking in the tavern or the library. The alcohols in
Thedas had a much harder kick than the ones she was used to. Probably due to the water filters and
technology, she thought to herself with a small eye roll. Cole was bringing out the jerky from their
pack since it was becoming more and more dangerous to hunt as they grew closer. They hadn’t
necessarily seen anything terrifying, it was just a general feeling they were all getting. The spirit
boy refused hearing any sort of song. There was just a tension that set him on edge. Cole had also
started prying in on more of Dorian’s personal thoughts and Athena knew exactly where that
“Why are you so angry at your father? He wants to help and you know he does, but – “

The Tevinter sighed through clenched teeth and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m not certain I can explain it to you, Cole.”

Athena took a chew of jerky and sat silently on the edge of the campfire. She spun her wrist and brought stones together to make a safe place for the fire before snapping her fingers together to bring forth the flame. Cole stood up and looked to Dorian with a confused look.

“You love him, but you’re angry. They mix together, boiling in the belly until it kneads into a knot.”

She let out a sigh and walked over to Dorian with a somewhat knowing sympathetic look. The mage let out a defeated sigh before throwing his bedroll out into the tent. “Sometimes...sometimes love isn’t enough, Cole.”

Before the boy could press on she put her body between the two with hands up in a surrendered pose. “Cole, sometimes those that love us hurt us the most. When you let someone in and open yourself up to someone, you leave yourself vulnerable to the most amount of hurt.” He looked to her and from his expression she could tell he was slowly realizing what she meant.

“Like in battle. If you don’t protect yourself the people who get the closest do the damage.” She nodded while shooting an apologetic glance over towards Dorian. He had composed himself again and she walked to his side while their other companion was brushing the horses and Kain.

“How much do you know about my father, Athena?” There was a bluntness to his words she could not deny. Athena let out a sigh and came into line of sight, leaning her back against one of the poles that held up their tent.

“I’m assuming you want the truth?” He nodded silently and she met his gaze. “A good bit, unfortunately. I’m not terribly fond of the man from what I know, but I know things are complicated. I cannot even begin to imagine how you feel, Dorian. I’m so sorry.” The cut scene between her friend and his father played throughout her mind and she bit back the tears that threatened to cloud her gaze. You tried to – change me! The Tevinter cursed in a foreign language under his breath and went into the tent without another word. She could feel the tension coming off
of him so she grabbed her lute from Prince’s back and sat by the flames.

“What were your parents like, Athena?” Cole’s voice was soft, pleading as he looked to her across the flames. She perked up from her position and met his eyes.

“Can you not feel them in my thoughts?” He shook his head and looked surprised.

“Distant, twisted. Your hurt connects you but their voices comes in whispers. Where are you, our little Key?” Athena’s voice caught within her throat and she instantly put her face within her hands. Key. That was her parents’ nickname for her when she went by Victoria. Vicky was what many people called her at school, but for her parents? It was just Key. Cole must have been able to sense that somehow because Solas was the only one who knew her original name. “They missed you. Time, skewed, faded, not aligned.” His face tilted to the side and she looked up with a tear-stained gaze. Dorian had come out from the tent and was now mirroring the sympathetic look she had given him earlier.

“What are you saying? Not-aligned? Twisted? I – I don’t understand.” She looked between him and Dorian. The mage looked down to the ground and nodded while looking to Cole with a curious smirk that had a dark undertone.

“I think I get it. They don’t move the same, right, Cole? You say they’re not aligned. . . “ The time-wizard caught on before Athena did and when she did her legs grew weak underneath her. She leaned onto a nearby tree and used its strength to prop herself up, eyes wide with her lips partially parted.

“Is it faster or slower, Cole?”

The boy closed his eyes and she could almost feel him pull on the threads of memory that connected her to her parents. “Faster. They’re faster. Slipping farther and farther away.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the love as always!
In My Heart

Chapter Notes

I decided to try a thing!

This is literally my first drawing I've ever really sat down and tried. But: I wanted to make something cute with Leafy and Athena.

http://i.imgur.com/XwIiFl6.png?1

(It's my baby; be nice.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Athena felt her body go cold as her eyes went wide. She gripped her hands onto her upper arms as her legs turned to jelly underneath her. Dorian instantly stepped in behind her and wrapped his arms around her in a moment of surprising affection. He tried to bring her back to reality by whispering words of apologies into her ear but she couldn’t hear them through the haze of her reality. Somehow, the times between her world and Thedas were... off somehow? Logically it made sense. She already knew of their world so she had to be in front of their time somehow. But her world was still even further away? Her mind couldn’t exactly wrap around it but it felt like her heart was torn from her chest and thrown into a rift. Cole came in front of her and hovered his hands over her shoulders, trying to find exactly where he went wrong in the features of her face.

“I’m sorry! I made it worse. I was just trying to help. Your hurt – it’s connected with your family but not like Dorian’s. You miss them and they love you! – “ Dorian looked up towards the spirit boy and cut him off with a sharp tone.

“Not. Now. Cole. Help me get her to the ground.” Cole steadied her by putting his hands on her hips and Dorian was at her back as she was lowered to the hard ground. The mage’s legs were on either side of her with his hands wrapped around her waist. His grip on her was tight and even with the sobbing she was thankful. He was anchoring her to the present. He was warm, family. Kain whined at her side and pressed his body up against Dorian’s leg so that he could be close to her. Even though he was getting fur hair on his clothes, the Tevinter did not say anything as she worked her way through the racking silent cries that left her lips.

Cole crouched by her feet, hat covering his gaze as he looked to the ground with a small sigh. Athena let her hands drop from her upper arms to grip onto Dorian’s, falling back into his chest with a pained whine. It took a few minutes but she finally quieted down to a point where hot, silent tears were falling down her face. She could feel that her eyes were raw and her cheeks were splotchy from her breakdown but she didn’t care. Somewhere in the distant future her family was hurting... and now she was too.
Dorian looked up to the spirit at their feet who looked like he was about to try something. Athena could feel him in the corners of her mind and she was too tired to fight him off. She tightened her grip on Dorian’s arms and nodded to whatever question he was about to ask. The mage at her back had other plans, stiffening behind her with a scowl on his lips. “I think that’s enough prying for one day. Let’s get you to bed, Amatus, we have a big day coming up.” He went to help her stand but Cole held a hand out, finally looking up from the brim of his hat with a hopeful yet blank gaze. “I found something. It will help. Then sleep.” He looked to Dorian who simply looked down to Athena for permission. Again, wordlessly, she nodded. He took her hands into his, patting them on top while reciting words plainly without rhyme or reason, his brows furrowing as he tried to piece them together. “Come stop your crying, it will be alright. Just take my hand, hold it tight.” He spoke them as a sentence but she knew them as a song, tears flowing freely as her gaze widened. It had been a song her family loved. Her parents had raised her on the love stories and children’s stories that she shared with the people in this world. They provided happiness and music to the darker times of their life, as few as they could be. The movies and musicals that they watched together brought them closer as a family. The words he spoke, the song he had unearthed from the memories of her mind brought all of the memories associated with it to the front of her mind. “I will protect you from all around you. I will be here.” He squeezed her hands and she smiled at him, sitting up from Dorian’s chest even though his hands remained tight over her stomach. “I will be here. Don’t you cry, Athena.”

A hurt and hopeful chuckle fell from her lips. She leaned forward while pulling Cole towards her into a tight hug. He tightened at first but relaxed once he realized that the touch helped her hurt. He wrapped his arms around her and Dorian slowly brought his legs back and came to a kneeled position behind them. He moved to where there was a single hand resting on her back, the other hand casting quick wards around the camp. She could feel the heat of his magic pulsing through the air and it was something similar to her own. As Cole was in her touch she uttered the next words of the song in a whisper, the tone of her voice rising and falling to the melody of the song.

“For one so small, you seem so strong. My hands will hold you, keep you safe and warm.” Dorian’s thumb stroked on her back and she reached over her shoulder to find his hand, squeezing it while shooting him a grateful glance. The tears were slowed and there was some of her normal light returning to her features. “This bond between us can’t be broken. I will be here, don’t you cry.” She kept on his hand and dropped her eyes to the ground while pulling on the memories of her parents. They swirled through her mind and brought a rush of emotions. It caused her magic to tingle on her skin and transfer to the boy in front of her and the man at her back. Cole twitched and she heard Dorian hum with what she thought was a smile on his lips.

“’Cause you’ll be in my heart. Yes, you’ll be in my heart.
From this day on, forever more. You’ll be in my heart.
No matter what they say. You’ll be here in my heart, always.”
She let out a shaky sigh while pulling all of the memories from her former world back into her mind. They would always be a part of her. They helped shape her to become the adult that was brave enough to survive in a world where dragons roamed the skies. Her family, her friends, even the random strangers on the street helped her in ways that allowed her to endure. She would never forget them but the hurt of potentially leaving them behind needed to fade, for now. There would always be time to properly grieve but for now? Now there was a task at hand. With a deep breath and a sigh, she let them drift into the back of her mind. Cole’s presence was still there and he hummed with a smile. Athena opened her eyes and smiled at him, touching his cheek gently with her hand.

“Yes, my dear. You helped. That... really helped, actually.” Dorian broke the over emotional scene with a playful scoff. He removed his hand from her back and wiped his together like he was ridding the overly touchy feelies from his skin.

“I thought my father was bad, but you don’t even have your parents here! Maker help us.” She looked to him and he gave her a playful wink. She pushed him backwards in an attempt to upset his magic.

“Oh no, you don’t get away that easily. I may be a world away from my parents but blood magic tops that any day, good sir. Get in that tent we’re going to bed. Cole, you too.” Dorian’s eyes widened as he opened the tent flap.

“What!? Uh – fine. He sleeps on your side. As well as this brute, here. There is nothing for you there!” He scolded Kain as the wolf was nose-deep into his crotch. The mage pushed Kain back before ducking into the tent and instantly flopping onto his bedroll on the side of the tent. Athena followed in and gestured for Cole to lay down first. The spirit arched a brow and stiffened into an uncomfortable posture. She rolled her eyes and got into her bedroll while making sure there was enough room for him if he decided to sleep next to her. They were an odd bunch in that tent: a wolf, a Tevinter, a spirit, and an otherworlder... but they were her odd little bunch. Kain settled by the top of her head and rested his head on top of her pillow with a small puff of air.

For the first time in their venture she took in a deep breath and purposely rolled her mind into the Fade. She trusted her friend’s wards and tonight she needed the touch of her lover. Her body appeared within the swirling dream land and she was instantly greeted by Inspiration, who was trying to hide a guilty and sympathetic expression. Athena walked forward and brought her friend into an embrace. The spirit let out a sigh and hugged her in return, squeezing her body while breaking the silence. “That was beautiful and painful at the same time, my friend. Are you alright?”

They broke apart and Athena wiped off any reminiscent tears from her face while nodding. She let out a small laugh before shrugging it away. “A typical successful road trip with friends in my world involves emotional breakdowns at one point. I just reached mine before Cole and Dorian. It strangely helped though; I didn’t realize how much I was worrying about my parents and family...
back home.” There was a faked tone of happiness mixed in with her words.

The spirit smiled and stepped back while keeping a hand on her shoulder. “Compassion has a way of helping people in odd ways. Are you close to your destination?” There was worry within her friend’s voice and Athena nodded while rubbing the back of her neck.

“We found this really strange statue. Command also said something about a former Witch of the Wilds banishing this creature to the edge of the Korcari Wilds. I can feel we are close. There is a strange magic in the air and I don’t know exactly how to place my finger on it. Now if you don’t mind, my friend.-“ She stepped forward and pressed her forehead to Inspiration’s with an almost nostalgic smile on her face. “I have someone I really need to catch up with. It’s been almost a week since I’ve fully dreamed in the Fade and I’m sure they’re worried about me.”

Inspiration mimicked the gesture with a smile. “Oh he has. Go on then, find your muse, Athena.” The spirit pushed her off onto a path in the Fade and Athena began walking down a fairly beaten path in the Fade. It pushed through a glen she pulled on her thoughts of Solas to bring herself to him. He was in front of a large wall, similar to his rotunda at Skyhold. He had charcoal in his hand and was sketching out a next piece and she arched a brow at it. He was in his normal garb except his sleeves were rolled up past his elbow and she could see small smudges of charcoal on his face and arms where he was working.

The design was not something she was familiar with. It wasn’t the towering pieces of art he typically made in his rotunda. This one appeared to be shorter and longer. She remained silent while she walked up behind him, eyes casting over the basics of his drawings. “That one is new.”

He stilled and looked down to this side with an incredulous stare. She rubbed her chin with one hand and reached out to the touch the basic charcoal outline he had drawn. It looked like a wolf standing sideways, fangs bared and growling. He nodded and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. “It is. It helps to outline things in the Fade so I can recreate the motion when I wake. How is your mission? Have you succeeded?” His tone was platonic and almost pointed which made her smile. She came in between him and the wall to wrap her arms around him and rest her head against his chest.

He let out a soft sigh before dropping the charcoal to wrap his arms around her in return. She noted that he was holding her slightly tighter than usual, pulling her into his embrace while allowing his body to relax. “Are you alright, vhenan?” He nodded with a soft smile, chucking into the top of her hair.

“Your small updates have not been successful in calming my worry, ma’fen. Something also feels like it is weighing you down. Is something troubling you?” She took a step back from him and gingerly rested her back against the blank canvas of a wall he was working with.
“We were talking about my family before bed tonight. Cole made an interesting observation that apparently, time here and time where I’m from . . . don’t match up quite right.” She put her hands in front of her with palms facing towards her chest, extending her fingers, and moving them to represent the times of her world and Thedas. Solas’s gaze widened in curiosity with a small hum of acknowledgement and realization.

“What does that mean to you, Athena?”

She shrugged with a hollow sound of surrender, dropping her hands to rest on the tops of her thighs. “I don’t know, honestly. I figure that means if I ever find a way back things might not be the same. Who knows when I would be returning to.”

His expression hardened and he wiped the charcoal off on his pants. “Do you plan on returning home?”

“Honestly . . . I came here when the Breach was opened. Logically that would then mean I would need another Breach for me to return home. What kind of selfish person would I be to wish that upon the world again? So, no. I don’t, I guess. The more realistic option is that I can’t . . . get in touch with them ever again. My last memories are the last memories I’ll ever have with them. That was part of what Cole helped me with tonight. It may hurt a little when I think of my family and everything that was left behind, but I’ll never truly be without them. I have a life here now. I have friends, family, you.” The words were convincing; Athena even believed them for now. She stepped forward and gripped the front of his shirt, bringing her gaze up to meet his. “Whatever I used to have, whoever I used to be, is behind me. I don’t want to return a world that doesn’t have you in it, Solas.”

His lips twitched into a smirk and he let the hardened points of his expression fade away. “That feeling is mutual then.” She joined in his smile while reaching up to touch his cheek gently. He held her hand against his face while kissing the inside of her palm in a gesture soft enough to bring a gasp from her lips. “I will not keep you here, Athena. You should be focused on your mission. I will be here at Skyhold when you return. Be safe. Ar lath ma, vhenan.”

She smiled and nodded, slowly pulling on her connection to the waking world with fresh tears in her eyes. “Ar lath ma, Solas.”

Chapter End Notes

Song: You'll Be In My Heart - Phil Collins (For the feeeeeeeeeels).
Thank you for the love and support as always!
Athena woke feeling refreshed with a smile on her face. Cole was ‘sleeping’ in between her and the tent’s edge and Kain had moved to be his pillow for the evening. Dorian was still asleep and had managed to stay in his clothes for the entire night. He had a habit of sleep stripping when it got too hot. She silently moved from the tent and began to break down unnecessary things and load up the horses. Prince was uncharacteristically nervous, constantly moving in his space while being tied up to the tree. The air feels sick. I don’t want to stay here. The horse said with a flick of his mane, meeting his friend’s eyes with a displeased expression. She nodded and looked out at the area around them. The twisting trees were becoming thick and there were periods of swamp-like ground where their shoes were sinking into something thick that released a foul smell. They were close. It was a guess she had in her gut, like a growing tension in a cord that felt like it was going to snap.

Cole appeared behind her, looking around the area before confirming her suspicions with a nod. “Something dark is close by. A sick, slimy song that scares. We should be careful.” Athena nodded and walked back to the tent. Dorian’s staff was lying next to him in the bedroll and he was sleeping with his hand over it. She nudged the bottom of his foot with hers, her expression hardened as the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. He groaned with a slight inflection on the end, wordlessly asking why he was being nudged awake.

“Something’s up. We’re leaving the horses and camp here and exploring. I think the cave is nearby.” He instantly opened his eyes and looked to her, realizing that the serious tone was already set for the day.

“I hear you. Let’s go then.” He grabbed his staff and exited the tent, only taking a moment to run his hand through his hair and straighten out his locks. She had her hair pulled up into a high messy bun on top of her head. She left her boots behind in the tent and kept her foot wrappings on. The air was thick with dark magic and she wanted to feel more grounded, connected to the natural magic that ran within the earth. Cole had his blades at his side and looked over to her, waiting on orders.

“Grab all of the potions you can carry and get some food in your stomach. We’ll leave in a few minutes.” The group worked around the camp silently. The tension was almost palpable in the air and Athena found herself deep in thought, idly chewing on a piece of salted pork while twirling a thin bottle of lyrium in her hand. She sipped on it in between bites of meat while Dorian brought out a skull from his pack, running his hand along its top.

“What is that?” She asked, breaking the silence while nodding in the direction of the skull. He smirked and bounced it back and forth between his hands.
“It’s the item I use to channel my necromancy magic. I’m getting a feeling that it’s going to be coming in handy soon.” Athena arched a brow, extending her magic to touch the skull. There was a spiritual energy within it that made her wolf ring vibrate against her finger and grow hot.

“Do you know who it belonged to?” Dorian shrugged and casually spun the skull on the tip of his finger.

“I imagine it to be a cranky widow who died surrounded by her riches and furs wearing a robe of marvelous black silk. It is why we get along so well.” He then kissed the top of the skull before hooking it on the side of his belt next to his potions and a spell book bound in a dark-skinned leather. Cole spun his daggers in his hand before sliding them into the sheathes on his belt, nodding to them that he was ready to go. Athena pushed up from her position in the camp before wiping off her pants and shirt.

“Any sappy comments of love and affection before we head out?” She smiled sarcastically to them both. Cole remained silent with an awkward shrug while Dorian gave a charismatic grin.

“You know how much I love those, darling. Let’s get on with it.” He spun his staff and she led them through the forest, quickly throwing a barrier over their campsite before walking past the odd, gnarled statue and continuing behind it. The pressing feeling of dark magic grew and it felt like within minutes they were at the mouth of the cave. She had a mini-flashback of her times in the Fade and felt a hum of connection between the image in her head and what was in front of her. The darkness of the cave had a sick singing coming from it, the wind swirling and blowing her hair back.

Cole shuddered, gripping a hand onto one of his daggers. “It’s here.”

Dorian scoffed. “Yeah, no shit, Cole.” His voice was riddled with doubt and Athena rubbed her hands together before opening her palm. Her ring hummed and she quickly summoned her staff to her right hand and gripped it into existence. Kain whined at her left, pressing his side into her leg as she looked down to him.

“Are you sure you want to come? I don’t want you getting hurt.”

He growled in response and stayed by her side, looking into the cave with a look of determination. She made a mental note to get him a collar or armor made with enchantments when they returned, no matter how ridiculous it looked. She led the party into the cave and automatically something felt wrong. In the shadows, it appeared that the walls were moving and there was only a dim light in the back of the cave. When they were all in the cave, the light disappeared from outside and she
cursed silently under her breath.

“And. . . so here you are.”

The voice was strained, old, tired, but it echoed throughout the cave effortlessly. The walls twitched in response and she placed her staff in front of her. Kain growled, his hackles raised as he stayed by her side. They moved forward and she caught the side of a creature skittering at the corner of her vision.

“You, who have been blessed by spirits.”

The voice laughed and Dorian let out a sound of discomfort behind her. “That is entirely unnerving.” The laugh continued as she took cautious steps forward. Something ran over her foot and she twitched in response, stabbing her staff down with a burst of energy. The walls seemed to vibrate with activity as she pulled up her staff to look at the bottom. There was a spider still twitching in its last moments of life and she flicked it to the ground.

“I, however, have been blessed by more powerful things.”

They turned a corner and they found the light source for the cave. It was a floating magelight in the top of the large area. Athena swore a dragon could have fit in there but she was too distracted by the towering pile of bones in front of her. It nearly touched the ceiling and at the top of the pile was a creature engulfed by shadow. It bowed in greeting before coming into the dim light of the candle while wearing a manic smile.

“You should have brought your armies, Sorcière. You are no match for mine!”

They looked up to see him fully for the first time. He was a creature eaten away by time and power, body thin from the waist up. Dark, stringy hair fell down to his back and there were large deep scars all over his torso and arms. From the waist down. . . Athena had to squint her gaze to see it correctly. Instead of legs his lower half was that of a spider, eight large legs clicking against the ancient bones that he stood on top of. He had blood stained on his mouth and chest and suddenly her entire body went cold, hand gripping the staff.

“How do you know me, creature?” Her voice was shaken but loud, reaching the creature who simply threw his hands up into the air. The light above them strengthened from his magic and illuminated the entire cave. The walls appeared to be moving due to the presence of hundreds and
spiders big and small. They coated the walls and the floor and were skittering across the top of her feet.

“My children tell me everything I need to know! You have wasted the gifts you have been given! You do not know how to use them properly. I, Th’arack, have had years of time to master them.” His voice twisted into a hateful tone as he pointed accusingly down towards her. The spiders’ movements were frantic but rhythmic, she assumed with his heartbeat. Kain bit at the creatures that threatened to come towards him.

“You have been twisted by yours, creature. You shame the spirit who blessed you before and I am here to collect that debt.” She pulled her staff forward and slammed its bottom into the ground, expanding her barrier to her party members. Cole was making himself hidden but she could feel him creeping along the sides of the cave while staying out of sight. Dorian had his staff gripped tightly in his hand while his other hovered over the skull. She heard him murmuring spells underneath his breath and his magic filled the room with an increased sense of dread.

“You can try, girl. I will add your bones to my collection and this world will forget your names.” He flicked a hand towards her and from all sides spiders began to shriek and scurry towards them. She quickly looked over her shoulder and called out: “Light it up, Dorian!”

He smiled and called back: “I have a better idea! Give me a minute!”

Her eyes widened in a moment of fear but she nodded, dismissing her staff for a moment while clapping her hands together. Flames came forth in her palms and she expanded her hands outwards, creating two streams of flames that came out like ribbons to surround her body. They swirled and she moved her hands in synchronous motions around her while moving forward. Any spider that came towards her was incinerated if its size was small enough. The larger spiders attempted to squelch the flames by spitting their poison at her but the constant flow of flames kept it at bay.

Cole was appearing and disappearing through the cave, slashing his daggers through the more poisonous spiders that were launching balls of ichor at her. Kain snarled at her side and ran with Cole to sink his teeth into the weakened spiders, throwing legs in every direction he could. Athena had to fight to maintain a barrier around her beast that was letting loose in the cave. It felt like things weren’t going so bad until she heard a call from the top of the bones.

“Your choice in a familiar was a poor one, Witch. Let’s see how he does against mine!” Th’arack raised a hand towards the top of the cave and she could feel a pulse of magic resonate from his hand. The room stilled and the scurrying creatures sang their songs of excitement towards the sky.
Athena could hear their high pitches voices in her head, their voices like a pounding drum that echoed within her mind. She continued her onslaught of flames, bringing back the flaming streams from her hands to take in a deep breath and exhale an arch of fire in front of her. When she was done, she gave a quick glance at the necromancer behind her. He had created a glyph of flame around her that burst anytime a spider stepped on it while he hovered his hand over his spell book and recited spells in a rhythmic language she could not understand. The bone pile began to shudder as he extended a hand towards it. Her attention was torn as the largest spider in the room made its way towards Kain with red lyrium pulsating on its thorax and legs.

The wolf turned to the challenge with a snarl and she screamed in protest, creating a whip of flame and throwing it around the spider Queen’s legs closest to her. She pulled back and tripped the creature and Kain made a move to lunge forward. Athena screamed out in the language of the Wild, eyes flashing into a golden wolven hue as she did.

*Don’t! Poisoned blood!*

He instantly froze and let out a frustrated wine, shooting her a nervous glance before turning his attention to a closer, non-poisoned, spider. The Queen shrieked and turned its full focus towards her and she took a step back toward Dorian, screaming in frustration: “Anytime now, Princess!”

She retracted the fire whip and continued to snap it towards the Queen in an attempt to get her to back up away from them and towards a wall. Th’arack stood in his position at the top of the bones, screaming down in his own arachnid language towards the swirling army of spiders that continued to come from the crevices of the cave. The Queen continued on her path, venom dripping from her fangs. Dorian managed to crack a smile as necromantic magic swirled around his body and gave a darkness to his features that he could not shake.

“That’s *Mr. Princess to you!*” He slammed his staff into the cave floor hard enough for it to puncture the rock and stand up on its own. He reached forward towards the pile of bones and she could feel his magi push past her in a wave. Suddenly, Athena felt very untrained in the midst of his power. It nearly suffocated her and she had to smile as the bone pile began to shudder and move at his command. Slowly bone fragments rolled towards him and reformed piece by piece, creating troops of skeleton warriors that followed his command. They picked up sharpened bones that could not be reformed and ran with shrilling cries that echoed off the walls of the cave.

The darkness of the cave was dwindling with each spider’s death, causing their leader to scream while clawing at his face from the top of the bone pile that was crumbling beneath him. Kain finished off his kill and retreated to stand behind Athena and in front of Dorian. She could feel the thrill of the hunt pounding within his chest, energizing every nerve that ran through his body. For a
moment, she smiled until she felt something wrap around her ankle.

In a slowed moment, she looked down to see a string of sticky web stuck to her skin. By the time her gaze followed its trail she was being jerked towards the Queen. There was a wicked look to the familiar’s gaze. Athena could see herself in the reflection of her many eyes and all she saw looking back at her was helplessness. She summoned her staff and stabbed it towards the spider. She was able to get one, two stabs in before the Queen shrieked and pulled Athena directly under her thorax.

Athena looked to her face, distracted by the red lyrium lighting up the spider’s gaze. In that moment, she didn’t see the sharpened barb coming from the lower abdomen of the Queen, blighted lyrium glowing from its point as it penetrated her shoulder and pinned her to the cave floor.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks as always for the love and support!

For those wondering why I didn't have the creature look the same as the statue: I saw something similar to the statue when I was home for the holidays at the local botanical gardens. It just seemed really cool and I figured with how old the Korcari Wilds were there would be old, cryptic statues littered throughout the place.
There were no words to describe the piercing heat as the lyrium tipped barb went through her shoulder. Athena screamed, pushing her staff up through the abdomen of the spider and tearing upwards to end the Queen as her ichor-tainted blood bathed down upon her. The barb broke off from the carcass and remained in her body as she stood. Her staff trembled within her grasp, the lyrium pulsing in time with her heart. She could hear the broken song that Cole described when he spoke of the stuff, it sounding like an off-key hum within the back of her mind. Was it corrupting her already? How did it even get within the cave?

“The Elder One’s reach is far, Fen’Elgara.”

Th’arack’s legs clicked against the cave floor and that was all she was able to hear, even over the roar of battle between the remaining spiders and Dorian’s skeleton troops. His children must have thought her to be doomed because they now completely avoided her and turned their focused towards her party members. Cole was nowhere to be found and she could only hope he managed to escape the cave. Athena fell to her knees as her hand gripped over the end of the barb. She tried to pull it out but it burned hot within her hand, causing her to recoil as Command’s former chosen came in front of her.

He bent down and put a clawed finger underneath her chin, lifting her weakened gaze to his. Darkness filled his face and he bared his sharpened teeth in a grin. “You choose the company of spirits. Haven’t you learned by now? Spirits are weak, easily corruptible. You risk your life for one of them? Pathetic.”

He pushed her back on the floor and pinned her with one of his front legs, pushing near the barb to put her in even more pain. Dorian finally caught sight of her and called out to her, flames erupting from his hands but Th’arack’s barrier came into view. His army swarmed and moved to absorb the damage, leaving them completely isolated from Dorian and Kain. “What do you have that Corypheus wants so badly? I have lived here for ages, seen wars, Blights, and life go by. You have been chosen by spirits and Gods alike but look at you.” He scoffed and crossed his arms over his chest while looking down at her with an expression of disgust. He pushed down and turned his back to her, looking down to his clawed hands while chuckling to himself.

“You have barely scraped the surface of what you can accomplish with the blessing of a spirit or demon. You lack imagination.” Athena’s let out a soft growl, knowing that that exactly the opposite was true. Imagination was her specialty. Her world granted her thousands of different ideas and abilities that nobody in Thedas could produce. Essentially, she could do things with her magic and talents that her allies could not think of. Then why was she so stuck? She pushed up
from the ground to somewhat of a sitting position, the red lyrium burning within her shoulder as blood soaked through her shirt. She then heard a soft voice from the air behind her and it nearly blended in with the swirling wind of the cave.

“You need to burn, Athena. Burn out the bad song before it has a chance to touch you.”

Th’arack was thankfully still deep into a monologue so she quickly whispered through gritted teeth: “I think it’s touching me all the way through my fucking shoulder, Cole. What do you mean burn it out?”

The spirit boy materialized and dropped a healing potion into her lap. “You were just thinking of how to heal the hurt. You’re unique. You know worlds that he does not. Don’t think about it. Just do it.” He then disappeared into an assassin’s fog and approached Th’arack from behind, quickly digging a dagger into the creature’s abdomen before disappearing back into the haze. He cried out and pressed his hand against the wound, coming back up with his claws soaked in a black ichor that smelled of sulfur. Athena crawled backwards until her back was pressed against the thankfully spider-less wall and her enemy was directly in her sights. She drank down the health potion and threw the empty bottle at Th’arack in a last ditch effort to buy time.

_Burn it out!_

She looked down to her hands and quickly summoned a flame, urging it to cover her entire body until she nearly glowed blue. There was a thin barrier on her skin and the flames she created were fighting against the blight within the red lyrium. She winced in pain and gripped at the barb, pulling at it again while ignoring the burning sensation on her hand. Th’arack turned around to face her, a terrifying glee in his eyes as he slowly encroached upon her. He licked his lips in anticipation while cracking the knuckles of his hands.

“You made a mistake in coming here, shifter. My familiar left you with a gift that the Elder One can use.”

Athena’s lips twitched into a snarl, the flames intensifying around her as she pulled on every mana reserve within her body. Her barrier twitched in and out of existence and she knew she would have to think fast before she burned herself to death. _Think, Athena, think! What’s something in your world that can survive this? What’s something that can burn away the corruption and rise anew?_ Her eyes widened. Rise anew. That was it!

She channeled the energy she normally used to shift into a wolf and combined it with the image in her head. It wasn’t specifically a creature, well, kind of. It was a creature who personified renewal
and its sheer power through flame. Her eyes glowed white with flame as her barrier broke down and the fire penetrated her skin. It flowed through her veins until her form was consumed by it. She fell to her knees with a wordless cry, hands gripping at the earth as Th’arack paused in his hunt towards her.

“What is this? One last attempt to fight back?” There was something she hadn’t heard in his voice before: doubt. She smiled and finished her shift with a push of magic from her back. White and red flaming wings expanded in a burst and expanded, flapping with pulses of intense heat to lift her from her knees and place her in a standing position.

From the ashes of her near death she rose, eyes glued to the spider abomination in front of her.

“You say I lack imagination, Th’arack, but you are sorely mistaken. I come from a world where we crafted beings that fly through the skies, where people bend the elements to their will, where creatures with powers unlike you have ever seen fight along our side. You made a mistake in trusting the Elder One, for he will fail.”

He lunged at her with a feral charge, screaming in a cry that sounded like a thousand shrieks of his army combined into one. “You lie!” He slashed out at her and she smiled, catching his arm with her hand made of flame and clutching it. The barb dissolved into the flame and fell through her onto the ground, scorched black from the intense heat her body was putting off. There was a slight tingling on her mind and she could feel Dorian casting a barrier over her, giving her additional strength.

“Barrier yourself, Dorian!” She warned him, nudging Cole with a small pulse of magic to get behind their Tevinter friend. Kain remained by his side, eyes glued to her as a snarl fell from his lips. Athena stepped forward and gripped Th’arack’s arms with her own, pulling him in close to where she could catch his gaze with hers. She looked over her enemy’s shoulder to see Dorian’s barrier standing strong over her allies and she nodded with a smile, suddenly thankful for the healing potion Cole had given her moments earlier. “You ask why Corypheus wants me? He wants what I have: knowledge of your world. What he doesn’t know is that I have seen his end. I have seen the reign of the Elder One foiled by the Herald of Andraste. I have seen the rifts closed, the sky healed. I have seen Gods of old rise again!” Her voice grew excited and dark, her own fingers digging into Th’arack’s as he pushed against her with his own power.

“And you will not be able to warn your master of any of it!”

He cried out against her and broke free, slashing across her chest as she released a wave of flame. It burned through her with a scream and she pulled on every reserve to push the attack outwards with her wings, striking out at Th’arack as his army began to burn and wither away underneath her
attack. Dorian kept his skeleton army alive, using them to take down the wounded larger creatures until they were also burned away. Kain barked in warning, the sound of his cries being washed out by the roar of the flames as they illuminated and worked their way through the caves. When the last spider was defeated she could not hold onto her form anymore, the flames coming back into her as she let out a gasp of exhaustion.

Th’arack was on the ground, panting with a soft and broken laugh. His legs were crippled underneath him, the larger ones trying to find purchase on the ground but they kept sliding on the remains of his army. Bone dust coated the cave and she looked to Dorian, Cole, and Kain, who appeared from behind the barrier. She flexed her hand but her mana pool was so low she didn’t get a hum of power from her ring. In between pants she looked to Cole and opened a hand, gesturing for him to toss her one of his blades. He did so silently, walking behind the spider creature and holding his shoulders steady so her strike would be true. Th’arack twitched under Compassion’s grip but accepted his fate with a nod, looking up to Athena with hollow, sunken in eyes.

“Do your work, Fade-Walker. Return to the side of-” Athena quickly slashed his throat to end his talking before driving the blade through where his heart should be. He gripped her hands and brought the blade in close, using his final movements to smile a blood-stained grin. The image sent a shudder down her spine and when she pulled the blade from his chest a wave of crimson ichor fell and stained her hands and clothes. She frowned and flipped some of it from her hands, cursing under her breath while looking for a cloth, blanket, or anything in the cave to clean her hands with. Unfortunately, she had just burned everything away so all that was left was ash.

Every movement she made hurt and was shaky, teeth chattering as the exhaustion was setting in. She looked around with a soft pulse of magic to ensure that they were all defeated. Dorian felt it and pushed on her shoulder with a scowl. “Venhedis, Athena! Save your strength or I will put you out myself!” He stepped forward and wrapped her in an embrace and she could smell the death magic still lingering in his robes. The skull at his side called out in an ancient language, the old voice sliding along her mind. She smiled and buried her face into the crook of his neck, finally smiling fully at the realization of their victory.

“That was incredible, Amatus. What did you shift into, exactly? The magic tasted like when you turn into a furball but this time poof! The room was on fire!” The Tevinter in him was showing with his excitement towards her magic. Cole quietly pulled a health and lyrium mixture from Dorian’s belt and handed it to her with a smile on his face. She used her hand to twitch the cork off and down its contents. It burned like acid on her tongue but the magical effects tingled and spread through her body the moment it hit her stomach.

“Uh- it’s hard to explain. I was thinking of a Phoenix, which is a fire bird that can resurrect itself from its own ashes. But then I thought of a certain person named the Phoenix and I guess my mind kind of melded the two.” She looked over her shoulder and saw that her “wings” burned through the top of the back of her shirt. The cloth was singed on the edges and she was suddenly thankful for all of the gifts that were sent to her after the ball. Her wardrobe could afford another hit, but she would need to invest in something with fire protection for future endeavors.
“Whatever it was, we’ll have to practice when we get back so we don’t burn the place down next time! If you could harness that, it would surely be something! Come on. Let’s get out of this place. I don’t think the smell will ever come out of my hair.” He gestured for all of them to leave and they followed. Kain ran over and pressed his nose into her palm, letting out a sound that was a mixture of whines and a growl.

*You took the barb for me.* She looked down to him and nodded, realizing also that there was a small puncture wound where the barb had implanted itself in her shoulder. The healing potion was taking affect but she would be blessed with another scar that she would be scolded for. Athena did not look forward to explaining to Solas that she had been attacked with red lyrium and had nearly been tainted by it. There were remnants of its poisoned song in the back of her mind, a whining similar to an out of tune violin that scraped along her thoughts. She shook her head to rid herself of the sensation, looking to the light outside when a voice stopped her.

“So you not wish to complete your quest, girl?”

The voice echoed throughout the cave and when she turned she could not see the source, even though she knew *exactly* who it was. Cole hummed, reaching out into the air with his power.

“The Veil . . . is very thin here, like paper.” Dorian licked his finger and put it in the air and she could feel something similar to static discharge coming from it.

“He’s right – wait- who was that?” He looked to the cave with a twitch of a frown and Athena sighed.

“Thank the Creators you can hear her too. Is that you, Command?” She called out to the cave and there was the sound of laughter in return.

“You name me correctly, Athena. We can complete your mission here. Come into the Fade and I will fulfill my side of our bargain.” The voice dissipated into the surrounding area and she felt a cold chill run down her spine. At times the Earth-girl within her was shocked by the fact that she interacted with things like spirits, demons, and abominations so casually but the Thedas side of her treated it like a Tuesday.

Athena walked to the center of the cave and sat down where the pile of bones used to be. When she saw a small cloud of bone dust burst into the air around her, causing her smirk in amusement while wiping her hands together.
“I think it is safe to say the hard part is done. If you guys want to go back to the camp and clean up, I completely understand.”

Dorian scoffed with a laugh, nudging her in the side with the tip of his foot. “Not a chance. Do your Fade-spirits-thing. We’ll be here when you wake up.” Cole was already sitting down with his legs crossed in the area where she was going to rest her head. He smirked, patting his lap and helping her lean back to where she was laying on her back. She winced and looked to the wound which caused Dorian to click his tongue in protest while fishing around in his pack and on his belt for a healing poultice.

The moment she fell into Compassion’s lap he wrapped his spiritual energy around her and she was helpless to the comforting touch, letting out a soft sigh before entering the Fade to face Command.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for 100 chapters of love, support, comments, kudos, and bookmarks.

Words cannot explain how thankful I am for it all. Here’s to the next 100!
Command instantly brought her spirit to the glen where Wisdom’s remains rested. There was a barrier around the location and Athena instantly knew it was to keep a certain someone out. She arched a brow at it and Command rolled her eyes, gesturing to the bench that had been summoned in previous meetings. Athena let out a sigh and sat down gently, wincing at the pain that followed her to the Fade. The location was beautiful and serene. The sounds of a nearby stream created a white noise with the wind that brought an almost overwhelming sense of peace to her mind.

The main spirit was rotating her wrists around and Athena could feel the spiritual energy moving in time with the motions. She arched a brow as she felt different pings of magic appear around the area. She followed their location and saw a multitude of spirits appearing. Harmony and Inspiration were the most recognizable ones at the front of the group, Inspiration coming up to sit next to Athena on the bench while squeezing her thigh. Athena gestured to the group with a confused gaze, looking to her friend with a matching expression. She smiled and nodded to them.

“They have memories we can use. Memories have a strength of their own and we can use them to bring back the Wisdom we knew, instead of a new spirit that will have no memories at all.” Oh. She nodded with a small smirk, wringing her hands in anxiety while Command stood above Wisdom’s resting place with her hands spread. The being literally emanated power. It was a palpable force that threatened to push her back into the waking world. She understood the spirit’s frustration at getting brought into the mortal world. What did she have to gain by coming into Thedas? Here, the spirit felt invincible, at least in Athena’s eyes.

“You have been summoned to bring forth one of our own tainted by mortal-kind.” There were a few awkward glances towards her and she winced down, wanting to hide her face with a newspaper or something large to obscure the obvious fleshy being in the plane of spirits. Inspiration leaned over and began to point some of the stranger ones out. Her voice was low and for a moment Athena had to question if she was whispering to her telepathically but soon determined Inspiration was getting better at lowering her voice.

“There’s Charity, Patience, Humility, oh there’s a spirit of Faith!” Her eyes instantly darted to the side, gaze widening when she saw a spitting image of Divine Justinia standing at the edge of the glen. Her body twitched to move towards the spirit but Inspiration pulled her back onto the bench with a confused glance. Athena moved her hands back and forth between her and the spirit she recognized.

“I’ve seen her! From my world! She helps us later!” There was a hand on her shoulder and Harmony was shooting her a warning glance that made her feel like she was like a child speaking
out at church. Command shot her a warning glance to the “mortal in the room” as well, smirking before turning back to the group that continued to form.

“Wisdom was one of the oldest of our realm and therefore has touched many. It will take every scrap of memory to bring her back to the way she was before she was enslaved.” There were sounds of disapproval through the glen and Athena couldn’t help but add her own while sitting back into the bench with a cross of her arms. Even though it had been only a month now it felt like it had been ages since Wisdom had been harmed. But I’m one of the foremost experts in Kirkwall circle. . . She had to roll her eyes. If the mages were so strong they wouldn’t have needed to enslave a spirit to their dirty work against bandits. They weren’t even fighting the demon hordes in the old battle ruins. They were fighting simple, dirty bandits.

“I’m going to start gathering energy. Commit your offering as soon as you are ready, kin.” Command’s voice cut through all of the whispering and the side conversations happening within the area, every eye fixated on her as she clapped her hands together and spread them apart. Small wisps fell from her mind into the center of her hands and began to form a pulsing ball of light. If Athena focused close enough she thought that she could see images flicker across the ball’s surface but they disappeared every time a new memory was added in. She smiled and watched it all around them. The light of the Fade’s sun faded into night so the memories illuminated the area like small lanterns.

Some spirits had more to contribute than others. Harmony and Inspirations gave a few small bits since they were some of the newest spirits but the Spirit of Faith put her hands to her face and exhaled as if blowing on the tip of a dandelion. Command drew in all of the energy and was mumbling something under her breath. Athena thought she picked up a mixture of ancient Elven and Tevene mixed in. She arched a brow and wondered how old the spirit really was to be the one leading all of this. The being was also showing her more sensitive side by recruiting so many people within a short amount of time. That, or the favor Athena did for her was that big.

The thought made Athena smile and she pressed a finger to her forehead while thinking of all of the memories that she and Wisdom had together. It all started when she first fell into the Fade. The air had smelled of putrid flesh and there was just a feeling that she was being watched everywhere. The Divine had just been taken by demons and Rathein had escaped through the first portal. Everything felt unreal, like a distant nightmare considering something resembling the Dread Wolf had ripped open a rift to bring her there. Wisdom was the first familiar face she had seen that brought her some hope within the dark and terrifying time.

The rest of them played on fast-forward through her mind and she tried to mimic the spirits around her and pull them out but when she tried she felt the hollowness of her mana pool. Even in the richness of the magic of the Fade, she was exhausted. Athena made a small sound of defeat and Inspiration looked over to her with a curious gaze. She shrugged and opened her palms in a gesture to show that she had nothing. The spirit smiled with a small chuckle, pressing her hands-on top of her friends.
“You can lean on us for this. Harmony! Come. Here!” She whispered curtly and through clenched teeth towards their comrade. He looked down to them with golden horns reflecting the lights in the sky, an amused smirk on his lips. He began to sit down next to them and they had to scoot to the end of the bench until they were all fitting on the seats tightly pressed together. Harmony and Inspiration shared a glance Athena could not catch before they both put a hand on her thigh. She felt their energies mingling within her dream-form and it allowed her to take a deep breath. It was a fresh reminder of how drained she was from her fight with Th’arack but it allowed her to hum a small song that Inspiration was urging into her mind help stir emotions attached to the memories.

Who can say for certain? Maybe you’re still here.

Athena held her hands to her chest and bent forward in a gesture of prayer. She wasn’t a spiritually religious person by any means but it allowed her to block out the other spirits and focus on her own contributions to the ritual.

I feel you all around me. Your memory’s so clear.

Deep in the stillness, I can hear you speak.

There was a humming within her palms and she pulled them forward slowly. There was a handful of small lights the size of marbles floating around in rhythm with her heart. She smiled with tears in her eyes, still humming with Inspiration swaying next to her and Harmony tapping a finger on top of her thigh. Command opened an eye from her focus in Athena’s direction. The spirit gave her a curt nod as Athena pushed the memories into the air. They were some of the last ones to join into the now large orb that Command was controlling with her armored hands.

Fly me up to where you are beyond the distant stars.

I wish upon tonight to see you smile.

If only for a world to know you’re there.

Athena did not realize she was singing under her breath until Command’s eyes flew open with a sound of concentration, her hands twitching to keep control of all of the energy that the spirits had given her. She looked around for something else when her gaze fell to Athena’s lap, a wicked grin coming to her face.

“And yet he still comes. Rise, Athena. Help me to finish this.”
There was strain in the spirit’s voice that gave haste to her moments. Athena pushed from the bench and the safety of her two friends to stand in the center of the glen in front of all of the spirits. Command reached forward and grabbed Athena’s hand that had the wolf ring on it, bringing it opposite of her hand to keep the spirit energy together. Instantly she strengthened her posture and put her other hand on the bottom of the orb. Sweat came to her brow and she wanted to scream at Command: *I have nothing left to give you!*

As if she read her thoughts Command reached down and squeezed her hand with the ring, bringing it into her line of sight again. There was a sense of urgency in her voice as she gestured to the ring with a swift jerk of her head. Blonde and silver ringlets were falling from the right up-do that the militaristic spirit normally wore as she explained: “Pull on the magic from this. The age of this object holds subtle memories. Push your magic into it and it will answer.”

Athena nodded and put her hand back to outline the collection of memories. She took in a deep, sharp breath and then pulsed the heat of her magic into the wolf ring. It immediately hummed and flooded her body with a warm barrier, sending a shudder from her crown to the tips of her toes. The sudden wave of magic came as a surprise and Athena let out a shaky sigh. Command pulled on that energy until the swirling orbs and flickers of light solidified into a single object. It glowed like the sun within the Fade and it was then that she noticed a spirit of Fortitude was holding his hand up and holding a barrier to keep them and their magic all inside.

Command smiled with a power-filled glee, moving her hands to the top of the orb to push down. Athena followed her moments and began to direct the motion of the memories downward. There was resistance and she screamed over the roar of magic and her pulse within her ears. “What are we doing!?”

The spirit acted as if she didn’t hear her but responded pointedly: “A seed needs fertile ground, Athena. Give it a push!” With a joint grunt and effort, the two moved, flexing their knees and using their body weight to descend the spell into the soil of the glen. There was a pulse of light beneath them and it flickered once, twice, before subduing the third time. Command’s breath came in pants and Athena felt like she was going to pass out, even in the Fade. Many of the spirits left the glen but Fortitude remained with his hand facing upwards to maintain the barrier. There was a tingle up her spine and she instantly looked over her shoulder, a nervous growl trickling from her lips when she realized what triggered her body to react that way.

“We need to leave quickly, friends. Command, when are we going to know if it worked?”

She cast a nervous gaze to the spirit who wiped her hands-on top of her armored thighs with a small shrug. “It needs time to grow, process everything we have given it. I did not promise instant results, girl, only an attempt.” Athena felt the twitch to want to embrace her in gratitude but restrained herself to a deep bow.
“I don’t know how I’m ever going to thank you for this.” She put a fisted hand across her heart and she heard Command laugh.

“You already have, Athena. I can feel the land already healing from Th’arack’s absence. You did well and are learning to Command the flame as well. You have limits, Shifter, but explore them. I will be watching.” The spirit tapped Fortitude’s shoulder and continued to walk past him with a flick of her fingers. He followed silently, dropping the barrier, and instantly disappearing into the Fade behind her. There was now only a general buzz of magic in the area and she let out an exhausted sigh while stepping forward, her legs buckling beneath her. Instead of falling into Inspiration or Harmony’s arms she felt something a little more solid grasp her with a cold touch. With her face angled towards the floor her eyes widened, hands gripping into familiar forearms that helped to lift her to a standing position.

Solas looked down at her with a chuckle, moving his arms from her arms to her lower back when she regained her footing. He tilted his head in confusion and sent a pulse of his magic into the surrounding area, humming in consideration before turning to her with almost a wicked smirk. “You have been busy, it seems?”

She laughed and the sound was weak in the Fade. She pushed herself onto her toes and wrapped her arms around his neck while capturing his lips with hers for a second. His lips twitched to a smile in surprise while she let out a sigh, quickly thinking of a half-lie to tell him to explain the magical energy in the air. “Inspiration and Harmony were helping me recharge after I completed my favor for Command.”

His eyes widened for a second in realization, pressing his forehead to hers while taking a deep breath in. “You are returning to Skyhold, then?”

The hope in his voice nearly made her melt. She returned the gesture and smiled under his touch. “Yes, vhenan. It’s going to take weeks to get the ash and spider remains from my hair.” He narrowed his gaze and looked to her with a glance of concern. She shook her head back and forth before relaxing and resting on him at a level where he could rest his cheek on top of her hair.

“Am I allowed to know the creature you faced?” There was a twinge of bitterness to his words and she rolled her eyes.

“His name was Th’arack.” There was a soft twitch underneath her body and she looked up to him. “You know him?” Solas clenched his jaw while looking out at the Fade, presumably for Command. She nudged him in an attempt to get him to relax. “Solas?”
“Only through the final memories of others in my time in the Fade. I thought his memory had long since passed by now. I’m am pleased that is finally so. How were you able to perform such a task?” He was still looking out through the glen while talking and she pulled his gaze to hers by cupping his cheek with her hand.

“Something similar to what I did in the Plains, only this time I didn’t pass out. Dorian and Cole helped immensely as did this.” She wiggled her hand that had the ring on it and he smiled while bringing her hand into his and looking at the ring.

“It suits you, ma’fen. Now, tell me of this journey you’ve been on.”

Chapter End Notes

Brief song mention: To Where You Are - Josh Groban

Thank you still for all of the support! :)

After the Seed is Planted

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Athena had to get back to the waking world, since Cole, Dorian, and Kain were still surrounding her in the cave she left them in, but she promised Solas she would fill him in on everything once they got back to their campsite. Even in the Fade she could feel Kain poking at her face with his cold nose and licking around her cheek and ear. The sensation was odd being shared in both the spiritual and the physical world but with a quick kiss from her lover she pulled herself back into the cave. Cole was still sitting to where her head was in his lap and Dorian was leaning against a wall cleaning out the ash from underneath his nails with a sharp tool from his pack. She woke with a groan, putting a hand against her forehead while pushing up from the ground with the other one.

Dorian smirked from his place without moving, finishing the task at hand before looking up to her. “Were you successful?”

Cole hummed behind her and helped her to a standing position. “The seed is planted. It needs to grow.”

The Tevinter arched a brow. “So, that’s a no then?”

Athena ran a hand through her hair, wincing at the number of knots and dust that was trapped within it. She then looked over to her friend with a small shrug. “Cole’s right. We have to wait and see if anything is going to happen. What needs to happen is a fucking bath. Kain, you smell water close by?” She looked down with a slightly glowing gaze to her wolf companion, familiar apparently per Th’arack. He looked up to her and tilted his head, sniffing the air before answering with a series of short barks and growls.

_Few hundred paces away. Close to Prince. Animals close by._

She nodded before walking towards the cave, gesturing to her friends with a wave of her hand. Dorian followed her with a curiously wicked grin that made her feel uneasy. She waited until they hit the fresh air of the outside before glancing over her shoulder at him. “What?”

He clapped his hands together, looking at her eyes then down to Kain. “I had a thought. That thing you do, with your eyes, can you feel your shifting magic stir when you do it?” She looked down to Kain and they shrugged a comedic shrug in unison.
“I mean, I guess? It’s hard to dissect when it’s something I’ve been doing since I met him as a pup all those months ago.” She kept a hand on the top of her companion’s back as they walked back to the camp. Prince was overjoyed by their return, walking past the camp line to butt his head against her chest. She hugged her friend with an exhausted smile, pressing her forehead to his before moving towards her tent so she could grab a fresh pair of clothes from her pack. It was just a basic blank tank top with a pair of tan colored pants. She made a mental note to clean her clothes in whatever they were about to bathe in as well.

Dorian had the same idea. He dropped his staff off in his side of the tent and grabbed a handful of clothes while putting a vial of some mysterious fluid between his teeth. He gestured for her to leave the tent first and she did, feeling him kick her backside with the tip of his boot. She stuck her tongue out at him with a quick glance over her shoulder. Kain led the party’s path through the trees and weeds that grew to their hips. The air already felt clearer with their task complete. The area was scarred, much like what the Breach left in the skies, but there was hope for regrowth. They approached a small river and Kain immediately began to drink up some of the cool water. One of the moons was at the point in the sky where Athena estimated that it was around three in the morning.

Dorian dropped his clothes on the bank and pulled his jacket off and added it to the pile. Athena followed suit, peeling the blood-stained jacket from her arms and dropping it to the ground. Her undershirt was nearly plastered to her skin with her bandings and it was difficult to remove but she succeeded. Soon she was wading into the slower part of the river with only her bandings and underclothes on with a stone in hand. The water was cool and crisp against her skin and instantly sent bumps along her body, but it felt clean. She took the stone and scraped off the spider carcass and ichor that was beginning to smell and stick to the tiny hairs re-growing on her legs. It took almost two passes before her skin was a bright pink but clean of the fight they had just been through.

Athena leaned back and put her head underwater while running her fingers through her hair. When she came back up she was greeted by a small vial that Dorian had thrown at her. “It’s a lifesaver. Trust me.” He tapped on his now soaked and obviously cleaned hair and mustache with a smile. She looked to the vial and opened it by placing the cork in her teeth and pulling backwards. The soap smelled of mint and citrus. The first pleasant smell of the trip brought an audible sigh out of her as she emptied the contents onto her head and used her fingernails to lather the soap.

Instantly the grime and debris separated itself from her hair and come to the surface, a pleased smile coming over her face accompanied by a hum of gratitude. Dorian shot her a smile from his section of the river while casually sliding a rock over his toned arms. Athena dropped to her knees so it would be easier to rinse her hair in the river. Using her fingers as a comb, she removed the dead hairs and remnants of soap from her head before standing up with a pleased grin on her face. Even though every muscle in her body hurt and her mana pool was drained empty: she felt accomplished.
Dorian took the opportunity of serenity to splash her with a push of his hand. She winced as the river water hit her eyes but instantly responded with a rebuttal. She stood up to straighten her posture while digging her heels into the constantly shifting soil of the riverbed. The two laughed and attacked each other back and forth with the water in a moment of childlike abandon. He moved closer to her and began to use magic to strengthen his attacks and she responded by putting up a barrier. Cole was nonchalantly cleaning his blades at the edge of the river. She eyed him with a wicked smirk and raised a hand to Dorian, putting a finger to her lips while sliding a barrier over her mind so Cole couldn’t read her thoughts.

“Don’t you think our friend looks dirty, Dorian?” He slid his gaze over to the edge of the river and grinned, nodding to her while crossing his arms over his bare chest.

“Why indeed he does. What a marvelous observation, my dear.” The spirit looked up to them and tilted his head in confusion.

“Am I not supposed to be? We just came from a dusty cave. I can make myself appear clean if it both-“ His words were cut off by two playful splashes, one from each of them. They chuckled to themselves and walked to the edge of the river to look down at Cole. He was laying on his back with a confused look on his face in the soil of the river’s edge. Slowly he touched his hat with his hand and frowned. “You wished to make me wet?”

Dorian chuckled at the potential innuendo and she elbowed him in the ribcage, offering Cole a hand to help get up. “It’s just playing, sweetheart. Here, let me help you get the battle out of your hair. You can stay in your clothes.” He nodded and reached up to grab her hand. She pulled him into the shallow section and took his hat off and kept it in between her teeth while she used the empty vial to pull up little bits of water and run it through the boy’s thick, dirty, and blonde hair. He then followed her motion from before and kneeled down into the river to where she could clean his hair more aggressively, warming the water around them with a bit of her magic so he wouldn’t get a chill in the current.

Dorian took up the task of washing their clothes correctly so they would not shrink. He took great care, even with her clothes and bindings. He nearly sneered while washing her basic tank tops and pants. “I swear. One day I am going to fill a part of your wardrobe with some real clothes so it doesn’t look like I’m friends with a wolf in literal sheep’s clothing.” She scoffed and ran her fingers through Cole’s hair while humming softly. The spirit seemed to like her music, even subtle bits of it while she hummed in their travels. He would close his eyes and rock to the beat and try to mimic the sounds himself.

The sun was almost up by the time they returned to camp clean and ready to travel. They had agreed as a group to forgo their sleep and get on the road. The horses were well rested but everyone else was fighting to keep their eyes open. Dorian attempted to keep Athena awake by probing her mind with questions.
“Back to what we were talking about last night. Can you feel your magic when you communicate with Kain?” She behind her on the saddle to her companion who had allowed her to position him awkwardly so he could sleep on Prince’s back. His body was thrown over the saddle like a blanket and his front paws were on one side while his hind legs were on the other with his tail hanging low. Athena patted him on the back before turning her attention back to Dorian.

“I mean, I guess. Where are you going with this?” He put his hands up roughly twelve inches apart in front of his face with a deadpanned look.

“Wings, Athena. You. Had. Fucking. Wings. If you can change your eyes when you talk to Kain, what if we can isolate parts of your shift and replicate it?” The volume of his voice was growing higher and she could tell he was excited about the idea of it even with their nearly absent energy levels.

“We could try? I don’t necessarily want this type of experimentation getting around Skyhold. What if I get stuck with a wolf’s head and a fish’s tail? They’ll call me an abomination and then I’ll be sorting scrolls in the basement library as a Tranquil.” He winced in response while putting his hands up in surrender. He then melted into a smug grin, bringing his horse up next to hers so he could speak low even though the three of them were the only ones on the trail back to the north.

“You’re talking to a mage who helped develop time magic, remember? I’m the King of experimental.” She pushed him away with the tip of her foot with a playful scoff.

“I thought that was just being Tevinter.” She teased back without looking over to him. Prince and the other mounts had thankfully slept while they were fighting in the cave so they could travel just fine. Dorian rolled his eyes and returned to his place in the formation.

“We’ll start tomorrow then. Somebody’s cranky from lack of sleep.”

They made camp that night thankfully away from the Wilds. They only had the energy to put up one tent and throw out their bedrolls. Athena didn’t even have the reserve to make a fire with the help of a lyrium potion. Dorian and she slept to where their sides were touching and even Cole was laying down in the space above their heads. Kain protected the front of the tent and within minutes
they were all asleep. For her, this meant she went to the Fade, even with how exhausted she was. Harmony was standing with his arms crossed in front of her, an expectant and frustrated look on his face.

“Did you forget about our training?”

She threw her hands up in the air and snapped at him. “Oh come off it! I haven’t slept since the ritual yesterday and that was exhausting enough. Can we start tomorrow night? I just need- “

“A break. He knows, he thinks he is being funny.” Inspiration appeared and grabbed her friend by the sleeve, pulling him into the haziness of the Fade while he shot a playful and infuriating wink at her. Athena slapped a hand to her forehead and sighed, slowly letting her hand fall from her face. The air shifted around her and she could feel the familiar cool chill running down her back. The irritation of the day faded away and she smiled, opening her eyes to see the rotunda at Skyhold. Solas was sitting with his feet propped up on the desk with a book in his lap. She walked forward with a tired smile, walking behind him to where she could wrap her arms around him from behind.

“I could feel your exhaustion from here, ma’fen. Something familiar would be less tiring on your mind.” She turned her head to where she could look at the book he was reading. The text was all elvish and it looked so foreign to her it made her head ache. She kissed him on the cheek before walking over and collapsing onto the couch. Even though she never saw him in it, in the Fade it smelled of him. Athena rubbed her cheek over the fabric and let out a fatigued sigh, hands gripping for the blanket that normally rested at the top of the couch.

When she couldn’t find it she looked up to see Solas smirking over her holding the object, slowly draping it over her body before sitting next to her with a sympathetic expression. “Do I look that pathetic?” He laughed with a shake of his head, resting a hand on her thigh.

“Pathetic? No. Just tired from your travels is all. I take it you are not able to tell me of this creature you fought?” She let out a groan before turning to lay on her back, looking over at one of the blank walls that had yet to be filled with a work of his art.

“It might take less energy to just show you.” She looked to the wall and sent a pulse of magic with a flick of her wrist. The memory began to replay from the moment they entered the cave and she took the time to sit back and focus on her breathing. Solas moved to where he was sitting with his back against the wall with her legs in his lap. His brow furrowed at the scene he was watching and she could just feel him look at her during moments he didn’t like.

There was a palpable twitch from him whenever the memory played of her getting stabbed by the
red-lyrium spider. She winced in memory and felt an ache on her shoulder, looking to him with a cautious glance. “Yeah – that wasn’t pleasant.” His gaze did not move from watching the memory play out but he shook his head and clenched his jaw.

“That’s going to need to be healed properly when you return. Red lyrium can spread if not tre-“She cut him off by flexing her legs on top of his, opening one eye towards him while jerking her head back to the wall.

“I get rid of it. Be patient.” He flicked his eyes down to her with a wicked yet hardened smirk, resting his hands on top of her legs while leaning back into the wall again. She rested her arm over her forehead and secretly watched his reaction as she turned her body into flame. He hummed and raised his brows, stilling underneath her until she ended the memory so he wouldn’t hear the part of her screaming: I have seen Old Gods rise anew!

“I see; that you did. I apologize for doubting you.” He teased her with a smile, sliding down to where he was laying on his side next to her on the couch. She rubbed her eyes with her hand before scooting to where she could feel him along the side of her body.

“Forgiven. But. . . it probably wouldn’t be a bad idea for you to look at my injury. I’m not the best healer and I don’t think Dorian knows a spirit spell beyond a barrier.” He chuckled and pressed his forehead to hers, touching her cheek with his hand to bring her in closer.

“That I can do. Is there anyway I can help you here? I do not wish to tax your mind any further.” Athena smiled at his touch and turned to kiss the inside of his palm.

“Can you read me that book you were reading? It has been a while since we’ve had an elvish lesson and exposure, even subconscious, would be helpful.” He nodded with a smile, levitating the book and bringing it over to rest on her abdomen as he propped himself up to read it. He traced small, comforting designs onto her skin while reading the text aloud, ensuring that they were somehow touching as she rested on the couch and took in the sound of his voice. It was difficult to keep herself materialize in the fade. The drain from the last two days was finally starting to take its toll and her body began to fade in and out of existence within the dream world.

With a small hum of acknowledgement Solas stopped reading and pulled his book back. He brought the blanket up to her chin and spoke softly near her ear. “Rest now, vhenan. I will sleep easier knowing that you are safe now.”
Thank you for all of the continued support~
Wings Were Made to Fly!

“Come on! Just try it. You’re rested now; I can feel from here you’re recovered.”

They were back on the trail and yet again Dorian was trying to get her to experiment. That morning they were quick to get back on the road and she was walking next to Prince to give him a break. Dorian refused to get down until they left the thicker swamp area because he “had just finished cleaning his damn clothes and wouldn’t sully them again.” Kain was scouting ahead while trying to get her to shift and join him as well. They would move faster if she wasn’t walking in her human form and he missed being able to hunt with her. She walked with a hand on Prince’s side, rolling her eyes to her friend that was maneuvering his show-mount that matched his personality to where he could be in Athena’s line of sight.

Cole was quietly riding his own smaller horse while watching them with a curious gaze. “What’s the harm in trying, Athena? Try something simple. I don’t know, a claw! If you can’t I’ll drop it.” The Tevinter looked to her with a hopeful smile and she sighed, patting Prince’s side before dropping her hands in front of her. Kain stopped in his pursuit of a rabbit up ahead, looking over his shoulder at her while offering to strengthen their link to help her out. She took in a deep breath and looked down to her dominant hand. She channeled her energy into her hands, trying to pull on the connection between her and her companion without Dorian seeing what she was trying to do. If he got excited about this she would never get a moment’s peace again.

The energy swirled and she visualized what she wanted in her head: Just a single claw on her middle finger. Nothing big, nothing furry or outlandish. The magic moved within her like a current and she combined it with the image in her mind and pushed it towards her finger. It was painful and she clenched her jaw to keep from making a sound, but slowly the nail on top of her finger hardened and lengthened into a black claw. She smiled at her victory and walked in front of Prince towards Kain without saying anything. Dorian went to move his horse towards her.

“Hey! You can’t run away from me!” Athena flipped him the bird to make sure he saw her success before pushing forward in a motion to shift into her white wolf form. The mage laughed from his horse, covering his mouth with a hand to contain the sound that was as charismatic and bubbly as he was. She ran forward with a grin on her maw, meeting up with her familiar to run forward through the woods. The horses followed her at an increased speed. Prince, the largest of them all, trusted her and knew that they would scout out a safe and quick path to get them home. There was no trepidation of a mission yet to come; there was no feeling of dread in their gut. The only destination was home and she couldn’t’ speak for the rest of them. . . but she couldn’t wait to get there.

The pair of wolves scouted and hunted for the rest of the day, leading the party back to a road that would eventually connect to the highway that would take them up to Skyhold. Thankfully that meant just a few more days of boring travel but with Dorian’s new goal and her lessons with
Harmony at night, Athena would be busy. If there was a spare second in her dreams to spend with Solas she would consider herself thankful. Dorian and Cole were amazing company; the wilds were just driving her insane. Athena was an American girl. She needed a bed with close access to food and friends. Going on an adventure every few months was great, but the back to back missions were draining her spirit. When Kain and her returned to the camp that evening, Dorian had a few vials of lyrium set out and had made a glyph on the ground.

In her wolf form she walked to the edge of it and sniffed at it, probing it with her magic to figure out what it was. The Tevinter mage grinned before gesturing to the circle. “It’s safe for you. Get in. I’ll explain things in a second.” With a short sneeze of disapproval, she walked through the barrier of the glyph and stood in the center, tilting her head in confusion with a soft whine. He came to the front where she walked over and strengthened it with his magic before striking his finger over it like a match. Magic hummed underneath her and she shifted back from the rush in her feet. Athena felt like every hair was on end but it was an invigorating feeling.

“This is a containment spell I made myself. It was helpful when I was learning necromancy and didn’t want my father poking in at what was going on. Everything you cast will stay in there so we don’t all get burnt alive while we’re teaching you to fly.” She rolled her eyes at his admiration for her, crossing her arms while shifting her weight onto her left foot.

“Supposedly. Alright, Master of Forbidden Magic, what do we do first?” He clapped his hands together while picking up a small lyrium vial and tossing it to her. She caught it easily and popped the cork off with a flick of her thumb. Dorian smiled, running his thumb and index finger over his mustache before snapping his fingers at her.

“You need to shift back into whatever you were in the cave. I know you had a bit of a lull between the first time you shifted into a wolf and the second. I don’t want that to happen every time you learn a new form. You remember what you were feeling at the time? You remember what drove you?”

Cole appeared by his side with a nod, giving Athena a hopeful look. “She needed to burn out the bad song. The poison.” Athena nodded in agreement, looking to Dorian while gesturing to the area around her.

“So, what, just go for it? I thought you wanted me to shift specific things, not entirely?” He smiled while clicking his tongue against the backs of his teeth.

“Yes! But if you know this new form intimately, we’ll be able to pick out the different traits. Now, stop wasting time and go!” He pushed at her with a pulse of magic and she sighed, taking down the titan’s blood like a shot of bad tequila. She threw the empty vial at his feet, smiling at the shattering sound while closing her eyes. The lyrium instantly made her feel empowered, her magic
flowing like liquid heat within her veins. She harnessed that feeling of fire, embodied it while squelching the urge to summon a barrier. The last time she shifted into the Flame, it started from the outside in. Perhaps this time could be opposite? The first time she truly felt it magic it felt like a hot pit of acid within her core.

Athena plunged her will into that feeling, feeding her mana with sheer thought and emotion alone. The fire grew until it felt like she was going to burst from it. Her magic threatened to push at her from underneath her skin and when she opened her eyes she could see light glowing through her pores. Dorian looked on with a sick curiosity, writing down different stages in his spell book while smiling at her. The urge to shift was almost undeniable and with a wordless cry she fell to her knees and let the magic flow over her skin. Flesh melded into flame and her form was obscured by it. She heard a whooping cry of happiness from Dorian and it was then she opened her eyes. Colors of orange, white, and blue danced where her skin used to be.

She pushed off from the ground, leaving small scorch marks, before standing and looking over her shoulder. Sure enough, the wings had returned and it made her feel like a legendary bird from one of her favorite games to play. It was strange having a magical connection pulling at her back but she sent a pulse through that new connection to flap her wings a few times to push herself from the ground. She levitated before turning back to Dorian with a smile on her face. The light from her flames illuminated the absolute glee on his. “By the Maker. I can’t explain how this looks.” She swore she saw tears glittering in the corners of his eyes but Cole tilted his head with a confused gaze.

“It looks like she is on fire.” Athena laughed and the sound was mixed from the roar of the flames, but the spirit’s succinct assessment of her current form was hilarious. She stood up straight and experimented with moving the wings on her back. She looked over her shoulder and spun in a circle in a poor attempt to see what they looked like. They felt heavy, not like pixie wings. Did they touch the ground? She did a spin in one last attempt to see them when Cole answered her question for her.

“Just the tips drag on the floor.” He was now sitting on the ground with his knees pulled to his chest, watching her with a blank expression. Dorian was rapidly writing with his quill and at the end of his next sentence he dropped the quill into the middle of his book and shut it.

“Alright, how far do you think you can get off of the ground?” Athena clenched her hands into fists with a wicked smile, shooting him a wink before pushing all her magic into her back and pushing off from the ground with her feet.
“Okay! You can come down now!” Dorian shouted from the ground by cupping his hand next to his face. It had been a few days and they were nearing the bottom of the mountain path that would lead up to Skyhold. Athena was above the trees hiding in the clouds so people from the ground wouldn’t spot her, spinning with a smile on her face. Her body was still completely in flame, but the transition was getting easier between the different forms. Dorian was dissatisfied that they couldn’t single out the traits of her flame yet but she was completely happy being above the ground. Flying had always been a silly dream of hers, even on Earth. It was shown in different comic books, TV shows, and movies. It was always the one thing she wanted to do but knew it was impossible.

The air felt crisp on her face, well on the fire that was currently her skin, and the hum within the air was invigorating. Perhaps it was because she knew what exactly happened at Skyhold, but it felt like the closer she got to the castle, the stronger the natural magic in the air became. She could feel it pumping through her and it was another reminder that they were getting closer to home. Home, now, was where the air was thin. It was where she couldn’t sleep without hearing some person stumbling out in the courtyard on the way home from the tavern. Home was the constant smell of old books throughout the entirety of the castle. Home was knowing there would be the warmth of fire when she walked through the main gates with a dwarf sitting on her right. Home was having a seat for her at the Charger’s table when she needed it in the tavern. Home was falling asleep with a wolf bone in her hands. Home was... Thedas.

Her brows twitched in the strange realization and she quickly landed in front of Dorian, letting the flames distinguish so she could fall back into her skin. Cole was sitting on the back of his horse and looked to her with a tilted head. “Something’s changed.”

She dismissed him with a quick gesture, running her hands through her hair to settle herself down. “No, it’s fine, Cole. Really.”

“Home is here now. That hurts you and helps you at the same time?” He nodded with confidence in his words while Dorian jotted down the details of her last flight before shutting the book with a one handed close.

“You’re requiring less mana to make the shift now. Perhaps we can start isolating traits of this form as well! You can still do it with your furred one?” His voice was academic, not noticing the train of thought that Cole was trying to spell out to him. Athena raised a hand to him and one by one changed her nails into claws before clenching her hand back into a normal fist. They were approaching a small encampment that was becoming a last stop for villagers that were making the trek to the castle. It was a relief to see some semblance of civilization. There were larger tents at the front with rows of smaller ones behind it. Already there was a tavern of sorts built with smoke coming from the chimney and laughter from inside.
There was a man near the stable hailing them over to take care of the horses. She looked over towards Cole who was making himself scarce and invisible. She scrunched her lips to the side, letting out a frustrated breath from her nose while looking back to Dorian. “Think they have a room for us? I don’t’ know about you but my back is not appreciating these nights in the tent.”

Dorian placed both of his hands on his lower back and stretched up. Even from her position in front of him, Athena could hear the popping of his spine and the wince from his lips. “I don’t know how your boyfriend does it. Dreaming under the stars? Please. Sounds like a pain in my back.” She rolled her eyes at him and patted Prince on the side. The horse gave her a curious look, gesturing his head to the stable hand that was ushering him into the empty slot. Dorian’s horse and Cole’s horse were already being tended to when she handed the reigns over to the burly man with the bald spot and the protruding chest hair from his shirt.

This beast will be tending to me? Hmph. The horse’s voice was riddled with doubt and she could only laugh while she pulled a few silver coins from her bag to hand to the man.

“I’ll get you in the morning, you big baby. Mama needs a drink.” Athena quickly kissed him in between the eyes, turning and linking arms with Dorian while walking towards the tavern. “Ready to get home tomorrow?”

He made a hum of anticipation, scratching the base of his hairline with a smile. “I’m trying to think where we can continue our training without being seen. There’s that area past the dungeons with the waterfalls. You could fit an army there and nobody ever dares to venture into the depths.” He let out a melodramatic sigh while pushing the door with one hand and leading her into it with the other. The winter chill was beginning to knock on their doors’ in and it felt like October was coming up upon them. Typically, by this time in her world she would see the Jack-O-Lanterns set out on the porches with different colors of orange and red lights on people’s houses.

Thankfully the tavern was warm and full of people. There were a few faces she recognized in the crowd, soldiers that had accompanied them on the way to Halamshiral. She kept her face hidden in Dorian’s arm while he led them to the bartender where the tavern-keep was behind it. He put on his award-winning smile and leaned forward on the bar. “Good evening, darling. Please tell me you have a room open here?”

The over-worked woman turned around with small bits of hair hanging in her face. In one hand, she had a tray loaded with dirty bowls of broth and in the other hand she was holding a pitcher of ale. “One room with one bed. ‘Not much, but it’ll do.” He nodded and slid some coin over on the table and she put the pitcher down to bite the coin between her teeth. Once she determined it was real, she pocketed with a quick wink towards Dorian. “First room on the right. Have fun you two.”
The moment she walked out earshot he looked to her with a wicked grin. “All right. We can either cuddle or one of us is sleeping on the floor.”

She laughed while flagging over the barmaid that was handing out bowls of soup that appeared to have some variation of pork and potatoes in it. When the two bowls slid in front of them on the bar they let out a sigh in unison. It was better than the jerky and raw meat she had been hunting, but tavern food was still tavern food. They muddled through their meals quietly when she heard a call from behind her that made her stifle a groan.

“Hey, Sorciere!”
Athena clenched her jaw and let out a frustrated sigh, shooting a glance to Dorian before looking over her shoulder. There were two intoxicated soldiers sauntering over to her and she suddenly wished she didn’t tell Kain to go up the mountain and meet the pack. Claw had come down when he felt them close so they would be able to reunite with her familiar. He was large enough now that if Kain were behind her at the bar, nobody would even want to talk to them.

“Oh is this your lover here?” The bolder of the two spoke first and gestured with his sloshing drink to Dorian, who was eyeing the man up and down with a roll of his eyes. The other one sneered with a look that made her skin crawl, nudging his friend in the ribs.

“No, remember, she’s with that knife-ear!” Athena felt her vision go white for a moment as she white-knuckled the fork in her hand. Dorian instantly reached over and put his hand over hers, squeezing it in a warning. Could he tell I was about to stab the soldier with the fork? Damn him. She cleared her throat before turning her body around on the wooden barstool, fluttering her eyelashes with a sarcastic grin.

“I’m sorry. You have me in a terrible predicament. You know me but I do not know you at all.” Dorian smirked behind her and the first man was foolish enough to puff his chest.

“Arthur Greystone.” Athena made an instant mental note with a smile. From the condition of his armor, he was an entry level grunt of Cullen’s, maybe one level higher. The Inquisition forces were growing large enough that it would be difficult to keep track of every soldier. He would soon know the name of this soldier, however.

“Ooh, Greystone. Sounds like a strong name.” She purred, releasing the fork on the counter to rest her elbow on her knee while resting her chin on top of her hand. The soldier smiled while crossing his arms. The one behind him gave her a leery look and didn’t move from his position as Arthur’s wingman. “Now, what are these rumors you have heard on who I am with?” Her tone grew dark as the wicked smile stayed on her lips. She had to hand it to Vivienne; there was a sick thrill in the Game that she could not deny. Either that, or it was her wolf cherishing the thrill of the hunt. Probably the latter.

The second soldier paled a shade, nudging his friend. He saw the subtle change in her features but Arthur was too far gone into his ale. “It’s awful, really, Lady Athena.” He leaned forward to where he was resting his arm on the bar while putting his face within inches of hers. She could smell the failure and poor quality ale coming from his breath and it took everything within her not to slap
him already. *Give it time, Athena.* “They say you have shacked up with this old, bald, rabbit of a creature.”

Dorian began to chuckle and she swallowed down the bile within her throat. The bar had gone quiet since he had not done the polite thing and lowered his voice, so it suddenly became so silent she could hear somebody drop their spoon into their bowl. She joined in her friend’s laugh, shaking her head back and forth while shooting him a glance over her shoulder. “Okay. That’s enough.”

Without warning she pushed from the bar and grabbed his throat with her dominant hand, using the momentum of her body with a pulse of magic to push the man onto his back on the floor of the bar. His eyes went wide and he reached for his dagger but Dorian was quick to stand and put a hand out to the wingman and Arthur’s face. “Are you really that foolish, you brute?” Athena gave Dorian a wink while sending a pulse of magic into the hand holding Arthur down. Every nail turned into a sharpened claw and pushed into his skin, growing close to the point of breaking skin.

“You bitch.” She clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth.

“Accurate, but let me tell you where you went wrong, Arthur. Me? I can tolerate a lot of criticisms and off-handed comments. I’m a big girl.” She tightened her grip and brought her body over his to where he could see the full darkness of her gaze and the threat it held. “But what I cannot handle is the disrespect toward my loved ones. Insulting the Inquisition aside, you made a grave mistake, Arthur Greystone.” She then dropped her lips to his ear and could not contain the venom in her words. “Know that I held your life in my hands and allowed it to remain. Grow wiser.” She then squeezed his neck for a final time, standing from her position on the floor to stand by Dorian.

The bar was all looking at her so she jingled the coin purse on her side while looking over to the owner of the tavern. “Drinks on me for the inconvenience, m’lady. We’ll be out of your hair in the morning.” There were general sounds of gratitude and recognition through the bar and Dorian patted her on the shoulder. The tavern owner tucked one of the stray hairs behind her ear while sharing a look with her that screamed *He’s been doing shit like that all night. Thank you. Athena* nodded and trudged up the stairs into the first room on the right. The room barely had space besides the roughly full-size bed but it was better than sleeping on the floor with a spirit boy above her and her wolf moving throughout the night.

She let out a soft sigh while letting her pack slide off of her shoulder and onto the floor at the foot of the bed. Dorian squeezed in through the doorway and stood by her side, smiling while gesturing to the bed with a nod of his head. “Do you want to sleep next to the wall or by the window?” She realized he was asking for positions in the bed and laughed, shrugging while removing her over shirt and jacket.

“Doesn’t matter to me, as long as you don’t get grabby in the middle of the night.” He looked her
up and down with a scoff.

“No offense, darling? You’re not my type, even with as gorgeous as you are. Your womanly bits are all safe on your side of the bed.” She chuckled and ran her fingers through her hair, looking out the window to see if Cole was anywhere out there. She caught a glimpse of the brim of his hat by the stables and frowned, putting out the thought with a pulse of magic: *You can sleep inside, Cole. Don’t be afraid.*

“So, speaking of the old, bald man you are shacking up with. . . “ With an overly loud groan she leaned her back against the window frame and gestured at him.

“All right. What’s on your mind?” There was a playful smirk on his face as he stripped down to his undershirt.

“I have to know. What’s he like, you know, behind closed doors?” He then winked to her and she could feel her face instantly flush. There was a not-so-subtle heat to her skin as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and itched at the flush on her chest.

“Seriously, Dorian? I don’t believe I go around asking about your love life.” He sighed and sat down on the bed, patting next to her.

“Because unfortunately right now there is nothing to talk about. You don’t have to tell me much: Just give me a word and I can sleep easy knowing you’re hopefully satisfied.” He crawled up into bed with his back facing the wall. She chuckled underneath her breath, using a small pulse of regular magic to extinguish the candle that was lighting the room. Moonlight barely illuminated the room through the wall of clouds and the dark of night but it was enough for her to find her place next to him on the bed. She never had a brother, but she guessed this is what it felt like since they were so comfortable with one another.

“One word?” He responded with a hum, adjusting the pillow under his head while she positioned herself next to him side by side. Athena let out a satisfied hum, smiling while pulling on her connection to the Fade. “Godlike.”

Solas was surprisingly absent from the Fade that night but she spent the majority of it training with Harmony. It was getting easier to fend him off from her emotions related to Thedas but once he
tapped into her memories of the old world she instantly broke down. They were still intertwined heavily with her heart and thankfully she still had time to practice on defending herself from the mental onslaught that would be the Nightmare demon. She woke hopeful but feeling mentally drained from her dream. Dorian had rolled on his side towards her in the night and thrown an arm over her stomach. She smiled and nuded his chest with her hand. He glamorously woke from his sleep with a smooth opening of his eyes, wiggling his mustache until she came into focus.

“Good morning, Sunshine. Ready to get on the road?” She nodded with a few more reluctant noises of being brought from the Fade, rubbing her eyes with the palms of her hands. They slipped back into their clothes from the day before with the thought of a bath fresh on their minds. Athena was looking forward to just forgoing responsibilities, dropping her bag at the door, and sitting in a hot bath for maybe three hours. By the time they got outside, Cole had the horses prepped and facing the trail that led up the rest of the mountain. The market goers and tradesman were trying to get up before the snow started to set in so the road was busy. Dorian slid onto his horse and Athena walked in front of Prince to embrace his head in a gesture of good-morning. Prince reluctantly pressed his head into her, filling her mind with thoughts about how irresponsible the stable hand was.

_He didn’t even have the cubes. Dennet always carries them for me._ Athena shushed his worries while running her hand down the bridge of his nose. “We’re almost home, you poor thing. Let’s get started.” Cole reached over from his horse and patted Prince on the back of his neck.

“There, there. Almost done.” There was a false sing-songy tone to the spirit’s voice that made Athena smile. With a push from the ground she pulled herself onto Prince’s saddle and started the group off with a brisk trot to make up for any lost time.

Athena thought the first time she saw Skyhold it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. . . but the vision of it now after her mission brought tears to her eyes. It was roughly three o’clock in the afternoon so there was still sun in the sky. The soldiers at the gate waved to them while playing with Claw and the other members of the pack. The alpha had given a quick report that the castle was safe when she was gone. His breath was also beginning to smell of the meals from the kitchen. _Cullen._ She thought to herself with a smirk, patting the alpha wolf on top of the head before riding the remainder of the way across the bridge. Instantly Dennet was upon them and took the horses almost right out from under them.

“Goodness where did you go with them? They smell of swamp! It’s going to take three washes to get that smell out.” The gruff horse master took them back to the stable and she noticed Prince had a happier trot in his step. Dorian gave her a hug from the side, kissing her on top of the head with an exhausted sigh.
“Thanks for the fun venture. Let’s not do another one like that anytime soon, alright?” He then dropped his voice to a whisper and she could hear the smile on his lips. “I will let you know if I find a place suitable to continue our experiment, my little Flame Dame.” She chuckled against him and waved as she walked up the stairs to her tower. There was an anxiety in her stomach at how excited she was for her own bed and bath. It was building like a knot in her stomach and she gripped the door handle with such excitement, pushing her body weight into the door with a smile on her face.

It didn’t budge. It was locked.

“Oh come on! I didn’t even know my door could lock with all of the shit people leave in there! By the Creators!” She kicked the door and rested her forehead against it, dropping her bag to the ground in front of it while throwing her hands into the air. “Fuck it! I hear you, universe! Duty comes first! Bite my tired, sweaty ass.” With a final violent kick against the door she dropped all of her unnecessary belongings while turning away. There was a strange sound similar to laughter from within her room and she turned on her heel, listening in for it but heard nothing but silence. With an exhausted sigh, she looked out to the courtyard and saw Cassandra, Josephine, and Cullen standing in a circle. The Commander hailed her with a gesture and an off-centered smirk.

She used a ribbon to tie her hair up out of the messy catastrophe it had become. Cassandra had her arms crossed and was tapping her gauntleted finger against her forearm impatiently. “The Inquisitor returned from the Approach yesterday, but we have yet to meet to discuss our next step.” Athena cursed under her breath.

“No shit. She made it back here before me?” Josephine smiled at her cursing and nodded, counting with her quill exactly how many days they were gone. “You overshot your estimate by more than a week, Lady Athena. I’m assuming your mission went well?” Athena looked down at her body and poked herself in the center of the abdomen.

“Assuming I am not a lyrium spirit here, yes. I succeeded. Thank you for your concern.” Cullen chuckled and readjusted the grip on the hilt of his sword.

“One of my recruits said they saw the Inquisitor in a room on the battlements earlier. Perhaps we could find her there?” They all nodded in agreement and they moved up towards the next set of stairs. She looked around to them and their environment, an amazing realization suddenly clicking in on her face. Athena began to laugh without being able to contain it, covering her mouth with the back of her hand while staying near the front of the group.

I need to see this. For science. Cullen walked and nudged her with the side of his body, arching a
brow at her laughter. She shook her head and gestured for him to lead the group. “Nothing, nothing. Oh! You and I have to discuss one of your recruits. I’m assuming he is new.” He didn’t say anything but continued to keep his bewildered gaze. “Does an Arthur Greystone sound familiar?” The Commander nodded while making an uncomfortable shift in posture.

“I have a feeling I’m not going to like what you have to say about him.” Athena smiled and shook her head, flicking her gaze to the wooden door they were approaching. “But don’t worry. We can talk about that later over an ale. You’ll need it.” Cullen looked up and straightened his posture, looking down at the scroll in his hand that had a list of their improvements made throughout Skyhold. He opened the door without hesitation and walked in, eyes glued to the scroll.

“Sorry to disturb your rest, Inquisitor, but our fortif- OH SWEET MAKER.” He recoiled back and Athena instantly began to bite her tongue to keep from laughing, turning her head and covering her mouth with her hand as she heard a cocky voice come from inside the room.

“Cullen, how’s it going?”

Chapter End Notes

The coming scene is honestly one of my favorites from the game. It almost has me in tears every time.

Thanks for the love as usual.
Athena positioned herself behind Cullen immediately. The silent laughter was already beginning to hurt her stomach, eyes welling up with tears. Iron Bull was stretched out on the bed within the room, hand clutching the side of the mattress while giving Cullen a nod of greeting. Josephine casually came in with her hands resting in front of her, face innocent and unprepared. “Is the Inquisitor awake? I thought perhaps we... Oh!” The normally composed Ambassador choked on her words, eyes widening as her body froze in the large doorway. Athena took in a deep breath to compose herself, curiosity getting the best of her while she strolled in beside Josephine and rested her arm on her puffy shoulder.

Rathein slapped her hands to her face, looking to each of them while wearing a haphazardly placed formal blouse and pants that hadn’t even been fastened yet. “I promise...there is an explanation for this. Somewhere. In here.” The normally composed, noble Inquisitor rubbed the back of her neck and kicked a piece of broken wood on the floor. Cullen stammered next, keeping his hands raised to block out the view that was in front of him while keeping his gaze averted.

“I’m so sorry...“

Josephine tilted her head in amusement, her eyes never leaving the almost literal elephant in the room. “I cannot move my legs.” She stated amused. Athena laughed into the arm that was resting on her shoulder, glancing up towards Rathein with a shit-eating grin.

“I don’t think our Inquisitor can feel hers either.”

“Athena!” The brown-haired mage screamed in embarrassment while The Iron Bull laughed with an added “Nice.” Cassandra then walked in between them, looking around at everyone with a confused glance.

“Is something the matt-AH!” She took a step back and Athena pushed on the Seeker’s back to keep her in the room. Any trace of exhaustion from the trip was fading away. The happiness from the misfortune of her good friend was replacing all of it. This was one of her favorite parts of the game. And now? She was smack dab in the middle of it. Bull leaned back on the bed and shook his head,
letting out a frustrated: “Oh for fuck’s sake.”

Cassandra turned towards Cullen, asking out loud for anyone to answer: “Do you see this?”

The Commander, Makers bless him, answered with a curt: “No.”

Athena, at the same time, answered with an absurd amount of glee. “Abso-fucking-lutely.”

Cullen shot her an entertained glance while Cassandra moved forward. “I take it – “

Bull smirked and gestured over to Rathein, whose face was so red it was about to burst. “Actually, she’s the one who has been taking it.”

Both Cullen and Athena laughed under their breath, sharing a glance that only made her happier. At least somebody in the group had a sense of humor. Athena moved from Josephine’s shoulder, nudging the Ambassador to try and get her eyes to move from Bull’s gift. They didn’t, and Athena couldn’t blame her.

“I apologize for interrupting what I assume was a momentary diversion?” The Seeker looked with a focused soldier’s gaze.

Cullen smirked, looking up towards Cassandra. “Nothing wrong with having a bit of fun.” Athena shook her head, catching Rathein’s gaze from the corner of her eye. The Inquisitor was absolutely humiliated, but there was a small spark in her gaze that showed she was somewhat entertained by it all. She mouthed the word “Sorry” to her friend and she shrugged in response.

Josephine, still enamored, smiled. “Who wouldn’t be a little curious?”

They all looked to Rathein who finally let out her frustration into a sigh. Athena could feel the tingle of her storm magic filling the room and she let a small shudder go down her spine. “Well. Bull and I are together, have been together. It’s not momentary, and if you don’t mind, we would like to get back to it. Is that a problem, my Inner Council?”

Cullen and Josephine quickly said no and turned around. Cassandra, ever the secret romantic,
smirked and shook her head before leaving. Athena smiled to them both, clapping her hands together in an apologetic gesture before turning. As she was leaving Bull called out to her. “We’re even now, Alpha.”

She went cold, slowly turning back towards him with an arched brow. “You’re shitting me.”

He smiled and gave her a thumbs up. “Magic wasn’t quite fast enough. I saw it all, and your placement of the hair removal shit the Boss uses. Niiiiiiice.”

Rathein was the one laughing now, feeling more relaxed now that the Inner Council was gone even though Bull was still completely exposed. Athena’s eyes widened, slowly looking between the two of them while the wheels turned in her head. “Alright, you two. We’re even. I can now check something off of my bucket list though. Enjoy your afternoon, you two. Glad to see you’re back from the Approach.”

They casually waved to her like she was leaving the tavern instead of their lovebed. Athena laughed, shaking her head, and walking back on the battlements. She was about to descend the steps when she heard an amused voice coming from the side. “You knew that was going to happen and you let me walk in first?”

Athena turned in with a grin on her face towards the Commander, who thankfully wasn’t angry. He had his arms crossed while leaning against the battlement wall. She shrugged and paused. “Sorry about it. You can’t say you weren’t curious though. So I’m going to add a ‘you’re welcome’ to that as well.” He at first was taken aback but then laughed, scratching the back of his neck while a blush crawled up his neck.

“Ah – well – you said something about a soldier of mine over an ale? I think I could use two, if you are still interested.” She glanced down towards the main gates of the castle with a nod.

“Give me about ten minutes and I’ll meet you there. I need to let someone know I’m still alive.” He nodded with an almost disappointed expression, fixing it with a clearing of his throat.

“I see. I will see you in a bit then.” When he reached the bottom of the stairs Kain was automatically circling him like a domestic yorkie whose parent returned home after forgetting their keys. She rolled her eyes at the pair and made her way towards the main keep with a quickened speed in her step. When she entered the main hall, she was greeted with the heat of the fireplace and a familiar greeting that warmed her heart.
“Hey! Welcome back, Walker.” Varric waved the feather of his quill at her with a smirk, inviting her over with a quick gesture. He stood up and cleared some of the scrolls that always littered his unofficial study. She noted a few unedited chapters of the book he was writing on the Inquisition and a pile of unanswered fan mail. He popped back up into his plush chair while leaning forward quill in hand. “So! Tell me what you did while you were away.” He raised his quill and in turn she raised a brow towards him.

“Adding my tales to your repertoire?” He chuckled and nodded with an innocent shrug.

“It never hurts. Tales of the Fade-Walker could be a successful thing if you’re interested. Regardless, someone needs to write this shit down or else nobody will believe it.” Athena smirked and leaned back into the secondary chair, resting her head in her hands with a groan.

“Well. I fought something that was a fucked-up combination of a human and a spider. He went by the name Th’arack.” Varric looked up from his empty scroll with an interested expression.

“Wait, like the Varterral? We faced one of those when I was back in Kirkwall. Nasty thing.” She shook her head and picked up a scroll with a spare quill, licking the tip before drawing out a stick figured upper body with an oblong circle with eight skinny legs. Varric chuckled and took the scroll from her hand, shaking his head back and forth.

“Stick to your day job, Walker.” She shot him a playful glare before sitting back in her chair.

“Hey, I never said drawing was my strong suit. That’s Solas’s thing. That whole rotunda is evidence of that.” She leaned back and tried to look into the rotunda but the door was shut. She frowned and put all four legs of the chair back on the ground while Varric looked over the drawing.

“Even with this pheasant scratch of a drawing, that thing sounds nasty. I assume you’re not telling that one around the campfire?” Athena instantly shook her head with half a scoff.

“Fades no. I don’t think the children want to hear about how I got stabbed by a red lyrium barb and had to burn away a thousand spiders.” Varric’s eyes instantly went wide and he almost dropped his quill.

“You were stabbed by that shit? Maker, Athena, you all right?” His voice dropped and she caught a glimpse of the genuinely concerned dwarf for a moment. She smiled, reaching over and patting
“Honestly? I heard some weird voices and had a headache for the first few days. The voices are gone but I get an ache here where I was stabbed and here.” She pointed to her shoulder, pulling down her shirt so he could see the puncture wound that was clean and almost healed over. There were no red lyrium veins coming from it or any outward sign of infection from the attack. He looked at it and nodded with a sigh of relief, gesturing for her to put it away.

“Good. Last thing we need is one of our own getting infected with that crap. Maybe Solas can heal it out. Hey, you seen him around?” He looked up to her with his off-centered smirk. She leaned back and looked at the rotunda door with a hum of questioning.

“You haven’t seen him? Is he not where he usually is?” The dwarf shook his head and itched behind his ear with his quill, leaving a small mark of ink but he didn’t seem to care. He then chuckled with a smile, leaning forward and grabbing another scroll to write on.

“Nope. I saw him leave sometime this morning carrying a box of something. I couldn’t see but he hasn’t come back yet. What have you done to him, Walker?” There was a tease in his tone and she smirked, crossing her legs while leaning back into the chair.

“Whatsoever do you mean, Master Tethras? I am nothing but chaste and innocent.” This time he slapped his knee and laughed to where the sound echoed through the room. A few passing nobles sneered and raised their noses to them but the pair did not care. Athena joined in his laugh but he shook his head and wiped his eye with the corner of his glove.

“Sure you are. You know Chuckles. He’s typically silent as the grave in there most of the time. But shit you not, Athena, since you two have been doing whatever you’ve been doing, I hear fucking humming coming from in there.” He then pointed his thumb towards the rotunda with a knowing smile. Athena instantly blushed in slight embarrassment, tucking a stray hair behind her ear while shooting a thankful glance over to the piano. She thought she felt a pulse of greeting and wanting from the instrument. She did not have the energy to give it the attention it needed right then. Maybe tomorrow.

She cleared her throat but could not get the smile off of her face. “That’s...uh...Sorry about that then. I have to go meet the Commander for a drink and a chat about one of his soldiers. Maybe I’ll see you at the tavern later?” Athena stood up and looked to him with a hopeful glance. He only nodded at her in return, dipping his quill down into his inkpot while calling out to her as she left: “Don’t break too many hearts now, Walker!”
Athena rolled her eyes at him and descended the steps towards the tavern quickly. The roar of the evening was already beginning to start even though they had some sun left. With winter coming the days were growing shorter and people were finding reasons to get to the tavern and the mess hall faster. When she opened the door, there were a few people who called out to her in greeting. Loranil waved over from his usual table with a few of the other elf soldiers. There were a few of the new recruits from Halamshiral sitting with them. They raised a glass towards her and she sheepishly waved in response.

Cullen stood up from his table on the second floor and did a quick nod of acknowledgement in her direction. There was already a pint of ale for her across from him and she smiled while ascending the stairs. The Chargers were coming in from their daily training and already the volume of the bar doubled with their presence. Before they could see her and potentially drag her into a drinking game she dashed up the stairs and slid into the seat across from Cullen. There was a smirk on her lips as she looked over the tavern with almost a nostalgic expression.

“You look like your mission went well.” The Command stated plainly, raising the mug to his mouth while keeping his eyes on her. She smirked with a shrug, rubbing the back of her head before bringing the ale to her lips. It was bitter with a twinge of flavor at the end. As she rolled the swig around in her mouth she determined it was a crossbreed between chocolates. At least they were trying to experiment with their ale. She put the mug down and let out a groan as the bitter taste that came with the ales settled in on her tongue.

“You think so? Came away with a prize though.” She nonchalantly pulled back her shirt and showed him the scabbing over wound. At first, he averted his eyes, like the gentleman he was, but then slowly looked back and furrowed his brow.

“Are you all right?” His voice softened and she flicked her gaze up to his. He still had the hardened look of the Inquisition Commander being one drink in, but there was a subtle gentleness at the corners of his expression. She nodded with a smile.

“I’ll be fine. Now about this thing I wanted to talk to you about.” He smirked and took a rather large sip of his ale to prepare. She chuckled under her breath and joined him, noticing for a second that he was wincing and clenching his jaw. Damn headaches. He nodded when he was ready to start and she gave him a sympathetic gaze before continuing. “Are you familiar with your soldier Arthur Greystone?” He sat back in his chair, relaxing in his posture for a second before thinking.

“Hm. The name sounds familiar, but we have received a few dozen recruits since Halamshiral that my Lieutenants have been working with. Why? What did he do?” There was a curiously entertained tone to his voice and she mimicked his motion, sitting back in her chair while taking in some liquid courage before continuing.
“Oh. He may have asked if it was me who was with a - oh how did he put it. . .” She tapped her lips with her index finger while looking up to the ceiling. “An old, bald, knife ear? Or rabbit? I can’t remember.”

Cullen instantly nearly choked in his ale, covering his mouth with a closed fist while attempting to conquer the surprise and ale in his throat. She slowly sipped on her own, arching a brow towards him with interest. When he recovered, he sat back up with a deep inhale. His face was red but with his expression she wasn’t sure if it was anger or if he was recovering from choking.

“Do I need to write a letter home to his family saying he passed in the line of duty?” Athena laughed, sitting forward with a playful wink.

“Oh, come on, Cullen. I’m not that terrifying.” He tilted his head in question at her, not saying a single word. The silence between them spoke volumes and she swallowed down a nervous lump.

“Oh. He may have asked if it was me who was with a - oh how did he put it. . .” She tapped her lips with her index finger while looking up to the ceiling. “An old, bald, knife ear? Or rabbit? I can’t remember.”

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“Do I need to write a letter home to his family saying he passed in the line of duty?” Athena laughed, sitting forward with a playful wink.

“Shit. Well. Need to fix that then. No. I didn't kill him. Might have scratched his neck up a bit. . .” The soldier’s eyes widened in interest and she smirked, hands twitching in the urge to show him but she decided it would be best not to in the open air of the tavern.

He cleared his throat and straightened his posture, letting a shudder run down his spine as he shook his head. “I’ll have to ask where he was assigned for the week but I ensure that he will be dealt with when he returns.”

“Ugh! Ay! No talkin’ business here.” Sera walked out of her room and leaned her elbow on Athena’s shoulder, pointing between the two of them. “I swear. The moment you start shackin’ up with elfy, you get all serious and whatnot. Blackwall said you basically told Gaspard to fuck right off before the ball. Now that I would of paid to see.” Cullen broke his normal authoritative posture and chuckled, swirling the ale in his drink and it sounded like his mug was almost empty. Athena had to laugh, gesturing to him with her own mug.

“Maker, Cullen, you pounding that back there. Trying to bleach your mind from earlier?” She winked at him and his face paled, which only made Sera get more curious. She pulled up a bar stool and sat at the end of the table, poking Athena with a spoon someone had left behind.

“Maker, Cullen, you pounding that back there. Trying to bleach your mind from earlier?” She winked at him and his face paled, which only made Sera get more curious. She pulled up a bar stool and sat at the end of the table, poking Athena with a spoon someone had left behind.

“We walked in on Bull and the Inquisitor today. Bull was rather. . . stretched out on the bed when we walked in.” There was an obvious blush on her cheeks and she couldn’t help but laugh. Sera
instantly slammed her hands down on the table, stood up, and almost screamed.

“Tell. Me. Everything!”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the love as always. <3
Athena told Sera the whole situation, bit by bit. The elf was nearly in tears from laughing, her feet kicking against the table as she leaned back to where her stool was only on two legs. During the story, she had pulsed out for Kain, feeling him exploring around the stables. She asked for him to bring her the lute that was probably still sitting outside her locked door. He casually came up to the table and handed it to her, returning to his second favorite place at Cullen’s side. The Commander was nursing his second mug of ale when the companion arrived. He rubbed his hand down Kain’s fur and began to scratch a spot on his right leg that made the wolf begin to whine. Athena smiled at the pair, turning to Sera while pointing at Cullen: “And that is why we’re here. I’m drinking to celebrate my friend getting laid, and Cullen, well... He’ll need to say quite a few Hail Andraste’s to get this out of his mind.”

Cullen threw his head back and laughed, pinching the bridge of his nose while Sera came down to a chuckle. She pushed on Athena’s shoulder, gesturing to the lute that was now in her lap. “Come on! I want to hear this big ole middle finger of a song you sung for Gaspard.” Athena shook her head, dismissing her with a gesture before tapping on her chin with her index finger.

“Nah, you had to be there for that one. But now that I have a drink and a half in me I might be able to squeeze something else out. Think you could nab an Orlesian mask for me?” She took her hair down from her messy updo to make something sleeker and pulled back, pulling all of her hair into a tight bun so that when she wore the mask it would look like she didn’t have much hair at all. Cullen arched a brow at her while Sera scrambled back into her room. It sounded like things were crashing before she came out with a large gold mask, like the one Gaspard wore but this one had brown leather ties instead of black silk ones. Athena held it in her hand, flipping it over with an amused look.

“Why am I not surprised you found this so quickly?” Sera scoffed, standing up from her seat with a wink.

“Nothing’s more fun than making the richies squirm. And boy do they hate to be without their masks! Now come on, the Chargers are all downstairs and they’ll love this.” Sera grabbed Athena by the elbow, dragging her downstairs as she was barely able to fix her mask and grab her lute. Cullen stood from the table and leaned against the railing while looking at down at him. The candlelight reflected in the armor he still wore and Athena didn’t realize until then how much he stood out when he was still in his official garb. She was wearing her traveling jacket and dirtied tank top and pants with her mud-covered boots... so she finally fit right in.

Sera pulled her by the stairway where Maryden normally sat. The area was empty and the bard was
nowhere to be found within the tavern. Athena pushed her back up against the wall, lazily holding her lute up. The rogue smiled with a wicked glee, clapping her hands together while nearly shouting. “Hey you lots! Wolfy here has another song about our beloved Emperor!” There were general sounds of disapproval through the tavern, especially from the elven table that Loranil led. He saw Athena’s get up and instantly smiled, nudging his friend in the ribs and gesturing to Athena. She thought she read his lips and saw something akin to Fen’Elgara but she ignored it and raised her lute.

She now understood the safety of the mask because even though the ale was strong, her stage fright was stronger. She strummed the opening notes that were normally for the piano, but there was no way in hell that she would sing this song in the open view of the nobles. The tavern was, as Sera put it, people people. They would get it. Athena tried to put an awful Orlesian accent on her voice as she sang, looking over to her notable people like Loranil, the Chargers, Sera, and Cullen for guidance.

“You say: the price of my wars not a price that you’re willing to pay.
You cry in your tea which you hurl in the sea when you see me go by.
Why so sad?”

She dragged her finger down as a tear on her mask, quickly recovering to the song.

“Remember we made an arrangement when you went away.
Now you’re making me mad.
Remember despite our estrangement, I’m your man.”

Athena lingered on the note, looking around to judge reactions. There was obviously some animosity towards the Grand Duke now Puppet-Emperor in the room, even with the amount of soldiers present. She knew Cullen was a fan of the chevalier, but maybe now he wasn’t after his petty attacks in the Plains?

“You’ll be back. Soon you’ll see. You remember that you belong to me.
You’ll be back. Time will tell. You’ll remember that I served you well.
Oceans rise, empires fall! We have seen each other through it all.
And when push... comes to shove.”

She cleared her throat with a smile, strumming her lute while looking to the tavern with a wink.

“I will send a full armed battalion to remind you of my love!”
The chorus took off and the tavern-goers laughed. The door opened and brought in a chill breeze, Varric, Bull, and Rathein with it. The tavern, almost by instinct, rose a glass to the Inquisitor as Athena began to walk around the area and sing her tune. Sera was giggling next to Dalish, slapping the ‘archer’s’ lap while breaking into a full laugh. Athena then came up to Rathein and dropped to her knees, shooting her friend a wink while continuing on with the song.

“‘You say our love is draining and you can’t go on. You’ll be the one complaining when I am gone.’

Bull leaned over and quickly explained the scenario, since his Ben Hasserath eyes were quicker at picking up the tinier details. A flash of anger went over the noble Herald’s face, but then the real Rathein melted through and she opened her mouth to speak. Athena put a finger over her lips, smiling while bringing herself closer to her.

“And no! Don’t change the subject. ‘Cause you’re my favorite subject. My sweet, submissive”

She shot a playful wink at Bull who couldn’t help but laugh while clapping Rathein on the back.

“Subject. My royal, loyal subject. Forever and ever and ever and ever and ever.”

Athena stepped back, leaning her body more towards the elven table that she wanted to sit at anyways. Loranil brought the mugs more towards the outskirts so she could hop up and sit on their table, her feet kicking out in time.

“You’ll be back, like before. I will fight the fight and win the war. For your love, for your praise, and I’ll love you until my dying days!”

She moved to stand on the table, spinning around to build to the finale and using magic to pulse the music from the lute louder. The elves looked to each and smiled, reaching out and patting her on the leg for encouragement. Could they feel her nerves pounding her heart to where it felt like it was going to explode from her neck? With a quick glance up, she saw Cullen smirk, raising his mug an inch as a gesture of his approval.
“When you’re gone! I’ll go mad. So don’t throw away this thing we have. ‘Cause when push... comes to shove.”

Athena looked over her shoulder and gave a wicked wink to Loranil in character.

“I’ll kill your friends and family... to remind you of my love!”

She then immediately jumped off the table and finished the chorus, smiling that some of her friends were catching on with the tune while. At the end of the song she bowed deeply, ripping off the mask while pulling down her hair at the same time. When she came back up there was cheering that brought her into an automatic chuckle. The elven table in particular were shouting compliments in the language that they were beginning to share.

Athena wasn’t wrong though. The name Fen’Elgara fell from one of the new recruit’s lips and she had to let out sigh. She ignored the call of the Chargers to walk over and lean against the table, giving Loranil an accusatory stare. “Now where did these new soldiers hear that nickname?”

Loranil gave her a bashful smile, sitting back into his chair while running a hand through his red hair. He arched a brow to her before continuing in the Elven tongue. “Stories of how you help the people spread quickly, friend. I cannot help if they get excited, especially with Lev’adin’s tongue.”

She took a moment to process what he said, breaking down the different words and pulling back on what Solas had taught her in the Fade. “So they do. Do you not quell the rumors?” Her Elvish was broken and obviously being spoken by a shem tongue, but the table appreciated it enough. They gave her different variations of a smile and their “table leader” smirked.

“Would you like me to? I do not spread lies about you. Your actions are louder than my words could ever be.” There was a slight flirtation in his words and she straightened her posture, giving him a small hum in refusal to his subtle advances. She crossed her arms over her abdomen while chewing on the inside of her cheek. It took her a few seconds longer to come up with a response since she was piecing the different bits of the ancient language together but eventually she got it.

“I will not deny hope from the people that need it most.” She then cleared her throat and reached over towards Loranil, picking up his mug with a wolfish smirk on her lips. He wasn’t drinking the ale she had. His was more bitter and she had to fight the instinct to cough. However, the thrill of a performance and the buzz from her previous ale and a half gave her confidence. Athena took down two large gulps before slamming the empty mug on the table, using the other hand to pull a silver coin from her pocket and flick it at him. “Enjoy your evening, da’mi.”
Loranil laughed, picking up the coin and pocketing it while calling out to her. “And to you, *Fen’Elgara*!” She rolled her eyes when her back was facing towards him, giving him a flippant gesture as she walked over towards the Chargers. The traveling and the booze was starting to set in and she could feel herself growing more and more tired with every step. Krem was stifling a chuckle and she arched a brow towards him, smiling while asking: “What are you laughing about?”

The Tevinter shook his head, gesturing over to The Iron Bull. “Boss says you got an eye-full today.” The whole mercenary group laughed and Bull had his usual smirk on her face. She kept her face calm, leaning against the wooden plank on her left while shooting Rathein an assessing gaze. The Inquisitor was laughing with them, thankfully not embarrassed anymore. The two women had seen enough of each other when they were using the tonic to remove their hair. Oh! She snapped her fingers and pointed towards her friend, almost completely ignoring the others.

“Oh hey, can you get me more of that stuff?” Bull began to laugh and Rathein slapped him on the knee from her position next to him. She nodded with a smile, scratching the side of her head.

“Not a problem. You look awful, Athena. What happened to you out there?” There was a playful smile on her friend’s face. Athena pushed at her with a teasing slap of magic that made Dalish smirk.

“Nothing too terrible. Fuck-ton of spiders. I’m sure you’ll hear Dorian whining about how he keeps finding the little bastards’ legs in his hair. I can tell guys the story tomorrow. I think if I stay here another moment I’m going to pass into a coma.” Krem and Bull made sounds of disapproval while the others began waving her away with their words of farewell. Kain came down the stairs with Cullen at his side. The Commander had circles under his eyes and it looked like the exhaustion had hit him too. She patted him on the shoulder and walked out the door with him, taking in a breath of the cold night air. “Winter is coming.” She said with a small chuckle. He did not understand the reference but nodded, pulling the fur of his coat tighter.

“Wintersend will be here soon. I think I heard Josephine talking of another Maker-forsaken ball.” The despair in his voice was obvious and she couldn’t help but laugh at him. She walked forward, nudging her body into his like she would with her friends in school when they were walking down a hall.

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“Don’t you have enough marriage proposals to sort through, Cullen? Surely you’ll be a happy husband to some noblewoman with the small yippy dog.” She didn’t even have to look over at him to see the dismay setting in on his features.
“Maker – no. Mabaris are more my type.” Kain then gently bit down on his hand in jealousy and in an attempt to remove his glove. Cullen chuckled, pulling back on it until he succeeded in the small game of tug of war. “Apologies, Kain, Wolves too, now.” There was a soft blush on his cheeks but she didn’t linger too long on them. They stood to where they needed to split and he rubbed the back of his neck, looking up towards her tower that oddly had the lights on inside.

“I really ought to have Josephine change the keys. . . and give me one for once.” He laughed before bending down and rubbing his hand over Kain’s fur.

“Yes. Well. You two have a good night, Lady Athena.” She scoffed and shook her head.

“Please. After what you have I have seen today, I think we can drop the ‘Lady’ thing. But yes, good night, Commander.” He nodded and walked away, stretching up towards the sky with a sigh. She watched him walk away for a second more to make sure he was okay before turning her attention towards the ascent towards her tower. Her pack and possessions were no longer sitting out in front of her door and there was a smell coming from her room. There were no windows facing the courtyard, only the outside bridge, so she couldn’t peek in and see what was going on.

Athena slowly wrapped her hand around the doorknob, jiggling it back and forth to see if it was still locked. Thankfully it turned and she sighed, pushing her weight into the door and coming into the safety of her home. Everything was as she left it, almost. There was a box of supplies to the right of the door and she looked down to see the remnants of paper and paints that had seen Solas use for his frescos in the rotunda. She slid her lute from the strap on her back and rested it at the end of the bed. Just to be sure, she sent out a pulse of magic through the room and felt it ‘ping’ against something in the upstairs area.

Within a second she felt it return her call, and an all too welcoming chill sent a shudder down her spine.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the continued support!

Song: You'll Be Back - Hamilton

Translations:
da'mi - my blade
Athena let out a sigh she didn’t realize she was holding in, rubbing the back of her neck while slowly walking up the stairs. There were candles lighting the upper loft-like area and the window was open to let the moonlight in. Her feet felt like lead as she ascended the stairs and when she finally made it up she leaned her body against the wall, instantly smiling at what she saw. Solas was sitting in the window, wiping his hands with a dirtied cloth that was nearly saturated with small bits of plaster and paints from his fresco. He looked over to her and cracked a tired smile, standing from the window while extending a hand to her. She took it, slowly walking forward with her eyes suddenly glued to what used to be a blank wall.

Instead, there was now a beautiful scene. A large wolf with colors of mostly white and very pale yellows was painted from the side, its maw open and fangs bared in the Plains. On the left, there were the shadows of soldiers, their postures painted in a pose of retreat. Underneath the wolf was a side profile of her. She stood with her hand facing upwards to control the beast, eyes blazing like her summoned creature. Instead of her clothes coming off in bits, Athena bent down and ran her hand over the painted version of herself. Her legs were covered in a type of scaled armor that she recognized but couldn’t place. The colors were a mixture of golds and silvers and they ran up to her waist and then from there her body was covered in swirls of flames. Her hair was blown up almost like a crown and she could just feel the power that she was supposed to be exuded in the masterpiece.

Solas stood silent behind her as she took it all in. At the edge of the painting, on the far right in the shadow of the wall and the window, there was a smaller wolf painted at Athena’s back... with three red eyes painted on its profile. Athena’s breath hitched in her throat but she covered it with a curious smile. “This is breathtaking, Solas. Truly. I don’t know what I did to deserve such art.” He helped her stand with a proud smile, giving it one final gesture.

“I told you that moment would never be forgotten, and now it will remain eternal in this tower.” She smiled and brushed her lips against his cheeks, arching a brow before nodding her head towards the wall.

“Now tell me, why is the Dread Wolf at my back?” He stilled for a moment before chuckling, bringing her in close so he could turn his head and kiss the top of her head.

“Very observant. If you remember, he was during this.” His hand moved from her lower back to ghost over the area between her shoulders where she had the wolf tattoo during their excursion in the Plains. Her eyes widened in realization, her mouth forming into an “o” while giving him a wicked grin.
“How clever of you, hahren.” Athena smiled, facing him completely. He looked striking in the moonlight with his sleeves rolled up past his elbows with smudges of paint and plaster on his arms and face. She touched each spot while shaking her head while he looked at her with an amused expression. “You need a bath, vhenan.” The endearment broke his lips into a smile. He leaned down and whispered against her lips while arching her neck towards him by bringing a single finger underneath her chin.

“Which is why there is one drawn downstairs already.” He brushed his lips against hers in a greeting and the exhaustion of the day immediately melted away. When she was on her mission, she was focused. The only goal was to get to the cave and defeat the creature that Command had set aside for her. Now that she was home, now that she could feel her lover’s heat against her skin and taste the herbed drink on his lips, it all came flooding back into her. Her hands shook as she ran them down his sides, gripping onto the woven fabric underneath. She flicked her tongue against his lower lip, sucking in the soft moan he released with a smirk on her face. He gripped her shoulders and brought her closer to him, moving a hand to her lower back and pulling to where she could feel the heat of his skin against hers.

A winter chill came in through the open window and caused her to shudder in his touch, eyes fluttering open as he paused in their kiss. He flicked his hand into the air and with a gesture the window shut. The air tingled with his magic and she wondered if he used it during his art sessions. Perhaps that is why they were so moving. She smiled and he motioned down the stairs with hints of darkness in his expression. “I will see you downstairs. I need to finish here.”

Athena walked over to the stairwell, giving him a lingering look over her shoulder. “Don’t be too long.” The moment she started walking down the stairs she slid her jacket off and began to work on her tank top, knowing full well that he was watching her descend into the shadows of her bedroom. She left a trail of clothes down the stairs. One, as a tease. Two, because she was far too lazy and tired to stand in one place and undress. By the time her bare feet hit the bottom floor she let out a sigh, running a hand through her dirty locks before looking at the bath. Like he said, it was already drawn with water so hot she could see the steam rising from it. She ran her hand along the side and put one foot in, slightly hissing at the severe temperature of the water before settling in. The water level rose to barely above her breasts but she sat back and let the heat penetrate her skin and muscles.

To anyone else it would probably be too hot, but at this point she had spent so much time around flame she was sure her resting temperature was over a hundred. She took in deep breaths of steam, letting it roll over her mind and soothe the aches of her body. They all hitched at one point though, and she didn’t have to open her eyes to know it was her shoulder. Athena opened one eye and looked down to it, wincing when she saw that it had grown irritated since she had gotten home. The visible part was no bigger than a penny, but Creators did it hurt now.

“That looks worse than it did in the Fade.” Damn he’s observant. He slid his arms over hers from
behind, looking down at the wound with a disapproving stare. She looked away from it, clenching her jaw as he probed it with his magic.

“Feels worse too. Who’d have thought blighted spiders would leave a nasty scar?” She tried to be playful with him but she felt his hands move from her arms to the affected shoulder, pressing on the skin around the puncture site. This time she gripped the sides of the bath and could not hide her pain, letting out a groan through clenched teeth. He shook his head back and forth, standing and turning to the side. He had already brought a healer’s kit, because of course he had. She looked over and saw him down a lyrium potion before wiping his mouth off with the back of his hand.

“You should probably drink something; this might hurt to heal. Whoever did the initial healing did an unfortunate job.” She scowled at him playfully.

“Hey. You try healing after what I did. Give me a break!” She got a flicker of a smile from him before he turned around and knelt at the bath side. He rubbed his hands together and she could see his mana sparkling within his palms. He looked to her as a warning before pressing on her shoulder with his right hand. She gripped the sides of the bath and clenched her eyes shut, letting out a hiss between her teeth as his magic literally forced itself within her wound. She could feel it act as a current of water, sweeping the entirety of the area where the red lyrium barb touched. Where the initial attack had felt like a scalding heat from the source of a volcano, his magic felt like an ice that was so cold to the touch it felt like it burned.

He winced with her, gripping onto the back of her shoulder to stable himself while moving to somewhat of a standing position. He began speaking low to her in elvish and she was beginning to piece the sentences together. “I’m sorry, my love.” She smirked through the pain, nodding in response while murmuring out some broken elvish of her own.

“Reckless.”

Solas fought a smirk as he began to pull his hand back. The intense pressure from her shoulder subsided and she opened her eyes to see small swirls of green spiritual magic flooding from his palm into her shoulder. The wound, that was previously poorly healed, was completely sealed with barely any trace of a scar. She pressed her hand to it and rubbed over where the scab had been, smiling in relief. It looked like the size of a mole and blended in with all her other sunspots and imperfections that were riddled all over her skin. At least it wouldn’t stand out like the bite marks on her arm anymore.

“Thank you.” He nodded with a small hum, wiping his brow with the back of his hand. She sat up and leaned over the tub, grabbing him by the chin with a wicked smirk. “Now get in here before I have to drag you in myself.” He looked up to her with a smile, nodding silent while unrolling his sleeves so he could slip his shirt over his head easier. She was not shy in admiring his form, eyes
taking in every feature. Already the tension within her abdomen began to grow, a subtle need curling her lips into a smile when he stood to completely disrobe. He paused and looked over his shoulder at her with an arched brow. Athena lay back in the bath and jokingly covered her eyes, waiting until she felt his hands on her shoulders. He bent down and whispered into her ear: “Move forward.”

She followed the command and gave him enough space so he could slip in behind her. He filled the space between her back and the hard shape of the tube. He instinctively wrapped his arms around her and she leaned back into him with a satisfied smile. The water was close to the top of the bath but the heat was still piping hot. He picked the cloth up from the side of the bathtub and soaked it with the water, using whatever oils he could reach to lather up the cloth. He began on her arms, using firm strokes almost like a massage on her skin. She let out a soft moan, gripping the sides of the bath as her eyes fluttered closed.

He got all the areas within his reach, leaning forward and kissing her neck gently while doing so. When it felt like almost every inch of her was clean he wrung out the cloth and went to drop it on the ground outside of the tub. She grabbed his hand quickly, taking the cloth from his hand with a smirk while moving in the water to turn around. “You were far filthier than I was getting into this bath. You don’t get out of it that easy.” Solas smiled, raising his hands up in surrender as she straddled him by sitting on top of his thighs. He made a sound of amusement, resting his hands on top of her hips while his eyes took her in.

Athena was very focused on her task, looking for any stubborn streaks of paint or splotches of dried plaster that managed to survive him soaking. He was equally determined to try and distract her. His hands grazed over his skin. The light touches made her furrow her brows and focus more on what she was doing, clenching her thighs around him to let him know she would not be moved. She had freed his arms of the leftovers from the mural and was slowly working her way to his face. There were a few remaining streaks across his brow and she bent down to his lips, whispering on top of them: “Close your eyes.” He obeyed and tightened his grip onto her hips, thumbs stroking soft circles onto her skin. She contained the shudder that wanted to run down her spine as she ran the cloth over his brow, her free hand gripping the tub’s edge.

As she made a pass over his cheek with the cloth, she got a wicked idea. She smiled looking to him to see if he was still obeying her command. Good. She moved her hand with the material in it to his shoulder while her free hand moved from the tub to his lower abdomen, gently running a finger down from his naval to his growing arousal. He still underneath her, nails digging into her skin as a surprised groan left through clenched teeth. She bent down to muffle that sound, pressing her lips against his. She stabilized herself by keeping her non-dominant hand with the cloth on his shoulder so the other one was free to tease him. He arched his back into her grip, sliding one of his hands up her side to cup her face while she kissed him.

During his next moan, she took the opportunity to deepen the kiss, sliding her tongue along his in rhythm with her hand down below.
He swelled under her touch and this put a rush of pride within her chest. It combined with the forming knot of need within her stomach that came from just being around him, let alone touching him, kissing him, and pleasing him. He used the other hand to push up from the bottom of the tub to sit up from its back, pulling her in closer. Solas brought her lower lip between his teeth, coaxing a moan out of her. The shock of pain and pleasure paused her rhythm but she kept her hand on him, eyes slowly opening to catch his hungry gaze. He smiled, looking up to the ceiling with a flick of his eyes before looking back down to her. He ran his thumb over her bottom lip and out of reflex she took it into her mouth, running her tongue along its bottom side with a playful smirk on her lips.

Solas began to move upwards and she had no choice but to stand in the bath as well. She quickly slid her foot back to pull on the drain to allow the water to empty. Without breaking his gaze from hers, he stepped from the bath and offered her his hand. She took it gingerly, fighting to keep her eyes above his shoulders instead of blatantly looking down where her mind always wandered before she went to sleep. He allowed her to walk first, staying close behind her almost like her shadow. He kept her hand within his and she thought of the times they had made love before. A smirk came to her face as she chuckled, her free hand ringing through the wet mess of her locks. He hummed in question at her laughing, her foot pausing at the first of the steps.

“I just broke down what it means.” She looked over her shoulder and he simply tilted his head, asking wordlessly what she meant. “Lasa ar’an alas’nira aron fen’en. Before I only knew a word or two, but it makes sense now.” There was a blush on his cheeks like he had been caught saying something she wasn’t supposed to be able to decipher.

“And what do you think it means?” He smirked with an air of smugness, keeping a hand on her lower back as she ascended the first few steps. She nearly scoffed with a laugh, bringing some of her wet locks over the front of her shoulders.

“Let us dance as the wolves do? Something to that extent – woah!” Her foot slipped on the stone step and she fell forward. Her hands caught her body on the steps above and she was slightly crouched over the stairs, eyes wide as she realized her face was inches away from colliding into the stone. Solas chuckled behind her and she looked over her shoulder to see him looking her up and down. He silhouetted her body with his, leaning over and speaking low into her ear. Athena let out a small sound of realization as she felt his body completely align with hers on the stairs.

“Ma nuvenin, vhenan.”
Thanks for the continuing love and support!
Athena let out a mixture of a chuckle and a gasp, hands gripping the stairs as he steadied himself behind her. There were moments when she could see the cocky and head-strong side of him that he hid. It came out during the random moments of snarkiness during conversation or when they were alone together. He wasn’t always the polite and pointed academic everyone saw him out to be. It was the duality of his personality that made her care for him more. He had a hand on her hip to position himself against her heat, a soft, uncontrollable whine of need escaping from her lips as she arched her back against him.

He bent down and kissed the soft, clean skin of her back, nipping at a piece of it with his teeth. She could feel the dark smile on his lips when she shuddered under his touch. He used each movement against him to push himself into her slowly, teasingly, and never all at once like she wanted. Even though he was beginning to drop his walls around her, he remained the master of restraint. He could read the subtle cues of her body: the moans, the soft twitches, and the way she gripped the stairs when he moved within her. He used all those things against her. He dragged out every motion until she was nearly begging for more. When she looked over her shoulder at him in points of near ecstasy, she saw glimpses of the pleased smirk on his face that was hidden underneath his own throes of pleasure.

Solas finally sheathed himself completely within her. He pulled her back to him by placing his hands on the sides of her hips, slightly digging in his nails to gather purchase on her skin. She let out a strained sigh against him, pushing her hips back against his to get the full feel of him. He bent over and placed a gentle kiss on her back; she took it as a kiss of gratitude for tolerating his relentless teasing. He then began to withdraw and plunge himself deep within her in a slow starting rhythm. Athena bit her lower lip, stifling the sounds that yearned to burst from her throat. The castle was old and its walls were growing thin with age. If the wind was just right on some nights she could hear Cullen ordering around his poor soldiers in the middle of the night. Creators forbid what he would hear if she allowed her cries of passion out.

They moved together on the stairs and she slowly felt the knot within her belly unfold. Something felt missing and that thought gave her a moment’s pause internally. Bastard. Athena hardened her stance and moved her body against him more, gasping slightly as he thrust to reach the deepest parts of her sex. She realized though, he was still holding back. The familiar chill of his magic on her skin was absent. He was waiting for something, another opportunity to try and torture her and draw the process out. As much as she appreciated him extending her pleasure, there was already a stubborn part of her that wanted to take control. With his next thrust into her she pushed her hips back, holding him there by clenching around his length and uncoiling her magic to mimic the same
motion.

He instantly stilled, breath coming in a sharp hiss as his grip tightened on her hips. While he was stunned she smiled. She strengthened her position against the stairs before starting her own rhythm. She rocked rolled her hips forward until his tip was at her entrance before sliding back smooth and hard until she could herself completely sheathed around him. Athena repeated this, slowly bringing her magic into the movements to swirl up inside of his essence. Her movements, physical and spiritual, were synchronized and calculated to continually catch him off guard. She could feel his aura move up against hers in reflex but when she had a chance to look over her shoulder his eyes were closed and his lips were parted. He moved forward and rested a hand over hers, interlocking their fingers together while giving her a hand a small squeeze. His aura began to tingle over her skin in the shared contact, sending a shudder down her spine. He broke his hand from hers and began to trail his touch up her arm and down her back, leaving a small stream of ice magic on her skin that left her breathless. During her pause, he ran two fingers down her spine, stopping at her lower back before dragging the tops of his knuckles over her hips to where he could reach down between her legs.

Her legs nearly collapsed out from under her when his fingertips found the bundle of nerves that was already wet from the bath and her arousal. A wordless cry fell from her lips, her body instantly moving into his touch in wanting for more. There was a noise of satisfaction from behind her and he took back control with his hands and hips. He increased the tempo of his movements, building up on that pressure that was burning within her core. She pushed back with magic since her body was a willing prisoner to his movements and gestures. Together they climbed, his body filling every nerve with pleasure while she filled him with her magic. Due to his mastery of his subject, she rose quicker, shuddering underneath him and nearly falling against the stairs as her peak racked her body and stole the breath from her lungs.

Solas bent down and kissed her back, whispering loving words in his native tongue that did nothing to calm the soft whines that fell from her lips. Athena pushed up with her hands to arch her back against him, bringing him into that much deeper. He brushed his lips over the back of her neck and she sighed, tilting her head towards him to where she could capture his lips for a moment. He moaned into her mouth while using both of his hands to hold her hips. She turned to cradle his face in her hand, stealing the sounds from his lips to match her own. She flicked her tongue against his lips to deepen the kiss on his next thrust. In the same moment, she willed her magic to curl up inside of him and burst out in time with his movements. That final push did him in.

His hands gripped onto her hips, pulling her close to him one last time as he was stilled from his own climax. He broke from her lips to press his forehead against her back, hot pants of breath falling upon her already sweated skin. He smiled, relaxing his hands to where he could withdraw from her and turn onto the stairs. Even with the uncomfortable, unforgiving nature of the steps, he found a way to lay with his back on them looking up towards the ceiling. She allowed her body to fully fall forward onto her elbows and knees. Athena looked to him with a gaze glossed over with lust, a wry smile coming to the corner of her lips.
“Well that wasn’t how I expected that to go.”

Solas laughed, an almost weak sound as he struggled to find his breath. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand before pushing himself from the ground. He descended the few steps they had made it up to grab a cloth for her to clean up with. She made it to her side when he knelt at her side, stroking her cheek with the backs of his knuckles. “No, indeed it wasn’t. However, I think that was a perfect demonstration of that phrase you were so stubborn to translate.” There was a tone of play in his voice and she looked up to him with a wink, standing up to use some of the remaining moisture of the tub to clean between her legs.

“If you had just told me at the time I wouldn’t have had to work so hard.” He leaned against the wall and shrugged, eyeing her form with a hunger that betrayed the fact that they had just made love on the stairs.

“It is good to set goals when learning a new language, especially Elvish. It is a cold and complicated language that requires- “

Athena groaned playfully, biting the smallest bit of her bottom lip while teasing him. “Oh, I love it when you talk academic to me after sex.” He blushed with a small chuckle, scratching the back of his neck with the tip of his finger.

“Apologies, vhenan. My point still stands though.” He winked back to her and she felt a rush of pressure go to her stomach. She walked over and wrapped her arms around him, resting her cheek on his bare chest while he wrapped his arms around her lower back. There was a comfort in feeling his skin on hers, sharing his heat while listening to his breath. He looked down and kissed the top of her head before giving her a final squeeze with his arms. She looked up to him and he gestured with his head up the stairs and there was a teasing look in his eyes that said: And let’s make it up the stairs this time.

She laughed, stepping back from him so he could go up the stairs first. It allowed her to be put a drop of vanilla oil on her neck and on her wrists, using some of the extra to run through her hair. The smell was warm and reminded her of home, especially as it was getting closer to winter. She brought her wrists together in front of her face and took a deep breath before slowly walking up the stairs. With a quick glance, she noticed that there were small marks on her knees and elbows from their small venture on the stairs. Solas arched a brow at her as she began to laugh when she came into view.

“I have to wear long sleeves and long pants tomorrow or Bull will be able to point these out in a heartbeat.” She raised her elbows and then glanced down to her knees. The elf smirked, walking over, and waving a hand over them with a small pulse of magic. There was a tingling left on her skin where he did it and she didn’t need to look to know that the blemishes were gone.
“Should I ask how you know the Qunari would be able to recognize them?” There was an inflection of curiosity at the end of his voice that made her chuckle. She shook her head and gently touched her hand to his cheek.

“Still jealous, my love?” She tried in Elvish, raising a brow while walking over to her wardrobe where she could pick out a new pair of thankfully clean black smalls. Athena ignored the banding for sleep, looking over her shoulder at him. “I – uh – have never gone into how deep my knowledge of this world goes. Knowing Bull’s likes and preferences behind closed doors? Unfortunately, that is something I know.” She then put her palm to her forehead with a groan. “And now I have an image to go with it. The Inner Council and I walked in on the Inquisitor and her lover today.”

Solas choked on a laugh, trying to muffle the sound by placing his hand over her mouth. “How does our Inquisitor fair now?” Athena smiled and sat up on her side of the bed. Kain, Creators bless his soul, had fallen asleep at the end of the bed, and did not make a single mental comment about the noises he heard coming from downstairs. All he did was open one eye at her and she could see all the teasing he wanted to say in his expression.

“Rathein is quite recovered. My mind on the other hand will never be clean again.” He sat on what was becoming his side of the bed with a matching smirk.

“I foresee many baths in our future trying to rectify that.” With a small laugh, she got under the covers and let out a sigh of relaxation. The sheets were cold and comforting and they smelled entirely of him. Did he sleep here when she was gone?

Smells like it. Kain answered for her from the end of the bed with a small scoff. The wolf readjusted himself at their feet. Solas lay by her side, casually resting an arm across her bare stomach. She looked to him, tracing his jawline with her finger. “Ma nuvenin, vhenan.”

The next morning it felt like it was back to regular duties. With Rathein being back from the Western Approach, it was time to plan for their assault on Adamant. Athena rose after Solas. He had snuck out of bed and gotten dressed before she even had time to realize it. He kissed her on top of the head while moving some of her stray hairs out of her face. It was then that she woke, a happy smirk playing on her lips. He then left through the door and left her to get ready. She lazily
put her hair up into a high ponytail on top of her head. She picked a pair of well fitted pants that hugged her legs enough to almost blend into her foot wrappings. There was a long-sleeved soft shirt folded at the bottom of her wardrobe that felt like something casual.

She skipped up the steps to Rathein’s room with an apple in her hand. She would take a bite every four steps while humming a song to herself. The door to her friend’s room was already open so she slid in with a smile. The Inquisitor looked up from her desk, nearly suffocated by the number of scrolls and items that had been delivered in her travels. “Well aren’t you glowing this morning?”

Athena did a playful spin on the ball of her foot before skillfully tossing the core of her apple into a wastebasket. “It’s just good to be home, that’s all.”

Rathein hummed with a chuckle, signing her name on something before moving to the next scroll. “With that kind of welcome home I would expect you to be drinking your tea.” There was emphasis on the word that gave her pause. Athena arched a brow and looked over to her, a slight bit of nervousness trickling into her voice.

“Um. What tea? I try not to drink the stuff; Solas hates it.” The Herald’s eyes instantly widened and she scrambled from her chair to move to a small table where she kept her potions and herbs. She sorted through a box of them with different separating tabs before pulling out a bag of leaves that gave off a sharp smell. The Inquisitor did not hesitate to pour a cup of hot water before plopping the tea in it. The whole time she was ranting off to her friend: “Good Maker, woman! In the middle of all this do you really want to be bringing a baby into the world! I would think you would be more careful, Athena!”

It all happened as a blur in front of her and before she knew it Athena was holding a cup of interesting tea. She slowly looked down at the drink before looking back to her friend, who was expectantly motioning for her to drink the tea. “Well come on!” She took the sip and winced at the taste, noting that it would need some honey in the future. Once she took a big enough gulp, she began to chuckle in a slight realization. It was so long ago, she had an appointment scheduled to have a certain something removed. It had been five years since it was put in; she almost had forgotten it was still in there. Her laughter almost made the tea spill over and her friend looked at her like she was insane.

“What is so funny? Do you want to get pregnant?”

Tears were forming in the corners of her eyes and she balanced the tea in one hand to wipe her eyes. “You’re not going to believe this, Rathein. But. Um. The whole pregnancy thing isn’t an issue for me, at least not for the next thirty minutes or so.” Rathein threw her hands up in the air with a sound of exasperation.
“What kind of other-worlder shit are you spouting off about now?”

Athena swallowed the rest of the tea like it were a shot of cheap tequila, resisting the urge to throw the tea cup on the ground. “There may or may not be a type of device inside of me that helps me from getting pregnant.”

Rathein paled, looking at her like there was an alien inside of her womb instead of what was actually there. “Wha-“

She held a hand up. “It’s due to come out anyhow, but I’ve never done it by myself but I suppose I’m the most qualified person here to do it. Let’s see. Get me some boiling water, a pair of tweezers, and some cloths. This is going to be painful.”

Chapter End Notes

The idea for the latter half of this chapter randomly came to me one day. How does modern birth control and Thedas mix? For Athena, it doesn't, but it will be a fun turn of events regardless.

Thanks for the continued support, everyone!
Athena lay back on the ground behind the changing screens that were standing up in the middle of the Inquisitor’s room. Rathein managed to collect the necessary supplies, as well as a cheap bottle of wine to help soothe both of their nerves. What she didn’t expect, however, was that she also brought Dorian along. The mage was sitting on the bed with his head in his hands and she could hear him tapping his foot against the ground.

“Okay, go over with me what we’re doing again? This all sounds barbaric.” Athena let out a nervous laugh, running a hand over her already sweated brow. She had removed her pants and folded them by her feet and pulled her underwear down to her ankles. Normally this was removed by a provider, a healer in her world, but she figured it would be easier for her to just take it out. She had washed her hands with water as hot as she could tolerate and placed a cloth down between her legs. Hopefully it would go quickly. Rathein was still trying to comprehend the whole scenario.

“Let me get this straight. You have this device shoved waaaaaay up there. . .  “She pointed her finger up towards the roof and raised her arm above the sky. Rathein continued to walk into Athena’s line of sight while Dorian stayed on his safe place on the bed.

“Yeah – it releases a hormone to help me not get pregnant. It also took away my monthly bleed but it’s already been in there a few months longer than it should have.” She opened her legs and bit her lower lip while she was beginning the process, trying to keep her sounds of effort out of her voice.

“How long was it in there, exactly?” Dorian asked hesitantly, making small designs on a blank scroll with his quill.

“Five years, and some change – ah!” She had grasped the end of the thing with her tweezers, taking in a deep breath before pulling it out and out in one go. There was a deep cramping sensation that twitched throughout her abdomen, causing her to groan through clenched teeth. Instantly she put the old thing into a bowl of water, dropping the tweezers as well with her shaking hands. The overall process wasn’t extremely painful, it was just extremely weird. Dorian was right, it suddenly felt barbaric even though the technology was advanced, even for her world.

Rathein tossed her a soft cotton rag that she used to line her smalls. Athena groaned as she pulled her pants back up, looking into the bowl with a look of pride and regret. She used one of the cloths to cover the top of the bowl so they wouldn’t see what was underneath. The Inquisitor instantly ripped it off when she saw that Athena was clean, looking down at the modern device with a look of amazement and disgust.
“What the fuck, Athena? Not that it was happening before, but I’m never going to let anyone call you weak. Frankly, that took some balls.” She used the end of a quill to poke the thing around in the cup and Athena pulled it out of her reach. She would need to find a fire to burn this in before they could do whatever curious mages did with a medical object from another world. She left the cup on the ground and instantly flopped on the bed next to Dorian, a hand ghosting over her abdomen as small cramps began to course through her lower belly.

He looked over and smiled at her while patting her on the thigh. “So, this is considered medicine in your world? Fascinating. What else did you do there?” He asked, leaning on his side to look at her while she mourned what felt like the summation of a thousand monthly bleeds combining into one. She winced and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“We could do a lot of things. We could transplant one organ from a deceased or soon to be deceased person and put it into another. We could crack open somebody’s chest and manually pump their heart into working again. If a pregnant woman was having difficulty delivering, we could slice open her womb and pull the baby out to save both of their lives.” With every explanation, Dorian and Rathein’s faces changed. The Tevinter grew more excited and she could tell that behind his gaze there were a thousand follow-up questions for her. The Inquisitor was more shocked, running a hand through her hair before rubbing the back of her neck.

“Athena this all sounds barbaric. You sound more like butchers than healers.” Athena winced from her place on the bed, giving a small shrug.

“I was quoting more extreme examples, but that is just surgery. We also have medicines for almost every ailment out there and have eliminated many diseases. I’m assuming you guys do things either through magic or a mixture of herbs, right?” Dorian laughed with a small snort, nodding to confirm her suspicions while Rathein brought over a tray of fruit and some scrolls to read while they were sitting in bed. It felt like a very casual day with her two closest friends at her side. Athena was on her second cup of what she was calling “morning-after tea” when the first messengers started showing up looking for the Inquisitor.

“Madam Inquisitor!”

They all three looked up from the newly started “Inquisition News” paper that was being circulated to boost morale. It already spoke of Rathein being interrupted with The Iron Bull and how all of the tables were suddenly becoming uneven, probably due to the dastardly Red Jenny. Dorian was nibbling on a thicker bread that came with the Herald’s breakfast and Athena was making a mental list of things she needed to start working on for future events in their world. In the game, it felt like they had an unlimited amount of time, because in truth they did. She was able to herd a druffalo without the ever-pressing fear of the Breach or Corypheus coming on them. When
she was in the thick of it the pressure was an actual concern and it suddenly made things that much
closer.

“Yes, what is it?” Rathein looked up with almost an irritated gaze. The messenger looked to the
three before giving a small bow.

“Warden Blackwall requests your presence at the War Table. He states it is something of great
importance.” Athena instantly sat up on the bed, ignoring the lingering pain in her belly. Rathein
glanced over to her before nodding. She stood up from the bed and buttoned up her formal shirt all
of the way before wiping the crumbs off of her clothes to the floor.

“All right. Tell them I will be down there momentarily.” When the messenger left the Inquisitor
instantly looked down to Athena with a raised brow. She rolled her eyes dramatically, moving to
stand up from the edge of the bed. Dorian did not act like he wanted to move as he casually sipped
his wine from a tea cup.

“Do you want me to accompany you, Inquisitor?” The short-haired mage smirked before shaking
her head.

“Nah. Whatever it is, I’m sure we can handle it. Unless you want to give me a warning first?” She
asked with a wink while walking over towards the door. Athena dragged her foot on the ground
before letting out a sound of reluctance.

“Just don’t be too hard on him, okay? If you need me, I’ll probably be around.” Rathein looked to
her and nodded. With a click, she could see the mask of the noblewoman turned Inquisitor fall over
her features. The Herald’s posture straightened and she disappeared behind the door. Dorian
popped the remains of the bread in his mouth before wiping his hands with a clean cloth. He then
looked up to her with a smile. “Are you up for some training today? Or are you too wounded to do
anything?” She instantly pushed him on the shoulder so that he would fall back on the bed.

“Typically, when I’m cramping I lay down on the bed and watch terrible television.” He tilted his
head.

“Tele-what?”

She then shook her head with a smile. “Never mind. We can pick up on training again tomorrow. I
need to catch up on some things before time slips away from me. Where will you be for dinner?”
He hummed and stood up next to her, placing his hand on her lower back to walk with her out of the door. “Either mourning my day without you in the library or finding someone to prey on in the mess hall. You know where to find me either way.” He looked down to her with a wink before departing from her. Before leaving the Inquisitor’s room, she quickly turned around and disposed of what was remaining in the cup into the fire. She used a bit of her magic to melt away the remnants of what she had removed. Watching it melt away made her feel almost sad, but she took a few more bags of the tea Rathein suggested and put it in her jacket pocket before continuing down to the main hall.

Even though the afternoon was just beginning the hall was abuzz with people talking. She was able to slip through the crowd and disappear behind the door that led to the dungeon where she hoped to find Dagna working. Sure enough, the red-headed dwarf was standing in front of her obscure models tinkering with different pieces of material. She walked passed Harritt and waved at him before clearing her throat next to the Arcanist. “Excuse me, are you Dagna? I was hoping to have a word with you.”

The dwarf turned and Athena nearly jumped when she saw that the researcher was wearing a glasses-type contraction that had a few different changeable lenses on them. Her eyes instantly widened when she looked at Athena, tearing off the glasses and placing them on her worktable. “Madam Sorciere! I was wondering when you were going to stop by. Please, please, have a seat!” She pulled up a stool and Athena sat on it with a smirk on her face, looking the woman up and down. It was so odd that she was the same excited girl who wished to leave Orzammar to study at the Circle. She was willing to give up caste, family, and wealth to do what she wanted and it paid off. “What can I help you with?” She smiled expectantly, pulling up a scroll with an inkpot to begin taking details down.

“Well, actually, this is somewhat of a confidential matter and its highly experimental.” The dwarf beamed a grin.

“Now we’re talking. You have my complete attention.” Athena chuckled before tightening the ponytail on top of her head.

“Do you think you could craft a prosthetic limb that is connected to a person’s mind so they can control it? Like, for instance, say someone loses an arm? Do you think it’s possible to create a rune or enchantment that connects the object to their will so it’s like they never lost something at all?”

Dagna clapped her hands together and she could see the wheels spinning around in her head. She put the quill down and turned to her scroll, picking up a piece of charcoal while laying out basic sketches. “It’s never been done before, but perhaps with the right enchantments, and ooh! Maybe a lyrium vein engraved into the item itself. It might work! I have so many ideas right now but I need
measurements!” Without warning she pulled out a string that resembled a tape measurer and wrapped it around Athena’s left forearm. The dwarf slid out of her chair and measured the length of her arm, circumference of her wrist, and other various things. There was a nonstop slew of thoughts and questions coming from her mouth and Athena couldn’t help but be just as excited as her, even if the item was for if/when her best friend potentially lost her arm due to the Mark’s magic.

“This is going to need so many prototypes and I’m going to have to get ahold of different materials. How long until you need this, Athena?” She blinked and looked up to the ceiling of the cave, losing herself in the beauty of the area before finally answering: “Oh a few years.” The dwarf clapped her hands together before turning back to her scroll and jotting down a few details that looked worse than chicken scratch.

“That’s plenty of time then! I can start working on this right away, unless you had anything else?” She looked over with an expression of pure excitement. Athena shook her head, slapping the tops on her thighs before standing and heading towards the stairs to go back up near the main hall. A thought hit her when she had her hand on the doorknob so she paused and turned back, cupping her hand around her mouth to increase the volume of her voice. “Think you could cook up some enchanted wolf armor with a barrier? I’ll have Josephine set up the funds from me for both projects.”

The Arcanist laughed, giving her a thumbs up before writing down the new project on a new length of scroll. Athena turned back towards the stairs, wincing as each step put a new dull cramp in her lower abdomen. She needed a place to relax for a small bit, needed something with fresh air. She weaved through the crowd and headed towards the garden, ignoring her first thought which was the couch in the rotunda. If she went there she would need to re-explain why she was in pain in the first place. That conversation with Solas would just be awkward as hell.

The air of the garden was chilly, further setting in her fear that fall was in full effect. She pulled her jacket tighter as she slowly walked around the garden and looked at the different plants. There were a few she recognized: elfroot and spindleweed. The others she would need to study if she actually wanted to become a full rounded mage. Thankfully Rathein had agreed to set her up with the same plan that she was on. Josephine had it planned where she would get a “woman’s care package” that included necessary things for the bloom of the month as well as the hair removal gel. Athena was very much looking forward to that box later in the evening and she had the perfect hiding spot for it in the lower level of her tower.

Athena had found an empty bench to sit on and looked up towards the cloudy sky. The air was so thin here and she could feel the slight tingle of magic on her skin, either that or it was the chill but both felt familiar enough to Solas that it made her smile. She leaned back and closed her eyes, taking one second to relish in the day before she a voice cut through her thoughts. “Lady Athena.” The voice was curious and Athena often thought it sounded like a cat’s with how mischievous it was. She didn’t even have to open her eyes to know who it was so she smirked and nodded, keeping her eyes shut while responding.
“Lady Morrigan.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the continued love, darlings. <3
The Witch of the Wilds smiled with a hum, crossing her arms while looking down at the Witch of the Inquisition. Athena opened her eyes and stretched, flicking her gaze between Morrigan and her son Kieran. The boy had an odd feel to him. The change in his aura was obvious and apparently, the feeling was mutual because he was assessing her too. She probed him with her aura and he was able to feel it, a visible shudder going down his spine. Morrigan looked to her with a curious gaze while clicking her tongue against the back of her teeth. “What are you doing, Sorciere?”

Athena furrowed her brow before closing her eyes, listening in on the natural odd feeling that came from the boy. There was a song, similar to when she was in the Fade, and it gave her a flashback to when she was there. She shook it away with a twitch of her head before looking up to the boy’s mother. “Forgive me, I was distracted by something that seemed familiar. Is this your son?” Morrigan slowly nodded, placing a protective hand on her boy’s shoulder.

“Yes, but from what I hear you probably already knew that. They say you know of this world and your own. ‘Tis amazing more people do you not seek you out for their own personal gains.” There was a natural playfulness to her words that made Athena straighten her posture and grin right back.

“Is that why you sought me out in the gardens, Lady Morrigan?” Kieran shook his head with a hum, answering quickly.

“No, she hears your Call of the Wild.” Morrigan let out a controlled sigh while looking down to her son.

“Thank you for that, Kieran. Where is your friend you found earlier? Certainly, you can play with her for a minute while I talk to Lady Athena here?” The boy looked around the garden, a frown slowly coming to his face. Before Athena could even ask which friend he had made she heard her answer and felt it like a tackle coming from behind.

“Fen’mae!!” Lev’adin’s excited voice cancelled out all doubts and nervousness she had about talking to Morrigan. The morning’s pains melted away and she instantly turned around and brought the girl in close to a tight embrace. Her blonde hair was out of her typical two-braid style and bounced to just above her shoulders. Athena wrestled the girl until she was standing in front of her next to Kieran. Tobi, being the polite and quieter of the two, quietly came around the side and sat on the bench next to her. She wrapped her arm around him and kissed him on top of the head, looking to them expectantly.
“Hello, darlings. Did you behave while I was gone?” They both nodded silently while Morrigan looked on with a surprisingly gentle smile. Lev’adin nearly bounced while opening her palms.

“Look what Fiona taught me!” There was a small spark of lightning and Athena reached forward to squelch the spell. She grinned a genuine smile, bringing the girl forward to where their noses touched.

“You can show me later when we’re not in the middle of the garden, ara da’adahl. It seems like you like your lessons though. What about you, my dear? What have you been doing?” He smiled, pushing out of her grip to stand next to his friend.

“I’ve been practicing with swords! Like Prince Philip in your story! I want to be able to slay dragons!” His voice grew louder and more excited. She clapped her hands together, resting them on her chin while she smiled.

“Look at you two. You’re growing up right before my eyes.” Kieran was beginning to smile, pulling on Morrigan’s skirts while pointing to Lev’adin.

“These are my new friends. Can I go and play with them?” Morrigan gave them an uneasy look before nodding. Before the group left Tobi ran in for a final hug, quickly whispering into her ear before he left: “Can you come sing a song for us before we sleep? Leafy’s been having bad nightmares.” Athena frowned and nodded. She kissed the boy on the forehead and watched them run off to the gazebo in the garden. There were wooden play toys out and she saw Tobi instantly grab a wooden sword, thrusting it into the air as if he were Emperor Drakon fighting off some foreign invader.

“I did not realize you had children as well.” Morrigan smiled and gestured to the space next to her on the bench. Athena nodded and scooted to the side, watching her two play together.

“Ah – they are orphans that I seemed to pick up. Mother Giselle takes care of a group of orphans from Haven and the Temple of Sacred Ashes. They enjoy my campfire stories but Tobi in particular has taken a liking to me.” The shifter nodded in Leafy’s direction.

“And the elven child? She is the one Kieran has taken a liking to. She is very . . . energetic.” Athena had to laugh at her nervous tone, shaking her head back and forth.

“You are aware of elven history. She was the fourth mage in her clan and I happened to be there.
when it happened. So, I brought her with me to Skyhold.” They sat in silence for a moment. Morrigan instantly knew what she meant and hummed in acknowledgement, her golden gaze never leaving Kieran as he played out with the other children.

“She called you Fen’Mae. Do you know the language of the People?” The Witch switched languages mid-sentence, smirking mischievously. Athena assumed it was a test and a potential chance for Morrigan to show off so she cleared her throat and answered in her slowly improving elvish.

“Bits and pieces. I am being taught. Lev’adin witnessed me shifting and is enamored with my wolves.” Morrigan’s eyes widened, looking over to her with a nod of recognition.

“Your wolves? Is it they who speak to each other in the night?” Athena beamed with pride instantly, tucking a stray hair behind her ear while looking out past the garden walls. When she reached out with her magic she could feel that Claw and his pack were taking a nap. It was getting easier to reach Fang from Skyhold, but sometimes she only received fragments of their locations and thoughts. Now they were patrolling around the Dalish camp and looking for a place to rest for when the winter snow came.

“It is they. They are mine and I am theirs. It is nice to speak with someone who is familiar with the Call and does not judge me for it.” Morrigan let out a small, muffled sound that was like a scoff. She switched back into common, giving a quick sideways glare to someone who was looking at them strangely when they spoke Elvish.

“I am still curious how a person not from this world took to it so quickly. It is not something taught in the circles or passed on except by word of mouth. How did you come upon it?” Morrigan leaned back and narrowed her gaze when Kieran went out of view for a second. The mage was such a dutiful mother; it was endearing considering how selfish she came off in the first game. The years had aged her well and matured her even farther.

“To be honest, Lady Morrigan, it was my knowledge of you that inspired me to learn how to shift. You let me know it was possible in this world. I am still learning the limitations of my magic but I understand you can shift into a variety of animal forms?” It was the other woman’s turn to beam with pride and a hint of smugness. Athena knew from her past playthroughs that both Morrigan and Flemeth appreciated manners with a bit of flattery, so thankfully the conversation wasn’t as nerve-wracking as she initially thought it was going to be.

“A few, yes. Wolf, bear, spider, cat, things without name or mention in any book. When you are already willing to use a spell to shift your form, your imagination isn’t limited. It is easiest for me to turn into a giant spider, but I haven’t been able to run with the wild in years, not since Kieran.” There was an edge of sadness to her voice and Athena moved an inch closer to her. She was unsure
if she would appreciate a gentle touch on the thigh or shoulder. Getting slightly closer would do for now.

"Would you care for a hunt, Morrigan? Kieran will be safe here with Mother Giselle watching them and the pack would appreciate another friend." She smiled a genuine smile, feeling her own pulse, and call for a shift rising within her throat. Dorian had wanted to train on her form of flame, but there was something freeing about running through the trees with the wolves. Perhaps one day she would shift into a lazy housecat and walk around Skyhold completely anonymous and unknown to the world. Athena saved that idea for a later day while waiting on Morrigan to respond.

The mage looked out towards her child and shook her head with a sad smile. "I appreciate your offer, Sorciere, but I dare not let Kieran out of my sight. He is...precious to me. I'm sure you can understand with your two adopted." Athena looked to Lev'adin and Tobi with a similar protective gaze, nodding with a soft sigh.

"I suppose I do. If you ever change your mind and find a spare minute, I would love to hunt with you, or fly. How did you get used to flying? The sensation is strange and sometimes I forget to flap my wings." Morrigan laughed, standing up in unison with her to go and fetch Kieran.

"Do not think about doing it, just allow it to happen. If you are truly in tune with your beast of choice, it will happen naturally." She smiled, crossing her arms over her abdomen where the aching was coming in small waves. Considering her "beast of choice" in question was a fictional mixture of a creature and character, Athena felt shit out of luck. Still, she nodded and gently touched Morrigan’s shoulder with a smile.

"Thank you, Lady Morrigan. If you ever need it, you have an ally in Skyhold. My tower isn’t hard to find." The Witch stilled, slowly breaking into a smile with a nod.

"I will...remember that." Athena quickly said good-bye to her children before exiting the garden. Her stomach growled and she sighed, rubbing her stomach while biting her lip. The weather was cold and she felt dreadful. Typically, when she was home, the house rule was that the person who felt like shit got to pick the meal. Here, that wasn’t really an option with the kitchen spewing out meal after meal for the entirety of the castle. Rumor had it that the main chef tended to be a bit of a racist asshole, especially to the elves that worked in the kitchens.

Still, the urge to have something from her home made her stomach roar to where she could feel it rumbling against her clothes. She looked down and rubbed her hands over her stomach again to cool her hunger but she found her mouth filling up with saliva as a certain memory crossed into the front of her mind: Grandma’s homemade chicken noodle soup. The thought nearly brought tears to her eyes, but it felt right. The weather was getting cold and she remembered watching her great-
grandmother roll out dough to hand cut the noodles and make the soup. The recipe had come from a red cookbook from the 50’s and it had so much wear and tear on it many of the pages were held together by tape and a little love. Athena walked through the main hall with a soft smile on her face, gravitating towards the stairs that led down to the kitchen. It was an odd time in the afternoon so they probably wouldn’t be preparing dinner yet, it wouldn’t hurt to look, right?

She entered the dusty basement area of the castle and worked towards one of the smaller kitchens. All of a sudden, there was a crash and the chef burst through the doors screaming: “I’ve had it! Enough of these pranks and moving objects. I am done for the night. The castle can fend for themselves or eat leftovers for all I care!” She threw her white hat off to the ground and stormed passed Athena, crashing her shoulder into hers to push her out of the way. She blinked while rubbing her arm, looking to the kitchen aids that were slowly coming out with small smirks on their faces.

“He probably thinks it was us. I didn’t open the cabinet, did you?”

“Me? I swear it happened on its own. How the cat got in there I will never know.

“At least we got the night off. I’m going to head to the tavern.”

They acted as if she didn’t exist and walked past her up the stairs towards the main hall. The door to the kitchens swung open and inside she saw a clean, empty kitchen with pots sitting on the stove. “This can’t be happening.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t know all of the ingredients – “The voice was soft from inside of the kitchen and she quickly walked in to see Cole trying to gather things before she could come in. Already she could see the flour set aside and he was looking for the chicken she would need to boil. She patted him on the shoulder and silently walked over to the icebox that had a frost rune etched onto the outside. She opened the heavy door and saw that there was enough food to feed multiple armies stored in the freezer and the shelves within. Athena looked at the chickens and picked three of the nicest looking ones before bringing them out and putting two in one pot and one into another. The spirit boy watched silently as she re-tied her hair into a ponytail on top of her head and picked up one of the aprons that were laid on a chair on the side.

“This helps your hurt?” He asked, looking at her with innocent large eyes.

She nodded while drawing up water from the large sink, thank Fen’Harel for enchanted indoor plumbing. Athena lit the flames of the stove herself to begin boiling the chicken while she made the dough in a large pot. “My great-grandmother used to make this for us when it was cold outside or we were sick. You could smell this as you drove around the block and it just filled her house with joy. I think. . . you would have liked her, Cole. She had a way of doing anything for other people, even if it meant sacrificing some of her own time and strength.”
Cole hummed. “That sounds like you.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the continued support! <3
The smell of chicken broth filled the kitchens with an aromatic steam. While Athena worked, she had a shadow of a smile on her face and it looked like her eyes were always on the verge of crying. It was a bittersweet feeling. The past few months had been such a whirlwind she didn’t realize exactly how busy she had been. There was the initial shock of coming into Thedas but the normal time she would have grieved was shadowed by the element of surviving in the first place. Since then, event after event, quest after quest, she had worked to get the people around her safe. The mission with Dorian was something on her own, not included in the game in anyway. It was a chance for her mind to catch up with everything, unfortunately, and at the top of that list was realizing exactly what she left behind.

And what she would never be able to get back to.

The memories in her head, if she explained them to her friends they would never really be able to sympathize or understand the severity of the loss. To them her world was fiction, much like what she thought of Thedas before being transported there. Her companions don’t know what her world looks like, don’t know many of the different words she uses, or even what her family was like before this. Few of them had even asked. What is the importance of banter like that when there was a giant Breach in the sky or an Elder God trying to tear open the Veil to become immortal?

“He understands. Whispers of an ancient world, things out of touch for most but – “

“I know, Cole. It’s just complicated. I – I do not wish him to know everything I know yet. I’ve just gotten to the point where I’m happy; I would hate to lose that so soon. It’s selfish of me, I know. For now, I can keep my memories with me.. .” She looked over her shoulder at him while kneading the dough onto the counter. There was a small pile of flour on the right and the texture of the flour on her hands reminded her of when she would stand up on a little stool next to her great-grandmother and take over kneading the dough when her sore joints couldn’t. She tried to push herself to do anything for her and her family. She would hide the pain and the sickness that would eventually come, just to put on a face for them and ensure they were happy. Cole was at her side with a rolling pin, sensing the next steps of the recipe.

Athena sprinkled some of the flour on it and softened the length of the rolling pin before flattening out the dough. Since she was making a large batch the dough mound took up the majority of the counter. With every pull, she could feel the soreness from the mission settling in on the muscles between her shoulders and her upper arms, but the taste of this meal would soothe it all. There was something magical in the soup, or at least that is what she thought as a child. One sip and all her worries were gone. The soup was normally followed up by a warm blanket on the couch while they
watched old re-runs of Walker, Texas Ranger on the TV.

The tears began to form more heavily now in her eyes, slowly streaming down her face as she took a small knife and began to cut thick noodles out of the dough. Once they were done she would de-bone the chicken and boil it all until it was done. Perhaps the de-boneing could be done with a big of magic but there was something cathartic about picking each piece apart and getting the smell of chicken on her hands for days. Cole was looking for some way to console her but apparently found none. He was sitting in the corner of the kitchen with his arms crossed over his chest.

“What’s the music I hear?” He asked, and she hummed in response while looking over at him. The noodles were completely prepared and she was now removing the chickens from the pot with telekinetic magic to place them on a large cutting board where she could hand pick the meat off. With her flame capabilities, she wouldn’t need to wait until the chicken cooled to start the process so she washed her hands and began picking off the dark meat. Every few pieces she would pop one into her mouth and smirk. The taste was almost exactly the same. It was just boiled chicken, but cooking it with the love and intention her great-grandma had made it taste better.

“There is music in your head when you make this. It makes you think of her.” Athena paused with her hands in the middle of a steaming piece of chicken. Her gaze looked beyond the kitchen and she saw the musty living room of her great-grandparents with a record player near the hallway. There were a few records she always had playing, but the one that stuck out most of all was an old Elvis record. She chuckled, finally realizing that she must have been thinking of it somewhere in her subconscious.

“Here. . . I think you have Wintersend at the very start of spring. In my world, the closest we had was Christmas and New Year’s. It was a time of year where families got together and spent time with one another. You could exchange gifts and typically there were meals prepared together. Some people focused on the religious side of the holiday, but mine rarely went to church so we mostly spent the holiday together. Christmas was also a season, and during that whole season my great-grandmother would play the music you’re hearing in my head.” She tapped the side of her temple with a grease-covered finger, ignoring the now spot of oil on her skin while she moved from the first chicken to the second.

“This meal, this weather, it just all makes me miss home, Cole. I think you’re the only person that can feel how much it affects me, probably even more than I do.” He remained quiet in a silent acknowledgement that she was right, adjusting his hat while watching her work through the chicken pieces. Athena began to hum, tears running in silent streams down her flour-dusted cheeks as she worked.

“I’ll have a Blue Christmas without you.” The moment the lyrics left her lips her hands began to shake as a soft trembling took over her body. She clenched her hands into fists in an attempt to regain control but the melody still played throughout her mind. “I’ll be so blue thinking. . . about
you.” Using her magic as a net she picked up the large pile of chicken and dropped it into the one pot since she wasn’t boiling three chickens at the same time anymore. As the water began to boil she added the noodles and placed a lid over it so the soup could finish.

“Decorations of red on a green Christmas Tree. . . won’t the same dear, if you’re not here with me.”

As she sang she could hear her great-grandmother’s voice in her head, light and soft with age but she still managed to dance a little in the kitchen when she worked. Athena tried to do the same as she gathered up the dirty dishes so far to put them in the sink. She thought of an old Disney cartoon and gestured her hand towards one of the rags to start cleaning the easier pots and it followed her command, working circles through the pot as she used another wet rag to clean the flour from the counter.

“And when those blue snowflakes start falling. That’s when those memories start calling.”

She had to smile at feeling the song put within her stomach. They were like butterflies that fluttered around her stomach but brought her a sense of nostalgic dread instead of anxiety or happiness. The urge to sob was hidden in the depths of her throat but she kept it down while the noodles cooked in the chicken broth. The sound she was making while cleaning and humming distracted her from the door opening and Kain coming in with a visitor.

“You’ll be doing all right, with your Christmas of white. But I’ll. . . have a blue. . .blue, blue blue Christmas. . . “ She sang into the silence, squeezing her hands against the counter with her back facing the door. It felt like the right time to crumble into her homesickness when she heard Kain let out a high-pitched bark. Athena instantly wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands, cursing her skin for its ability to flush at the nearest smell of any emotion.

“I’m sorry to disturb you – I – uh – he was dragging me by my glove down here and I have no reason why – “ She didn’t have to look over her shoulder to know it was Cullen standing there, probably looking embarrassed and sheepish that he had just walked in on her essentially crying alone in the kitchen. She took a deep inhale through her nose before turning around with a small smirk.

“He likes to do that. What’s wrong, boy?” She looked down to Kain who could obviously feel her sorrow. The wolf let out a whine while walking over to her, licking the chicken grease where she had touched her temple earlier. He’s hurting. He won’t get help. The wolf confessed, looking over his shoulder towards Cullen who had a clenched jaw with a slight wince at the corners of his eyes. Athena looked up to him and sighed, rubbing the back of her neck where she could feel more flour. A hunt or a bath was necessary and she was leaning more towards the former.
“Your headaches are back again, aren’t they?” He stilled and to her it looked like he was considering fleeing the area but the caved in with a sigh of his own. He pulled a tall stool to the kitchen counter and rested his head in his hands.

“Today is one of the worse days, yes. It started off bad enough this morning and then the War Table made it worse.” She wiped her hands off on a rag while looking underneath the lid at her soup. It was done so she reduced the flame with a pulse of her magic so that it would just simmer on the heat. The pot was large, larger than anything she had worked with in her world and probably had at least two dozen servings in it. Well, she wouldn’t let it go to waste and it was magic after all. As she searched for the bowls in the kitchen she called out to him.

“How was the meeting with Blackwall? That didn’t cause your headache to get worse, did it?” The Commander groaned and nodded subtly.

“I feel like it would be a waste of time to ask you exactly how much you know of this world. Perhaps you should just tell me how it went, Lady Athena.” There was a bitterness and pointedness to his voice that made her twitch, anger flaring up within her already negative emotions and fueling her tongue.

“Not fair, Cullen. I do not have the patience for that shit today.” She pointed a large wooden ladle at him, wielding it like she would a blade before turning back and stirring the pot. She put a normal helping into the bowl before sliding it across the counter to him. He brought his head out of his hands and looked at it then up to her a few times before clearing his throat.

“Apolologies. What...what is this?” She threw her hands in the air in frustration, realizing that her patience was as thin as wet paper.

“Darkspawn blood, what do you think? It’s soup, a recipe from my world. Eat it; it will help your headaches.” He picked up a wooden spoon and picked up the first bite, blowing on it as he worked his way through his thoughts.

“Warden Blackwall confessed his previous crimes to us. His name is apparently Thom Ranier.” Athena hummed to let him know that she knew that information already, gesturing for him to continue with the ladle that was dripping chicken broth onto the floor. Kain didn’t mind, he was ready to catch the drops as they fell. “The Inquisitor was furious at him, and at you. He said you inspired him to come clean early and he was submitting himself to the Inquisition for punishment.”
She groaned, arching a brow at him. The thoughts of her childhood were pushed to the side as duty came forward. “I’m assuming Josephine sent a raven to the Marquise of the Dales asking what she wanted to do since technically Thom Ranier is an Orlesian criminal.” Cullen nodded solemnly, taking a second bite of the soup while failing to hide his noise of appreciation. She smiled at the compliment of his reaction and felt a swell of pride that she was able to do the recipe right.

“Yes, and until then the Inquisitor is keeping him in the dungeons. She hopes to have this settled before we march on Adamant. As soon as we hear back from the Marquise there is going to be a trial if she passes the decision to us, which is what Lady Josephine expects her to do.” Slowly Cullen’s pain was fading from his face and she didn’t know if it was the soup working or the casual talk of work distracting him. She nodded and turned towards the soup to stir it more so it wouldn’t burn or get stuck on certain areas of the pot.

“A wise choice. Tell me, Cullen. Do the headaches come more from the lyrium or the nightmares?” She asked bluntly, keeping her back towards him so he wouldn’t see the blank expression on her face. He coughed on the soup and cleared his throat before responding.

“. . . You know about the nightmares?” His voice was soft, vulnerable. She took in a deep breath and sighed it out through clenched teeth.

“It was more of an assumption. I would be surprised if you didn’t have them after what you went through, Cullen. You have a really bad habit of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.” If she was in the proper mood she would have put a teasing tone to her words, but now they were straight and almost pointed. She brought up a bowl and served herself a serving before turning around to him. He was just looking up at her with an empty bowl in front of him. Instantly she felt bad because his face was painted with hurt. “Shit – Cullen – I didn’t mean to. It’s just been a bad – “

He shook his head and gave her an off-centered smirk, scraping the bottom of his bowl with his spoon to get the last bit of noodle out. “No – don’t apologize. As strange as it all is, there’s a relief in you knowing what happened. It means I don’t have to talk about it myself.” He met her gaze and she chuckled at him in a similar broken tone. He pushed back from the stool and readjusted the fur of his coat. “Thank you for fixing my headache. . .again. I will leave you to your peace, Lady Athena.”

He turned to leave and she made a sharp, whistling around at him. He paused, turning on his heel while looking at her with a tilted head expression. She hardened her gaze at him: “While we’re on the topic of things I know: write to your fucking sister. It isn’t fair that you keep your family in the dark leaving them to worry about you. You have the chance to fill them in on your life and let them know you are okay. Not all of us get that chance so take it or by the Maker I will drag you to Honnleath myself. Don’t take them for granted.” Cullen physically winced but nodded, leaving the kitchen without another word. Once he left Athena slouched against the counter, letting out a tearless sigh while raising the cup of soup to her face. All she needed was one sip of broth,
something to restore some of the peace she was losing by mourning her world.

As she raised the bowl to her lips with shaky hands a rather loud mercenary kicked the door open with his troop immediately behind him and hollered in: “Fuck! Something smells good in here, what’s for dinner?!”

Athena swore in that moment, she would personally beat the shit out of The Iron Bull until he said katoh.

Chapter End Notes

Song: Elvis - Blue Christmas

Thank you guys for the continued support and love! Over 1000 kudos and 100 bookmarks. I'm completely blown away! Truly. You have made this experience so worthwhile and I can't wait for what is yet to come.
One by one the Chargers filed into the kitchen and started looking for what was making the smell. Athena felt invisible with how they buzzed around her but eventually Bull picked up the lid to the pot and took a deep breath in through his nose. She hadn’t even been able to touch her bowl to her lips when they walked in and now it was getting cold on the counter behind her. Dalish was picking some of the scrap meat off of the bones left on the counter and Krem was looking, by orders, for a cask of wine. The noise level rose to where she could barely hear her own thoughts but it all went silent when Bull reached for her bowl on the counter.

**Thwack!**

Without warning she turned around and slapped his hand with the still hot ladle, shooting daggers in the form of a glare at him while he retracted his hand with a scowl. “Hey, what the fuck, Alpha?” She raised the ladle again until he took a step back while the rest of the Chargers were chuckling under their breath. She pointed the cooking instrument towards the door that led to the abandoned large hall area that branched off to the dust-ridden library.

“Does it look like I’m cooking for the whole Keep?” She asked through nearly clenched teeth, never letting her gaze leave the Qunari’s. Ever the trained spy, he straightened his posture and pointed a thumb towards the very large pot of soup that was nearly full to the brim with her creation.

“No, but it looks like you made enough for a few dozen. Unless you plan to eat it all by yourself?” He teased, arching a brow at her. She let out a sigh, pinching the bridge of her nose with her free hand while still keeping the ladle pointed at the door. She slowly pointed it up before listing off instructions at a rapid rate.

“Krem? Kain will take you upstairs to the garden area where the orphan children and Mother Giselle are. Please inform her that I’ve made dinner for them and bring them back down to the hall outside that door. It’s getting cold outside.” The Lieutenant straightened up as if leading a drill, jerking his chin towards the door. Kain dutifully followed behind him, shooting her a lingering look of concern before disappearing behind the swinging door. She looked to the next two and pointed two fingers out them before aiming them out the door that led to the outside.

“Skinner, Grim, please fetch some blankets so the kids have something to sit on in the hall. That old rug isn’t going to do.” They groaned and rolled their eyes but complied, disappearing behind another door. She turned to the cupboards and with a flick of her wrist a few dozen bowls and
spoons floated down from the shelves onto the counter.

“Rocky, Grim. Dalish, can you take these out there? I think Krem was looking for a wine cask for you guys. . .if you find it. . .” She then brought down enough cups for the Chargers. “Crack it open. But if I see any of the children drinking it I’ll beat you bloody.” There was a playful tone hidden underneath the blank expression of hers, eyes flicking between them all until they decided to agree to listen to her. That left Bull and her in the kitchen alone and he instantly leaned against the island that was in the middle of the room and crossed his arms over his chest. He didn’t say anything, he simply looked at her with a soft expression that made her even more annoyed.

“What.” She snapped. He let out a scoff, tilting his head up to gesture towards her with his horns.

“Do you want to talk about it?” His voice dropped into the soft cadence she had heard before, many months ago, when they were moving from the remains of Haven to Skyhold. He had managed to pull her away from the group and get her to talk. He even gave her a hug. Not now, though. This was one of those things. . .she didn’t know how he could help her. He wouldn’t understand, and there was still the threat that whatever she told him could get back to the Qunari. Rathein hadn’t gone on a trip to the Storm Coats with him yet, so he was still technically a spy.

She shook her head, wiping underneath her eyes with the end of her sleeve. The tears were beginning to form again at the mere threat of being hugged. “I can’t.” She managed to squeak out, cracking a broken smile while looking up at him. “What do your Ben Hasserath eyes see, Bull?” He barely cracked a smirk back at her before he dropped his hands to his sides and made the motion to come close to her.

“Like you’re barely holding it together. Are you sure?” She held her hands up and pressed her back against the counter as far as it would go. He mimicked her pose and put his hands up in surrender. Her gaze fell to the floor and she focused on her breaths and reigning in her emotions to have some semblance of stability. He hummed in realization, resting his hands on the counter behind him.

“Shit, strange as it is, maybe you two are a good match.” She looked up to him while rubbing one of her eyes with her palm. She had a history of having sensitive skin, especially when she was crying or getting flush in the chest. The children might be ignorant to the fact that she was crying but the rest of the Chargers would be able to see if they even glanced at her. The next time she rubbed her eyes she spun in a small amount of healing magic to reduce the redness around her eyes. It felt like it worked; the skin underneath her eyes stung less when she looked up to Bull with a quizzical look.

“Well, thanks? For the approval? I guess, what do you mean?” His eye twitched, probably noticing her small change to her eyes, before nodding and continuing.
“I’ve noticed there are times when he disappears into himself. It’s more than deep thought. I’ve seen the guys who have come out of places like Seheron do the same thing. It’s like he goes into another world and completely checks out to the here and now.” He stepped forward and poked her in the center of the chest with a playful smirk on his face. “You do the same thing. For you, I can just tell you have a whole lot of hurt inside you. What happened while you were gone?” She chuckled and pushed his finger from her chest.

“I’m not a kitchen girl, Bull. I don’t need you to tell me I’m pretty while you listen to my woes.” He laughed and rubbed the back of his neck while she cleared her throat. “While I was gone. . . it was just the first time that I didn’t know what was going on. It allowed my mind to kind of catch up with me, and Cole confirmed that I can’t go home.” His eyes widened and he looked down to her with a sigh.

“Shit, I’m sorry, Alpha.” She raised a hand to dismiss him. Talking about it more would just tear her apart and he thankfully caught onto that, humming with a groan while stepping to her side to grab the pot. He gripped the handles and lifted the thing almost seamlessly. She smiled and patted his arm in gratitude, quickly grabbing the ladle and a towel to rest the pot on. He walked through the door and sat it in the middle of the large rug that filled the room. Athena followed and put the lid over it until the children arrived, swirling her wrist to continually stir the soup with a small current of heat magic.

Krem came down with the children behind him, and Mother Giselle was not part of the group. Before she could even ask, he shrugged and sat down across from them. “I don’t think she was too keen on following a Tevinter to dinner in a basement.” Athena couldn’t help but chuckle, even more so when Lev’adin and Tobi nearly tackled her to the ground in greeting. She let her back hit the floor with a cold thud as the children giggled to one another. Tobi was the first to help her up as Lev’adin stayed by her side. Bull had the burden of holding the ladle while everyone else filed in. Athena could sit up and fill the bowls before passing them around. Before she could pour herself a fresh bowl sounds of appreciation were already filling the air.

“Maker – fuck – what is this?” Skinner was the first one to talk, smiling while nudging Dalish next to her. The Chargers were more vocal about their delight while the children simply hummed between bites, scooping their spoons feverishly into the bowl to get every bite. Krem looked up from his bowl and politely asked: “Is this a recipe from your world, Athena?” She nodded almost solemnly, taking her first bite of the soup. The broth washed over her tongue as she sat back with her eyes closed. It was a slap of nostalgia in the face and as she swallowed it down she fought the tears at her eyes. It was everything she wanted.

She was pulled from her thoughts of home by a small tug on her sleeve. Leafy was already halfway through her soup and she looked up to Athena with a small smile. “Where’s your home, Fen’mae? The clan said it was another world, how far away is that?” Oh my sweet innocent child. She let out a small sigh of restraint, running a hand through her hair.
“A far ways away, Leafy.” The child was so curious, she put her bowl down on the ground and positioned her body more towards Athena’s.

“What’s it like? Can we go there? Are you like Tobi and me or do you have parents?” Tobi shot the elven girl a warning look but she didn’t catch it. Athena bit down on her tongue and shook her head, trying to keep her voice clear and optimistic.

“Uh – no, sweetheart. I have- “ Had? “Parents. They’re not here though.”

It was obvious the girl had more questions but at this point the emotions in Athena’s throat were suffocating. She could feel the soup churning in her stomach and there was a knot in her throat that was normally the trigger before a sob. She placed her bowl on the ground and noticed that her hands were beginning to tremble again. Shit, keep it together, Athena. But even as she thought to herself the name Athena felt foreign within her mind. Her mouth ran dry and she could feel her pulse quickening on the sides of her neck. She focused on taking a deep breath in through her nose when Bull cleared his voice.

“Hey, Alpha. Aren’t you late for that thing you told me about?” She opened her eyes quickly and met his gaze. He tilted his head and raised his brows to her and she smirked in gratitude, nodding before turning to her children to kiss them on top of the head. Tobi looked to Bull with a grin but Lev’adin was taking a while to catch on.

“What about a story?” Athena kissed her cheek before speaking low in Elvish.

“Another time, my love. Sleep well. I’ll fight off the bad dreams for you in the Fade.” She turned to Tobi and whispered similar endearments into his ear. Kain rose and sat in the spot where Athena had stood from, looking to her. The pair shared a look and Athena tilted her head to the side with a smile. “Watch after them for me? Ensure they get to bed?” The wolf let out a sharp yelp that gave her the signal to leave. With a wave towards the Chargers and a nod to Bull, she pushed through the door of the kitchen. Her pace picked up and her strides lengthened the moment she hit the courtyard. She pushed forward through the air with her hands and wrapped her body within a barrier so that she could push through the Veil without creating too much noise or drawing too much attention to herself.

Athena fade-stepped through the courtyard until she opened her door and placed her back on the other side. Solas wasn’t there yet and the sun had just set, meaning that he was probably finishing up whatever he was studying in the rotunda. That gave her a bit of time to burn off the mana that was rising and swirling with her emotions. She ran up the stairs, taking them in two-step strides, to bring her body in front of the window. With shaky hands, she opened the windows and pushed
them outwards. The biting wind of autumn blew in and cooled the drying streams of tears on her cheeks.

She slowly put her body within the space of the window, hands clutching the sides as she surveyed the outdoors. The guards were in the middle of their shift so they wouldn’t be walking across the bridge anytime soon. With the cooler temperature came a fog and low-hanging clouds that would give her coverage underneath the castle and in the valleys below. The real challenge would be dulling her flame so that if anyone was looking off the battlements they wouldn’t see her shining like a beacon within the thickness of the night.

“Well, you’ll have to improvise.” She stated to herself, moving before she could doubt her actions and throwing herself from the window. Gravity took over and her body fell through the cutting winds, the sudden chill bleaching over her mind. It felt like she was dunking her head into a pail of cold water, and it was just the refresher she needed. Athena outstretched her arms, gathering mana from the Veil and the energy around her, before spinning her body and surging her flame through her veins.

Fire erupted out of her pores and changed her body, the wings ripping through the fabric of her jacket and burning it away in the shift. It was too quick of a process to be done delicately but right now all she craved was to burn through her feelings, burn through the thoughts of home that made her feel like curling up with a blanket and staying in bed forever depressed. Home was Thedas now. Home was Skyhold. Her past life, her past memories, her family, it was all out of reach now.

Then why did she feel like shit?

Athena pushed her wings and leveled out her body, soaring in the midst of the clouds. She kept her aura expanded to act as her eyes in the thickness of the fog, tilting her body when a large spire of rock or a tree came near her. The speed of the wind kept new tears from forming but she just wanted to scream. Why did that rift open outside of her house? Why did an image of the Dread Wolf appear before her before she was dragged into this world? And why was she so damn in love with him now?

It was all technically his fault. He gave the orb to Corypheus and it was when the Breach opened that she was pulled into Thedas. It was his form that came to her and, from what she could tell, brought her into his world. It didn’t make sense; it didn’t feel like she had all of the details. There was something missing in all of this and it made her mixture of emotions feel worse. The phase of sadness melded into rage and she ran her hands through her flaming hair, using the new rush of anger to do something she had been unable to do before. The clarity of the wind, the focus of her thoughts, cleared the flames from her body as she ran her hands over her hair and down her neck. Her skin appeared underneath until all that was left were the wings on her back, and even they had changed from the shining orange to a deep blue flame.
Athena turned with a new determination and pumped magic into her wings, allowing her body to disappear into the heavy clouds.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, as always, for the continued support. <3
After what felt like several long hours she returned to her room. The descent was slow and by the
time her body broke through the still open window the flames from her back puttered out and she
fell to her knees on the wooden floor next to the canvas Solas had painted for her. Her breath came
in heavy and exhausted pants and what were the remains of her jacket fell to the floor in charred
bits of leather and fabric. She attempted to push up from the ground but found her arms heavy so
she remained on all fours in the light of the open window. There was a small pulse of energy
through the air and she could hear someone stirring below.

_Better?_ The wolven voice spoke into her head. She paused and shrugged while closing her mouth
in an attempt to take more control of her breaths. Athena expected to see Kain coming up the stairs
but when she looked to her left she saw Solas in his light tan cropped pants that he wore sometimes
to sleep. He held their blanket in his hand and wordlessly he dropped to his knees by her side and
draped the soft thing over her. She sighed at his gentle touch on her back, leaning forward to where
her forehead could rest atop her hands. He sat by her, running his cool aura with his touch as he
drew small designs into her back.

“You nearly burned through all of your energy.” He stated simply after completing his minimal
healer’s assessment. She nodded with half a smirk, considering that was the idea in the first place.
After another second of deep breaths she pushed herself up to where she was sitting on the backs of
her heels, using her shaky hands to wrap the blanket that smelled of him around her. Did he have a
room of his own, or did he just prefer to sleep in her bed? The thought comforted her for a moment
but he was silently watching her, his expression full of a thousand questions she knew he wished to
ask. She swallowed down a lump of nerves, raising her tired gaze to his.

“Ever since the trip. . . my family has weighed heavily on my mind. My entire world has, I guess. It
hit me all at once that I’m _never_ going back. I tried cooking something from home, but all that did
was stir up more memories and the emotions associated with them.” He hummed with a small nod,
bringing his hand from her back to sit on top of his thigh. She tried to wet her lips but found her
mouth still dry like ash from her flight.

“Why did you not seek me out?” He asked softly, furrowing his brow at her. She let out a shaky
laugh, shaking her head back and forth while dropping her gaze to the floor.
“And say what exactly?” She took in a deep breath, deciding to just let it all out at once instead of dragging it on anymore. Perhaps it she just said the thoughts aloud it would make her feel better instead of keeping them to herself. Cole said he would get it, even if he couldn’t confirm it. “How my whole world is probably seen as fiction to my friends here? They will never be able to see or visualize my home, my friends, my family. I can explain things to them until the picture is clear but I don’t think they’ll get the heaviness of it all. They see more the interesting things about my world like the stories and the technology, not the little things that were left behind that I can’t get back.”

He stayed uncharacteristically silent as she ran her hands through her hair, pushing it out of her line of sight. “Nobody here can comprehend it, Solas. There is literally an entire world of memories and sights that can never be explained. I just – I don’t know what to do with it all. I tried pushing it down during the mission for Command and it obviously didn’t work. I’m just feeling so many things now: grief, nostalgia, loneliness, and the utter sense of loss.”

Tears glossed over her vision but did not make it past her eyes. Her voice remained clear and focused even though it was obvious how tired she was. “I feel selfish. We have someone literally threatening to tear the sky asunder and here I am.” She made a defeated gesture to her body and the rant she was finishing, dropping her hands to her side as her gaze rolled upwards to the ceiling. Athena closed her eyes, rubbing her hands-on top of her thighs. Solas moved in front of her, touching her cheek lightly with his hand to bring her gaze open and to him.

His expression nearly matched hers with weight, his gaze holding a similar pain that she was sure she showed. Her breath caught in her throat and she tilted her head into his touch. The petty and emotional part of her wanted to get angry at his kindness. She wanted to scream irrational things at him. This is all your fault! The low cadence and sincerity of his voice brought her back into focus on him. He shook his head, stroking his thumb across her cheek. “I am so sorry, vhenan. Nobody should suffer this kind of loss.”

She reached up and placed her hand over his, turning to gently place a kiss on the inside of his palm. “How do you do it?” He hummed in question, hand twitching in her grip. She continued with a broken voice, gripping onto his hand for some sort of tether to hope. “How do you endure? Like after Wisdom?” His lips twitched at the corners, his eyes falling to the floor while she searched his expression for answers.

His voice fell at a whisper. “Time. Time allows you to cope, endure. It is no wonder why I seek the company of spirits. They have given me shoulders to lean on when there were none. Before you.” Athena let out a sigh and scooted close enough to him where she could rest her forehead on his. She put both of his hands in hers, stroking her thumbs over the tops of his hands.
“I am sorry to put my burdens onto you, vhenan. I don’t know what else to do.” He looked up to where he could brush the tip of his nose against hers.

“I can help you to shoulder these burdens. You can trust me with them.” He turned his hands over and squeezed hers. Athena nervously chewed at the inside of her lip, watching him comfort her by holding her hands. His aura buzzed heavy in the air like static, running goosebumps over her skin since her mana was nearly depleted. It was a sensation she was getting used to and she was able to recover quicker from it than in the past. She took in a deep breath, speaking low without looking up to meet his gaze.

“Have... I ever told you how I came to Thedas?” He slowly shook his head back and forth, sitting up to where he could look at her.

“From the Fade is all you have said. I do not know what happened before.” She nodded, reaching up to where she could cup his face and stroke her thumbs over his cheekbones. With what little magic she had left, she swirled it around them and used a similar trick she had seen him use before to put her to sleep.

“Allow me to show you then.”

The Fade was quick to respond that night. It instantly sensed the memory at the front of her mind and twisted it into the air around them. Solas remained silent at her side, arms clasped behind his back, returning to the safe posture of a scholar. Athena looked to the front of her old house, swallowing down the start of a sob that wanted to come. It was crystal clear in this memory. She had noticed when she dreamt of home that smaller details were starting to fade and blur. This memory, this memory she would never forget as long as she lived.

Her lips twitched into somewhat of a smirk when she saw her car coming down the street. Solas’s gaze widened when he looked at the thing. Before he could even ask, she gestured to it and calmly explained: “That’s a car. It’s how we get from place to place. Think of it as an automated carriage.” He hummed, watching the memory of her come into the driveway. Athena could already remember how the day had gone. She had been fighting with a patient all day to keep him stable and their body just did not want to comply. Her and the doctor had been going back and forth with different medications and thankfully the patient lasted until shift change. It was just the type of day where she wanted to open up her cheap twist top bottle of wine, sit on the couch, and binge watch the awfully crude show Rick and Morty.
The past memory of her opened the door, holding her purse, phone, and keys in her hand while trying to open the door. Once the door opened Athena smirked, crossing her arms and tapping her fingers on her skin. “The only reason I turned around was I forgot my water bottle...” The memory cursed under its breath, dropping her possessions on the couch before turning back to the car. She casually took steps towards the car, leaving Solas by the streetlight that was by the corner of her house. He looked to her and silently followed her. The moment the memory turned around from the car the wolf popped out of thin air. She didn’t know how it got there; they could only see what she knew from her point of view.

She heard a sharp intake of breath behind her and she didn’t have to look to know it was Solas. He raised a hand, his power coursing through the memory and freezing it. The image of Athena was pressed against the car, hands raised in surrender as she was trying to take in everything that was happening. The elf moved forward to investigate the wolf, as expected, but Athena moved through the area and sighed. Hopefully her roommate had adopted her cat. The two had always gotten along and her roommate liked to joke that they had a timeshare over her cat. He was friendly with everyone. Hell, someone could threaten to rob the house and he probably would have rubbed up on their legs anyways. Would her roommate have emptied her room? Sold her furniture and put someone else in there?

It’s not like she died in the house. It’s not like her spirit was passing through the walls and knocking mismatched Tupperware without a lid out of the cabinets at precisely 03:15 in the morning. She just, disappeared. She walked up to the memory of her past self and sighed, looking her up and down. It felt like she was looking at a different person now. Athena knew she had toned up from living in a world where you walked miles every day and battled for your life, but the change was dramatic and jarring. With a small shake of her head she turned and leaned against the car, the former memory of herself disappearing into a small puff of color and fade-dust. Solas was standing to the side, jaw-clenched and hands unclasped from his back.

He walked a circle around the image of the Dread Wolf in front of him, eyes scanning it for every detail. “I do not understand.” He stated simply, looking up to her with a mixture of confusion and what she could only interpret as anger. She shrugged with her arms still crossed, looking down to the thing with much less fear than she had the first time she saw it.

“Neither did I. I still do not. From the images, I’ve seen, this is the image of Fen’Harel, is it not?” He nodded, hardening his gaze as he continued to circle the creature. Even now, she could see the hunter deep within him shadowed in his movements. He moved to study the creature, to figure out its weakness and its purpose. There was still a confusion in his face that made her feel slightly better. Perhaps it wasn’t him after all.

“Did he say anything to you?” He waved his hand and allowed the memory to continue at a slower pace. The black wolf threw back its head and howled, summoning the green rift beneath them. He then stopped it again, looking to her with his deep blue gaze. She did not allow herself to be lost
within it. She kept her eyes on the wolf and tapped the side of her temple with her index finger.

“In a way. I heard words in my mind but the voice was my own. It just simply said: ‘Come with me.’ Then I was sucked into the rift and I witnessed the death of Divine Justinia. It also my first time seeing Rathein. She was able to escape the Fade.” Athena now waved her hand and allowed the memory to fast-forward. The scene around them dissipated and they stood in the center of the familiar green haze that was the Fade. He let out a small sound of disappointment, pinching the bridge of his nose while disappearing into thought.

“Why did you not share this before?” She tried not to be defensive but she couldn’t help it, giving a small scoff while dropping her hands to her side.

“I’m sure that would have gone over so well. I wake up and instantly tell Cassandra and Cullen then the last thing I saw in my world was the Elven God of Rebellion.” His face fell and she cursed herself silently for her reaction, putting her hands up in surrender. She then ran her hands through her hair to soothe her worries, letting out a slow breath through pursed lips. “I’m sorry – I just – Didn’t know what to say. I mean, it’s crazy right? Why would I be singled out by someone like that? It doesn’t make sense!” Her voice grew nervous as she hoped for him to say something solid, something to make her fears go away. She turned to him with tears in her eyes and he looked up, pain etched into his features.

“I have no explanation for this, vhenan.” She let out a small sigh, taking steps to close the distance between them. Thankfully he made no move to pull away, allowing her to come and rest her head on his chest. He stilled underneath her, slowly moving to where he wrapped his arms around her and rested his cheek on top of her head. “Thank you. For trusting me with this.” Athena rubbed her face into his shirt, taking in a deep breath before nodding in a small gesture.

“Of course, Honestly, I don’t think I can tell anyone else.” He looked down to her with a small hum of question. She chuckled, letting out a heavy sigh. “You have seen things in the Fade that probably cannot be explained. You have seen things people would not believe. You, out of everyone we know, would be able to see this and not look at me differently.” He smirked while rubbing his hand up and down her back.

“If you would, allow me to investigate this for you. I have some spirit companions I can seek out for assistance in identifying this.” She gave him a final embrace before stepping back, rubbing the back of her neck with a nervous look.

“You don’t think that was him?” He shook his head and crossed his arms, rubbing his forehead with his index and middle finger.
“Truly? My instinct says no, but like I said. I would like to investigate further.” She smirked, running her hand down the strings of his necklace until she could run her thumb over the wolf bone that rested on his chest.

“I’m assuming that means you won’t be coming back with me?” He shook his head and she wasn’t tempted to press the matter further. She nodded, turning away from him while pulling on her magic to bring her back into the physical world. It felt like she was about to open her eyes when he grabbed her by the shoulder. She paused, looking to his touch and then over her shoulder to him. He gave her a ghost of a smile. The subtle change in expression brought butterflies to her stomach.

“Enduring takes time. It is not an easy thing to do and I learned to do it alone. I . . . would not wish you to do the same.” Athena looked up into the fade-sky and smiled, reaching up and resting her hand over his.

“Ar lath ma, vhenan.” He released her and nodded with a genuine smile of his own.

“Ar lath ma, ma’fen.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the love and support as always! <3
When she came back into the physical world she instantly curled up against him. The window had been left open all night and the sun wasn’t even close to coming into the sky. Had they been in the Fade long? Apparently in their sleep he had moved them to where he was sitting up against the wall holding he with the mural he painted on their left. In the light of the moon she crawled over to it, running her hand over the dried plaster with a smirk on her face. If she hadn’t make any marks on this world yet, here she would be as long as the castle stood. She looked over to him and sighed at how even in his sleep he looked like he was trying to work through some thousand-year-old equation or philosophy loophole. His brow was furrowed and he crossed his arms the moment she left his grip. How much could he sense when he was in the Fade?

Still, it would be rude to wake him just to get him back to bed. Athena bit her lip with a slightly wicked expression, rubbing her hands together to pull on the small amount of magic she had left. Sleeping had given her some of it back but she could tell she would need to recharge and relax the next day. At least she could tell Dorian she made headway on their experiment but now she would need to learn to do it without being on the verge of a colossal breakdown. Solas had moved her body in the past without her waking up. Certainly, she couldn’t be as subtle as he could, but she could definitely try.

She spread her palms wide and summoned forth mana into her grip, walking over to him and spreading her magic to where it filled the room and covered his body. She could see a shiver go down his spine but he didn’t wake or make any change in expression showing he pieced together what she was doing. She compacted her magic down to where it was just around his form, her hands low and her body crouched. Slowly, she stood up and brought her hands up. The magic wrapped around him followed and his body gently levitated from the ground. Forgetting all tragedy of the earlier afternoon, she had to bite her lip to keep from laughing at how strange it looked. She walked backwards out of the room and down the stairs, keeping her eyes on his body and ensuring that she didn’t hit his head against anything as she descended down into her bedroom.

Kain looked up from the bottom of the stairs with a tilt of his head. She ignored him, backing up until the backs of her legs hit the bed and then she crawled into her spot on the bed. As her magic began to waver, Athena quickly brought him to his side and put him on top of the sheets, letting out a heavy yet satisfied breath. She pulled her top over her head, facing away from him and towards her wardrobe. As she threw her top and pants into the waste bin she felt a change in the magic in the air. She looked up to the ceiling, taking in a deep breath before sliding underneath the covers and sliding her body next to Solas’s. She draped her arm over his lap while resting her head on her pillow that was wedged up against his side.

Everything was going well until he opened one eye towards her with a wolfish smirk. “Was that supposed to be discreet?”
Athena laughed into his side, rubbing her face against him with a smile as she lazily spoke muffled elvish against his side. “Go back to sleep, old man.”

He slid down to where he was under the sheets with her, turning and bringing her into his arms. He fell back asleep with a smile on his face, and the sight made it easier for her to fall into a fade-less sleep.

She was thankful for not drifting into the Fade that night. Harmony surely would have drilled her on her previous memories and the only thing she wanted to do right now was cope. The peak of her emotions had passed and now she was left feeling somewhat hollow from it all. She rose with the sun, brow furrowed in disapproval with the day already being there. Kain matched her tone, letting out a groan of regret and flopping his head down at Solas’s feet at the end of the bed. Athena smiled and sat up to reach forward and pat her companion on the head. Her lover was deep within his Fade research. When she left his grasp, he would subconsciously flex his hands as if looking for her before relaxing his features and going back into sleep. It was adorable.

Athena pushed from bed and quickly pulled out a long-sleeved formal looking shirt that was a pale blue. She fastened up the buttons one above her bandings line on her chest and pulled it down to remove wrinkles, smoothing out the fabric with her hands. She pulled out a pair of blank pants with matching foot wrappings, pausing with a smirk on her face. Even though it was getting colder outside, her feet had somewhat adapted. As a child, she would often walk barefoot in the small town she was raised in, but this was something completely different. She didn’t know if she would be able to truly commit to the lifestyle and go barefoot when they went out on adventures, but for walking around Skyhold? This was more comfortable.

She skipped down the stairs with Kain shadowing so she could run a brush through her hair and pull it up into a high ponytail. She had to laugh at how the hairstyle managed to take almost eight years off of her visage but it was the easiest hairstyle, especially when she slept with it after it was windblown from her flight. Athena was trying to pat down some fly-aways when she heard a knock at the door. Her eyes widened and she pushed from her vanity up the stairs using a small fade-step to get to the door before Solas woke up. She opened the door and looked the messenger up and down with a confused glance. He was carrying a box that had a letter written in a fancy script on top.

Without exchanging any words the female messenger handed off the box and then turned down the stairs. Athena looked at the girl leaving then down at the box. Out of strange instinct she put her ear the box and shook it, expecting some sort of a ticking sound to come out of it. When there was none, she shrugged and slipped inside the door and returned downstairs to her vanity. The note was
written in a very stylish text and she slipped it out of the envelope and read with a smirk on her face.

Lady Athena,

The Inquisitor stated you were in need of one of these packages. Hopefully you will find some use in it.

Josephine

She pulled the top from the box and began to laugh. There as a mixture of vials, perfumes, potions, and salves within the wooden box. It was like a women’s first aid of sorts. In Rathein’s writing there were different labels on the bottles: for bleeding, for pain, or rub this on your stomach it feels amazing. The dull cramp was low that morning but she still took a small swig of the mint tasting potion for pains and bleeding with a smirk on her face. Technology be damned, magic still astounded her.

Once she felt the effects kick in, Athena was running up the stairs and out the front door. Solas had pulled the blankets back over himself and returned to his research. She watched as his aura pulsed in and out in time with his breaths, stretching to all walls of the room before coming back to be skin tight against his body. It was hypnotizing to watch and it only made her want to crawl back into bed with him. The thought was tempting, but he needed to do his own research into why Fen’Harel showed himself to her in her world. She needed breakfast.

She walked through the courtyard into the main hall to see Rathein standing and talking to Mother Giselle. Their conversation finished by the time Athena arrived but her friend was already looking down at a letter signed by Magister Pavus. Mother Giselle smiled at her before leaving, patting her on the shoulder gently as she made her way towards the garden. Athena could not shake the pit in her stomach as she looked over Rathein’s shoulder.

“Dorian’s Dad?” The Inquisitor didn’t even flinch to hide the letter. She hummed in answer, nodding her head while showing the letter to her.

“Yes. Unfortunate timing too. Bull approached me this morning and said the Qun had reached out in hopes for an alliance between us. I am leaving for the Coast tomorrow with Bull, Cole, and Sera. I would bring Blackwall, but . . . I believe you know why I cannot.” Her voice was bitter and Athena wasn’t surprised. She walked around in front her friend, jerking her head to the side so they could speak softly in the rotunda since Solas wasn’t in there yet. The Herald followed her in and shut the door behind her, casting her hand up and casting a barrier around them. Athena arched her brow and poked it, smirking as the barrier shuddered under her touch but remained intact.

“What’s this for? You anticipate an attack?” Rathein scoffed and rolled the letter up, handing it to her.
“It’s a silencing barrier. Have you not seen one before? My family would use it to discuss private matters when we had mixed company.” Athena smiled and quickly memorized the feel of the magic and the intent behind it. *This will certainly come in handy.* Rathein had somewhat of a scowl on her face, rubbing the back of her neck while looking up to where Dorian sat in the library.

“I don’t want to tell him. His dad’s right, he is too proud not to go.” Athena’s eyes instantly widened and her lips twitched into a frown.

“What.” Rathein shook her head and dismissed her with a gesture.

“That is the last worry on my mind. I have this alliance with the Qun, Blackwall coming out as a murderer and an Orlesian criminal, the impending attack on Adamant, and all this business with darkspawn in the Approach. That dragon was a bitch, by the way. It did not like us one bit.” Athena hummed, arching a brow while crossing her arms.

“He let you bait it? I thought you would need more resources to do that.” The short-hair maged shrugged with an almost cocky smile.

“Since you and I went over things before I left, we appeared very knowledgeable about the whole thing and he was excited to help us right then and there. I was able to snag this little thing for later.” She then pulled a smaller dragon’s tooth from her pocket and Athena smiled at the meaning, nodding to show that she knew what it was for. Rathein put the thing away, patting on the outside of her pants where it lay before hardening her gaze and looking back to Athena.

“Perhaps I should have had you warn me about the Blackwall situation. That was quite unexpected.” Athena swallowed down a small lump of nerves, managing to crack a smirk.

“I warned you.” Rathein nodded.

“He said you encouraged him to come forward sooner than he planned to. He is fully willing to accept whatever punishment that is given to him. We sent our fastest raven to Briala to ask her what she would like to do since he is technically an Orlesian criminal first. Maker Athena.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “You have technically been allowing us to harbor an Orlesian criminal for how long now? Is there anything else I should know!” The Inquisitor’s voice rose and the volume shuddered the sound barrier she had put up. Athena took a step back with a snarl on her face.
“Bullshit, Rathein. I’m getting tired of this. You know this. Look, I was pissed about the Blackwall thing too at first. You’ve seen how he is working with people, training the men. He is trying to make amends like everyone else here. We have a spy, a vigilante, a carta member, an apostate, a spirit, and a Tevinter in our party. Orlesian criminal fits right in with the bunch of us!” She threw her hands in the air with an exasperated groan. Rathein stilled, wanting to snap back at her or punch her. Athena noticed her hand twitched but her friend sighed and nodded, rubbing her temples with one hand.

“Since we’ll be gone for a couple weeks, if Briala responds to the letter and decides we are to deal with him, I trust your judgment as Hand of the Inquisitor for what to do on this matter, or any matter when I’m gone.” Athena clutched the letter in her hand with a groan, allowing her shoulders to visibly slump in disappointment.

“Oh come on-“

Rathein cut her off with a snap of her finger, slicing her finger across her neck in the air as a gesture for her to quiet. “I will not be the only one burdened here by responsibilities, Athena. I really don’t like having to be the bad guy all of the time. You sit up in that chair and see how it feels when everyone is looking at you for answers. Who am I to decide? I was sent to the Conclave by my circle and WAM! Here I am Inquisitor. You made the mistake of being my close friend.” She then finally broke her anger with a wink towards her. “So, you get to help me out on this. Now, handle that, will you?” She gestured down to the latter in her friend’s hand.

Athena looked down to her, flicking her hand to the side with a pulse of magic to dismiss the sound barrier. When it shattered, she held it in front of her with a nod. “I’m telling him.” Rathein opened her mouth to argue by with the push of a Fade-step she was up the stairs and casually leaning in front of bookcase by Dorian’s chair. Rathein ran up the stairs behind her to try and stop her when Dorian turned around from his standing position to look at them.

“Now aren’t I lucky? It appears I am being fought over by two beautiful women, two taken beautiful women I might add. Now, to what do I owe the pleasure, ladies?” Rathein tried to push Athena out of the way but she held firm and held the letter forward.

“Dorian, honey, there’s a letter you need to see.” Dorian arched a brow and smiled, taking it from her hands.

“A letter? Ooh. Is it a naughty letter?” Athena forced a smile and used her dominant hand to push Rathein behind her. She was sure it looked childish how they were acting, but they were like sisters so a part of her really did not care about public image.
“It’s a letter detailing all of the devilish things I really wanted to do to you when we were camping alone together.” She added a wink to lighten up the soon to be heavy conversation. Dorian laughed and opened the letter, allowing his eyes to scan down its contents. He then frowned, shaking his head back and forth.

“This is so... typical. I bet this retainer he speaks of is going to knock me on the head, throw a black silk bag over my head, and drag me back to Tevinter.” Athena let out a small growl of disapproval, shaking her head back and forth while Rathein began to realize what warning him was the right decision. He looked to the Inquisitor and cocked his head to the side.

“Sorry darling, this is not something someone as high and mighty as you need to dirty your hands with. Athena will be coming with me. She owes me one anyways after the whole spider fiasco.” Rathein nodded, clapping her hands-on Athena’s shoulders from behind.

“That was the plan, Dorian. I have business in the Storm Coasts for the next bit of time before we march on Adamant. I hope this goes well; I need you at your best for what is to come.” Athena let out an angry scoff, elbowing her friend firmly in her chest.

“Ever the sensitive one, aren’t you? Man, Bull must be rubbing off on you. I’ll see you later.” The Herald pushed out all of the air in her lungs at the impact, rubbing her chest where Athena had hit her. She turned to go down the stairs, throwing a rude gesture towards her as she left.

“The Commander requested a meeting with me then wanted to speak with you about further preparations and the schedule. Go see him when you’re done.” Athena nodded and waited until she was out of sight, watching her hair stay in place even as she bounced down the stairs. That’s not fair. Dorian crumpled the letter I his hand before shoving it in his pocket, eyes glossing over with an angered expression. Before he could speak she closed the distance between them and wrapped her arms around him. He twitched under her, looking around in the library before finally succumbing to his feelings and returning the embrace.

“This is going to be absolutely dreadful, I imagine. I wouldn’t want anyone else going in there with me but you.” He whispered into her head, letting out a sigh while holding her close. Athena smiled, nodding into his chest while breathing in his musk of cologne.

“The road to Redcliffe may be dangerous. I imagine you and I could handle ourselves once we get to the tavern, but perhaps we should consider recruiting someone else for the travel?” He smirked, allowing a chuckle to trickle from his lips.
“Fine. Bring the story-teller and your boyfriend. At least we can have some pleasant conversations while we’re traveling that don’t have to involve my father.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the continued love and support! <3
After a quick breakfast with Dorian in the library she crossed the courtyard towards Cullen’s tower with Kain at her side. The wolf grew excited when she told him where they were going. He was nearly bouncing at her side as they climbed the stairs. Rathein was on the way down, wearing her usual mask of the noble Inquisitor. Athena paused to let her pass, arching a brow at her friend’s expression. The discomfort of their conversation that morning had been watered down by a sweet strawberry jam Dorian had found in the kitchen with fresh baked rolls from the mess hall. The Inquisitor paused, shooting her a friendly glance.

“He should be ready for you now.”

Athena nodded before walking up, allowing Kain to get in front of her and scratch at the door. At first there was no answer, so the wolf whined and let out a sharp yelp, backing up to forcefully butt his head against the flat of the door. There was the sound of a groan as Cullen backed up his chair. She could hear his footsteps as he walked to the door while calling out: “Coming, boy.” Kain began to wag his tail excitedly and she swore that she had a golden retriever instead of a full-blooded Hinterlands Wolf. Cullen opened the door with an exhausted gaze, visibly recoiling when he saw Athena standing there. “Maker!” He let out a breath and put his hand to his chest as Kain nudged the door open with his nose and ran into the office.

“Sorry, the Inquisitor said you were expecting me?” She asked sheepishly, trying not to smile at how off-guard he was. He shook his head and rubbed the back of his neck, opening the door further for her. She walked in and immediately stepped on broken glass, letting out a groan because she had to pick that day to wear her foot wrappings. One of the sharper pieces sliced along the bottom of her foot and she bit her tongue to keep from crying out. Instead, she clenched her jaw and looked at Cullen.

“Is this a bad time?” He shook his head and faced away from her, rearranging some scrolls on his desk. She could already see sketches of the trebuchets and siege equipment they would be bringing to the Grey Warden fortress.

“Oh. Good. Do you have a cloth? I seemed to have injured myself on the stairs up here.” She lied, hoping to not make him feel bad but he turned to her and instantly looked down at the floor. He cursed under his breath, pulling out a white cloth from inside of his fur coat and dropping to his knees in front of her.

“Andraste – I am so sorry. The Inquisitor was just in here and I- “She shook her head and balanced
herself on one foot on a safe piece of floor while resting her injured foot on her knee. There was about a two-inch slice in the arch of her foot that was already bleeding bright red. Cullen let out a sigh, running a hand through his hair. Athena took the cloth from his hand and placed it against the wound just to clean it up. When she was able to get the glass fragments out she ran a hand over it, using her aura to heal the wound with only a minor scar.

“See? No problem done. Now, where is your waste basket? I can get this glass off the floor from here if I have a target.” He pointed his thumb over his shoulder shamefully towards a small wooden bin near his desk. Athena swirled her hand, using similar magic to the one she used the night before to levitate Solas from the upstairs to the downstairs. The image put a smile on her face as she collected all of the glass and deposited them into the wooden trash can. When it was safe to put her foot down, she crossed her arms over her chest and looked around the room. Things were in general disarray but the thing that stood out the most was a lyrium vial standing up on his desk.

Instantly she pushed past him and walked towards the desk, using a wave of her hand to shut the door behind her. He winced at the magic use but she didn’t care. “Cullen. Why is this out.” She asked tersely, jerking her head down towards the potion on the desk. He stood to a defeated position and looked to her. Instantly she could see how tired he was, how the withdrawal symptoms must have been setting in hard. Normally she would have backed off but with how Rathein acted towards Dorian’s letter she wasn’t sure if this Inquisitor was the exact same as the one she created in her world.

“I thought you knew?” He asked softly, readjusting the fur of his coat with a heavy gaze.

“I know you have been doing wonderfully while quitting lyrium, so then why is this open? What did Rathein say?” He swallowed down a visible lump of despair, looking off to the side where Kain was licking at a dirty breakfast plate that had been purposely left on the floor by a bundle of blankets that had a wolf-sized imprint in the middle.

“I informed her that the Seeker was assigned to watch me. I was asking her to look for a replacement and asked the Inquisitor what I should do. . .” His voice faded off and she wanted to snap at him but instead she gave him a second to breathe. “She left the decision in my hands, stated it wasn’t her choice to control my life. I do not wish to give less to the Inquisition than I did the Chantry, so I am going to take it again.” Instantly her hand wrapped around the lyrium vial and she drank it herself, keeping his eyes on hers while she did so.

He took a step closer to her with a hand outstretched and when she was finished she threw the glass vial out of his open window that was at his desk’s back. It wasn’t something that was in the game, but at least now it allowed him to get some damn sunlight. The Commander was asking different incomplete questions so she looked to Kain and summoned him with a pulse of magic. He instantly rose and came over to her. She dropped to a knee and allowed him to smell the lyrium on the tips
of her fingers. He took in small sniffs around the edges of her hand and nodded when he had it down. She then pointed a finger to the rest of the office and the wolf took off.

Cullen caught on quick, his sadness dropping as it slowly turned to anger. “What are you doing?!” He spun as Kain whipped past him and shoved his face in a drawer, sorting through a mess of papers with his nose before he found a loose vial hidden at the bottom of it. He gently put the vial in his teeth and brought it over to Athena in a dark game of fetch. Athena’s face was stern as he did it. When Kain was bringing her the second vial she let out a sigh and looked to Cullen, who was standing on the other side of the desk with his hands resting on its surface.

“Frankly, she gave you the wrong answer. You know how well you were doing! You thought it was the right answer to throw it all away? For what? What kind of service is worth it when you’re addicted to this?” *What kind of Maker would subject his loved ones to this torture?* She wanted to shout at the faithful man but she held her tongue at that sentence, grasping the two small vials in her hand as Kain brought her a third. “You gave the Chantry everything and more. *I saw* it all, Cullen. You gave it more than it deserves.”

He flinched and she didn’t care. Kain was at the bottom of the ladder that led up to his bedroom loft, barking while sitting in a straight position. *Near the bed. Right side.* Athena shoved the other vials in her pocket before climbing up the stairs. Cullen instantly ran over and grabbed her ankle, trying to bring her down. She wriggled out of his grip and quickly ascended the ladder, going right to the nightstand and seeing that the lyrium vial was in a top drawer, sitting on top of a copy of letters from his family. The sight broke her heart so she took the final vial in her hand and gracefully jumped off the edge of the loft, bending her knees to lessen the impact against his stone floor.

“You have no right, Athena. I should be taking it!” He began to raise his voice but she cut him off with a scoff that resembled a growl. “How many lives depend on the Inquisition? How many people look up to us?” He was growing upset again and repeating lines she knew before. She kept the lyrium vials in her back pocket while pushing against his chest.

“You are risking your *fucking* life, Cullen. You have already raised an army and taught them well *without* lyrium. What good would it do you now?” He paled and looked to her, twitching his lips in a snarl and responding to her challenge.

“If the demons at Adamant are anything like you say and we need the Rite? They need me at my best! I cannot ask it of them if I’m not willing to do it myself.” She let out a groan of frustration and threw her hands in the air, shoving her hands into her pockets while facing Kain. The wolf was laying down with his head on his paws, watching his “parents” go back and forth by just moving his eyes. Could she just tell him it would be okay? What could it affect by him knowing that they would succeed at Adamant? They would need to have a deep briefing, much like what her and Rathein did before the ball.
“It is not the same, Cullen. You are different from you were then, I hope.” The rage in his eyes towards mages during the Circle tower was terrifying. It had been years since then though and he didn’t seem to flinch at her use of magic. Just to be sure, she pulled all the vials from her pocket and one by one drank them with her back towards her. Her mana pool was refilled and then some. It felt like she could run up the face of a mountain and she suspected it was almost similar to the felix potion from her favorite book series. She walked over and threw the four empty bottles out of the window, listening to the very small sound the glass breaking on the way down. “That shit tastes awful. Is there anymore, Cullen?”

He clenched his jaw but shook his head. She let out a sigh and wiped her hands together. “Good. Now let’s talk about Adamant.” She used the tip of her foot to bring a stool in front of his desk, smirking as she walked around the desk and sat in his chair. He looked to her and then to the stool slowly, smirking but submitting anyways. She looked for a blank scroll and looked over his desk, noticing that there was a letter half-way written to his sister Mia. Athena couldn’t help but grin, tapping her finger on it. “I see you listened to me. Sorry that I was grouchy last night.” That was the understatement of the age.

He broke their tense tone with a laugh, gesturing to the letter with a smile. “You remind me of her, you know? She would hound me as well. Let’s hope you two do not meet; I don’t think I would survive the encounter.” She laughed and finally pulled up a blank scroll, dipping the quill in his ink pot before continuing.

“You’re probably right. Now, about Adamant.”

The pair talked until the beginning of the afternoon. There were different diagrams of the Inquisitor’s path through the fortress and where help would be needed most. He had already thought of different preparations on how to help on the barracks so that Rathein wouldn’t need to lose focus and help the soldiers. He was careful in his strategies, always keeping the safety of his men as a top priority. The last item to address was a sensitive subject probably for them both but she wanted to make a point this time to let him know.

“The dragon, again?” He asked with a clenched jaw, making her feel like a student being scolded by a teacher. They had switched seats during a stretch session so now she was in the small stool while he was in his “official” Commander chair. He rested his elbows on the desk and clasped his hands over his mouth, looking over the map he had of the fortress. “That will be a problem. We won’t be able to get the siege equipment inside fast enough to get hard hits in. I am already
bringing in mages to cast the Rite in timed intervals to keep the demons at bay, perhaps they can cast barriers as well.”

She perked up, taking a sip from her cup of water that a messenger had brought her. “You got the mages instead of the Templars we have?” He looked up with a curt nod. Now that all talks of his lyrium and family were off of the table he returned to the all-business leader of the troops. His tone turned the stricter side and anytime she tried to derail their conversation he brought her back to the task at hand.

“The Rite is a spell, just like any other. The Templars will be focusing on the magic suppression while the mages will be reciting the Rite. Dagna is working on putting the spell onto an object that they can charge at-will.” Athena nodded, twisting her lips to the side while letting out a groan.

“An issue I’m aware of is that the dragon can try and intercept the Inquisitor when she’s trying to work. Unfortunately. . . “ She pushed her hair out of her face and played with the ribbon on her wrist that was formerly keeping her hair up. “I’ve learned a new skill that might allow me to draw its attention from the troops. Shit I’m going to need some fade-touched obsidian to boost my natural guard. . . “ He knocked on the desk to grab her attention. He was giving her a look that was akin to a strict librarian looking over a pair of glasses but this time it was him looking over his desk at her.

“I’m afraid to ask what new skill it is. There are limited things that can distract a dragon.” She answered wordlessly, putting her palms towards her body while locking her thumbs together. She then mimed a butterfly flying away and his eyes widened. “Andraste help us – you’re kidding? You can fly?” His voice was excited and afraid at the same time but his expression did not change. Athena sheepishly shrugged.

“I’m surprised you didn’t get a report saying there was something flitting around the base of the castle last night. But yes, I can. Like I said, I’ll just to get some new armor, maybe something if elven make so it will be lightweight? I’ll add it to the list of projects I have Dagna doing for me right now. I think that is all, Commander. By your leave?” He nodded and stood when she did. She walked over to the door and noticed that there were scratch marks at the edge of the door, roughly at about Kain’s height. She looked down to her companion, who only whined in response.

“Have Josephine bill me for the repairs to your door.” Cullen followed her line of sight and chuckled, bending down to scratch Kain behind the ears a final time.

“No harm done, nothing that cannot be fixed.” Athena shook her head and opened the door. Kain bolted down the stairs and immediately went to go pester the horses in the stable since Blackwall wasn’t there to scare him off. She looked over her shoulder towards Cullen and smiled at him.
“I’m glad we’re about to make a strategy about Adamant. You’re going to start rolling out the siege equipment?” He nodded and leaned against the door frame.

“As we discussed, yes. Enjoy your travels to Redcliffe. Will you be taking him?” He didn’t even identify who it was but she laughed, shaking her head.

“No, he needs a break. Thank you for watching him for me.” Cullen raised a hand to dismiss her, waving goodbye before shutting the door to where it was only cracked. Athena felt like an odd pair who had a timeshare over their child, but it was a beneficial arrangement. He had a companion and she had somebody to watch her fur child while she was away.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise! Another chapter! :)

I am like 10 chapters ahead so I wanted to give you some back to back updating like the good ole days.

Thanks for the continued support, as always. <3
Athena walked into the rotunda near lunch time, noticing that Solas still wasn’t at his usual spot. She pulled up to his desk and wrote a small note unsigned: *Still hard at work, vhenan? Thank you.* * . * *ma melava halani.* Her Elvish script was elementary at best but she was trying. It had taken years for her to barely get a grasp of Spanish in school and that was something she was required to learn. Elvhen was a language she had a deep hunger to master, even if it sounded obviously foreign on her tongue. She left the note on top of a book on old Tevinter runes before turning and going back towards the main hall. She had asked Cullen to talk to Josephine about fixing the door, but now that she thought about it she had no idea in hell where the money came from for her account. She didn’t find *that* much to sell on their adventures.

She turned to the left past the throne and made her way into the Ambassador’s office. Leliana was casually sitting in her chair while Josephine was speaking with the seamstress that seemed to work for both Vivienne and the Inquisition. There were designs laid out that were different than the ones for Halamshiral and already Athena could feel the loathing at the thought of sketching out another gown for herself. Maybe she would throw caution to the wind and let Sera think of something, but knowing the elf she would probably just have her come to the party dressed in something worse than a bathing suit.

“Josephine! Why are you so worried! Nobody was harmed and now your family is free to thrive again!” The Spymaster said with a cat-like smile and instantly Athena wanted to turn on her heel and walk out. Josephine playfully crumbled up a piece of scroll and threw it at her friend, not seeing Athena walk in.

“There are other ways that could have been handled, Leliana! How did you know about that contract, anyways? The House of Repose themselves were surprised you knew about it.” Her eyes then went wide as Athena cleared her throat, sheepishly waving with one hand while looking to Lelianna with a pleased smirk. The red-headed rogue nodded back in appreciation, spinning a dagger in her hand with the point pressed against her gloved finger. The two relaxed and played with one another in a way that was almost uncharacteristic. They were like Rathein and Athena, it seemed. In a time where an ancient Tevinter threatened to break open the sky, it was important to have friends.

“I suppose I should confess, Lady Josephine, that was me. I told Leliana about it because I wanted to avoid a potential try on your life that would happen if we did it your way. Time is of the essence, you know?” Athena could not stop the embarrassed blush from going up her cheeks. Josephine composed her posture and let out a sigh, touching her hand to her forehead before nodding.
“I thank you, Lady Athena. Entirely unnecessary – “

“You’re wrong, Josie!”

“But thank you, nonetheless. I will start again on establishing trade routes for my family. You came at the perfect time, I wished to discuss something with you.” She gestured for her to come over to the desk where there were more than designs for the clothes. While Cullen had strategic plans for the army, she had the follow-up celebrations planned down to the last detail. There were decorations listed out for the main hall and which nobles were already invited to attend.

“With Wintersend coming in a few months, I am already beginning preparations for the celebration after Adamant.” Athena flinched, looking over the scrolls with a curious eye.

“And how do you know the results of Adamant, Josephine? How do you know what to celebrate?” She said teasingly, looking over to the two women. Lelianna assessed her gaze and smirked while Josephine actually stammered and tucked a hair behind her ear.

“I, well, I assumed you would be having more discussions with us if the events at Adamant were to be. . .unsuccessful. Forgive me if that was an incorrect assumption.” Athena looked to them both and laughed, shaking her head back and forth.

“That was a clever trap, you two. Did you think of that one, Nightingale?” The Spy-Master shrugged before smiling to her friend, giving her a playful wink that allowed Josephine to visibly relax.

“Believe it or not, I remember a young boy saying something that you had a holiday similar to ours back in your home. I cannot remember where he went though.” The Ambassador rubbed her forehead to try and recover the memory as she stilled, cursing herself silently for allowing Cole to be in the kitchen while she cooked and reminisced of home.

“Uh- yes. It was not called Winter’s End but it was Christmas. It was typically held in December – er- Haring?” Two nodded at the correct identification of the month as she continued. “The more spiritual celebrated it as our Maker’s birthday. There was an exchanging of gifts with family cooked meals. They played Christmas music from Thanksgiving to New Year’s.” There was a nostalgic smile on her face as she spoke, her hands shuffling around the different designs. There was a sketch of the men’s suits and they appeared to be more slim-fit, informal almost compared to the ones at Halamshiral. There were silhouettes of all of the men drawn out with their measurements from the past ball written at the side in a messy text. . . but she couldn’t find her lover’s so she quickly became disinterested.
“Music! Oh! Perhaps we would be able to sample some? With that lovely instrument in the main hall, that would be perfect for the event. We would still hire an orchestra of course but we could showcase you as the main musician! That would attract so many of the nobles from Halamshiral and perhaps even the Marquise would attend herself. We sent invitations to the Ferelden Palace as well!” Josephine stopped herself mid-rant, looking to Athena with a shy smile. “Permitted you would agree to play, of course, Athena.”

This time she laughed, rubbing the back of her neck as a blush crawled up her chest. “That would be... interesting. Unfortunately, I don’t know any of your holiday songs so it would probably be mostly things from my world. But with it being Winter’s End and my songs being about the thick of Christmas, we’ll see if it will work.”


“Fantastic, come, let us hear one of these songs.” She gathered some of her papers and brought the women, even the seamstress, out to the main hall. As they were walking Athena cleared her throat and spoke softly to Josephine.

“Actually, I had come to ask a question of you, Lady Josephine.” The Ambassador hummed and leaned her head to listen, walking slower to give them time between the door and the piano by the front of the room.

“How exactly... do I earn my income? Do I have a balance to my name? I never was explained the nature of our accounts and earnings.” She felt like she was talking to her human resources representative at work, and essentially, she was. Josephine let out a polite laugh, casually linking her arm into hers as they walked in beat with one another.

“Ah – well, you see, the Inquisition has sponsors for our services offered throughout Thedas. As you have seen, we have trade routes established with the locals and with the Dalish thanks to your connections. There are people who support our cause with coin and others who support it with their trade and commerce. Ever since the ball, nobles have sent their gifts to you and the Inquisitor for your actions at Halamshiral. You have been personally sponsored by families from Antiva and a few from Rivain that saw you dance. Do not worry, there have been no promises for marriage in exchange for these things. These nobles are from the Maker’s hand that only wish that we continue the good work in his and Divine Justinia’s name.” She stated plainly, leading Athena to her bench to her down. “And yes, you and the Inquisitor have a handsome balance. If you require any large transactions or trades, allow me to handle them for you.”
Before Athena even knew it her hands were on the piano keys and she was looking up to an expectant Josephine, Lelianna, and a seamstress named Valerie. She laughed to herself, cracking her knuckles before giving an introductory pulse of magic to the piano. It sent back a scorned greeting in return, leaving her fingers feeling hot on the keys. *It must have missed me.*

“I’m sorry, did nobody play to you while I was gone?” She stroked her hands over the keys, soothing the instrument with her aura and allowing its enchantments and her presence to bond before she began to play. Leliana smirked, clapping her hands before her back.

“You act as if it is living.” She arched a brow towards her, finding the right placement for her hands on the keys.

“This wondrous thing has lived since the times of Arlathan. Anything that can endure through so much and still play as beautifully as it does deserves as much as I have to offer. Now, this is one of the more traditional songs from my home.” She cleared her throat again, playing the opening notes of the song. Somewhere within the hall she could feel Cole listening in on her. His spiritual presence made her ring vibrate at times in recognition of his aura and magic that made people “forget”.

“Oh holy night, the stars are brightly shining.
*It is the night of our dear Maker’s birth.*”

She changed the lyric to match the lore of Thedas, looking up to the women for approval. Valerie was writing down different details of the main hall that would need to be changed and decorated for the event, but her head bobbed in time with the song.

“Long lay the world in sin and error pining.
*Til he appeared and the soul felt its worth.*”

The obvious Andrastians in the room began to quiet their conversations and listen in. The Orlesians held their masks gently and turned their gazes towards her. It was still a strange sensation, being watched so intently, but at least here she could turn her gaze towards the keys instead of having to perform like she did in the bar.

“A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices.
*For yonder breaks, a new and glorious morn.*
*Fall on your knees.*“
Her voice began to climb as she experimented with the acoustics in the room. To achieve the sound, she was used to hearing with this song, she flowed a coursing magic through her vocal cords. Nobody could sing this song like a certain diva from her world could, and it would be poor showmanship to sing it without trying to do her justice.

“O hear the angel voices. O night divine!
O night, when the Maker was born.”

She finished the song a few verses short of vocal embellishments, but it was a good sample nonetheless. The women nodded and smiled while others gave her a small round of polite applause. When it all quieted, she could hear Varric’s quill feverishly scratching against a piece of parchment. As she looked over her shoulder at him he gave her a knowing wink, setting aside the scroll and returning to whatever he was working on before she started singing.

“That will be lovely, Lady Athena.” The Ambassador said with a smile, looking towards the door of the main hall with almost a grin. Leliana had a matching look but brought her gaze from the front door to Athena’s eyes.

“Is it too late to try and recruit you as a bard, Lady Athena? With how many people wish to hear the music from your world, we could get you into so many soirees!” Athena shook her head and held her hands up in surrender, a coy smile on her face.

“No thank you. I’ve had enough of the Game for one lifetime. Madame Sorciere is retired until our goal as an Inquisition is accomplished.” As she finished speaking she felt a gentle touch on both of her shoulders, a low voice cutting in and making her grin.

“A shame, truly. She was a wonderful dancer.” The voice sent an instant blush up her neck. She reached a hand up to rest over his, her gaze looking over her shoulder to find him. Solas looked down at her with a proud smirk, his hands squeezing against her when their eyes met. He broke from her and reached into his back pocket, pulling out a rolled-up scroll and handing it to Josephine.

“I believe this is what you requested, Ambassador? Hopefully it will suffice for your needs.” Josephine took it without further explanation, her face lit with a blush from either the song or however he was looking at her when she had her back turned. She then looked down to Athena, nodding while moving for her to go back to her office. “Thank you for the sampling, Lady Athena. I look forward to what you come up with.”

As they left Athena rose from the bench, wiping her pant legs off before she patted the piano on its
surface in gratitude. It hummed in response and she could feel its magic decrease until it entered 
a little hibernating state. Solas kept a hand at her lower back, leading her towards the rotunda 
away from the main hall.

“You slept in late. That age catching up to you?” She teased. He shot her a playful glare, shaking 
his head as they took slow steps across the hall.

“No, unfortunately I could not find any answers to our question from last night.” Our question. The “our” put a small bit of happiness in her heart. If it bothered him too, perhaps he didn’t do it, or he 
didn’t do it knowingly. Those options seemed better than him doing it and keeping it secret from 
her.

“Well there will be plenty of time on the road to talk about it. Dorian leaves for Redcliffe in the 
morning and you, Varric, and I are to accompany him.” She said with an increased volume in her 
voice. Varric put down the paper he was reading with a groan.

“Is that how they taught you other-worlders to ask for permission, Walker? Do I have much of a 
choice in this?” She paused and winked at him with a smile.

“It’s either a safe, probably non-violent ride to Redcliffe or you can accompany the Chargers and 
the Inquisitor to the Storm Coasts where there probably is a hurricane brewing with the seasonal 
changes.” He glared at her before rolling his eyes, stacking up his papers and knocking them 
against the chest they rested on.

“I suppose I don’t have much choice. I’ll go pack up.” The dwarf walked off with Bianca on his 
back towards his personal quarters. Solas chuckled under his breath and led her into the rotunda. 
Instantly she roamed over the comfort of the couch. She flopped her body against it and stretched 
out until the curves of her back fit the curve of the cushions. The lyrium rush from drinking 
Cullen’s potions was still at a high and it felt like her skin was tingling from head to toe.

“Why is your aura so energized this afternoon? I expected it to be exhausted after your excursion 
last night.” Solas walked over to the couch with a book in his hand. He tapped her legs and she 
raised them up to where he could slide underneath them. Once he was comfortable he tapped them 
again and she rested her legs in his lap. He looked to the note she left him, smiling before tucking 
it into the front of the book.

“I had to get rid of four lyrium potions and I figured consuming them would be easiest. I don’t 
think my stomach appreciated it that much though.” Probably because its literally the blood of a 
Titan. Too early to say that out loud though. She groaned and pulled her favorite blanket over her
eyes, letting out a sigh as the smell of old-book filled the surrounding area. Solas fell into a calm silence, his left hand idly stroking up and down her thigh as he read.

“What are you reading?” She asked in their language, flexing her thighs on top of him to get his attention. He hummed in acknowledgement, turning the page with a smirk on his lips.

“Fori. ‘Tis an old Tevinter book but I wanted to compare it to what I have witnessed in the Fade.” Athena could hear the small bits of smugness in his voice and that made her smile under the shield of the blanket covering most of her face.

“Can you bring that on the trip? I have been curious about them myself.” He nodded and rested his hand on top of her thigh. The subtle and relaxed touch between them relaxed her mana but at the same time lit a flame within her core. Perhaps it was their shared wolfish nature, but being this close to him, even in a relaxed setting, made her full of wanting.

“An elf studying Tevinter books? What are the odds!” She heard from the balcony above. Solas tensed underneath her and she could feel his aura trickle out in a moment of anger. He looked up towards Dorian with a frown.

“To measure inaccuracies, of course.”

Athena sighed and rubbed her eyes through the blankets. And so it started and they weren’t even on the road yet.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Ma melava halani - You helped me.

Song:
O’ Holy Night - Mariah Carey (because of course)

Thanks as always for the support! :)
Names of the Past

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Athena was able to get a small nap in on Solas’s couch. He was like a statue and did not move since her legs were rested on top of his and he had the comfort of his book. When she finally woke, he hummed in acknowledgement, smirking while turning a page nonchalantly. “I did not realize you were still so exhausted. If I had known I would have kept you in bed this morning.” He stated plainly like he was assessing from a healer’s point of view. She shook her head and rubbed her palm into her eye in a poor attempt to get rid of the crust that had formed.

“I’m still a little tired from it, yeah, but what’s what happens when one flies around the castle at night.” There was a shuffling of papers and angry steps coming from upstairs. Dorian gripped the railing from the library above and looked down at the two with an accusatory and slightly angry gaze.

“Do I hear this correct, are you training without me?” The Tevinter’s eyes were red and she couldn’t tell if it was from tears or anger. Knowing Dorian, it was probably a mixture of both. She looked to her friend and rubbed the inside of her eye with a single finger, gesturing to him that it was obvious he had been upset. He nodded and brought a cloth from the inside of his harness, dabbing underneath his eyes before pretending to sniffle like he had allergies.

“Not so much training. Needed a release last night.” The quippy mage returned with a playful wink and a gesture of his chin towards Solas.

“I bet you did.” Athena fought the urge to throw her pillow at Dorian’s back as he walked away but decided to sit up from her lover’s lap and put her feet on the cold ground. A shudder went up her spine and she looked over to him and his matching foot wraps.

“How long did it take for you to get used to these?” She wiggled her toes and he didn’t have to look up from her book to know what she was referring to.

“I have been in them for a lifetime, vhenan. You have been in them for what? A month? You are faring better than the average person of your kind.” He said the last part with a playful smirk and she pushed him to where his back hit the wall. She then twitched her lips into a frown, eyes flicking from his face down to his book.

“You’ve never referred me to my kind before.” He instantly noticed the change in her voice and
shut his book with one hand, scooting up to where he could place his hand on her back.

“It was just an observation, vhenan. It is abnormal for someone that is not of the People to be able to stand wearing them. I am impressed.” There was a sincerity in his voice that she could not deny. With a bashful smirk, she turned and kissed him on the cheek before pushing herself up from the couch. He stood gracefully next to her and walked silently over to his desk. It was still amazing to her how he could walk through a room without making a single noise or shuffle. Ever the hunter, he was always cautious.

“Where are you off to? I can see purpose set into your mind.” He smiled at her and she rubbed the back of her neck.

“Um. I’m going to see Blackwall in the dungeons. I was going to see if the Chargers left anything of the meal I cooked last night and was going to bring him some.” Solas’s lips fell into a frown and he clasped his hands behind his back.

“You are to visit a murderer in his prison?” His tone had grown cold and she straightened her posture and rested a hand on her hip.

“I’m visiting our friend, our comrade in arms. He is no different than the man he was a few days ago.” He looked to her and then nodded, realizing that she knew the entire time. There was a subtle change in the severity of his anger but she rolled it off her back, catching his glance a final time to wink good-bye before traveling down the stairs to the kitchens. Things were in working order again and the chef’s aides were moving in an organized and almost strategic fashion.

When she walked in their paused and smiled. One of the elven helpers jumped out of formation to come and approach her. She wasn’t smiling the last time they met, but Athena recognized her as the elf from Halamshiral. Instantly her lips broke into a smile and she embraced the elf out of instinct. “Syla! You are looking so much better. Do you enjoy it here?”

The elf smiled and shyly tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. “Why – yes – Madam Sorciere. Lady Leliana asked where I thought I would be happiest and I picked here in the kitchens! The chef can be hard sometimes – “

Athena cut her off with a frown. “I think the word you’re looking for is racist, but I’ll work on that.”
Syla blushed and shook her head in a small gesture. She then looked over to the icebox and pointed. “Did you make that stew last night? That mercenary group, the Chargers? They left it behind and I thought I heard them say your name. If you don’t mind, serrah, the chef served it out and allowed us to have some. It was amazing.” She spoke softly and it was Athena’s turn to flush pink. She scratched her hairline on her neck and looked to the icebox.

“Oh there’s still some left? I was hoping to grab two more bowls.” Syla made a small face and then nodded.

“That might be the last of it. Let me grab it for you!” Before she could protest the elf turned and disappeared into the large icebox that was nearly the equivalent of a Costco sized freezer. Athena looked to the other workers with an awkward wave before Syla came back out with two wooden bowls full of the cold soup. With a small pulse of magic, she took them from the elf and levitated them above her index finger, keeping her finger pointing towards the sky to keep them spinning with a current of heated aura.

“Thank you, Syla. I am glad you were able to find your happiness and freedom here.” She turned to move and leave the kitchen when her ally grabbed her arm and took a step towards her. The normally shy elf smiled and spoke in her native tongue.

“Those of us who were freed do not forget who did it, Fen’Elgara.”

Athena stilled, nodding before pushing the door open with her free hand. It had to just be a silly title, right? They didn’t actually think of her like some breaker of chains. Shoot, she didn’t have the silver hair but she had the fire to go behind it. She rolled her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose while descending the steps towards the dungeon. Helping the elves find their freedom was important to her. In fact, to her it was probably more important than defeating Corypheus because at least she knew the Elder-One could be slain.

The fate of the elves was literally in a God’s hands.

The Evanuris were known for being self-absorbed. Some of them cared little for the people and this was evidenced by Falon’Din’s blood reign. He had murdered thousands just to get the people to sing his name again. It wasn’t until he was stopped by his divine brethren that the massacres ended. If she was to be compared to anyone like that, she would need to make changes. She was Athena, hell, she was barely that name. She wasn’t this divine person to come in and change thousands of lives. It was all too much to process.

The guard of the dungeons did not question when she arrived near Blackwall’s cells, even though
she was essentially microwaving two bowls of soup with her magic alone. He nodded her past and
she smiled, nodding back to him before sliding a stool in front of the Warden’s cell with her foot.
Blackwall had been allowed a piece of wood and a small knife to whittle with. He was no danger;
he had willingly turned himself in. He looked up from his work at the smell of soup and made a
gruff sound of acknowledgement to her presence.

“I figured it wouldn’t be long before they told ya’.” She smiled, offering the bowl through one of
the broken cell bars. They obviously hadn’t diverted any money yet to repairing the dungeons but
he was probably being kept down here on principle alone. If the Inquisition wouldn’t punish one
of their own, they would already be becoming a corrupt organization. As if the Chantry did not
have enough corruption already. . .

Athena smiled and blew on her own soup, taking a bite and instantly smiling at how the taste
hadn’t faded even when it was a day old. Blackwall made a small sound of happiness, chuckling
while mixing the soup with his spoon. “I know it’s odd to say, but I’m proud of you, Thom.” The
use of his real name brought a small twitch to his beard but he shook his head.

“I was cowardly to sit in silence. You were right – it would only hurt worse if I waited longer. Now
I will get my judgment and finally have this burden off of my shoulders. I wish to help everyone
the best I can, even if that means my life.” Athena shook her head and pointed her spoon at him.

“No talk like that allowed here. You’re still a valued member of the Inquisition. Everyone here has
their secrets and their dark, dirty past. You’re just one of the first to voice yours publicly.” He
groaned and took another bite of soup.

“I truly doubt that, my lady.” She smirked and hit her spoon against the metal bars in front of her to
get his attention. When she had his gaze, she looked down to him and nodded again.

“Trust me when I say this, Thom. You are not the only one with secrets. Want proof?” He
remained silent in curiosity before shrugging and continuing to eat his meal. She took a large bite
of soup and closed her eyes, swallowing the delicious piece of noodle before looking to the ceiling.
“Athena isn’t my real name.”

Rainier’s eyes widened. He put the now empty wooden bowl on the ground and rested his forearms
on top of his legs. “Truly? What was your name before?” She smiled, happy that he took the
conversational bait.

“It was Victoria. You go by Blackwall because you say a Warden inspires others, well that is one
of the reasons I chose Athena. In my world, Athena is associated with strength, guidance to others.
It was just one of the first names that popped into my head when I came into the Fade so it stuck.”

He itched along his beard and made a hum of listening, looking over to where the guard was sitting. The guard had dozed off in his chair with his feet propped up on top of the table in front of him. Thom huffed a laugh and then looked back to her. “You grew into your name, your role. You left Victoria behind you.”

Athena let out a sigh and nodded, placing her bowl on the ground as well as she clasped her hands in front of her. “She will always be a part of me, but that part of my life is over. That is something I really had to realize in these last few days.” She rotated her wrist and used a small pulse of magic to bring his bowl out of the cave to stack it on top of hers. “That does not mean she is gone forever; I will always learn from her.” Blackwall stood from his spot and looked at her. There was a look of deep sorrow within his gaze. It was years in the making and in that moment, she could see the monumental regret he felt towards what he had done in the past.

He was simply a man trying to better himself doing what he knew how to do. He was not running any longer.

“Thank you. . .for sharing that with me, Lady Athena.” He put an emphasis on her name with a smile, reaching through the bars to shake her hand. She did it gladly with the empty bowls in her non-dominant hand, grasping his forearm with her right hand with a smile.

“Of course, friend. I hate to be the one to tell you this, but if the Inquisitor does not return by the time your trial comes I will be the one deciding your fate. You’re a good man, Thom.” He squeezed her arm and gestured for her to leave the dungeons. There was a chill coming in from the waterfall and she could sense how cold it got at nights. Before she left she traced a small design over the bars, pressing her palm to it and charging it with her own magic. The heating rune glowed and disappeared into invisibility but its effect was noticed. The warrior smiled and took in a deep breath, visibly shuddering in relaxation.

“I do not deserve your kindness. I will pray to the Maker that you are true and honest in your judgment of me.” She smiled and made a move to leave the dungeons when he stepped towards the front of his bars and gripped them with both hands. “Please give my regards to Lady Josephine! I do not know how long I will be down in these depths.” Athena chuckled and looked to the blank scroll on the guard’s table. She flicked her head and levitated it over to him.

“Give them yourself, Thom. You’re a prisoner, not dead and without a quill. It will mean more coming from your hand.” He released the bars and disappeared to the back of his cell without another word. Athena placed a silver coin on the guard’s table before she exited the dungeons and returned to the kitchens to wash her bowl. It was almost like he knew, but Kain was there at the sinks impatiently waiting with a rapid wag of his tail. She dropped the bowls in front of him and
patted his head. There was already the smell of bacon on his maw and she rolled her eyes.

“The Commander is out to make you into some kind of Ferelden lapdog. I will not have it, Kain. You are a wolf, proud, loyal, ferocious!” Athena announced, thrusting her fist into the air with a dramatic flair. He arched a brow at her, giving her the full weight of his annoyed gaze before licking the scraps from her bowls. There were barely any, but he made whines of appreciation nonetheless. Once he was done she cleaned up after herself and did small tasks around the kitchen that the others would probably have to do later.

Just to keep herself busy she picked up a brush and scrubbed off the counters with hot soap and water. There were small bits of flour that the Chargers didn’t catch from her prep the day before so she felt responsible. She was about to move to the floor when a familiar presence opened the door and chuckled at her. “Now what compelled you to do this?” Solas leaned against the door frame and smiled at her. She pushed off from the ground and threw the brush in the foamy bucket, wiping her hands off on top of her pants with a hard-earned smile.

“Remember Syla? The one from the ball?” He nodded and she gestured to the kitchen. “Apparently, she works down here; I was trying to do some of her tasks to give her a night off. Gods know she deserves it with all she has gone through.” There was a look of surprise on his face but it softened. She was putting away the cleaning supplies and when she looked back up his expression was full of adoration. He walked over to her and rested his hands on her hips, looking at her like she was nude or in some sort of gown of foreign make. But her hair was messily thrown up, there was soapy water on her pant legs, and she was pretty sure there was old flour on her left cheek.

“You continue to surprise me, vhenan. You have such a beautiful spirit.” He traced her jawline with the backs of his knuckles, drawing her gaze into his sea of greys and blues. Her breath stilled in her throat and she blushed within his grasp. He leaned down and brushed his lips against hers, taking in her scent while gently showering her with kisses and gestures of affection. The moment she whined and attempted to deepen them, he pulled away with a smirk, running his thumb over her bottom lip. “We keep our allies waiting. Let us join them or else your friend will send out a search party.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the continued support! ^^
There had been a silent consensual agreement amongst the two traveling groups that they would meet up in the tavern for drinks. The universe was on their side and the tavern was empty minus the Chargers and the group that would be leaving with Dorian the next day. The bartender had abandoned his post when he saw the group that was forming and left them to their own devices, making a comment that he would bill the Inquisitor for whatever they drank. For the Chargers...that was an open invitation to break open a cask of their favorite drink and spread the joy around. At first, Athena had gone into the night only wanting to nurse one drink over the course of hours, but Bull wasn’t having it. With his not-so-subtle charm and charisma, he managed to get all of them on their second or third drinks.

She had never been truly drunk around them. There had always been a barrier that was afraid of what she might say if she was sloshed. When alcohol was involved, she tended to be very grabby and talkative. It was a fun trick at parties because that was where she truly blossomed at times, in a not-so-graceful way. She was slowly sipping her second cup of whatever Gods-awful whiskey the Chargers had picked. The Inquisitor on the other hand, was far gone into her stupor. When she wasn’t sitting on Bull’s lap Rathein was making her rounds to all of her friends. She was a touchy drunk like Athena, but her topics of discussion happened to be more personal.

Dorian was talking with Athena about what progress she had made into her phoenix-training when Rathein leaned on his shoulder, looking down to him with a pitiful sympathetic gaze. “So, that thing with your father- that’s...that’s...bad, right?” Athena bit her tongue to keep from laughing but Dorian wasn’t having any of it. He finished what was in this third cup and slammed it down on the table in front of them.

“Quite, Inquisitor. Quite bad.” He looked over to Athena with a pleading gaze and she stood up and grabbed Rathein by the shoulders.

“Quite, my liege. Let’s get you sitting on the table for now.” The short-hair mage didn’t object as she plopped her right on the middle of the table. Athena shifted her weight from one foot to the other, looking her friend up and down before clicking her tongue against the back of her teeth.

“You’re a mess, Lady Trevelyan. Whatever shall we do with you?”

“Hurry! Let’s play cards while she’s drunk!” Skinner suggested from the back with a raise of her mug. Varric chuckled and nodded in agreement, raising his glass to toast the Charger from across the table. Athena calmed them with a gesture, looking to Bull with a wink. He was watching the situation with a leery eye, keeping his concern to a minimum since they were in safe hands. Solas was on her other side trying to get away with drinking as little as possible. It was a personal goal of
hers to get her lover drunk since she had never seen it in the games. He would probably be the academic type that went on even more tangents and lectures after three or four drinks.

Still, it was a goal of hers. She looked back to Bull and caught his gaze silently, flicking her gaze to Solas without moving her head before taking a long drink of the nasty shit in her mug. He arched a brow at her before laughing, slapping his hand against his belly. “Hey, Alpha, what do you say about doing one of those drinking games you showed us? What was one of the first ones? Never have I ever?” He winked to her and she laughed, bringing her hands onto her friend’s thighs as she came in between the Inquisitor’s legs to hug her and keep her standing up.

“We’ll have to go easy on our fearless, light-weight leader here. Is everyone game?” There were noises of disgust and hesitation but they all eventually nodded. She raised her glass and spun around, looking to all of her allies with a cheeky grin. “This will be easy. Never have I ever been outside of Ferelden or Orlais.”

Everyone but her took a swig of their drink, making various noises of reaction to whatever they were drinking. She looked to Dorian and gestured at him with her drink, smirking and winking towards him. Solas had leaned over and started talking to Varric so he didn’t catch her flick her gaze at him. He nearly choked on a laughing scoff, swirling his newly refilled drink while humming in consideration. “That’s quite interesting. . . Hm. Never have I ever visited the memories of another in the Fade.” Solas perked up and looked over to him with an arched brow, slowly drinking his drink at the same time as Athena.

She cleared her throat. “Not fair, but okay. Who is next?” Dorian looked to the Inquisitor, who was joining the program and was running a hand through her hair with Athena still standing between her legs. Rathein looked to each of her friends with a growing smirk, flicking the tip of her nose while winking at Bull.

“Never have I ever used a healing spell.” Dalish, Solas, Dorian, and Athena drank and hissed as the sharp alcohol burned down their throats. With a disappointed stare into the bottom of his empty cup Solas stood up to be fair and refilled his cup, shooting Athena a playful glare. He spoke pointedly across the group in their shared language.

“Wicked, my wolf.”

She raised a glass and winked with a shrug. “You can’t help a wolf for trying, love. Your turn, Krem!” The lieutenant blushed when she looked at him, diverting his gaze to the bottom of his cup.
“Never have I ever used magic.” Bull laughed.

“I thought you were Tevinter, Krem? Don’t all you Vints just use magic.” Dorian made a sound to argue but Athena reached forward and ruffled his hair to distract him. He cursed in Tevinter and balanced his cup on his legs to he could fix his hair. Solas and Athena drank again and she began to regret her plan. There were few things Solas did that she didn’t do. To get him drunk, she would have to commit as well. The taste was mixing poorly with the leftover soup she had eaten with Blackwall earlier. The Chargers had managed to steal a few loaves of bread to nibble on but it was slowly disappearing as the questions went by.

Drink after drink her vision was beginning to grow hazy. She was using the table for full support and smiling in between drinks. Dorian reached the silent, introspective phase of his inebriation and was swirling his cup while looking at it disappointingly. Sera had joined in from her room and had only just started so she was more energetic than the rest. Everyone was beginning to quiet down when Bull made somewhat of a scoffing noise while looking over to her. “Any sage advice on what’s going to happen on the Coasts, Alpha?”

The table went quiet and everyone looked to her. She was awful when she was sober at hiding her emotions but now she felt transparent underneath the gaze of the Qunari spy. Rathein was sleeping curled up underneath his arm, completely oblivious to the entire conversation. For the quest, they were about to go on, the final decisions was Bull’s. He was the one who needed to hear something most. Athena tried to shake it off with a chuckle and a shake of her head. “Nah – I mean – What all do you really need to know with a group like this?” She then raised her cup in a toast, allowing her features to harden and for sobriety to come through in her words. It was a subtle change in her features, and something that a trained Ben Hasserath like the Iron Bull would notice. “Horns up, Bull.”

The table was suddenly ripped from their various forms of a drunken stupor and cheered. Rathein jerked awake and raised her glass with everyone else. It felt like time slowed around her as she remained with her glass raised, her gaze holding Bull’s with heavy intention. He raised his glass with the rest of the table, smiling to blend in, but he looked to her and she thought she saw the smallest bit of a nod of acknowledgment. The thought of them coming back without the Chargers... it nearly put a sob in her throat. In a not-so-subtle gesture Athena downed the rest of her drink with a hiss, wanting to breathe it out in flames to rid her body of the poison. She patted Dorian on the shoulder and gestured to the door.

“We should probably get some rest tomorrow if we’re leaving for Redcliffe. At most it will take us two days to get there. . .three if we have the hangovers I think we’re going to have.” He smirked with a twitch of his mustache. The tanned mage stood gracefully from his chair like the professional connoisseur of alcohol he was and walked out the tavern door without saying goodbye to anyone. Varric was in deep conversation with Sera about something with Solas looking annoyed on the sidelines of the conversation. Athena nudged him with a small pulse of magic, trailing the sensation up the back of his neck until he looked over to her. She gestured towards the door and he nodded, moving to stand but having to use the table for support.
Bull laughed and pointed instantly: “Fuck yes, we got em!”

Solas looked up to the Qunari with a glare and hissed under his breath. “Nonsense. Your childish – “He went to move again and Athena took a large step to close the distance between her and him. She put herself underneath his arm with a smile, wrapping her arm around his lower back. There was still a trace of anger on his face but it melted when they touched. He brought his free hand over to trace from her ear down to her chin in a non-characteristic public display of affection. “What was your intention for having me consume so much of that distasteful stuff?”

Athena shrugged and began to lead him out of the bar. “If you can talk like that still I did not accomplish my goal.” He chuckled and she shook her head. “Everyone has a ‘type’ when they drink. I just wanted to see what yours was.” They were a few steps away from the table when Sera’s volume rose to where she could hear it.

“Know what I don’t get, Varric?” She asked with part of a sarcastic laugh in her voice. He hummed in answer and she gestured with her cup towards them. Athena looked over her shoulder out of curiosity and paused. Solas didn’t notice yet and was rubbing his hand on her upper shoulder where she was helping to support him. “Solas is all elven glory but then – she’s not?” Instantly Athena’s face fell and Varric caught the glance, frowning and looking to Sera with a shake of his head. “What the Void do you mean, Sera? Why does that matter?” He tried to look to Athena apologetically but the damage had already been done. Her body was stiff and there was a fire in her chest that was telling her to slap the woman for not having the forethought to think about her words before saying them. She didn’t even realize tears had formed in her eyes until Bull was standing from the table and walking over to her. Sera was looking around with a confused expression and Varric continued to chide her but she did not get the hint. “I mean it doesn’t make sense! I can’t make ears or tails of it!” The elf laughed while pointing to her ears.

“Leave it be, ma’fen.” Solas almost immediately sobered and dropped his arm from around her shoulders to pull her closer into him. Athena growled underneath her breath and without thinking Kain jumped to react. He was at their back-facing Sera. His ears were back and he gave her a warning growl low in the depths of his throat before turning and running his body along her side. He was attempting to calm her, share his heat with her, but she was too fired up internally to find it comforting. Solas led her outside and the moment the cold hit her skin she let out a groan through clenched teeth, pinching the bridge of her nose as she fought the tears that stung her inebriated gaze.

“Do not let her get under your skin; she is apart from herself.” He spoke low to her, brushing his lips against her hair while holding her close. She wanted to shake him off since Sera’s words had roused some of her self-doubt but instead she leaned into him. Kain read her mind and walked into
her line of sight, barking at her a sharp yelp with one demand coming from his maw.

Run.

He always knew what was best for her, most of the time. If she ran away from her problems every time they came up, she wouldn’t be able to be of sound mind to help her friends. As great as it felt to run through the woods with the wind in her fur and the scent of her pack around her, that was a temporary fix in these kinds of situations. Internally she laughed at how similar her and Solas were in some ways. It was difficult for her to open up with things she knew, in fear of how others would react or what it could do. She imagined he felt similarly about his own identity and past. There would be many difficult quests and missions ahead of them, and she could not change everything. It was a difficult pill to swallow, but it still hurt.

“She just has an awful habit of not using the filter she was born with.” Athena said through gritted teeth, tapping on her temple while walking towards her tower. Kain bounced around in front of her, still pleading for her to go on a hunt with him. With alcohol freshly hazing her mind, she bent down and kissed him in between his eyes. “You would not want me bringing this energy into the hunt, my heart. I will go with you in the morning before we leave for Redcliffe. Does that sound better?” The wolf whined but licked her from chin to nose, giving a small nod before turning and running through to the tower door.

Solas arched a brow at her and gestured towards the woods silently, knowing like Kain what she wanted to do. She looked to him and gave a somewhat drunken shrug, turning on her heel while going up the stairs. “I’m in no position to shift and I don’t think I would be very good company, do you?” Even though he was able to put on a good posture for her, she could see the subtle changes in his gait and the continued furrow of his brows, like he was trying to process everything that was going on at once.

“You are probably correct with the wolves. I quite enjoy your company.” He said it almost as plainly as Cole and this brought a laugh from her lips as she opened the door. He walked through and she closed it with a giggle on her lips.

“Oh really? That’s why you continue to sleep in my bed and tolerate my mood-swings. I thought the sex was just good.” The tips of his ears turned pink and he scratched the back of his neck, looking up towards the ceiling while averting her gaze.

“It’s... an enjoyable side-benefit.”

Chapter End Notes
Thanks as always for the continued support! <3
Solas sat on the edge of the bed the moment they entered the room. There was a general air of misery about him now that the alcohol was setting in. He let out a groan while resting his head in his hands, leaving Athena with a small sense of guilt in her stomach. At least he let loose for one night. There was a part of her that was afraid he was going to confess his secret in the bar with alcohol loosening his tongue, but at least then he wouldn’t have to wait to say it. She kissed the top of his head before going downstairs to grab a pitcher of water and two glasses. In her woman’s care box, there was a vial of familiar purple potion that Solas had given her before so she carried it between her teeth and returned upstairs. She was humming a soft song, trying to distract herself from thinking about the Chargers and what Sera had said. Bull noticed what she meant to say, or at least she hoped he did. He was Ben’Hasserath, he could hopefully read between the lines and catch the weight of what she was trying to communicate with her eyes and face alone.

“Your mind is heavy, Athena.”

Solas called from his place on the bed, lifting one hand so he could glance over at her. She poured two cups of water and handed one to him, frowning and then tilting her head to the side. “Sorry, I’m shit with frost magic.” He smirked and flexed his hand and instantly she could see frost coating the outside. He tapped his index finger against the glass and she noticed hers did the same. They took a sip of cold water in unison and let out sighs of relief. Athena sat next to him on the bed, swirling the water in her glass with a hum of acknowledgement to his statement before. “I’m sorry – it’s difficult to word these kinds of things because I’m afraid if I say the wrong thing or reveal too much there could be consequences.”

He relaxed his hands and rested his arms on top of his knees, looking over to her with a caring gaze. There was no pressure to talk, no prodding questions like she was certain that Cassandra or even Bull would ask if they were alone in a room with her. “This mission the Chargers are going on. . . it ends up being more than just an alliance with the Qun. I don’t think we should be allying with them in the first place. We are protecting the mages and then extend a hand to a civilization where they sew mages mouths shut? It doesn’t make sense.” She used the chill from her frosted glass on her hand to rub the back of her neck. “There is a vital turning point in their mission. If Bull chooses the Qun, the Chargers and his identity as the Iron Bull dies. And then eventually. . . he dies. The Qun will call upon him to attack us and of course we will have to end his life.”

She gripped the glass and eventually put it on the ground in fear that her emotions alone would shatter the thing in her hands. She copied her lover’s posture, clasping her hands in front of her while hanging her head low. “The Chargers have to live. I tried to hint at it and I think he understood, but – fuck – I should have said more. I can’t imagine any of those people at the table not coming back. Krem, Dalish, Skinner, Grim – things would feel so empty. There are so many of these seemingly small decisions throughout the path of the Inquisition, and I can’t feel pressure but
to do something. But their lives are not mine to control – so I’m at a loss.”

Athena sighed and put her palms over her eyes, sighing while trying to put pressure on her brow to alleviate the growing headache from the mixture of terrible whiskey and ale. “If you could go back and change things you have seen in the Fade, knowing what happened afterwards. . .would you take that chance?” Solas sat up and rested a hand on the middle of her back. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him drink the rest of the water and half of the potion she had come up with.

“It is difficult to say. The things I have seen have already happened and the world has known its path. Yours have yet to happen; do not feel discouraged, vhenan. Whether you see it or not, you are making changes to this world and the people around you.” Much to her reluctance he pulled her in close to him. Her body resisted and eventually they ended up to where he was sitting up against the headboard and she was relaxing in his lap looking up towards him. He was stroking the sides of her face with frost covering his fingertips and the relaxing gesture brought a tired moan from her lips.

“I don’t know – “

He traced his finger until it was covering her lips, shushing her momentarily as he smirked. “What of the children you have guarded – Lev’adin and Tobias? If you had not come along Lev’adin would be by herself in the Plains. Young, untrained mages are prime targets for demons and the darker sides of human nature. You ask. . .if I would change things I have seen. There are events in the Fade that caused violent shifts to the world around them.” He sighed, his face softening and he began to have a gloss over his gaze that she sometimes shared when she was thinking of her past world. He looked up and through the door, just to give himself a break to think of his words. “I have spent a large amount of time wondering ‘what if?’ What if I were able to go back? How many things would be changed? How many lives could be spared?”

Solas’s voiced dropped and there was a flicker of a shake in his tone. She found his hand and clutched it to her chest, reigning him back into their conversation. His expression twitched and he smiled, returning his gaze down towards hers. He turned his hand over on his chest to where she could feel his palm above her heartbeat. “If you spend so much time into worrying about what might happen, you will lose the courage to act. Be confident in your knowledge. You have not led anyone astray yet, regardless of what they say to you. You saved many lives in Haven, you have improved the lives of city elves and Dalish elves alike, and –” There was a flush of color in his face and she smiled in anticipation of what he was going to say. “It has been a long time since anyone has drawn me from the Fade and its visions. You, Athena, are a vision to me.”

He bent down and pressed his forehead to hers and she raised up to meet him halfway, moving a hand behind his neck to hold him there. There were happy tears in her eyes, one finding its way down her cheek. “About what Sera said –“ He chuckled and shook his head, touching the tip of his nose to hers as he did. Even with half a laugh she continued. “From what I know – you would have never – she was right.” With each word the volume of her words fell.
He cupped her face in her hands, leaning down to close the space between them and press his lips against hers. She let out a sigh, feeling weak within his touch and arching her back to where her chest brushed against his. All doubts were erased from her mind and an all-too-familiar heat came to bear in her belly. The alcohol probably helped accelerate the process but he could have asked anything of her with that chaste kiss and she would be his. He moved his hand down her body, gripping underneath her backside to pull her closer while drawing another sound from her throat. Before she could beg to go further, he broke the kiss and caught her gaze, his nearly sparkling with bits of happiness. “As I said, vhenan. You have changed this world, whether you realize it or not, and mine.”

The next morning was rough beyond comparison. Athena managed to squeeze in a quick hunt with the pack at sunrise before coming back and preparing for the trip. Solas was much better at hiding his exhaustion but he was working his way through a cup of tea to get some energy. In between sips he winced and made sounds of distaste towards the drink. Athena had searched the kitchens until she found the Thedas version of coffee. It was a very bitter drink compared to what she was used to, but it did the drink to get her on Prince’s back and on the road.

Varric and Dorian were nursing their respective hangovers, passing back and forth the familiar purple potion that Athena was coming to respect. Whatever was in it, it was truly magic. The conversation didn’t start until they were outside of Skyhold’s gates and halfway down the mountainside. Athena was warming up and getting her mind awake by going through her different shifting exercises Dorian had been drilling her through when they were on their last trip. Finger by finger she turned her nails into claws and made small changes to her body until she felt warmed up. Varric looked over at her while she had turned her hair into flames alone.

As an inside joke with herself the flames were blue, making her look like her favorite villain from one of her movies from childhood. The dwarf shook his head with a laugh, looking her up and down while running his hand up and down Bianca’s spine with a polishing cloth. “That magic of yours is really strange, Walker.” Athena winked to him, finally feeling the effect of her morning drink. She ran her hands up through her flaming hair and made it come to a kind of point before its natural movements relaxed it again.

“Do I sense jealousy, Varric? You know with flaming chest hair you could probably ring in as many women as you wanted.” Dorian nearly snorted with a laugh while Varric scratched at his chest with a chuckle of his own.

“Nah – I’m good. You can keep all that to yourself. You and Solas can keep your spirits, your Fade, I don’t need any of that stuff. Bianca and I are good.” He patted the weapon lovingly while
balancing her on his mount’s back. The freshly fallen snow didn’t hinder the horses at all, especially with Prince leading the group. From Athena’s calculations, they would be in Redcliffe by the next afternoon. Until then, she was hoping to distract Dorian with more of her magic since he was so fascinated with it.

“Speaking of spirits, do you use them as servants, Solas? You’d have no trouble capturing them!” The Tevinter sounded excited and genuinely interested. Athena did not hide the fact that she slammed a palm against her forehead with a groan, extinguishing the flames of her hair while shooting her friend a warning glance. Solas looked over to Dorian with a glare.

“No. They are intelligent, living creatures. Binding them against their will is reprehensible.” Dorian rolled his eyes and shrugged, looking over to the group.

“How much ‘will’ do they have? They are amorphous creatures of the Fade.” She could feel Solas’s aura flare so before they could get into an argument she cleared her throat and looked to Dorian, tilting her head to silently scream at him: Really?!

“I’m surprised you think that considering you heard such an amorphous creature from the Fade project their voice through the Veil to talk to me.” Plus, the entire point of that mission was to potentially resurrect a spirit. In her dreams, she would check in on the spot. It was still warm with magic but there was no growth of life yet. Inspiration insisted that she didn’t give up hope, but Athena liked to see results. During her highest points of frustration, she wanted to run to Morrigan’s eluvian, scream Fen’Harel enansal, and march into the Fade herself to find out what was taking so long. But rituals like this took time, or at least that is what Inspiration and Harmony kept telling her.

Solas smirked and did not let the point die, nearly shooting daggers with his gaze over to Dorian. “I am surprised you do not practice blood magic, Dorian. Is it not popular in Tevinter?” The necromancer threw his hands into the air and had a chance to catch Athena’s gaze, mouthing ‘you caused this’ to her before responding to the elf.

“While we’re sharing surprises, you’ve done a lot less dancing naked in the moonlight than expected.” Athena and Varric did not hide their groans of unison. They shared a look of shared torment and shook their heads, urging their horses to go faster. Solas scoffed, steeling his posture, and biting back to Dorian.

“Tevinter lore about elves remains accurate as always.” Dorian had a similar angered expression, giving a sarcastic wink towards Solas while gesturing out to the open area.
“I want to see you make flowers bloom with your song, just once.”

“Song – Maker – that’s a topic changer if we’ve ever needed one. Got anything to help, Walker? I’m desperate.” Varric grumbled to himself, rubbing his hands over his eyes while murmuring different curses to himself. Athena sighed before laughing, running pieces of Prince’s mane through her hands to keep herself busy. The horse made a noise of contentment and she continued to do the motion, brushing through her fingers with a smile.

“Any requests, Master Tethras? It’s a long bit to Redcliffe and unfortunately I do not have the stamina to regale you an epic right now.” She tried to mock Solas’s voice when she called him by his formal title. Varric caught onto it and chuckled, completely ignoring the two bickering mages behind them that were now talking about their different pasts. The dwarf next to her smiled and shrugged.

“You... pretty much have a song for everything, don’t you?” She hummed in response, winking with a confident smile. “I feel like this is a challenge then. Got any songs about dwarves?” Athena twisted her mouth to the side in thought, tapping her hand on her chin while still holding on to a piece of Prince’s mane.

“Ooh – Well – I have a song sung my fictional dwarves in my world. That’s going to have to be close enough.” Varric looked over to her in confusion.

“Far over the Misty Mountains cold, to dungeons deep and caverns old.” The low register was difficult for her to hit so she sang it an octave higher than normally sung, putting emphasis on the beat to try and mimic the effect. Varric closed his eyes and hummed, smirking as they rode side by side and fell into their own little conversation. “We must away, ere break of day to find our long forgotten gold.”

Athena took in a deep breath and opened her palms, crafting a small dragon made of flame within her hands that flew around her and helped tell her miniature story. “The pines were roaring on the heights. The wind was moaning in the night. The fire was red, it flaming spread, the trees like torches blazed with light.” When she finished with the lyric the dragon returned to her palm so she could squelch the flame with a smile, looking over to Varric with a shrug that said ‘it’s the best I’ve got.’

He clapped once and nodded his head, bringing out his quill and scroll with a mischievous smirk. “Now tell me of these ‘other dwarves’ you mentioned. Is it another otherworlder story?” Athena groaned and rubbed her temples with one hand, rubbing Prince’s back with the other.
“Yes. Perhaps it will be a multi-night story-telling event when we get back. It was twelve hours of movie time in my world. Half a day just watching the damn thing. I don’t know how long it’s going to take for me to tell it.” Varric look uninterested, waiting to write down details for what it was actually about. She rolled her eyes and finally gave up, somewhat throwing her hands into the air while speaking in monotone to show her annoyance. “It’s a long story about two hobbits taking an evil ring to a volcano and along the way there are wizards, elves, dwarfs, and men fucking about.”

He held up a quill, laughing to himself and having to control himself before he even spoke. “Walker, what the Fade is a hobbit?”

Chapter End Notes

Song:

Misty Mountains - The Hobbit Soundtrack

Thanks for the love and support! As always! <3
Athena and Varric thought the bickering would have died out a few hours in but it continued for the majority of the day. She was telling her new close friend the basic plot points of the Lord of the Rings stories so he could write them down for their potential book while Dorian and Solas were continuing to fight. She regretted bringing Varric and Solas along for a moment but in between fights her lover would shoot a wicked smile at her after winning an argument and she would melt a little inside. That did not stop her growing frustration at the campfire when Dorian cleared his throat and tried to make peace with Solas through talk of magic.

“Solas, that little flare you sometimes do with your staff... You’re redirecting ambient energy to your personal aura?” The elf looked up from his bread and nodded curtly, gesturing with the piece of his meal.

“Yes. The effect clears magical energy and creates a minor randomized barrier to impair incoming magic.” Dorian hummed and sat on the bench closest to Solas, leaving Varric and Athena playing a game of Wicked Grace on the side. The dwarf had agreed to teach her the basics because she wanted to get good enough to hopefully start winning money when they played casually. It was a game of lying and learning peoples tells, none of which she was good at.

“Fascinating. It’s a Tevinter technique – “ Athena winced, putting the cards down with a sigh. Varric arched a brow, looking to the other two with a small hum of understanding. They began silently packing up their game. “I’ve never seen anyone in this part of the world do it.” She pointed over to Varric and Dorian’s tent, mouthing the words ‘can I sleep in your tent?’ to her friend before pointing a thumb in the direction of the other two party members. The petty part of her wanted them sort out their differences, even if that meant they would sleep in the same tent and keep each other up with passive aggressive arguments. Even if it meant a night not sleeping with Solas, they had both been acting like children and deserved to be treated as such.

Varric huffed out a chuckle, nodding while sliding the cards and dice into his pack. Dorian and Solas were only watching each other and she could feel their auras clashing in the air as they spoke. *Pride indeed, vhenan.* Her and Varric snuck into their tent and she flopped onto Dorian’s bedroll. It smelled of his hair shampoo and the cologne he often wore. It was a calming scent and the wicked part of her swelled with pride that she was able to switch out. Just to make things sure, she quickly flicked a barrier over the tent and armed it with a small static to shock whoever tried to enter. . .mostly Dorian or Solas.

“The technique is not Tevinter. It is elven.” The bitterness in her lover’s voice was palpable and she winced, turning towards Varric and speaking low.
“Think this is ever going to be over?” He shook his head with a groan.

“This has been going on for hundreds of years, so probably not. At least not this trip. Oh joy!” They laughed under their breath and turned over, shoving a pillow over their faces with unison huffs of frustration.

“Oh! That means we . . . never mind then.” Dorian’s voice finally fell in realization and she could tell he truly hadn’t thought about it before. He was a product of his country, but he was one of the few that very much wanted to change. His goal was to bring Tevinter back into the fold as a positive change to the world, not the cocky blood-magic wielding place that created Corypheus.

“But do go on about the wonders of Tevinter magic.” Solas stated bitterly, nearly hissing with his words. The outside camp was quiet for a few moments before Dorian cleared his throat and assumingly looked around.

“Wait. . .a minute – hey! Get out of my bedroll!” Athena hid her laughter in her pillow while Varric shot up from his with a growl-sounding groan.

“No! You two need to cut the shit and get along. We’re going to sleep; you two do whatever the fuck you need to do to make tomorrow tolerable. Maker help me, I’m going to need a drink to get rid of this headache I’ve got from listening to you two whine all day. Good. Night.” He then slammed his head down into the pillow and extinguished the candle at the top of the tent with his bare fingers. Athena rolled onto her side and smiled at their plan, pulling up Dorian’s soft blanket over her shoulder to get comfortable.

“Are you serious, my wolf?” Solas asked in their shared language. She could feel a smile behind his words and perhaps a bit of pride for their trickery. She nodded, even knowing he couldn’t see it before mumbling back in a quick burst of elvish.

“As Falon’Din’s realm. I love you both now get along. He tends to cuddle in the night, be careful.” He nearly choked on a laugh, rubbing the back of his neck before ducking down into the tent. They were barely off of the main road so they weren’t the only ones camping in the area that night. They were lucky that nobody would need to stay up for guard shift. Just as Athena was about to fall into the Fade she heard Dorian cursing while crawling into her bedroll.

“I swear if this smells of wet dog I’m going to charge you for new clothes.” Solas scoffed and turned away from him.
“Please, Master Pavus, like you could use anymore of the things you call clothes.” Athena let out a heavy and frustrated sigh, slamming her hand on the ground and sending a pulse of magic into their tent. It would be the equivalent of a static shock, but enough to get her point across. They silently moved to fall asleep as she turned on her back, somewhat happy that she was in Dorian’s bedroll because his was much softer and finer made than hers. There might have been a sleeping enchantment in or something because it wasn’t long before she drifted into the Fade. With how tired she was the visit was short-lived, but it was enough for Solas to be leaning against a Fade-tree with his arms crossed over his chest. He gave her a wolfish grin, one that instantly made her full of wanting.

“It is a shame you chose to share a tent with Master Tethras. I was quite looking forward to our night together.” There was a dark tone over his gaze and she shrugged it off, walking over to him with her hands clasped behind her back. She stood up to where her lips were nearly ghosting over his, mimicking his smile while whispering to him.

“Really? I never thought it with how you two were acting. Ar lath ma, Solas.” She then brushed her lips against his lightly before allowing her body to dissolve through the Fade so she could sleep deeply that night.

Sadly, Athena slept like a dream. Varric woke her with his morning grumbling and when she turned to look at him with eye open he managed a smile and a wave, pushing up from his position and instantly looking to Bianca on the far end of the tent. She noted that he managed to take his shirt off at some point in the night and she was too tired to care. The chest hair... was unmanageable to say the least. She turned over to her own bag and pulled out a fresh, clean “noble looking” shirt that would due to meet a Magister. Its color was a deep red and the shirt was tailored to her exact form. She slid off her old shirt and quickly put on the new one, pulling her hair up into a more tamed and tight bun on the back of her head.

“Oh look at you being all official this morning.” Varric joked while getting dressed himself. She smiled and used a flick of her wrist to roll up the rest of the bedroll, rubbing a hand over it to show her gratitude.

“I wanted to try and not look like a woman who typically runs with wolves. Hm, maybe I should have left the wolf cloak and skull helm at home...” She jested, tapping her finger on her chin with a smile. The dwarf laughed and motioned for her to leave first through the tent. When they greeted the day, they saw that the two other men were already packed, the tent was disassembled, and they were eating breakfast around the campfire. Varric and Athena shared a quick look of concern.
before packing up their own stuff. Prince had nothing to report from his voluntary night watch, headbutting her in the chest affectionately while nibbling on a sugar cube she managed to pack. She looked over to Dorian and saw he was holding all of his frustration in around his eyes. When she pulsed her magic out, she could still see the two mages’ essences battling in the air.

“Does that not exhaust you two?” She snapped, turning her head while continuing to hold Prince’s head in her hands. Solas looked up and over his shoulder at her, arching a single brow while Dorian scoffed and pushed up from his seat near the embers of the fire. He went to say something assuming sarcastic and she clicked her tongue at him, gesturing over towards her with a quick jerk of her head. He finished his bread with a drink of water before walking over to her and leaning against Prince’s side.

“Yes, Headmistress?” He teased, smirking at her and finally breaking from the bitter attitude that Solas had put him in. She rubbed the back of her neck and averted his gaze, suddenly feeling guilty that she didn’t pull him aside earlier.

“So, we’ll be getting into Redcliffe in a few hours. You know how the letter said there will be a messenger?” She asked, slowly looking up to him with obvious guilt in her features. He read it all, instantly realizing it with a sigh.

“There. . . is no messenger, is there? He’ll be there?” She nodded silently, reaching out to grab his arm, shirt, anything, but he stepped out of the way with a hiss of breath. He furrowed his brow, gripping his water flagon tightly in his hand before turning on his heel towards his pack.

“Let’s be on with it then.”

They were outside of the tavern in Redcliffe and Dorian was looking at the door. Solas and Varric were standing a few paces behind and waiting for instructions on what to do. The air was tense and Athena wasn’t sure if that was just the awkward situation or if her anger towards his father was beginning to materialize in her aura. She reigned it in, just in case. There was a Tevinter Magister on the other side of the door and the last one she had encountered in Redcliffe blew a hole through time. Dorian took in a deep breath, still looking at the door and called out to the group. “Alright. This is something I need to do alone. I’ll. . . let you know when it’s done.”

Solas and Varric instantly turned around, the elf giving her a lingering look with half a smirk before disappearing into the markets. Athena went to turn and join them when she felt a tight grip
on her forearm, Dorian cursing under his breath. “Don’t you dare.” His voice was soft, vulnerable, and slightly cracked as if he were about to cry. She turned into his grip and instantly wrapped her arms around him, turning to kiss him briefly on the cheek while holding him in an embrace.

“You know you’re perfect to me, right?” He tightened the embrace, pulling her up slightly towards him so he could bury his face in her neck and sigh.

“Sweet-talker. You’ve already had me in the same bed once. What else are you looking for?” She chuckled into the nape of his neck and pushed him back, smoothing out her shirt and tucking in a few stray hairs before looking to the door. He followed her gaze, rubbing the back of his neck before nodding.

“Come on then, amatus.” He pushed open the door and walked into the tavern. Where it was normally bustling and full of customers, it was completely empty. The old and creaky blinders allowed thin strips of light to come in and illuminate just how empty it was. Athena let out a shaky breath, following in her friend’s stride while straightening her posture and hardening her features. Dorian let out a low-toned whistle, scanning the place with a pulse of his aura that was already quick to bear. “Empty. This is not foreboding at all.” She smirked that he still had his usual sarcasm, hands twitching at her side as they entered the main area of the tavern.

“Dorian.” A deep accented voice rumbled from the side and she tensed at the same time as Dorian. Her friend looked to the side with an exhausted glance, clenching his jaw and nodding in response.

“Father. So, the bit about the retainer, what was it? A smokescreen?” He gestured out to the empty bar as his father finished descending the stairs. Athena looked to the Magister, realizing exactly how much her friend looked like his father. They even had the same hair, which she was sure Dorian hated almost more than anything.

“Then you were told. I apologize for the deception – Oh. You are not the Inquisitor.” Athena had to fight a grin but instead nodded, coming to Dorian’s side and taking a low bow. Her friend and gestured to her and spoke with pride in his voice.

“Apologies, father. This is Athenas Wolfsbane, Hand of the Inquisitor, Sorcière of the Inquisition, and my traveling companion for the day.” Wolfsbane? Athena glanced up to him and caught a twitch of a smirk at the corner of his lips. She stood and cleared her throat, trying to sound as diplomatic as she could since Rathein was not there.

“The Inquisitor sends her regards but urgent business called her away to another location with a party of Inquisition soldiers.” Magister Pavus nodded, keeping his hands close to his body while
continuing on with his probably practiced speech.

“Regardless, Sorciere, I apologize for the deception.” Dorian’s aura flared and she glanced over to see him stewing in his building rage. His magic moved like a snake, tethering out and lashing out whenever his emotions were high. It was entrancing to watch but she knew that he had the ability lash out at any notice. It was one of the reasons they got along so well, after all.

“Oh yes, Magister Pavus could not dare be seen in Skyhold with the dreaded Inquisition. What would people think?” He scoffed, taking a step towards his father with venom dripping from his words. “What is this exactly, father? Ambush? Kidnapping?” She could feel his tone shift to an icy harsh sarcasm that made her almost flinch. “Warm family reunion?” He took another step forward and his father sighed, looking over to Athena almost for help.

“It has always been this way.” She didn’t give him an inch, clenching her jaw while looking over to Dorian.

“Let’s change that then.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you as always for the continued support?

Has anyone told you how awesome you are today? Well you are! Keep on trucking! :)
“Magister Pavus, considering you tried to lie to get him here, he has every right to be furious with you.” Dorian gave a dark smile, looking over her shoulder at her with part of a scoff.

“You already know most of everything, but let’s catch up Father to make sure I have it right. I prefer the company of men. Father disapproves.” Athena gave a mock gasp with a curl of a smile on her lips. She crossed her arms over her chest and shifted her weight onto her hip. With the red, the high bun, and the posture, she felt like Command. It was an unsettling feeling but also something that gave her confidence. Here she was supposed to be acting as the Inquisitor’s hand, but she had abandoned that role to be Dorian’s best friend.

“He would probably have a heart attack to know I currently prefer the company of elves.” Magister Pavus frowned while Dorian choked back a laugh, glancing over to her and catching her gaze. There was a quiet message of gratitude shared between them, grateful that she was there for poor comedic support and just being there to lighten the load of the conversation. Truly she felt uncomfortable and was resisting the urge to slap his father for all of the things he had done to him, but that wasn’t her place and she knew it.

“This display is uncalled for.” Halward Pavus focused his gaze on Dorian but Athena did not fail to notice he flicked a disapproving glance her direction as well. Perhaps if she tried to bring flowers to bloom with her song it would make the situation better.

“No – this is what you called for, by luring me here.” The volume of her friend’s voice was rising and the touchy part of her just wanted to reach out and hold his hand during the entirety of the thing, especially if it would make his father more uncomfortable.

“This is not what I wanted.” The Magister lamented, steeling his gaze and keeping his posture strong.

“I’m never what you wanted, Father. Or had you forgotten? But why should I listen to you? So you can spout more convenient lies?” He approached his father and got within touch’s reach. Hurt began to trickle into his voice and Athena let out a heavy sigh, shoving her hands in her pockets while abandoning the noble and proper way to stand. “He taught met to hate blood magic. The resort of a weak mind. Those are his words.” Dorian turned around and ran a hand through his hair, continuing on as his aura began to flare out with each syllable.
“But what was the first thing you did when your precious heir refused to play pretend for the rest of his life?” Dorian’s gaze glossed over with tears and Athena didn’t want to hear what came next. She knew it. It broke her heart in the past world and it was breaking her heart here now. “You tried to change me.” Athena took a step forward towards him, keeping her fists clenched within her pockets while trying to keep her magic contained. The whole idea of what happened to him disgusted her. A person’s blood cannot be manipulated to change things like that. She thought to herself. Sure, Dorian had a chaotic personality and tended to drink himself to oblivion sometimes, but that was part of his charm.

“I was only trying to do what was best for you, Dorian.” His father pled, trying to make some semblance of peace in the conversation. Athena scoffed and clenched her jaw, shooting daggers into the Magister.

“You wanted what was best for you! And your fucking legacy! Anything for that.” Dorian turned on his heel and walked over to a part of the bar, resting his hands on the table while catching his breath. Athena followed him, keeping his father within her peripherals while resting a hand in the middle of his back. At first, he twitched away from her touch but eventually submitted, looking over to her silently. She rubbed his back a few times before turning and resting with her back against the table, her side as close to his as possible so she could speak low between them.

“Look, I know this is shitty, my friend.” She rested her hand over his forearm and squeezed. “But don’t leave it like this. Take it from someone who really wishes she could go back and change her last words and conversations with her family. You never know what is going to happen; you’ll hate yourself if you leave it like this. It’s hard and it’s painful, but we came down here for a reason.” Athena then released his arm and jerked her chin over towards Halward.

Dorian let out a sigh, pressing his forehead to the table before pushing off and going back to face his father. “Tell me why you came.”

The Magister spread his hands and nodded, taking a small step towards his son with a pleading gaze. “If I had known I would drive you to the Inquisition…”

“You didn’t! I joined the Inquisition because it’s the right thing to do and it’s filled with good people!” Dorian pointed an extended finger towards Athena and she smiled at him. The gesture made her heart warm and she placed a hand in the center of her chest to show it. “Once, I had a father who would’ve known that.” He turned and went towards the door but Athena didn’t move, re-crossing her arms and looking to his father to speak next.

“Once, I had a son who trusted me. A trust... I betrayed. I only wanted to talk to him, to hear his voice again, to ask him to forgive me.” Dorian stilled, turning back and glancing to Athena who only gave a small shrug with a smirk. He went to talk to his father and she gave them their privacy,
escaping to the kitchen in the back. They had basic ingredients for what she needed, a pleased smile coming to her face. Tonight was another night for soup. Not for her though, for him. None of them had the opportunity to eat it with the Chargers and the children, so she had to work quickly. There were two chickens in their icebox so she took to boiling one while using a bit of magic to knead the dough and create noodles. Flour dusted her formal maroon shirt and she rolled up the sleeves so she could get dirtier without completely ruining the shirt she was sure that Josephine had picked out for her at some point. Roughly half an hour went by and the chicken was full into being boiled the noodles were finished being made. She was washing her hands in the sink when she heard chairs being scooted out in the tavern floor.

She walked out and saw Dorian and his father embracing. The sight drew her breath from her, causing her to lean against the door frame with a smile on her face. When they separated, she walked over and patted Dorian on the back, making sure there was no flour on her hand before she did so. Magister Pavus gestured for her to come to his side as he walked to the door, speaking low with a friendly expression on his face. “Thank you, Lady Athena. . . for being such a good companion to my son. It makes me happy to know that he has people like you in the Inquisition.”

Athena stilled, slowly nodding with a genuine smile growing on her lips. She turned her back to Dorian and opened the door for Magister Halward, keeping her voice low. “I thank you, Magister. I am saddened that you just realized exactly how amazing of a son you have. I can only speak for myself, but I have been forever changed by his friendship. If you require anything from us, please send me a letter.” She extended a hand for him to shake and he did, nodding solemnly before disappearing into the crowd. He probably had a room saved somewhere outside of the city so he wouldn’t be seen in the place of the rebel mages. It was probably in poor taste if he stayed too, since the city had just recovered from another Tevinter Magister. Solas and Varric were waiting near the gates that led to the docks.

Solas looked up to her and arched a brow of question, watching Dorian’s father leave. She nodded and gestured for them to come inside while holding the door open. Varric took in a deep breath through his nose and clapped his hands together. “Man is there an innkeeper around? That smells awesome!”

She closed the door and felt a hand slide in around her lower back and draw her in close. Her lover was looking down at her, smirking until she leaned up on her toes and kissed his forehead. Athena then turned to Varric with a hum. “No, that’s mine. I made this the other night for myself and ended up sharing it with the Chargers, the children, and the Commander. It feels needed again tonight. In the meanwhile. . . “ She found an apron on the counter and wrapped it around her waist, coming up behind the bar and patting on the counter.

“What’ll it be, gentlemen? Dorian, get your ass over here. I’m assuming your father rented out the tavern for the night just in case so drinks are on him!” The Tevinter smiled with a dark expression and pulled up a stool to the bar while she found four clean shot glasses and served them out in front of them. Solas wrinkled his nose at the impending shot. She looked at the different liquor glasses and found something called *Rivainese Poison*. She popped the lid off and took a whiff, instantly
chuckling because it smelled of tequila. “Hold on, I have a trick for this stuff.” With a boosted fade step, she took off into the kitchen until she found salt and a lemon, since they did not have limes. She sliced up the citrus fruit and divided it up while putting the salt in front of her.

“We have something like this at home. If you’re not a fan of it, there’s a trick where you lick the salt, take the shot, and then bite the lemon.” Dorian chuckled and tried it, giving her an evil eye as she poured all of them shots and then herself. Varric, ever the stubborn dwarf, crossed his arms and refused the lemon. Solas shook his head and refused as well, looking to her out of curiosity as she poured his. She could read the question on his face and it made her laugh. “No, *vhenan*, this is not another ploy to get you drunk. Let’s go, cheers.” Athena hit her own shot glass against the bar before going through the motions of tequila. The bite of lemon washed the taste from her mouth and she was able to keep the strong liquor down. Something in her world must have diluted the strength because it felt like her stomach was on fire.

Varric and Solas took theirs without the “training wheels”. Varric let out a laugh and put the shot glass down while the other clenched his jaw and let out a hiss between his teeth. “Thanks for being a sport, everyone. Soup will be up in about ten.” She flipped her shot glass upside down and went into the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron while using magic to lift the chicken from the boiling water and place it on a cutting board on the counter. The door opened and she assumed it was Solas by the change in temperature around her. Athena smiled, quickly picking the meat from the bones and putting them in a bowl on the side.

“Can I help with that?” He asked, coming in at her side and looking to the task at hand. She shrugged, popping a piece of the meat into her mouth while speaking in between bites.

“Sure, but careful it’s-“

“Gah!” He reached for it and was immediately splashed by a hot pocket of water that came out when he pulled at a thick piece of dark meat. Athena chuckled under her breath and took his hand into hers, noticing that he already had a minor burn that was blemishing as she assessed it. She covered the finger with her hand and surged healing magic into it, focusing on the only minor healing spell she knew and had practiced.

“I warned you it was hot, Solas. Stubborn man.” She uncovered his finger and saw that her magic was successful. With a small hum of pride, she turned back and quickly continued her work. He turned his hand over and looked at her handiwork with a smirk on his lips.

“The temperature does not bother you?” He asked quizzically, watching her work instead of getting involved again. *The old dog learns new tricks after all.* Athena shrugged, flipping the chicken over and picking out the remaining bits of meat.
“I suppose not. As I’m sure the cold probably bothers you less than it does me. Careful now of the splash.” She lifted the meat bits and dropped them into the broth, bringing it back to a boil with a pulse of her magic into the fire. Solas read her mind and had the noodles in his hand, gently placing them around the bowl as she stirred with a large wooden spoon. She put the lid over the pot with a small sigh, wiping her hands off on the apron and tucking a hair behind her ear.

“True, that comes with an affinity for the school of magic of choice. You have taken quite a liking for flame.” Athena mocked, lazily rolling her eyes over to him with a grin.

“You don’t say. That would explain so much!” She looked up and rubbed her finger on the counter to gather fresh flour on her finger before tapping him on the forehead and nose with it. Solas took a step back, touching his hand to his nose and wiping the flour between two fingers. He then looked to her, a wicked grin curling his lips as he stepped forward and pinned her against the counter next to the boiling soup.

“Do not start a fight you cannot finish, ma’fen.” He teased, gripping her hands together with one hand while lightly grabbing her jaw with his free hand. She smiled, playfully fighting against his grip only to fail.

“Oh, I can finish it. You’ll be covered from head to toe and there will be a you-sized silhouette of flour on the wall behind you.” She quickly broke from his hand and wrapped her arms around him, resting her cheek on his chest and finding solace in the movements of his breaths. He kissed the top of her hair and stroked her back in slow, gentle movements. Athena could feel him smiling above her and the thought made her heart warm. Just as she hoped to pursue something more in the kitchen she heard Varric call out: “Dorian, bottle down!”

Athena and Solas sighed in unison. She turned around and noticed that the soup was done, quickly serving it up in bowls and balancing all four on both of her arms while holding the spoons in her hand. “Well. . . this isn’t over, Solas. For now, I need to keep my brother in arms away from drinking himself to an early grave.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for the continued love and support!
The soup was consumed and more drinks were had. Her creation brought a sense of warm to her belly, filling her with fond memories of home and swirling bouts of nostalgia. This time there wasn’t as much sadness associated with it as the time before. Every day, the pain was becoming duller. One day she would be able to go through a day and not be saddened by the life that was lost, but it would take time. Varric demolished his first bowl and demanded another. Solas was delightfully pleased by the simple ingredients and the results it made, ever the scientist. Dorian had to be pressed to eat since all he wanted to do was drown his conflicting emotions with the Rivainese Poison she had found and the Antivan Essence he spotted behind the bar.

Varric had somehow convinced Solas to play cards with him and soon regretted doing so. The Dread Wolf was calm and collected. . . and he could rob a person blind. He sat at the table with a passive face, sometimes asking questions about the game as if he didn’t understand the rules to appear more like a novice. Athena could see the wheels turning from her spot behind the bar. She had a glass in her hand and was polishing it with a cloth. Even if the Magister had paid for the tavern, she was taught to leave a place cleaner than she left it. Another gift of Wisdom from her great-grandmother. Dorian had his head resting on top of his folded arms on the bar top. He would glance up to her, silently asking for another hard drink. After the eighth one she refused and poured them each a glass of the sweet wine she liked.

“Damnit, Solas!” The dwarf shouted while slamming his hands against the table. Athena looked over to see Solas collecting a dozen or so coins from the center of the table, quietly putting them into his coin pouch tied to his waist. He glanced up to her and she winked, giving him an approving thumbs up. It all felt like a normal day in the tavern when her friend let out a defeated sigh, pushing his head up to where his hands were resting against his forehead.

“Maker – Athena – I don’t know if I could ever have children. We’re too alike, he and I.” The room went quiet and she froze. Dorian’s eyes were covered by her hands so she looked to the other two men, putting a finger to her mouth to gesture for them to be silent before pointing to the rooms upstairs. Varric held up his hands in surrender while slinging Bianca over his shoulder. Solas stacked up the cards and put them on the table where he found them, nodding to her and giving her a smirk that let her know that he would be waiting for her. Once they began to ascend the stairs she took a sip of her drink and refilled Dorian’s glass.

“You may be, but you would never do to your kids what he did to you. Don’t even think like that, hun.” She leaned across the bar and grabbed one of his arms, squeezing it since it was the closest thing she could do even though she wanted to jump over the bar and hug him. He huffed out a breath of air, running his hand through his groomed locks. There was a gloss of alcohol over his gaze and she could just feel the melancholy rolling off of him. Even though the meeting ended on good terms, there were too many emotions that came with it. Forgiving his father meant reliving
everything they had been through together, and that was too much to bear sober.

“It’s not only that. I’m terrified. I don’t know if there is someone who I can trust with all of this.” He gestured to his entire body and then tapped the side of his head. Athena frowned, swirling the drink within her cup.

“You trusted me.” Dorian eyed her with a quick roll of his eyes.

“You are different. You knew half of this stuff already. It makes it easier because you didn’t have to pry it out of me like every other poor sob who tries to get close to me. I can’t – it’s suffocating – it’s too much.” He collapsed his head back into his hands, letting out a heavy sigh that Athena knew all too well. Tears normally followed, but Dorian was much tighter lipped than she was about grandiose gestures and shows of feelings.

Athena scratched the back of her neck, pulling on a ribbon and pin to allow her hair to bounce down her back. It fell in thick curls since it had been pulled in a bun all day and she tousled her roots with one hand to keep it from looking too insane. “For what it is worth, you would have gorgeous children. They would have to be, coming from you. I think you would make a kind, caring, accepting father.”

The mage in front of her choked down a sob, chuckling while rubbing his eyes with one finger. “Let me find someone I want to raise them with first then we can talk hypotheticals.” Athena shook her head, pushing up to where she was sitting on the bar at a side angle so she could still look at him without completely straddling his lap.

“Nonsense. If you found your someone, I would totally be willing to bear that child for you.” Perhaps it was the drink or just the bond she felt with Dorian, but she felt confident in making that kind of promise. With a quick and deep gulp, she finished her wine and poured herself another glass, then realizing that she had lost count of how much she had been drinking with her friend. Shoot, were they even? His tolerance was much higher than hers and she was sipping along with him to be polite.

Dorian arched a brow at her, crossing his arms over his chest while leaning back slightly in his bar stool. “I’m assuming there’s something like that in your world?” She nodded and he laughed a hollow laugh, scratching the corner of his mouth with a shrug. “You wouldn’t be the worst genes to mix with. I’m sure my family would be pleased. With our blood combined, they would have great hair. And teeth.” Athena smiled big almost on cue for him, chuckling and reaching across to ruffle his hair.
“You know it. They would need sophisticated names, something mysterious that instantly creates a character. Hm.” She tapped her finger against her chin, sipping on her wine before snapping her fingers. “Like for a girl, what do you think of Scarlett? Scarlett Pavus, enchanter of hearts all across Tevinter and Thedas.” She waved her hand out through the air, looking past the tavern at the imaginary child that had dark, wavy hair and a confident smile that would woo dozens. He chuckled and allowed some of the gloom to fade from his face. He sipped on his own drink, gesturing to her with the half empty glass for a refill.

“Oooh – yes – I can see her now. What about for a boy? What type of strong, Tevinter name shall we give him to pass on some sort of my legacy?” His eyes twinkled with inebriation and curiosity. They raised a glass to one another and she began to list of names.

“Jupiter? Phoenix would be cool, except in my world they are a flaming bird of rebirth, not the feathered monstrosities you have in the Approach. Never mind then.” Dorian hummed, twitching his mustache to one side before proposing his own suggestions.

“Draco? Icarus?” She let out an impressed breath at both names, nodding while thinking to herself. She ruminated over them, looking into her imagination at the charismatic boy with a fashion sense like his mother’s but the urge to rebel like his father. They wouldn’t be able to keep him contained.

“Lucian Pavus. Tell me that name doesn’t ooze with power.” She put her hand on top of his, interlocking fingers and squeezing with a hopeful smile. He chuckled, the sound growing into a laugh.

“Those sound like gorgeous children we would make artificially, Amatus. Do you not wish to have your own with Arlathan up there?” He pointed up towards the rooms and she instantly blushed, rubbing the back of her neck and turning her gaze away from him.

“Oh Gods, Dorian. We haven’t talked about that at all. I mean – we don’t have magic, fantastical creatures, or anything like this in my world. How am I supposed to raise a child when fucking dragons fly in the sky and can raze a village with an exhale of their breath?” Dorian wasn’t buying it, tilting his head down while arching both brows at him. She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, rushing through her drunken thoughts quickly. When she finally thought of something she picked up her wine glass, swallowed down some liquid courage, and answered. “If it were to be a girl, Salahn. It means song in Elvish, or Melody more accurately.”

He smirked. “Fitting.”

She nodded and drank again. “For the boy... something fitting for the both of us perhaps. Suledin.”
Endurance. He would look just like his father, maybe with his chin, jawline, and ears.” She traced the same features on her face with a smile, thinking of a young boy with an inquisitive and quiet nature with hair that came in thick braids down his back. The girl would be an adventurous thing, always getting into trouble and looking just like her mother with her father’s eyes. Would they both be mages? Would they be archers? Whatever they would be, she would be so filled with pride for them.

“Well they can get everything but the ears, darling. Unfortunate how the mixing works sometimes.” Athena froze in place, eyes slowly looking over to him as he lifted his glass to his lips. He took a long, unrushed sip before finally catching his gaze. “Ah – shit. I’m sorry, that was insensitive.” Dorian let out a heavy sigh and ran his hand through his hair. She moved off of the bar and finished her glass of wine. When she went to refill it, she realized the bottle was empty. She tossed it into a waste basket before starting to clean her glass. What he said wasn’t new information, it was something she had always known, it just hadn’t set in yet. “If I can barely get through a conversation with you, how can anyone stick around long enough to – to – even consider.”

He hung his head defeated, gripping his glass to where she was afraid he was going to shatter it. Athena nudged him with a pulse of magic. “Dorian, don’t get yourself down. It’s going to be alright.”

The mage scoffed with a shake of his head. “This is one of those nights you can’t just wipe away, Athena. What can you do? You have a fucking song about the utter fear of letting someone in? About the fear of failing?” His voice grew increasingly shaky and she remained silent, slowly putting away the rest of the dishes. There were small sounds behind her that let her knew he was about to cry, small sobs breaking up his words. There were small fluxes of his air in the air, causing goosebumps to flare across her skin. Athena took a deep breath in, tapping her foot against the ground. It may get on his nerves, but she did have something for him and it would keep him from falling further into his self-pity and depression.

“Someone to hold me too close. Someone to hurt me too deep.
Someone to sit in my chair, and ruin my sleep, and make me aware of being alive.”

Dorian remained silent, releasing the tension on his glass while keeping his gaze low towards the bar. Athena turned towards him, keeping her voice soft and low to keep from waking up the men who had gone upstairs.

“Somebody need me too much. Somebody know me too well.
Somebody pull me up short, and put me through hell., and give me support, for being alive.
Make me alive. Make me alive.”
She began to walk around the bar, running her hand along the counter top. The other hand undid the apron and hung it on the edge of the counter as she came around it. Dorian tensed preemptively, knowing she was going to try and do something comforting. She slowed her approach, tapping her finger on the counter to keep beat even though it was more her trying to get him to calm down.

“Make me confused. Mock me with praise. Let me be used. Vary my days.”

He finished the drink in his cup, knocking it back and clenching it in his first. She could see he was resisting the urge to throw it, but with a deep breath through his nose he relaxed all of his features. He rested his arms against the counter and flicked his tear-glossed gaze over towards her. Athena took this as an indication to move closer to him, coming in contact to where she could put one of her hands over his.

“But alone. Is alone, not alive.”

He nodded, curving his hand up to where he could interlock fingers with her as she came around and pressed her chest against his back, using her free arm to wrap around his torso.

“Somebody crowd me with love. Somebody force me to care. Somebody let me come through. I’ll always be there-“

She squeezed him in an embrace, resting her cheek against his back as her voice faded from a low singing into more of a whisper that was shared between them.

“As frightened as you, to help us survive. Being alive.”

At the end of her lyric she pressed her lips to his back and brought him into an embrace. Dorian’s body shook in a tremor. He brought her clasped hand against his chest and relaxed back into the gesture, looking up to the ceiling with tears running down his cheek. “Damn you.” She moved to the side of the chair and he turned to face her, quickly bringing her against him as he buried his face against her shoulder. Her shirt grew wet with his tears but she continued to hold him and rub his back, tilting her head against his.

“Te amo, Dorian.”

Athena barely knew ten words of the Tevene language from the books she read in the Skyhold
library and conversations she had heard Dorian have. It meant she loved him. Moreso, he was family to her, but she didn’t have that translation down yet. He squeezed her even harder, nodding while scrunching up her shirt in the back to hold onto her tighter.

“I love you too, Athena. Now – don’t let your boyfriend get jealous.” He joked, trying to come back into his usual persona of the sarcastic witty person. She didn’t react except but smile, rubbing his back and not moving from her spot. He lifted from her, reaching up over her shoulder to wipe his eyes. “Where were you when I was in Tevinter?” She finally broke and chuckled, cupping his face and using her thumbs to wipe underneath her eyes and clean his face up.

“Unfortunately, in another world going through my awkward phase alone. But I’m here now. If you ever need to feel all mushy and warm, I’m your gal.”

Chapter End Notes

Song: Being Alive - Company (AMAZING song. Gives me chills everytime.)

Te amo - I love you (In Spanish and Latin, but I see that people use Latin as a basis for Tevene so we’re going to roll with that.)

Thank you as always for the continued support and love. <3
The steps back up to the room were difficult. Mostly due to the emotions that had been unraveled down in the tavern below, but also due to the drunken Tevinter that was leaning on her shoulder as they walked up the stairs. The possibility of having a child, any sort of extended happy family life... it was something she had always wanted. Ever since she was a child she looked forward to the white picket fence with the golden retrievers and the two children that would go through phases of loving and fighting. It was the safe, stable life she had always dreamt of having. Now that she was in Thedas in a place where war consumed multiple parts of the world, dragons reigned the skies, and there was the constant threat of some real deity destroying something, it felt almost naïve to believe she could have that kind of life.

Being the Hand of the Inquisitor came with responsibilities that she did not expect. Rathein had oh so graciously given her the task of handling matters when she was away, including the trial of Blackwall if Briala allowed them to do so. He was a good soldier; she saw that now. When they had first recruited them in the Hinterlands she was so overwhelmed with what she knew and what she was currently living she didn’t have time to see the work he was trying to do. Even if he was running away from his mistakes by taking on a new name, he was at least trying. That’s all any of them were doing. Each person in the Inquisition came with their own secrets and dark pasts that they didn’t want to come forward with. It was their right. Something she was coming to realize being in the midst of it all... they did not have the right to control people’s lives. They were an organization of neutrality, something created in the name of peace to end threats to the world. It would be something to consider going forward, especially with the Exalted Council.

Athena never considered herself a spiritual person by any means, so being chained to something that would eventually become the Divine’s honor guard made her itchy. The Divine had the power to call for an Exalted March. She refused to be a part of something like that. But, there was still time to think of that. For now, she could only feel like that life she once wanted didn’t belong to her. It was taken away when she was taken from her world and it left a sour taste in her mouth. Dorian let out a sigh when they reached the top step, stumbling forward a step or two and catching himself on the hall with a hand. She was not in a better position to help him, so she rubbed his back and urged him to go to his room.

Varric had chosen the first room, Dorian was the second, and Solas had found a room big enough for the both of them at the end of the hall. Athena pushed open her friend’s door with a push of her hip, grabbing his hand and leading him into the room. He stumbled forward until he could fall on the bed and lay on his side, instantly grabbing a pillow and bringing it under his head. She sat on the bed in front of him, running her hands through his hair with a soft smile on her face. He groaned, rubbing his cheek into the pillow. “This bed feels dreadful.”

Athena nearly snorted with a laugh, gently stroking small designs into his back to try and calm
him. “How terrible of you. Redcliffe offers its finest and you refuse it like this? Such manners.” She teased with a smile on her face, using her free hand to tuck stray hairs behind her ear. The moon’s glow came in through the window and showed how exhausted he was. There were small lines in the corners of his eyes and there was redness underneath his gaze and cheeks from his crying. He wasn’t good at hiding it, as much as he tried.

“Fuck manners. I’m...out of sorts. You’re a champion for sticking by my side through this, Athena. I don’t know how to thank you.” She shushed him and brushed the back of her knuckles over his reddened cheeks, shaking her head to dismiss him.

“You do not have to thank me, Dorian. You are not some plague that I am burdened with for eternity. I consider you family.” He turned his face to where she could only see his right eye, but he was smiling at her.

“Don’t get mushy on me. You know I hate large displays of affection.” She smiled and patted him on his back, moving from the bed so she could pull the blanket at the end of the bed up and over his shoulder. He gripped it and brought it down snug, twitching in discomfort before sitting up, ripping his shirt off, and laying back on his back with his arm over his eyes. Athena took this as a cue to leave, smiling and turning her back to him. “I look forward to meeting Scarlett or Lucian one day. They sound perfect.” He whispered under his breath as she left. She leaned against the doorway, grinning before shutting the door. The alcohol was still high in her body so she walked as quietly as she could back to her room, creaking the door open to see Solas lying on top of the blankets with his hands resting on his stomach.

He sometimes slept as still as a corpse, but she noticed that was mostly when he fell asleep first without her beside him. When they slept together, it was almost always facing one another or with him at her back. She walked to the window and shut it to keep the chill out, leaning against it and stretching her back with a soft sigh. There were a few small pops up her spine and it only allowed her to stretch more. When she stood tall she shut the curtain most of the way before pulling off the maroon shirt that was partially covered in flour. It was a pretty top, more something that they would put Rathein in to entertain noble guests. Noble Orlesian benefactors, Tevinter Magister, not much difference in her mind.

Athena removed her boots and sat back on the bed wearing her bandings and pants. She let out another sigh, rubbing the back of her neck and looking to the ground. There was a small brush of wind against her back and then felt Solas sit up from bed to look over at her. “All is well?” He asked softly, keeping his voice low so that their conversation wouldn’t carry to the only two other people in the tavern.

She shrugged, laying back in bed onto a pillow while mimicking his sleeping position from before, flicking her gaze over to him. “All is currently buried under alcohol where it will be unearthed at a later date.” He furrowed his brow at her and she smiled with a wink. “It’s alright, better than it
was. We talked about family, I sang a song for him, and we spoke of children.” He hummed and softened his face, turning to face her on his side while stroking his touch over her bare stomach. The gesture nearly put her to sleep at first pass, but it was a good way to keep her calm.

“Spoke of children? Do you mean Tobias and Lev’adin?” He asked with a smile. She shook her head and sighed, trying to think of the right words to explain this without rousing the jealous wolf that was hidden away.

“Nah – they are fine. In my world, it is considered a kind gesture to bear child for someone who normally cannot. That includes someone in his situation. There is no touching or romance involved, it is like a procedure. I offered that to him at some point, if he was interested.” He processed the information and she could see different expressions go across his face. Just as she was about to add more words to try and clarify things he looked down to her.

“Do you not want any children of your own?” The question wasn’t asked like it was a pivotal moment in their relationship, more like a curious query. She still flushed underneath him and stammered, running a hand through her hair and chuckling.

“I – uh – It’s hard to say. The future is so uncertain. I used to think I did, but after coming here. We even talked about names –shit oh man. I can’t think straight. Why did I drink again with him?” She stumbled over her words and ended with a groan, slapping her hand over face in a poor attempt to hide from his gaze. Solas paused for a moment then chuckled at her, reaching and pulling her hand from her face so he could look at her. There was a teasing look in his eyes and that melted away some of her worry.

“You two tend to destroy the inhibitions in one another. What are the names you have chosen?” He stroked his hand down the side of her face and she moved into his touch, closing her eyes before kissing the inside of his palm. He stilled beside her, his breath catching within his throat. She smiled and gave a small shrug.

“For Dorian and I’s hypothetical children? Scarlett and Lucian.” He nodded with a hum, continuing to ghost his touch over the skin within his reach.

“Such proud, Tevinter names.” There was an air of bitterness to his words. This caused her to open her eyes and arch a brow at him, pushing against his chest playfully.

“Be nice. The other names were Salahn or .” His eyes widened slightly, a twitch of a smirk playing across the curve of his lips.
“And that is Elvish.” Athena nearly froze, a groan of reluctance escaping her teeth as she clenched her jaw and closed one eye and shrunk away in embarrassment. He didn’t seem completely appalled to the idea, more entertained.

“G-good observation. They were just hypotheticals and considering the only way that would happen right now would be with you I thought it would be appropriate, considering how much I perform and I like the name Melody in Common so Salahn wasn’t that far of a stretch.” He bent down and interrupted her fevered words with a brush of his lips, stealing away her embarrassed rambling while moving a hand behind her head to bring her closer to him. She submitted to defeat with a sigh, dropping a hand to her stomach while using the other one to steady herself on his shoulder.

When he broke the kiss, he rested his forehead against hers, smiling with a laugh in his voice. “Do not be so nervous, vhenan. It is a fitting name. The future is uncertain, but it does not hurt anyone to think about such things.” She let out a sigh and relaxed into the bed, kissing him again before sitting up and bringing him into an embrace.

“Suledin was the male name, or something along those lines. Endurance felt also fitting for us both.” He squeezed her tighter, humming with a small nod into her shoulder. They held each other for a moment, synchronizing their breaths and cherishing the silence of the room with one another. She was thankful he did not pause or shirk off the idea of thinking about kids. The only downside was, her fucking human genes would hide any trace of his elvish background which, for a God named Pride, probably meant a lot. Well, not the only downside. There was still the potential for him leaving to, oh, start the elven uprising. Athena shuddered at the thought, gripping to him tighter before laying back into her place on the bed. “Speaking of uncertain futures. I am not particularly excited about returning to Skyhold so soon.”

He moved and helped them both get under the blankets, bringing her against him so that his bare chest was flush with her back. She let out a content sigh, pushing her body against his until it felt like things clicked into place. Once they were in a comfortable spot he pulled her hair out of the way and kissed her neck, humming in question. “Why would that be?”

Athena arched her neck to give him more space, playing with a piece of loose string that was coming off of their blanket. “Rathein officially told me I’m in charge while she’s gone. There might be a trial. Then when she returns we march onto Adamant Fortress. Once we’re there. . . I get to fight a really fucking big Nightmare demon.” He paused with his lips on her neck, pulling back and tightening his arm that was draped over her stomach.

“Athena, I know you didn’t want to fight a big Nightmare demon, but—”

“Athena.” He leaned down to kiss her neck again, still holding her arm. “Just thinking about it makes me shiver.”

“Nightmare demon? Tell me about it.” She cursed herself and her big tipsy mouth. They hadn’t talked about going into the Fade yet, and part of her was unsure how to tell that to him since she
assumed part of his end-game was to go into the Fade physically and tear down the Veil. Dorian was as excited as a kid on a field trip to go, perhaps Solas would be as well.

“It’s complicated.” He pulled back on her shoulder until she was lying flat on her back, looking up at him with a sheepish and frustrated gaze. The inebriated part of her wanted to sleep but the still awake part just wanted in his arms in the silence of the night. “The Wardens have a rift open and on the other side is the demon. At one point. . . The Inquisitor opens a rift with the Mark and we all end up in the Fade. All of us as in the party that goes with her in Adamant. Once we’re there, there’s a Nightmare Demon that I intend to kill myself. Harmony has been helping me train to keep my mind protected from its powers and Command has been helping me strengthen my fighting skills at night. It’s also why Dorian has been helping me to train as well. I’m still not excited about it; that thing was frightening enough when I wasn’t here in person.” She looked to him reluctantly, biting the inside of her bottom lip in a gesture of anxiety.

Solas had his bottom jaw clenched but there was an air of curiosity over his eyes, much like Dorian’s when she told him about the whole thing. He shook his head with a small laugh, kissing her on top of the nose. “That seems improbable.” She remained silent, arching a brow back at him until his features began to click into realization. “Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh. Oh fuck is more I like it. I know you and Dorian are over the moon about going, but I’m not looking forward to going back there. It. . . makes me feel uneasy being there.” Solas kissed her on the forehead, tracing her cheek with a finger and tucking her hair behind her ears.

“I will confer with my friends in the Fade on this as well. If you would allow it, may I assist with your training that Dorian has started? Casting in the Fade will require a greater focus in your spiritual abilities. . . “ He paused and looked down to her hand, bringing it into his while glancing down to the wolf ring. At his touch, the ring almost hummed in response. Athena had a growing suspicion that it was his, especially with how Command noticed it during their ritual to bring back Wisdom. She shook her head, turning towards him and running her hand down to where the ring and his necklace collided.

“Perhaps. Just please don’t kill each other or put me in the middle.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the continued support. <3
Making Peace

Chapter Notes
All she had asked was that they didn’t put her in the middle of their squabbles. It hadn’t even been half a day into their travels before they started going back at it. Three of them were working through hangovers while Solas just apparently woke up prickly after not finding much of anything in the Fade regarding the Fear demon. Part of her felt like he was frustrated she didn’t tell him sooner, but she was always playing catch up with what was happening in the current world and what she knew. She was grateful she wasn’t a part of all of the war table meetings because she probably would reach across the table and yell ‘don’t’ to every decision they made. Things happened for a reason and there were right and wrong choices, but she wasn’t the person to dictate all of them.

Varric and Athena were leaning against the same tree, their gazes bouncing back and forth like a ping pong ball between the two men arguing only a pace or two apart. Solas was determined to focus on strengthening her spiritual skills, since her source of mana and focus was from the remnants of the Veil around her. The Veil and the beyond favored her, for whatever reason, and using those skills would help her when she was actually in the Fade and surrounded by spiritual energy.

Dorian, on the other hand, wanted to continue to focus on her fire and shapeshifting skills since they were the first thing she had learned when she came into the Fade. He wanted to cater to her offensive side, the part of her that really shined when her emotions flared. . . which they were doing a great job of doing right then. Varric let out a sigh and kicked his boot against the tree, looking up to her with a frustrated glance. “I thought Aveline and Isabela were bad. Andraste’s tits – this is beyond annoying. How long do you think they can go on?”

Athena looked over to the two men and groaned. She loved them both but, per Solas, the ‘differences between them were not to be easily discarded’. Stubborn ass wolf. She scoffed and pushed off from the tree and put her back to them while winking towards Varric. “Probably until the second coming of the Maker.” He broke out of his angry expression and laughed, nodding to her as she took a step back towards the two. They didn’t even notice her turning around to face them. She rocked forward and back on the balls on her feet, clearing her throat. Solas glanced over to her, a hint of a smirk in his eyes and on his lips. She wanted to pull a three-stooges and collide their heads together and then tell them to get back on the road. “Will you two cut it out? If you don’t stop squabbling like cloister sisters I’m going to kick your asses and then go back to Redcliffe with Varric.”

Dorian rolled his eyes with a large gesture and scoffed, pushing on her shoulder like a bully in the school yard. “We’d like to see you try, amatus.” She pushed back into his hand and felt small
sparks of frustration fly through their gazes. Solas then got a look that she immediately knew she wasn’t going to like, especially when he tapped Dorian on the chest with the back of his hand. The Tevinter looked to him, disgusted at first, but then saw his intention and nearly grinned from ear to ear. “I guess that would be the best way.”

“Instead of – “ Solas went to add and she took a step back from the two of them with her hands up. The air grew thick with the presence of magic and it made her lips almost tingle. Without warning Dorian took a large step back to grab his staff and Solas fade-stepped to the side to fetch his. Athena extended her palms and put up a barrier around herself, cursing under her breath quickly while Varric laughed. She looked over her shoulder and saw that he was holding Bianca and her eyes went wide.

“Fucking traitor of a friend you are!” She shouted, quickly ducking as he fired off a shot from Bianca as if it were nothing. He pulled on his back and grabbed another arrow, shrugging with a charismatic smile.

“This is much more fun than listening to them bitch all day. Plus, you wanted to train, right?”

She threw her hands up in the air, reinforcing her barrier while her mind moved at a thousand miles a minute. There were conflicting auras in the air. Dorian’s came hot like steam from her left, thickening the air and coming close to be suffocating. Thankfully he left Harriet, the name they had both decided on for his rich widow of a skull, in his pack so there wouldn’t be any undead forest creatures coming after her. Still, the bear-sized fireball coming her way wasn’t nice either. It clashed and burst through the barrier and when the fire hit her the magic within her core flared and kicked into survival mode. The moment the flames touched her skin her body adapted, completely turning into the Phoenix she had created for herself. With a push of her wings she spun on the ground, allowing the rest of the fireball to push past her as if it were nothing.

Varric let out a low whistle, taking aim and firing an arrow at her. She turned towards him and arched a brow, knowing he wouldn’t be able to see much of her expression. When she was complete flame, her eyes were more of a bright white and could be seen in the seas of orange and red. The arrow went completely through her and she heard Dorian curse on the other side as he side-stepped to avoid it. Athena laughed, gripping onto her stomach and bending over. The air then turned icy cold and she stood up straight and hardened her focus. Even if he was her lover, Solas was serious when committed to a task. There were two balls of frost shot in her direction. They were meant to be a distraction because she dodged them with a tilt of her head in opposite directions, hands twitching at her side. Eventually she would need to go on the offensive but right now she was feeling all three of them out.

Solas slid his foot forward and flicked his staff from the ground towards her. The air shifted and she felt the temperature of the ground change quicker thanks to her foot wraps. She pushed with her wings from the ground while jumping, narrowly missing ice spikes that erupted up towards the air.
Athena continued to move up and out of their reach, using the current and her height advantage to
dance around their attacks. If she really focused and spread her aura, she could feel the changes in
the air that coincided with their movements. It would give her an additional second or two to dodge
their oncoming attacks.

“Sit still, you firefly!” Dorian shouted playfully, spreading his hands into the air and clapping them
together. Six separate fire orbs summoned around her, dancing in a rhythm that was not her own.
They flew at her one by one and she frowned because one passed through her and it actually hurt. *What the fuck?* The next one came straight for her torso and she caught it in her hand, taking in a
deep breath and exhaling through her nose. The action washed away all flame from her body
except the wings, which pulsed rhythmically with her heartbeat on her back. The Tevinter cried out
in happiness, clapping his hands together. She looked at his attack, passing it back and forth in her
barrier-covered hands before realizing he had put a necromantic core in the center of his attacks.
With a snarl, she took it and threw it down at him like she was pitching in the 9th of a Red Sox
game. He stood on his tip toes and arched his back to avoid it, looking much like a dancer in the
moment. “I knew you would be able to do it! Took you long enough.”

Athena was getting winded, her breaths coming in heavy pants. She quickly scanned the ground.
She was still dedicated to the training even if he was beginning to fool off. Solas was nowhere to
be found and she stilled. “Fuck.” She managed to say out loud, twisting her body and looking in the
trees around them. He was discreet, was he in the middle of a fade-step? She pushed her hands
forward to act as if she was going to, searching for him in that in-between of the Veil and the
physical world. There was a swirl of motion to her right and she was knocked down nearly ten feet.
It took a moment to center herself and shake her head, collecting her focus, and flying up higher
above the trees. He was *somewhere*, his signature chill was in the air and it sent a rush of
excitement down her spine. She was able to avoid Dorian’s flame attacks, now it was time to focus
on what Solas wanted.

She pushed with her wings to get some air before closing her eyes, taking in a deep breath, and
pushing her barrier outwards. It tingled in the air, picking up on bits of ambient heat and energy.
She put herself on the verge of crashing into a fade step. That precipice, it was exhilarating and felt
like she was looking into a whole other plane. The wisps of movement became clear in front of her
and behind. There were glimpses of the Dread Wolf, jumping from a tree branch and sliding past
her while doing small things like touching her cheek or her hip. They felt like strong currents of the
wind but now she knew it was him using the Veil to warp the spiritual energy around them. The
ring on her right hand hummed and she smiled, flaring out her aura in that in-between space he was
hiding in.

There was a vibration on her ring and she felt a ping from the right side. It was like slow-motion.
Small bits of air moved and his icy presence came to her side. Without even thinking she reached
forward and grabbed him, hand clinging to his shirt while the other one rested on his hip. He was
caught in surprise, both of them being jerked from the middle of their spells. He began to fall down
towards the ground and she tightened her grip on his clothes while pumping her wings up to keep
them in the air. The visual was ridiculous but he caught her gaze, smiling with pride before
twisting out of her grip and acting like there was a rock in the air that he could push from to get to
the nearest branch. She quickly descended to the ground and allowed her wings to dissipate, hands on her knees while she took in sharp breaths.

“Your magical skill is impressive, Dorian.” Solas commented after jumping down from the nearest tree. He sheathed his staff on his back and walked over to her side, rubbing his hand up and down her spine while trailing some of his magic to calm her. It worked instantly, eyes closing. The tremors disappeared from her hands and legs and it felt like she could breathe normally again.

“You’re not the first to say so.” The Tevinter grinned, spinning his staff in a grandiose movement before sliding it on his back. Solas narrowed his eyes and gestured towards him.

“Would you not conserve magical energy with a less. . . flashy style, however?” Athena instantly laughed, standing straight up and sliding a hand behind Solas’s back. She rested her head on his shoulder, shaking her head back and forth while Dorian groaned and rolled his eyes.

“Yes, and I’d live longer if I only ate rice and boiled vegetables, but that’s just as unlikely.” He hummed while Athena choked back a laugh, patting him on the back while looking to both of them with a weak yet happy gaze.

“Did that please you two, gentlemen?” There were hums of contentment around the camp and she ran a hand through her now wind-blown wavy locks, itching at the roots. She walked over to Prince who head-butted her and urged for her to get back onto his back so they could both go home to their comfortable beds and places that was full of their scent.

“What is that creature you shift into, Athena?” Varric asked from the back of his own mount. Silently, apparently, they had all decided that the exercise was the end of their break. In a smooth motion, she slid onto the saddle and patted her companion on the back of the neck.

“It’s. . . complicated. A combination of things. You know how wide spread the fiction is in my world?” The dwarf scoffed while getting a good grip on the reigns of his mount.

“I’ve figured as much from all of the music you know. How you keep so many songs up there – I will never know.” Solas mounted his horse effortlessly and brought the creature up to her side.

“I would assume how you keep all of your characters in your head, Master Tethras. Are they not similar?” The dwarf shrugged and motioned for them to get back onto the path. Dorian had a pleased grin on his face, his spell-book bouncing off of the saddle as his horse nearly pranced like
“It is so entertaining to hear you try and explain it. Humor me and do it again, perhaps it will sound sensible this time.” Athena flushed and rubbed the back of her neck, chewing on the inside of her lip. She made a few unsuccessful attempts of starting before finally getting frustrated and flipping Dorian off.

“In my world we have this fictional creature called a Phoenix—“

Varric cut her off. “Gross, not those things from the Approach?”

She shook her head with a laugh, taking in a deep breath of fresh air since they left their clearing and were back on the open road towards Skyhold. “No. They were symbols of rebirth, second chances. The phoenix would turn into a pile of ash at the end of its life and resurrect itself from those ashes. They were fantastic and strong. They could carry much more than their own weight and their tears were said to heal even the most fatal of wounds. Unfortunately, there is also a fictional character called The Phoenix so at the time I had fire plus human form on the mind. It ended up turning me into somewhat of a fire elemental and I just rolled with it.”

Solas took a swig of water from his water flagon, tossing it over to her wordlessly with a smile. “I like the symbolism of the choice. It is meaningful to you.” She blushed at his words, drinking a large gulp of water to keep from having to continue talking.

Dorian brought his horse close to her, leaning over on his side as much as he could before he fell. There was a teasing expression on his face, eyebrows wiggling with a charming smile. “Or she really likes setting things on fire.”

Varric laughed. “As most humans do.”

Her lover arched a brow, nearly glowing with pride. He looked back to Varric and clicked his tongue against the back of his teeth. “Ah – but I believe she has proven that she is not like most humans.”

Chapter End Notes
Thank you for the continued support! <3
They had taken their time getting home and pulled into Skyhold’s courtyard a day later. There was a light layer of snow setting in and she had her jacket closed tightly with her eyes looking over a thick navy blue scarf. Since there was enough sun in the sky, the party decided to go have lunch together before returning to their separate duties around the castle. Athena could finally breathe now that Solas and Dorian had somehow come to speaking terms over their so-called training exercise. They pulled up to one of the middle tables in the mess hall with hot soup and bread in their hands. Dorian decided to be snarky and sit next to her, forcing Solas to sit across from her and next to Varric.

“Alright, Lady Wolfsbane, what are your plans from now until Adamant?”

Athena groaned and rolled her eyes while holding a piece of bread in her mouth, biting down once she sat down and ripping the still steaming piece from her teeth. To emphasize her point of being a lady, she took a few bites, shoved the bread into her cheek with her tongue, and looked Dorian up and down. “Yeah – I meant to ask you about that. What the fuck? Did you just make my last name?”

He buttered his bread with a small, polished jelly knife that appeared to come from his personal collection. “Call it a moment of panic in front of my father. But hey! You have a full name now! Lady Athena Wolfsbane of the Inquisition!” He cheered with a flourish of his knife against the end of his bread. Varric nearly choked on his ale, coughing into his gloved hand with a grin on his lips.

“Wolfsbane? You mean she’s a bane to herself? It’s a great name for a writer; you think about my proposition anymore, Walker?” Solas arched a brow and hummed, casually rubbing the back of her calf with the top of his foot underneath the table. She instantly smiled and blushed, amazed at how he kept his upper half of his body so polite and hardened but he could still show signs of being a romantic.

“Solas – he has offered to publish my songs and stories in a series. I’m still thinking about it, however. I feel guilty taking credit and money for stories that are not mine. I am simply repeating them; other people in a world impossibly far from here did the hard work of writing them.” She drank some of the broth from her bowl before starting on the hearty bits of vegetables and meat at
the bottom. Varric wouldn’t let go, nudging her bowl by reaching across the table with an arrow he pulled from Bianca’s holster.

“Come on. They don’t know that. It would be a great opportunity. We could even do a book tour! You would get to see all corners of the continent.” Athena didn’t hide her eyeroll as she swallowed down another broth-soaked piece of bread.

“If you get me within spell’s reach of Gaspard again I think I may kill him.”

The table laughed while Solas nodded silently, catching her gaze and giving her a look that showed he would probably do the same thing if he were her. As childish as it was, their flirting underneath the table brought a blush onto her cheeks and distracted her from eating. They were all nearly finished with their meals when a messenger approached her from the side and saluted. It felt rude to continue sitting while he did that so she pushed back and stood from her spot, nodding to him and crossing her arms over her chest to help straighten her posture. “How can I help you, soldier?”

He relaxed from his salute and pulled a letter from his pocket. It had already been opened, but she noticed that instead of Rathein’s name or title it simply said Sorcière on the front of it in a cursive script. She took it and opened the letter, eyes scanning over its contents as everyone watched.

_Lady Athena,_

_I hear the Inquisitor is away on business, so you and I shall speak of this matter regarding Thom Rainier. His crimes in Orlesian are horrid, but since he has been recruited under your ranks I feel it is fitting that you exact the judgment on him. We have released the soldier who was being held for Rainier’s crime and he has been returned to his family. Creators guide your decision. I trust it will be just and true._

_Dareth shiral,_

_Briala, Marquise of the Dales_

“Fuck.” She said out loud, shaking her head and folding up the letter while putting it in her jacket inside pocket. The soldier smirked at her cursing, nodding before continuing on with a message she assumed Leliana or Cullen passed on.

“The trial will start in two hours. The Council did not want to wait on this decision. I’m sure you understand.” Athena couldn’t help but clench her jaw and nod, somehow feeling under the messenger in rank but he was simply delivering orders from on-high. “Lady Josephine has sent people to your quarters to help-“
She held up a hand to him, rolling her gaze up from the floor to his face with a flicker of annoyance. “I get it. Tell your betters not to worry; I will be where I need to be.” He flinched but hummed in acknowledgement, saluting before disappearing from the mess hall. Normally she would have sighed and relaxed her posture but everyone in the hall was looking at her now and there were appearances to keep up. Her table companions were all waiting for her to say something but she let a shudder shoot down her spine. She rolled her shoulders and looked over to them, giving them half a smirk to show she was still in there somewhere underneath the façade of someone who looked like they knew what they were doing.

“I would appreciate having friendly faces in the crowd to look at. But if you don’t want to be there I completely understand.” They all gave sounds of consideration before Dorian clapped her on the lower back with enough force to almost make her cough.

“Don’t worry. We’ll all be there, drinks in hand. Go, get all official. Don’t worry about us.” He pushed her towards the door and she gave Solas one last glance before she walked through the main hall and towards her quarters. Already there were rumors spreading through the keep and the crowd was making its way into the main hall. She kept her head down and sped up her pace until she hit the fresh air of the courtyard. Athena made it halfway up the stairs to her tower when Valerie opened the door and gestured her in with a jerk of her head. The seamstress and stylist pulled her down the stairs into the lower level of her tower, sitting her down in a chair in front of the vanity while pulling out her brushes and different make ups.

It felt like the brush was made of iron and it had spike on the end with how she was quickly pulling it up. Valerie daftly used her fingers to braid her hair back up before pulling the ends of the braids into a tight bun. The makeup was basic, using highlights to bring out her cheekbones and light around the eyes. Athena arched a brow when Valerie disappeared upstairs and came down with what was supposed to be her “official” attire for the judgment. There were boots that came up to her knee with the leather coming to a point with black leggings up to her high waist. There was a silver thick rimmed belt and then a white blouse material with white fur for the shoulders that had a white cloak going down the back.

“You’re kidding, right?”

The stylist smirked and gestured for the clothes. “Lady Josephine and Leliana insists on the Sorcière dressing to her character. We all have our parts to play, no?”

Athena nodded and disrobed down to her bandings, which were switched out for silk nude ones so they wouldn’t show through the blouse. Once everything was done she looked at the mirror and nearly scoffed. She looked like an odd mixture of a Dalish Keeper and a noblewoman. The way her hair was pulled back and the makeup was done made her face look like it had more pointed
features. “Marvelous, Lady Athena. Shall I take you to the main hall? The trials are about to start.”

She blinked. “Trials? Plural? I thought it was just the one.”

Valerie shrugged and crossed her arms over her obviously corseted waist. “There is a list of things that the Inquisitor needs to work through. Per the arrangement, that falls to you and some of these matters cannot wait anymore.”

Athena nodded, looking at the mirror one more time and running a hand over her braids. “Alright. Let’s not keep them waiting. Superb work as ever, Valerie. I don’t know how you do it.” She genuinely smiled over to the stylist, even though she felt like a foreigner in the clothes that were picked out. The wolf shoulders were a nice touch, and they even managed to match the color that she naturally was when she shifted. The Council was trying to mix a bit of her in with the overall character of the Hand of the Inquisitor. Well, it was a start.

Valerie ditched her at the door and she tried to sneak around the side to come up to the throne from a discreet location. But the crier already saw her and cupped a hand around his mouth. “Lady Athena Wolfsbane, Hand of the Inquisitor!” She winced and put her hands up in surrender to him, hearing who she assumed was Dorian laughing in the crowd at how fast his name for her was spreading.

“Gods – please no!” He flinched and looked to her but it was too late. The entire crowd was already looking to her and spreading a path for her to walk up the main carpet in the direct line of their sight. Josephine, Cullen, and Leliana were all at the top of the steps near the throne. Josephine gave her a reassuring smile, leaning in with her clipboard as a gesture to come forward. She swallowed down a firm lump of nerves in her drying throat while straightening her posture and walking towards the throne. There was a small heel to her boots so she clicked as she walked and with every noise her brow twitched in annoyance. Everyone was standing with such straight postures, looking at her without a single murmur between them.

She turned with an unintentional flourish of her cloak, sitting down with her hands clasped in her lap. Already they were bringing Blackwall in with his shackles jingling against one another. The sound echoed through the hall but people were beginning to jeer at him. Murderer! Liar! She furrowed her brows and leaned forward on the throne, gripping the armrests so hard she was sure her knuckles were stark white.

“I must present Captain Thom Rainier, formerly known to us as Warden Blackwall. His crimes, well... you are aware of his crimes.” The Ambassador’s voice was breaking up as she spoke, tears glossing over her eyes even though she kept her posture strong. “The decision of what to do with him has been given to us through the mercy of the Emperor of Orlais.”
Athena could not help a subtle eye roll at the thought of the former Grand Duke, nodding to her in gratitude before looking to Blackwall. The crowd was still murmuring to one another so she raised a hand to silence them, secretly pleased at how quickly they followed her small command. Damn. This is intimidating. “This is not how I imagined this going, Thom.”

The accused was on his knees, forced there by the soldiers escorting him. He huffed, eyes on the ground as pain set into his features. “Another thing to regret, sadly. What did you have to do to release me into your custody?” He looked up and met her gaze and she felt the weight of his sadness. A chill ran down her spine and she cleared her throat before speaking.

“We simply penned a letter to Orlais explaining the situation. Their leaders were happy to release a man they had been keeping for your crimes, one of your underlings when you were in Orlais. No foul play done; do not worry.” He nodded before hanging his head low again. She noticed that in this situation, compared to what she knew, he seemed more carefree. He had come forward before someone’s life was at stake and in doing that they saved the lives of people in the future. Had things gone according to normal, the Inquisition would have had to kill and use their darker ties to free him. This option was much better.

“I accepted my fate when I came clean to the Council. The guilt of my crimes still weight on me daily. I was ready for this to end. What... do you plan to do, Lady Hand?” Athena clenched her jaw, tempted to go to town and chew the inside of her cheek out of habit. She took in a deep breath through her nose and sighed, sitting back on the Throne and relaxing her hands from the armrests.

“When the Inquisition first came upon you, Thom Rainier, do you remember what you were doing?” He hummed in question, looking to her with a quizzical expression on his face.

“Training conscripts.”

She clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth. “Yes. You were training local farmer boys how to hold blades and shields to protect their families from bandits. I watched them fight; they probably would have been hopeless if it wasn’t for you. Ever since you have come to the Inquisition you have trained those in need of help. We have all seen the fine work Commander Cullen has put into his soldiers and you strengthen those practices. I’m sure I am not the only one who has heard you drilling them at dawn.” There were a few chuckles from the more observant people in the audience, this bringing a smirk to her face. “My point is you are actively trying to atone for what you have done. I will not deny that your crimes were horrid, but you are trying with all of your might to make things better, to do right by your pupils.”

She glanced over to the Council and saw that Josephine looked less distressed about the situation,
looking over to her with a nod of confidence. Cullen seemed pleased by the compliment but he was holding firm and hardened in his features. “Taking all of this into consideration, The Inquisitor and I have decided that when all of this business with Corypheus is done, we will make an honest man out of you and send you to the Wardens to go through the Joining. They will decide your fate then. For now, the Inquisition needs you as a free man willing to fight. The road to Adamant is long and we are ready to march the moment the Inquisitor returns. Soldiers, release Thom Rainier from his shackles.”

They moved on both of his sides and quickly worked through the locks. When they fell to the ground he finally stood with half of a smile on his lips. “I am grateful for this, Lady Athena. I will serve for as long as I can.” He stood and looked to the Council, giving them a nod of gratitude before turning and blending in with the crowd. Josephine cleared her throat, stepping forward with a blush on her cheeks and a smile on her lips.

“The next matter is... rather peculiar. We were recently, well, the castle was attacked with a goat.” Athena’s eyes widened and she looked to the Ambassador with a childlike glee, laughter trickling from her lips. Before Josephine could finish she waved the guards in, tears of joy glossing over her gaze.

“Oh no please. Bring in the Avvar Chief. This will be quick and I am much looking forward to it.”
Chapter End Notes

Thanks as always for the love!

Has anyone told you you're amazing today? Well you are! :)
Athena armed the Avvars and exiled them to Tevinter with as many weapons as they could carry. There were then a few minor issues about trade routes and farms that were handled with the advisement of the Council at her side. Once everything was done she thanked the crowd and dismissed them. The moment their backs were turned she leaned her arm on the armrest, rubbing her temples with one hand. Josephine came over to her side and touched her shoulder gently. “You did wonderfully, Athena. You are a natural!”

She winced, opening her eyes and looked to the almost glowing Ambassador. “I’m not sure if I should be happy about that or not, but thank you for the compliment. I’m assuming you approve of my calls?” Their gazes met and Josephine nodded in knowing, squeezing her furred-covered shoulders. Leliana mimicked the gesture, giving her a quick wink before descending the stairs with Cullen behind her. The main hall went back to its normal flow when the Inner Council disappeared to their usual offices. She pushed up from the throne and made a bee-line for where Solas was standing. He was leaning against the wall next to the fireplace where Varric was sitting in his chair. Dorian sat across from them and they were playing a game of chess. Athena scoffed and resisted the urge to flip their board over.

“Gee – some support you guys are.” Dorian flipped her a rude gesture before turning to his game, moving a piece forward that caused Varric to groan.

“We said we would be here, and we were.” The dwarf stated plainly, flicking one of his pieces over off of the board. Solas was watching them passively but she could tell his mind was somewhere else. There was a subtle anger in his features and his arms were crossed over his chest instead of clasped like when he was watching something academic like chess. Dorian and Varric fell back into their conversation and game so she turned towards him, putting her body in between his line of sight and the chess game. He blinked and looked to her, hand reaching out and running over the fur on her shoulders.

“Is something the matter, vhenan?” The words were genuine but his voice was somewhat pointed. She smirked, nudging him in the shoulder.

“I was going to ask you the same question, Solas. What bothers you? I can see it on your face.” Athena flipped into Elvish, thankful that her speaking it with Lev’adin and Loranil made her pronunciation smoother. He sighed and glanced over to where the trial had been. The lines of his face were so sharpened by his anger and just around them she felt the air grow cold.
“I thought he and I were the same. We’ve seen war, knew its costs. He...ran away from what he did rather than facing it. Selfish.” He spat, looking in the crowd to try and find Blackwall. She touched his cheek gently, pulling his gaze back towards her. She frowned, pulling the cloak up around her shoulders since the doors open brought in the winter chill.

“He is trying, love, just like any of us. There isn’t a person in this room that doesn’t have some demon or secret they’re hiding from. They come in many different shades, but we’re not all so different.” She tried to not make her tone harsh, but he was being hypocritical. He was the Dread Wolf and literally created the Veil, starting the downfall of his people. He might have had agents already working to help reverse that, but he was here under another name. He was helping the Inquisition to undo his mistake, and that was something she could see.

“This is different. It's...ah.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, looking to her with a defeated gaze. “Different. Forgive me, I have something I need to get back to in my study. I will see you tonight.” He quickly leaned forward and kissed her forehead before turning and disappearing into the rotunda with the door swinging behind him. There was a trail of cold in his wake and she let out a soft growl, shouting out “Liar!” in Elvish. Dorian and Varric looked up to her silently, completely unaware of what had transpired.

“It’s nothing. Do you two mind some music? My hands are itching to do something.” Varric nonchalantly pulled up a scroll and quill on his side, nodding while moving one of his bishops forward to take Dorian’s tower. The Tevinter cursed and shooed her away without an answer, gripping his chin lightly to focus back on the game. Athena made her way over to the piano and sat on the bench, resting her head in her hands and her elbows on the keys. The instrument vibrated at her touch. Every key was alight with energy, ready to feel her magic course through it.

“I won’t disappoint you, hold your horses.” Athena groaned, sitting up and placing her hands on the keys. There wasn’t any particular song on her mind and with Solas getting frustrated by Blackwall she didn’t know what to pull from. She assumed he was sitting in his rotunda throwing himself into a book or the Fade to pull his attention away from his emotions. Well, perhaps she could give him background music to make him happy. Her fingers moved before her mind did and she spread them out and started the opening notes of Phantom of the Opera. There was a proud smile on her face as the music erupted through the hall.

All of the nobles in the room disappeared and she felt only herself and the hum of the magic beneath her. She hummed softly with the melody of the tunes, her body bobbing forward as her eyes closed. It was unnecessary to constantly look at the keys; they weren’t going anywhere or moving. The piano bonded to her as much as she did to it, guiding her body and anticipating the notes that were to come. She only imagined what art the ancient elves of Arlathan could make with such an instrument, but her songs would have to do. She had made it through the first few songs when she heard giggling behind her. The air around her shifted and she pulsed her mana out to see who was coming.
“Hey! Not fair, Fen’mae!” Lev’adin shouted, slamming her foot on the ground in frustration. Tobi obediently came up and sat next to her on the bench, watching her hands move up and down the keys.

“You should learn to conceal your aura, Leafy. Has Fiona not taught you that yet? You’re naturally quieter because of your race, but I simply know.” She looked over to the elf on her left with a wink, going back to her humming. The elven girl positioned herself closer until her right side was lined up with Athena’s left.

“Mother’s intuition – yeah.” Athena smiled and nodded. It was still odd to be called mother but it was an endearing title she wore with pride for the two of them. There was nobody else to watch them and they had picked her in a sense. To turn her back on them now would be painful, for both her and them. They were an odd little family in Skyhold, since none of them had families. They had each other.

“Children, tell me how you have been since I’ve been gone. Lev’adin – are the nightmares gone? Tobi told me about them. I’m sorry I never came to check in on you.” The girl twisted her mouth to the side and shrugged, her finger slowly stroking a key out of curiosity. She didn’t press down on it but the instrument recognized one of its own, humming underneath her touch. Athena chuckled, nudging her daughter on the side. “It likes you.”

Leafy beamed, clapping her hands together in excitement. “The nightmares are . . . better. It’s strange. I feel like I’m being watched all the time and sometimes I hear a voice. It’s like a blade on stone; I don’t like it.” Her voice was soft, scared, and she could feel her small little aura flare with her words. “But other than the dreams, I’ve been training a lot! Fiona says I am a quick learner.” Athena nearly glowed with pride, moving onto a bit of a slower song that was leading up to the romantic ballad between the two young characters in the opera.

Tobi messed with a wooden sword on his side, clinking it against the piano bench while he waited for Athena to look to him. She did with a wink, using her left elbow to tap him on top of the head in between a break of notes. He put some confidence in his voice and spoke louder than normal, tapping the tips of his two index fingers together in a gesture of anxiety. “I – uh – have been following the soldiers around. I want to be like the Prince, in your story! They say the Commander may even let me go out on a mission with them soon. Or with the Chargers when they get back! The Iron Bull is so strong!”

She nearly slammed her hands down on the keys but she controlled her reaction with a deep breath, nodding into a bob with the rhythm of the music. “Did he now? Do you want to be a Templar?” Tobi scrunched his face and shook his head.

“No – that means Lev’adin and I couldn’t be friends! I hear how the mages and the soldiers talk
about each other. It’s mean.” Leafy agreed with a loud hum before Tobi cut back in. “I want to be a leader! Like you and the Inquisitor, Athena!”

She stammered and shook her head, “Darling I’m no leader, but I appreciate the compliment. I just do what I have to.” Tobi frowned, resting his head against her side to listen to the music soar. Lev’adin was feeling the pulse of the music by resting her hands-on top of the piano. The magic must have called out to her because she smiled and nodded.

“Does this one have words? It’s pretty, Fen’mae.” Athena smiled, taking in a deep breath with a nod. The music swelled and she felt alone in the room with them. There was no fear of entertaining the nobles or looking to see who was watching. They were part of her center, her home there at Skyhold.

“No more talk of darkness, forget these wide-eyes fears. I’m here, nothing can harm you. My words will warm and calm you.”

Athena looked to her left at her daughter, smiling and nodding at the thought her nightmares. She would have to talk to Solas about what young mages went through in terms of demonic curiosity. If there was something already scoping her out, she would need to go into the Fade and end its curiosity of her. “Let me be your freedom, let daylight dry your tears. I’m here, with you, beside you, to guard you and to guide you.”

The young elf smiled, toying with her hair before fully deciding to pull her untamed straw blonde hair back into a singular braid, like the one Athena had in her hair. Tobi was at her side with his head bobbing against her as the song continued to go on. Athena let out a sigh of contentment herself before moving onto the next verse that she felt like singing. Her voice was soft but it still managed to carry above the music, accenting the different melodies and hopefully reaching the rotunda.

“Say you’ll share with me, one love, one lifetime. Let me lead you from your solitude. Say you need me with you here, beside you. Anywhere you go, let me go to. Darlings, that’s all I ask of you.”

She looked to both of them at the lyric, smiling in a silly fashion while closing her eyes. They giggled as she finished the song with just the music alone and her humming. She swayed to the left and right to bump into them playfully.

“Say you’ll share with me one love, one lifetime. Say the word and I will follow you. Share each day with me, each night, each morning. . . “
Athena cleared her throat, shooting a playful glance down to the children at her sides. “Say you love me...”

Lev’adin laughed, wrapping her arms around Athena’s side to bring her into an awkward side-hug. “Ar lath ma, Fen’mae.” Tobi mimicked the gesture, burying his face into her side as a yawn conquered his face. “Love you too, ma’.” She fought the tears in her eyes and moved to where they could lay on the bench on their sides with their heads resting in her lap. With it being winter, the sun was setting earlier and they were probably getting tired. Athena twitched her wrist on the next note, wrapping her mana around them protectively and providing a warm barrier for them while they slept. Lev’adin nuzzled into her thigh at the gesture, tightening her grip on the cloak that she was using as a blanket.

They stayed like that until she was finished playing through the opera. By that time most of the hall had emptied and Varric and Dorian had played through a few games of chess. Athena yawned and closed the lid on top of the keys, leaning forward to rest her head on a spot comfortably. It felt right to sleep there, especially with the children snoozing peacefully on her lap. They weren’t so young that she felt like they were unprotectable. Tobi was around twelve, probably thirteen and Lev’adin was close to the same. Traumatic events had sheltered away their personalities but as they all got to know each other she felt them open up to her more. Tobi was always the shy one; Lev’adin was a good match for him.

Her mind was quickly falling into the Fade when she felt a soft touch on her shoulder. She hummed, turning her head to the side and opening one eye to see who was there. Solas looked down to her with a loving gaze, stroking her cheek gently while looking down to the kids. He whispered softly on top of her head before kissing it. “Let me help you get them to bed.” She nodded and slowly moved. He took Tobi in his arms, wrapping his own magic around him to keep the child asleep. Athena watched the way his aura moved and did the same with Lev’adin. They moved through the castle together and she couldn’t help but smile at how they looked with “her” two children.

Mother Giselle was awaiting them when they showed up, pointing to the two beds closest to the door. They were already pushed together and Athena’s heart melted knowing they slept that close together. In unison movements Solas and Athena tucked the kids into bed. She reached across and kissed both of them on the heads before sliding her cloak off and tucking it on top of them. Lev’adin absentmindedly pulled it around her shoulder, adjusting into her bed with a happy yawn. They did not wake and Athena took the opportunity to wave at Mother Giselle and slip out of the room with her lover holding her hand.

“Are you feeling better, Solas?” Athena asked, breaking the silence of the garden as they crossed it. She could tell they were walking by Morrigan’s room because there was the pressure of a new aura emanating from a single door. It was the room closest to the storage room with the eluvian in it, she noted to herself. He squeezed her hand in response, letting out a gentle sigh.
“I needed time to think it over. My people have a saying: ‘the healers have the bloodiest hands.’ He has already done the hardest part by accepting his wrongdoings. My initial judgments of him were too harsh.” She smiled, squeezing his hand in return. They took a side staircase from the garden that led out to the courtyard. The chill set in on her since she was without her coat but she rolled her shoulders to shrug it off.

“I’m glad. People probably think my judgment too merciful, but a Warden’s life is not an easy sentencing. It’s a half-life, almost a cursed one. It is not something I would sign up for myself, but sending him to do it feels like he is righting the wrong. Do you agree?” He nodded silently while they ascended the steps towards her tower room.

“Yes, it was a hard decision to make but you did well. Were these trials something within your knowledge?” Solas asked without judgment while opening the door for her. She chuckled under her breath and walked in. When the door closed behind her, her hands took to undoing the bun and braid that her hair was in. It didn’t take long to unweave it, but when it was done her hair was nearly in ringlets from being in the tight updo all day.

She turned to him and ran her hands through her hair in a poor attempt to calm them. “Yes – it was actually why I got so excited about the Avvar chief. I always thought that was hilarious and odd. Can you imagine what must have been going through the goats’ mind as they were launched on our walls? This is how I die now. The air feels nice.” Her voice fell into a mocking monotone as her hand waved through the air to mimic the motion of the poor swamp creature that was flung through the air on a trebuchet.

He choked down a laugh, covering his lips with the back of his hand. “It must have been in distress, yes. The entire situation was entertaining, to say the least.” He ran his hand down her back before walking over to his designated side of the bed. He began the process to remove his shirt and fold it when she made a noise of disapproval. Athena walked to her armoire and through the doors open, looking at all the unnecessary clothes within.

“‘Tis a shame. Instead of keeping your clothes on that small nightstand. . . you could. . . keep some. . . Fuck it-” She pushed the clothes that Vivienne had initially picked out to the far side, revealing a drawer that was hidden by the lengths of the gowns. When she opened, it she found nothing but space, a smile coming to her lips. “Here if you want. If-if you want.”

Solas made a sound before walking over to her, resting a hand in between her shoulder blades while leaning over at her side to examine the thing himself. “Where did you get all of these wardrobe options from? It seems. . . excessive.” He arched a brow and moved his hand through them to look at them, making small faces at the choices Vivienne has made. She giggled and nudged him with a shrug.
“I completely agree but you’re changing the subject. What do you think? You’re here every night anyways, vhenan, and that way you can be comfortable. I picked this tower in part because it looked decrepit and crumbling so people would leave me alone. There is plenty of space for some of your things.” He stood up straight and smoothly lifted his over his head, folding it quickly to put it in the empty drawer. Almost like he was assessing it, he looked at it amongst all of her things and shrugged.

“That is a reasonable enough suggestion.” He then broke his stance and smiled, supporting her back while pushing her against the bed. She released a cry of surprise, wrapping a leg around his back for support as her hands clung to his shoulders. He captured her lips and she could not help but smile under it, cupping his face with her hands once her back was safely against the bed and his hand was pulling her thigh closer to him. Before they could get too carried away she patted on his chest, pulling back with a wicked smirk.

“I just realized. I’ve never even seen your room. Tomorrow we can move some things over? Like a typical, boring couple that isn’t planning a siege on a Grey Warden fortress?” She asked with some hope in her voice. He nodded, resting his forehead against hers while simultaneously pressing his hips down into hers.

“We can rectify that. . . .tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the support as always! <3

Song: All I Ask of You - Phantom of the Opera
Unfortunate Politics

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

What Athena thought was going to be a plain day of moving boxes ended up being an impromptu day hashing out all of the specific details of the attack. They estimated that the Inquisitor would be returning in a week and planned to turn towards Adamant the moment she set her bag down. Athena had been in a heated training session with Harmony and Command. The former demon of Rage would assault her mind while Command would practice her martial skills. She was a champion with the spear and was teaching Athena techniques that would benefit her since she could summon her own spiritual weapon with fire. Solas and Inspiration were watching on the side, their eyes flicking back and forth between the three while making small commentary. They had convinced him to not go check on Wisdom’s resting location. They had also avoided doing a shared glance of annoyance that would have definitely given them away, but they continued.

The dream was interrupted by a loud knocking noise at her door in the physical world. It repeated itself, which ruled out the idea of it being a messenger. Athena rolled her eyes to Solas and with a quick wave to their spiritual companions they were back into the physical world. She groaned and rubbed her face into her lover’s arm, pulling the blanket over her shoulder and rejecting the possibility that the morning was already there. He chuckled and kissed her on top of the head while slowly moving towards the door. He was still wearing pants so he wasn’t entirely decent but he stole the blanket from the top of the sheets to wrap around his torso. She retracted her legs and bent them so they were as close to her core as possible, cursing under her breath in a mixture of Elvish and English.

Solas opened the door and she heard a stammered voice outside. “Ah- uh – Solas. I was expecting Athena.” The elf casually kept the blanket around his chest, shooting Athena a glance that she knew meant trouble. She turned on her back in the bed and rested a forearm over her forehead, watching the exchange play out with a sick amount of curiosity.

“She is present but still rousing from her sleep. Is there a message I can pass on for you?” He sounded so diplomatic and casual, like the Commander hadn’t just nearly walked in on them in their morning glory. Cullen cleared his throat and she assumed he was averting his gaze or being bashful, but instead she heard the hardened voice of the leader of the troops come in.

“She is needed across the bridge with the troops for a briefing. They are leaving for a rendezvous point to make the trip quicker when the Inquisitor returns. As soon as possible.” He raised the level of his voice at the last words and she sat up in bed with a curious gaze. Solas nodded, his lips curled in minor satisfaction at the other man’s discomfort.

“Thank you, Commander. I will pass the message along.” She heard Cullen’s footsteps echo down
the stairs and once he was out of range she let out a sigh and rubbed her hands into her eyes.

“Fantastic. Rathein still isn’t back and I’m playing Inquisitor again. Better not keep him waiting; he sounded prickly.” She moved over and quickly wrapped her feet with navy blue foot wrappings, tucking the last piece in behind her calf. Solas was already at the armoire, grabbing articles of clothing that would match the wrappings she had picked out. He had chosen a long-sleeved navy blue shirt that had a soft, ruffled scarf to go with it in matching colors. The pants were black and he had her tan jacket hanging off the edge of his finger. As he handed her each piece she slid it on, running her hands through her hair quickly. It still had volume and curls from the day before but it would have to do. When she slid her arm through one sleeve of the jacket he assisted her with the other, squeezing her shoulders while bending over and kissing her cheek.

“Prickly is not the word I would use. Jealous, perhaps. I do not think he expected to see your half-clothed lover standing in the doorway.” She laughed and reached up to run her hand over the back of his head.

“If I’m not mistaken, weren’t you jealous of a certain Tevinter that has no interest in my nether parts whatsoever?” Her voice was high and aloof, gaze looking to the ceiling. He chuckled into her neck, bringing her close in a quick embrace. She could still feel the heat of his chest even through her clothes and it brought a similar heat in the base of her belly.

“A misunderstanding, surely. My interests in that area have not changed, however.” Athena flushed when his lips touched the small bare piece of skin above the scarf and underneath her chin. She turned and kissed him on the cheek, patting him on the shoulder as her embarrassed blush traveled to her chest.

“Wicked, you are. Hopefully this meeting will not last long. I will meet you in the rotunda after? That is if I do not get dragged into a dreadful meeting or something.” Solas smiled and pushed on her back and put her towards the door. She patted on her leg and summoned for Kain to come to her. He instantly perked up from his sleep and ran down the stairs with excitement in knowing who they were going to see. She looked over her shoulder one last time, memorizing the way Solas immediately went back to lay in bed in the spot she was in. It was the little moments that drove her further in love with him.

The wind was unforgiving and there was a biting chill in the air. She pulled her jacket closed and pushed the scarf higher up until it was tickling the bottom of her jawline and chin. Kain and her did a lazy jog across the bridge to where Cullen was standing with messengers swarming around him like bees. She could hear the command and point in his tone, her posture suddenly straightening. She looked down to Kain and his did too, a soft whine coming from her throat as they finished crossing the bridge and stood before the clearing that was in front of the forest.
Nearby she could feel Claw and the pack calling out to her, getting excited that she was in such a close vicinity. Small cries and howls echoed from the depths of the forest and instantly the soldiers stopped and looked slowly towards her. Cullen looked to them, opening his mouth to bark questions at them before he followed their gaze to her.

Instead of the usual bashfulness, his gaze hardened and his brow furrowed. She crossed her arms over her chest, the stubborn side of her showing up to the conversation. Athena arched a single brow towards him while Kain sat by her loyally. “I was summoned, Commander?”

He scoffed lightly, looking her up and down. His gaze stopped at her face but he wasn’t looking directly at her eyes. Did he notice her hair was different? Around the Keep she normally wore it up in some kind of ponytail or lazy style, so this curly day-after down style was new. “Yes, we need to go over the plans for Adamant with the troops. They are being dispatched today and the senior officers wanted to hear more on the dragon and the demons we will be facing.”

She wanted to take a step back in recoil but simply huffed a breath, tapping her finger on her arm while keeping her gaze on him. “Alright, what part of my previous briefing was unclear? I can reiterate if necessary, but I thought we had covered the details already.” She could not hide the tone of annoyance because of the odd stares she was getting from his senior officers behind him. Loranil was among them and he happened to catch her gaze for a moment, giving her an apologetic glance and shrug since he was at the Commander’s back.

“We have the strategy for the battlements and breaking through the gates, but we are most concerned about the dragon. It did a hell of a job at Haven and we want to know your exact plan for it.” Athena blinked twice, looking down to Kain with an amused expression. The wolf tilted his head as well, a playing smirk on his maw that only made her snarky attitude increase in her head.

“My plan? To distract a dragon? I was going to use my pre-known knowledge of the layout of Adamant and pick a course that is away from the Inquisitor’s path to save our troops from further damage done by that creature. I will be taking an aerial approach, typically a zig-zag pattern is the best to confuse an enemy.” She made the motion with her hand, speaking completely in an official tone with her face remaining plain the whole time. Loranil was grinning ear-to-ear behind Cullen, who was not having any of it. He clenched his hands into fists at his side, letting out a controlled sigh before meeting her gaze with his own that sent a shiver down her spine.

“We would like to see how you fly –“ The Commander nearly demanded, her face breaking into something of anger as she took a step towards him.

“I don’t know how it happened in the Chantry, Commander, but I am not a street performer who will show my tricks on demand. Trust in me, sir. I will do my part and protect our people.” Kain let out a huff of air in agreement, standing up while sending her itch to leave the conversation. His tail
was stiff behind him as he watched their conversation. Even if he as friends with the Commander, he was her familiar and her friend first. When there was no response except for a smile of encouragement from her elvish friend she began to walk past them silently, her gaze set on the forest that was just within reach.

A firm grip on the back of her arm stopped her. Athena’s eyes widened, aura flaring to heat underneath his touch as the coil of rage within her belly expanded. “I do not want Haven’s mistakes to happen again.” Even if he meant it in a warning, a sign of his vulnerability about the situation, she curled her lips into a snarl. They blamed Haven on her. Would they blame Adamant on her too if there was a single life lost? They had gone over every detail imaginable, even the boulder that read “up your taint, blighters!” What more could she add to the situation to instill trust? Loranil trusted her. Even in this conversation he was more on her side than his Commander’s.

Kain moved in front of her, looking to Cullen’s hand on her arm while letting out a whine. Breathe. He whispered into her head, poking his nose into her bare hand. The snow around her bare feet began to melt as her aura peeled away from its slumber, the white of her eyes overtaking her gaze. The wolf stepped back with a sigh and she shrugged out of the Commander’s grip just in time for a wash of white flame to overtake her body. The shifts were coming quicker, especially when her emotions were running high like they were.

“Maker – Athena!” He snapped, raising his hands to cover his face as the heat from her body created a small current of air. The other soldiers mimicked his motion but Loranil simply crossed his arms and admired the flames, relishing in the heat they provided in the frost of winter. She turned, raising up on the ball of her foot before spinning in a graceful motion. During the move her blue wings uncurled from her back and extended out as far as they would go. The bitter part of her wanted to craft horns on top of her head, but that would be going overboard, even for her.

“By your leave, Commander.” She stated slowly through clenched teeth, stepping forward and bowing as low as she could with a sarcastic flourish. When she turned back towards the forest the flames disappeared with a snap in the air, as if all of the sound were sucked out of the air at once. The troops had gone still and silent as her feet crunched through the snow, a wicked smirk playing at the corner of her lips. From the back, she heard a distant calling, happiness lifting the voice over the crowd of men.

“Dareth shiral, Fen’Elgara!” Loranil shouted, his hands cupped over his mouth. She flicked her hand at him in a gesture, smiling full once the trees were almost in arms reach. From her left she heard a whisper underneath her breath from a voice that raised the taste of bile in her throat.

“Bitch.” Fucking Arthur Greystone. Apparently, he had been allowed back in the army, just lowered in rank by the look of his armor and weaponry. She didn’t even have to say anything, Kain had sensed it all and heard it all. In a blur of fur and snow the wolf charged at him. The soldier slid
on the snow and fell down on his back, scrambling back from Kain as he approached him snarling with fangs bared. He was nearly on top of the man when Athena whistled tersely, shooting the man a knowing glance. Claw and the other wolves appeared from out of the tree line, curious as to why the normally playful Kain had bared his feral side.

The alpha let out a bark of laughter and summoning, bringing Kain back into their fold. They all disappeared as a pack within the forest and she shrugged off her jacket and scarf, hanging it on the closest and strongest branch. The wind brushed across her skin and helped spur the magic that brought her into her wolf form. The white of her fur matched that of the snow and she was reminded of the first time she shifted with them. There was so much fear in her heart, so much anger from the people of Haven. The different members of the pack began nipping at her legs and hide, urging for her to run with them. There were several hoof marks in the snow that showed either an elk or a ram had gone through the area. Steam fell from their maws as excited yelps and whines echoed around her. Athena began to wag her tail slowly, nodding to Claw before taking off like a bullet after the largest set of hooves in the snow.

The pack ran through the afternoon to help edge the morning’s anger away. They feasted on the small elk together and took a nap in a clearing underneath the sun that had peaked through the clouds. Athena had two of the smaller wolves on her back with Kain curled up by her belly. Their breaths all rose and fell in a synchronized unison, a sense of absolute relaxation taking over their minds. She woke first out of them all, licking her maw and yawning while stretching out her front and hind legs. Kain stirred, growling underneath his breath in reaction but slowly calming down. Better? He asked, his voice sliding over her mind with familiarity. She nodded and stood carefully, trying not to wake the others. Before they left she went and licked each of their heads, pressing her nose to Claw’s head especially. They all made some noise of recognition or affection, one of the younger ones waking to completely cover her face in kisses.

The pair trotted back to where they had left and she noticed that nobody had touched her clothes. Kain licked around her maw to clean off the last bits of blood before she shifted back. Every time she shifted, she got better at keeping her clothes intact. This time they sat exactly how they left them so all she had to do was slide on her jacket and wrap her scarf around her neck. Kain stayed by her side within arm’s reach as they crossed the bridge. The guards nodded and smiled to her, pretending that nothing had changed since her display earlier in the day. Athena smiled and waved back, her spirits lifted after a hunt and nap with her pack.

Loranil’s minor defiance of his Commander in support of her gave her a swell of pride. He openly called her Fen’Elgara in front of the troops. More than likely it was a playful jab at her since he knew the title made her uncomfortable, but the support still made her feel at home. Somehow it was with the elves in the Inquisition was where she felt like she could unwind, at least outside of the Inquisitor’s party. They were more relaxed, especially in their shared language. It was why they deserved everything she had to offer in this world. The future of the elves was the problem that persisted even after the Inquisition, and even though she agreed that the Veil needed to come down she did not think it needed to come down in a torrent of fiery chaos. More elves needed to be helped before the end of the Inquisition, and that was luckily in her capability. She ran up the steps to her room, grabbing a quill and scroll before jotting down a quick note before doubt could enter
her mind.

The ravens were kept up in the top of the castle where Leliana hid away. With Kain at her back, she ascended all of the stairs until she found the raven that knew the path to the Marquise of the Dale’s residence. The raven pecked at her fingers but she soothed it by running her hand over the top of its head and down its bath, smiling when it began to make small noises of comfort. She tied the scroll to its foot and tapped the speed rune that was etched into an anklet that looked to be made from obsidian. The rune glowed with power, giving the bird a cue to hop to the nearest window and depart.

The Spymaster hummed and walked into view as if from the shadows. “I don’t think I have ever seen you send a raven before, Lady Athena. What is the occasion?”

Athena smiled, putting her hands on the window to watch the raven catch a wind current and disappear out of view. “I wish to speak with Brialia regarding the future of the elves; it has become one of the things associated with me, has it now?” Leliana nodded, looking her up and down before turning back to her desk. Truthfully, the message would be innocent enough to anyone who read it, but only Brialia would see the true meaning.

Lady Brialia,

I feel it is time we meet to discuss the future of the People. When the moons are high in the sky on Sunday eve, meet me where all of the paths meet.

Fen’Elgara

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all of your continued support! <3
The days passed quickly and soon Sunday night was upon her. It was difficult to wait until Morrigan was asleep but she spent the night with Leafy and Tobi in their room. They had pushed the beds together, as usual, and she slept in the crack while the children threw their arms over her. At one point Solas had come looking for her and slid a blanket over them. She smiled and buried her face more into the pillow, dozing back off for a few hours until Kain came in at his assigned time and woke her up with a cold press of his nose to her cheek. It was difficult getting out of the bed without waking the children but after a few minutes of moving inch by inch she was leaving the room and out in the garden. There was a fresh layer of snow over everything and instantly her feet felt the chill. Athena dashed down the hall to the room where Morrigan’s eluvian was stored, placing her hand on the door to check for wards.

Oddly enough, there were none, only on the room where Morrigan herself slept.

The pair slid into the room and closed the door behind them. Athena traced a simple alarming ward on the door with her finger and tapped the center to set it in. It was something she had seen in a sort of “magic for dummies” book that Dorian had sarcastically lent her. Kain silently knew what he needed to do, finding a place in the center of the dirty storage room for him to keep watch. It was no wonder why there weren’t more wards in the place; the room was a sty. Broken furniture filled it from wall to wall and she could barely make out the large, tall, and flat covered eluvian in the back. The dirty sheet covering its surface blended in with the rest of the room so it appeared to be hidden in plain sight.

She moved over the furniture piece by piece, being very careful as to not make any noise. There was the ambient bustling of the castle at night that provided a certain white noise of protection outside, but she was still fearful of drawing too much attention. Minutes went by but eventually she was standing in front of the mirror, under the protective sheet with her nose almost to the glass. She rested her hand on it, nearly breathless at the fact that she was touching an eluvian, a gateway of ancient Arlathan. Would the passcode even work? Was it still relevant?

“Only one way to find out. Okay, here we go. Fen’Harel enansal.”

Light from the eluvian nearly blinded her, the piece humming with an ancient magic that made her bones ache. Wild curiosity took over her and she plunged herself through it, hands trembling in excitement at what she was about to see. In the books, it was described that when a human stepped into the Crossroads it was black and white, or the colors were not as crisp and clear. When in the in-between realm long enough, they would grow fatigued and get headaches. Hopefully the meeting with Briala would be short. Part of the purpose of the meeting was to test out the eluvian...
while the other part was to reinforce her support for the elves and create a channel of communication between them. She did not have the resources yet to learn how the elves were doing in Denerim, the Brecilian Wood, the Dales, or even Orlais itself. The massacre in the alienage of Halamshiral could not be repeated again, at least as long as she was there. It was a horrible political power play made by the previous Empress and even if Briala was the Empress now, the Game was still a factor in it all.

The light from the eluvian closed behind her and she rubbed her eyes to get the haze out of them from the sudden increase in brightness. In the Crossroads, it still felt like nighttime. The temperature was slightly better but she could feel the cold of the stone beneath her feet. She could feel that Kain was sniffing around the room but was still on his guard, occasionally looking back to where she had disappeared. Athena opened her eyes and blinked as her gaze adjusted to the area. Magic tingled on her skin and it felt familiar to the Fade somehow. Her mana pool was flowing and the air felt crisper than at Skyhold.

She walked out to the main circles of eluvians, always keeping the one she came out in the corner of her vision. There were dozens of them scattered all about her. The majority of them had been shattered through time, their ornate frames standing after a thousand years of neglect. Her gaze bounced from portal to portal, her body spinning naturally as she tried to take them all in. The euphoria and excitement of being in the new place set into her nerves. There were spherical shaped trees that jutted from the ground on the sides of each eluvian, their branches bare of any leaves. Athena could barely catch her breath from the sight of it all, and yet...

“You are faring much better than those of your kind in this place. I wanted to believe you wouldn’t come, that the rumors of your knowledge were not true.”

Briala’s voice brought her around to see her and two guards at her sides with arrows drawn and aimed at her. She held her hands up in surrender, shaking her head back and forth to shake some of the shock off. The place was beautiful to her, untouched by the cruelty of mankind and...

It was in color. Vibrant colors in the golden frames of each eluvian and even to the skies where there were swirling mixtures of purples and greens, something similar to the Northern Lights of her world. Her mouth was dry but she nodded to the Marquise of the Dales, moreso the Empress of Orlais.

“It is . . . wonderful. I’ve never seen anything like it.” The elven woman arched a brow underneath the mask, tilting her head with a cross of her arms over her chest.

“Wait – what do you see, Lady Athena?” The Marquise gestured for the guards to lower their weapons and they did, but both of them did not move their eyes from her.
“Everything, Empress, everything.” Her words were hollow, confused, and somewhat amazed. What did this mean? How was she able to see things that other humans were not? This was supposed to be a dull, grey, lifeless place for the humans, dwarves, and Qunari. Athena wasn’t an elf or even half. It didn’t make sense. If Wisdom were still living she would have fled the Crossroads and gone into the Fade immediately to consult her on it, but the ritual they performed still hadn’t produced any results. This wasn’t something she could go to Solas about since he was still searching for how to obtain the eluvians from Briala. She wasn’t sure how Fen’Harel obtained them in the end, but she didn’t want innocent people hurt because of her.

“You prove to be more surprising every day. I’m assuming my passcode was something known from your past?” Athena took in a deep breath and focused her mind, pushing back all confusion of how she could tolerate the place.

“Yes, as well as your time in this place. My knowledge of this world is rather scattered. That is not what I’m worried about; that I can handle. The reason I called this meeting was to help fill in what I do not know and how I can help.” Her posture finally relaxed and she was surprised at how confident her voice was. Apparently somewhere between the ball and now I’ve actually become a politician of sorts. Fucking great.

“What would you like to help with, Madam Sorciere? Please, come sit. This standing is creating unnecessary tension. We are allies, after all.” The woman stated with a wink, walking over to a stone bench that rested in front of a cracked and broken eluvian. It had gnarled vines twisting up the sides of its frame, creating roses that were long since dead at its top. “I am hearing that your work for the elves has not ceased since Halamshiral. The Dalish clan has safely been moved, the ones you recruited have been reassigned, and my sources even tell me you have a child of your own from the People?” There was something calculating behind the silver mask of the Marquise and Athena could barely restrain her eye roll. Instead, she smiled at the mention of her adopted daughter, resting her hands in her lap while sitting next to the woman.

With a chuckle on her lips she looked next to her and shrugged. “Yes, emma’asha. She is a crazy bit of energy but I feel that she does the people proud. All of what you said it true and I hope to do more. The Inquisition is supposed to be a beacon for people everywhere, that anyone who comes will be treated as an equal.” Athena let out a sigh and rubbed the back of her head, trying not to show how nervous she was even though Briala’s trained eyes could probably see right through it. “I apologize, Empress. I did not fully anticipate for the code to work and for, well, me to see as you do here. My words are minced, but I truly wanted to know if there are more places where I can help. Being with the Inquisition puts me in a unique place, surrounded by unique individuals. Have you heard anything that I can help with? Anything even from Ferelden or beyond?”

The guards looked to one another, genuine smiles on their faces in the conversation. She had a feeling they didn’t see too many humans loudly voicing their support for their kind. Athena had personally seen too much discrimination and racism from her world to allow it to happen in
Thedas. Briala let out a small hum, leaning back on the bench casually while tapping her foot against the ground. “Since your display in the Plains, Gaspard has not dared to act out again. The alienage in Halamshiral is rebuilding without threat of the common people attacking them again. I have heard rumors of unrest in the alienage in Denerim, but there are no specific sources. Perhaps if any of the representatives of Ferelden come to the ball your Ambassador is hosting for Wintersend you can inquire about the subject?”

Athena smiled with a nod, looking at the expanse of the scenery as her ally spoke. “I will try. Are you coming? I do not know who all the Ambassador invited.”

The Marquise of the Dales nodded with a small shrug. “I am, but be warned, the Emperor of Orlais will also be in attendance. I would keep your lover at your hip at all times.” There was a twinkle of wicked knowing in her eyes and she didn’t flinch, feigning a blush and turning her face away.

“I suppose I will. Thank you for meeting with me, Briala. I swear to you the secret of this place is safe. I would never jeopardize the safety of you or your people. If you need to speak with me or ask anything of me, I’m only a raven away.” Briala hardened her gaze and nodded slowly, standing to leave with her guards. Athena sat on the bench for a moment, strategically waiting to leave last so she wouldn’t know the precise location of where Skyhold’s eluvian rested.

“And same with me, Sorciere. Normally I would not trust a shem with this secret and would have put a blade in your throat. . . “ She looked to Athena for some sort of reaction but did not get one. Athena clenched her jaw but kept her expression pleasant, knowing that was exactly how it would have ended if she was not trusted. “But, I am hearing the name Fen’Elgara more on the lips of my people. They look to us for a better future. Let us work together to provide them with one.” The trio of elves moved to disappear into the fog that was the Crossroads when Athena hummed in realization, reaching out with a hand to halt them.

“Oh! Thank you for the gift! It has done Skyhold well!” Her voice was slightly embarrassed and caught off guard. Briala paused, looking over her shoulder with a nod before nearly melding in with the fog. She waited a few minutes before finally letting out a breath of nerves, bending forward and rubbing the back of her neck. “That could of went much worse.” Her voice was a tired grumble and she was realizing that the children’s beds did not do her any favors. There was a stiffness on her right side that twitched with every moment and shot a pain down her leg. According to Tobi it made Lev’adin fall asleep faster and she didn’t seem to have nightmares, so that was a bonus.

It felt like it was around three in the morning so she stood up from the bench and stretched to the sky, letting out a groan as three cracks shot up her lower spine. Athena took her time getting back to her eluvian, whispering the passcode before tapping on it with her fingertips. It hummed underneath and allowed her passage into the now seemingly dull storage room. Kain began to whine and wag his tail, bounding over the pieces of furniture to get to her face and cover it in gestures of affection. The eluvian died down behind her to its dormant phase and she let out a
breath she didn’t realize she was holding in. “Did I really just do that, boy?” She asked, pressing her forehead to his and kissing between his eyes. He guided her out to the garden and then she finally felt free of the situation. She had taken her first step to do something she wanted within this world. A smile came over her face and it remained even though she heard a voice come from her side.

“Cannot sleep, Lady Athena?” Morrigan’s pointed tone cut through the night but Athena felt safe since she was standing in the middle of the garden instead of right outside the door. She rolled her gaze over to her and shrugged, rubbing the back of her neck.

“I fell asleep in the children’s room and was woken up by this mutt.” She nudged Kain’s side with her foot playfully, feeling more energetic in the crisp winter chill.

“You are not the only one. I heard some laughter from inside of the castle. Shall we investigate since we are both awake?” The Witch’s eyes twinkled with curiosity and she could not deny her. Athena extended a hand to her with somewhat of a flirtatious grin.

“Why of course, Lady Morrigan. We shall.” She looked at the arm and then smirked, placing hers on it casually as they walked together from the garden into the main hall. Morrigan was right, there was giggling echoing throughout the hall. Athena looked to her with an arched brow, glancing down to Kain who was sniffing to try and identify who was there.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the continued support! <3
Morrigan and Athena walked through the main hall together, linked arm in arm as they walked through the normally silent keep of Skyhold at night. She could personally feel her heart racing in her neck, making it feel like something was going to burst out of the sides. Even though she was already standing in the middle of the garden when the Witch found her, there was always the small possibility that she had seen her leave the room with the eluvian in it. Would she say anything? The woman was crafty and had a tendency to further her own desires. The biggest fear in the back of her mind was that she was would say something in front of Solas, but that kind of deception and mischief would require Morrigan knowing about the Dread Wolf. From that kind of backstabbing she was safe. Saying something on a supposed accident in front of the group to make her look bad? The more probable possibility.

She could feel her eyes begin to glow as she tapped into Kain’s senses to smell who was inside. There was the present perfume that clung to Josephine’s clothes and furniture but there were a few other scents. The strangest one was the smell of polish for armor. The power from her eyes faded when they walked through the door and cleared their throats in unison. Morrigan was confused, but the initial sight explained everything for Athena. Cassandra, Josephine, and Leliana were all sitting in a circle in front of the campfire in the Ambassador’s office. They all were holding the same book and it was difficult to see the title, the instant blush creeping up the Seeker’s neck explained everything.

“What are you doing awake? It’s only a few hours until dawn!” Cassandra spat, doubt and a mixture of shame leaking into her voice to bring it to a higher pitch. Morrigan chuckled and released herself from Athena’s side, gesturing to them all with her infamous cat-like smile.

“My my. I could ask you ladies the same thing. Surely the needs of the Inquisition do not go this long into the night? Shall I fetch the Commander? He is the only one of the Inner Council not present besides the Inquisitor, but we have her hand right here.” The Witch’s eyes fell to the book cover and then her smile didn’t grow, but changed in character. Almost out of knowing herself Morrigan’s expression turned wicked while Athena covered her mouth with her hand to hide a chuckle.

Josephine tucked a stray hair behind her ear, failing to hide the blush growing on her cheeks. “Well – ah – We normally meet when the Inquisitor is here but we... couldn’t sleep and grew impatient.” Leliana didn’t even look up or have a face of shame. She sat on the ground with her back leaning against the wall next to the fireplace, flipping through the pages with an amused curl on her lips.

Before anymore teasing could happen, Athena held her hand up, an almost joyous smile on her face. “No worries ladies. Rathein was supposed to hook me up with copies of the books as well but that we before Haven when we went to Val Royeaux. I think she forgot but I would love to read them. Do you have all of the chapters? I’m a quick read.”
Re-reading Harry Potter as a yearly tradition made it easy for her to pick up details quickly. Ever since she was a child she was an avid reader. Shoving her mind into fantasy was a consistent trend through her life and now it was kind of ironic considering where she was. Cassandra smiled, scratching the back of her neck with an embarrassed glance down to the ground. She had never seen the Seeker in anything but her armor; it made her appear almost vulnerable. She was wearing the high-necked formal wear that Rathein would wear around the keep but Cassandra’s had darker tones of grey and black mixed throughout. It made her features appear striking in contrast to the color and oddly enough it fit her character.

“Yes, Lady Athena. I . . . have them. Josephine, do you have the first one with you? Perhaps she could start and catch up to us?” There was a glimmer of hope in the dark-haired woman’s eyes as she looked from Athena to the Ambassador, her hands playing with the pages of the chapter in her lap.

Josephine was on the move, pushing up from her chair and going over to the bookcase. Her hands skimmed over books with official-looking bindings, but then she plucked from the middle of the bunch and opened it up to the first page. She nodded with a smirk, transferring the book to one hand and closing it with a thud. “This will be it. It gets better as it goes on. So much better.” Her voice dropped down low and she met Athena’s eyes with a smile. She took the book, reading the binding on the outside.

“History of Orlesian Carnivales. Wonderful cover, Josephine. Hiding it in plain sight, no?” The woman laughed with a small nod as she returned to her seat and picked up where she left off in her book. Morrigan clicked her tongue against her teeth, looking to all of them with a leery gaze. “Sorcìere, I feel like I’m missing something.” Athena giggled and flipped to the beginning of the story, raising the book so that she could see it over her shoulder.

“Literature, Morrigan. Smutty smutty literature written by our own Varric Tethras. He claims it’s his least favorite publication, but from the whispers of the ladies in the kitchen and now half of our Inner Council it must be a good read. Would you like to stick around?” Athena asked with hope in her voice, turning her body so that she was positioned in between Josephine’s chair and the door where Morrigan was lingering. The Witch held her hands up in surrender, a smirk playing on her lips. Athena saw a flash of sincerity move over her face but then the usual coy and mysterious aura returned. “I will pass. Kieran tends to wake up early in the mornings so I should return to his side. Enjoy the rest of your evenings, Ladies of the Inquisition.” There was a subtle insult in her words but Athena didn’t care. She was already laying down in front of the fire on her stomach with the book in her hands.
Cassandra hummed in satisfaction, crossing her legs and leaning over the book again. She looked up to Athena with a childish smile, nudging her leg with her hand. “Let me know who your favorite character is. Mine is the Knight Commander, when you get to her. I’ll leave you to your readings. You have a lot of catching up to do.”

Athena arched a brow and looked over her shoulder, her lips curling into a teasing smile. “Is that an order, Seeker?”

Cassandra caught onto the joke and let out a small scoff. “It would be a strange one, but in this room? Get to work.” The woman hardened her features for a moment but then winked, looking down to her pages and holding them as delicately as she would a thousand-year-old poetry book. Athena let out a sigh and looked down to the story in front of her, the exhaustion and meeting with Briala fading away into her memory as Varric’s words swept her away. It was unfortunate that she read it in his voice, but hopefully that would fade.

Hours went by and the normal bustle of Skyhold began. Kain was sleeping at her side next to the fire as she read and the other women were in the same positions as the hours before, save for Cassandra who had slipped away to change into her armor. When she came back, she sat down in a chair with a forced straightened posture from the chest piece but continued to read. The door was opened with a forceful push and the heavy sounds of boots echoed through the room. Josephine looked up from her chair and nodded to whoever entered but Athena could not be bothered. She was in the middle of a hot and heavy section and her hands were pressing into the book like it was her string to eternal life itself.

Kain looked up with a single eye open, his tail slowly wagging at the arrival of a new visitor. He lifted his head so he could yelp a greeting before resting his head back down on the tops of his paws. The visitor chuckled and the voice brought forth an anger to the front of her mind that disrupted her from reading. “Good morning, Kain. Ladies.”

The other ladies hummed in unison and Athena stretched forward, arching her back up like a cat with the book still in her hands. This movement disrupted Kain and he finally shook off the sleep from his fur and trotted over to Cullen, resting his hand in his hand and licking the inside of his gloved palm. Athena bristled, remembering their interaction from yesterday with a clenched jaw. He had a tendency to get down to business when it was about his men, but asking her to shift on command? It wounded her pride and felt humiliating. It was something she had just grown confident doing in front of her friends that knew her, but to the soldiers who whispered her name behind their backs? The ones that were afraid of her? It would ruin any chances she had of being somewhat normal in their eyes.
“Did... you not get sleep?” He asked the group nervously, committing more to welcoming Kain by dropping to a squatting position and rubbing behind the wolf’s ears. She could hear happy growls of welcome, the mongrel’s eyes closed as he began to pant. *Traitor.* She whispered inside of his mind bitterly, turning the next page of her books while fighting the blush on her chest from reading it.

“Why yes. None of us could sleep so we gathered to... study.” Josephine stammered towards the end, looking up to the Commander with a pleasant smile on her face. How the other three women hid the bags under their eyes and the grouchiness, Athena didn’t know. She could feel annoyance trickling up from the back of her neck from the lack of sleep and the remnants of her anger towards him from the spat from the day before.

“Study? What subject in particular?” He walked over and stood near Josephine’s desk with a curious expression on his face. The other women froze and Athena smiled, taking the chance for a quick and sweet revenge.

“Something you wouldn’t enjoy, Cullen. I assure you.” She baited, folding down a piece of ribbon to save her space in the book before standing up.

He scoffed, looking her up and down and she could see a bit of frustration from the day before on his features. “I can be the judge of that. May I see?” He asked, extending a hand towards her book. Leliana instantly beamed a grin and Cassandra opened her mouth to say something. Before either of them could give the game away Athena handed the book to him, a coy smile on her face. Cullen’s eyes fell down the lines of text and she instantly saw his trademark blush flush across his cheeks and neck.

“For the love of Andraste – really!” He closed the book and shoved it into her chest and she gently put her hands around the cover.

“What? I am simply learning from her teachings. She had both her husband of the mortal and ethereal planes, correct? It is my utmost duty as Hand of the Inquisitor to embody our Blessed Andraste in all of my actions. I finally see the light; this is really helping me out.” Leliana had the decency to laugh and understand she was joking but Cassandra scoffed, pushing up from her point on the ground. When Athena looked over her shoulder at her she saw that there was a smile on the corner of the Seeker’s eyes but she was using the pseudo-aggression at her blatant blasphemy to leave the room.
Cullen was obviously flustered. Either by her jab towards his Prophet or at the fact that she had tricked him into reading the dirtiest lines of smut in the book. He shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose, but she arched a brow because underneath it she saw a flicker of a smile on his face. “I’ll leave you ladies to it then.” He grumbled, turning on his heel and turning towards the office. Athena placed the book on the corner of Josephine’s desk, clicking her tongue against the back of her teeth to catch his attention. He paused but didn’t look over his shoulder, simply nodded up to show he was listening.

“Consider this even, Commander.” He chuckled and shook his head, pushing open the doors to the War Council room.

“Consider it noted.” Athena smirked and turned on her heel as well. She picked up the book and waved it at Josephine, silently telling her she was going to borrow it and catch up. Josephine nodded and gestured up with her quill as a farewell, moving to her desk and beginning the official workday as Athena left. The main hall was beginning to bustle and there were people standing around and discussing the day before. They were talking of how the siege equipment and a good number of soldiers left and how the Inquisitor should be returning soon. She kept to the wall while snatching off an apple from a communal basket of fruit. Everything looked to be the same except for one minor details.

On top of the white piano was a clear jaw that looked like it was normally used to keep salves. Athena rested her book and apple on the surface, looking at the jar with an arched brow. There were little pieces of paper at the bottom folded in half or crinkled up. She shook the jar and hummed in question. Varric began chuckling behind her at his normal spot. The smell of tea came from the fireplace and suddenly she was craving a cup of coffee or a soda to get her day started. Jesus. Soda. The old taste washed over her mind and she found herself thirsty, but that would have to be fixed later.

“Varric. What the fuck is this?” She shook the jar and he looked up with a smile.

“I put it there. I’m not your secretary and people kept asking me when you were going to play and what. So I told the Blighters to put their thoughts into that and you would read them.” Athena nearly slammed the jar down on the piano, fishing out the first request. She read it allowed with annoyance and dread in her voice.

“Something in between happy and sad. Mysterious even.” She spawned fire at her fingertips and burned the request, looking to Varric with a glance of annoyance. He held his hands up in surrender and she scoffed. “Well. If I’m taking requests I’m going to get fucking paid. Where did you find these?” Varric pointed with his thumb to the rotunda and she stormed through the door, looking underneath the tall structure Solas had to paint on. He wasn’t in his office yet so she found another
empty glass jar and a small jar of red paint on his desk. She dipped her finger in the paint and wrote the word TIPS on the jar before bringing it out to the piano and sitting it next to the requests jar. Varric laughed and rubbed his hands with his eyes.

“Yeah, like you need any more money, Walker. I think all of us in the Inquisitor’s party are fine.” Athena wiped the paint off on the thigh of her pant leg and pulled her hair up out of her face into a lazy bun that sagged on the back of her head.

“Consider it for the orphans then. We could fix up a new room or even a small complex for them. It could be for the orphans and for the new recruits that have yet to be assigned to a place.” She cracked her fingers and rested them on top of the piano keys, sending a welcoming pulse of magic into the instrument to wake it and herself up.

“Ever the philanthropist. I’ll match half of what you earn from that jar, courtesy of the Merchant’s Guild. How does that sound?” Athena hummed with a smile, rolling her neck while trying to think of a song that would match the description. There were a couple that matched, but the key word was mysterious. There wasn’t anything she knew that wasn’t blatantly Halloween so she went with the original topic, something in between happy and sad. She considered it kind of a coffee-house jazz song so it would be easy going for the morning crowd of nobles and workers.

“I never believed that there was a rainbow. With a pot of gold at the end. I’m much too smart for fairy tales like that. But here I am again.”

A single Orlesian noble with a red painted mask glanced in her direction, a soft blush coming onto his cheeks as he returned to his conversation with the dwarf in front of him. Oh-ho-ho. Found you.

“I thought this time, this time we’re going to make it. Why I thought so, I really don’t know. Maybe something in his eyes just told me so. Something in his eyes. . . “

The piano tune carried the jazz melody through the hall and she altered her tone to extend on the notes and provide character, eyes closing with a smile on her lips as she lost herself to the song. The piano stole her exhaustion and gave her inspiration in return. Her hands felt lighter on the keys and the migraine that was starting was stolen from her head.

“Tell me lies, and I’ll come runnin’. I must have lost my mind! I could close my eyes. And tell you, just exactly what’s coming. Life’s going to turn just a little unkind.”
She felt two familiar touches on her back and she scooted to the center of the bench so the children could sit on either side of her. They were freshly bathed. Tobi’s hair was combed and Lev’adin was pulled back into tight braids that twisted into a bun. Athena smiled at them and nudged them both with her side while keeping her attention on the keys underneath her.

“Seems like everyone’s sailing, way out on the sea. And I’m stuck here on the shore. Sun’s always shining, but it’s never for me. Why should I try anymore?”

Leafy sighed, watching her hands with great intent while nibbling on a piece of toast. Tobi was holding his wooden sword in his lap, holding a straight posture as he sat on the bench next to her.

“Tell me lies, tell me lies. And I-I-I’ll just keep right on coming. This time I’ve got to believe in the dream. This time I’ve got...to believe in his dre-e-e-a-m.”

She finished with a soft sigh, bringing her children into a group hug. Tobi giggled, rubbing his face while looking up at her. “Are you going to tell a story again soon? The other kids keep asking and I don’t know what to tell them.”

Athena twisted her mouth to the side, humming in consideration before nodding. “Tonight. Lev’adin, would you want to go on a hunt with me and the wolves after? You must miss the woods.” The little girl instantly grinned, wrapping both of her arms around her waist and burying her face into her side.
Athena already knew which story she would be doing at that night’s campfire. Varric had prepped a few blank scrolls and a fresh pot of ink for the evening, joking that there were already interested parties asking about when they were going to release their book. Since there was a performance and a hunt to be had, she desperately needed a nap. On the walk, up to her tower she untwirled her scarf from her neck, letting out a sigh of exhaustion as she walked through the front door. The bed was already made and she noticed that instead of his clothes being on the nightstand they were missing, presumably in his new drawer in her wardrobe. She smiled, leaning her back against the door with a sigh on her lips.

“Sleep well with the children last night?” Solas called down from up on the loft. She quickly walked upstairs and saw him with his back against the wall reading a book while the sunshine from the window illuminated the room. He had a blanket wrapped around his shoulders but was still shirtless with his necklace hanging in the center of his chest. She let out a small hum before yawning and stretching her arms to the slightly shorter ceiling.

“That bed of theirs does not do me any favors.” He shook his head with a chuckle, thumbing to the next page of his book. With a quick glance, she saw that the title was Tevinter and looked to be about old runes. She arched a brow and sat next to him on the ground, stealing part of the blanket while leaning against his side. Solas turned to the side and pressed his forehead against hers, smirking to himself before shutting the book. Just being this close to him made her feel safe and insanely sleepy. Athena fought to keep her eyes open underneath the comfort of his warmth and the blanket they shared. He nudged her with his shoulder, pushing back from of the hair from her face.

“Would you like to go down to the bed then? It seems to be the better choice if your back is already hurting.” He nudged at her forehead with the tip of his nose, trying to get a better look at her face. She was already halfway asleep tucked up against his side, nuzzling her cheek into his shoulder while bringing his arm close to her chest as an anchor.

“Nope. Far too comfortable here. Would you join me in the Fade?” She whispered into his shoulder in a last attempt to cling to consciousness. His answer came in a swirl of magic over her body that brought her to a small clearing of the Fade where he was looking at her with an amused expression.

“Are we to train? I could summon Harmony for you.” There was a teasing smirk on the corners of his eyes and his lips which made her groan in annoyance. It was comforting knowing her body was getting sleep and it was becoming easier to slip into the Fade at the close of her eyes. She didn’t know if it was because of the ring he gave her or because of the focus on her spiritual magic.
training, but it was a handy little trick.

“Gods no. For one night, I would like to not think about the Nightmare Demon. I feel like it can hear me in here and that is entirely unnerving.” She rubbed her hands on her upper arms and allowed a shudder of nerves to shoot down her spine and into her toes. He looked over to her and nodded, extending a hand for her to grab. She took it instantly, following him down a path he was weaving through the Fade. She always remembered the Fade being this twisted, gnarled landscape with varying pits of ominous fluid with lots of altitude changes form the drastic hills. With him, things seemed calmer. There were more flat pastures of grass or wheat. “Can you show me something of the past? I feel like we’re always going to my world in our dreams.” She teased at him with a wink, squeezing his hand to emphasize her point.

Solas looked over her shoulder at him with a small smile on his lips, raising his other hand to flick it in a short gesture. The images of the Fade swirled around them and soon the dismal colors of the clearing turned brighter, with mixture of gold and green. She stopped mid-step, eyes widening as all of the details began to click into place. Tall ivory towers with ivy wrapped around them popped into existence, leading into a large palace of sorts that threatened to touch the clouds. Each room had cool marble floors covered by ornate rugs of varying dark colors. The elves that filled each room were dressed in their best clothes and the general theme was that flowy was better, flashier. The excess of fabric accentuated every movement they made and the minor details in their gowns and cloaks were mesmerizing. Athena fought to keep her jaw shut as Solas led her through the front doors, which were the size of giants and carved from a beautiful ornate wood with swirling designs of trees and leaves on the surface.

“Is this where I think it is?” She asked with joy in her voice. Her gaze constantly bounced to all of the new details that were sharpening in her peripherals even as he continued to weave her through a crowd towards the doors of the main ballroom. He nodded with a small hum, smiling over his shoulder at her before pulling her to his side and into an embrace.

“I believe this is a memory of Arlathan. It. . . was so long ago, the details can be twisted and muddied through the Veil. You have shown me dancing of your world.” Athena instantly blushed at the memory, remembering exactly how that dream played out towards the end. He looked stunning in a slim-fitted suit. It was a shame there weren’t more of her world’s clothes in Thedas. Perhaps she could have a sit down with Valerie to try and get more of her own styled clothes into her wardrobe. She would kill for a racerback tank top and a pair of jeans. Music swelled from inside of the ballroom and he placed a hand on the doors before hesitating. He shook his head and looked at them both up and down. He was still in his normal “Shepherd in wolf’s clothing” attire with the woven top with his foot wrappings. She wasn’t much better in a long-sleeved shirt with a soft scarf around her neck and tight-fitted pants. “Allow me to show you some of this one.”

He turned towards her and closed the distance between them, cupping her face in his hands while stroking her cheeks with his thumbs. Athena instantly smiled, raising up so that she could brush her lips against his. He smirked underneath the kiss, bringing her closer by sliding a hand to her lower back and bringing her body flesh against his. The chill of his magic wrapped around them like a
blanket and she could feel the fabric of her clothes shifting and changing against her skin. A sigh left her lips and he took it in, digging his nails into the soft of her upper back that was now exposed in the dress she was wearing. She ran her hands down his arms, feeling the curve of his biceps and resting on his forearms.

He broke off from the kiss with half a laugh, pressing his forehead against hers before opening his eyes. “Ah. There you are, Fen’Elgara.” He teased, looking down to her clothing. She arched a brow at him before looking down herself and using her hands to feel her hair. It was pulled back with curls and from what she could feel it reminded her of a Greek-style updo. Ironically. Looking down at the dress it was a pale gold that flowed down to her feet in a sheath-style make. There was a black band at her waist to accentuate her curves and then a choker around her neck that had straps running from it to the top of the dress. She raised her brows and nodded in approval, looking to him and taking a step back. He of course, was perfect. The sight of him took her breath away and instantly her cheeks were flush with want.

He was wearing almost a skin-tight black top that had sleeves down to his wrist, where a single ring of fabric looped over his middle finger to extend the sleeve. His legs were covered in black scaled armor that drew her eyes to the curves of his thighs and waist. There was a furred sash curving over his right shoulder to be tucked into his waistband but the color was black. She ran her hand through it, lips parted in amazement and a slight arousal at just how damned good he looked in it. “Well. Vhenan. In a rare moment, you have me completely speechless.” She attempted to wet her lips but found her mouth dry so instead she just rolled her eyes from his legs up to his face. He was looking pleased with himself, almost smug but he chuckled under his breath.

“I am pleased to see you approve. Would you like to see what is inside?” She nodded, pressing against his chest once more to kiss him on the cheek as a gesture of approval. He wrapped an arm around her waist and brought her against his side, pushing open the door with his free hand. Even though he said the memory was old, all of the elves within the dream looked vivid and sharp. She could see the features of their faces down to some of their valasslin. Solas’s face briefly twitched in annoyance at the site of the blood markings so she squeezed his upper arm and smiled at the sight before her. There were large arching windows on both sides of the ballroom, allowing moonlight to filter in from both sides. Tiles of gold and silver scaled the wales and decorated the ceiling and in between the designs there were large paintings. The ceilings were high up, but from what she could see they were of the Elvhen Gods.

There was almost a full orchestra in the back of the ballroom and she could see a familiar instrument at this front. Except this one was black instead of her white wooded one and the musician was wearing a green cloak that flowed over the bench and around them on the ground. Thankfully Solas was leading her to the dance floor because she was not paying attention to where she was walking. Everyone was just so beautiful! The air buzzed around them like there was static within the air but her hairs were not on end. Is this what the world felt like before the Veil? It felt easier to breathe, even though she was in a dream of a distant memory. As they walked through, people looked to them and nodded in recognition of their presence. Was this one of his dreams? She arched a brow and looked up to him. His face was one of nostalgia, a curl of a smirk on the corners of his lips. His posture was straighter and he looked to be more in his element. The
confidence he wore put a small twist of pleasure within her belly, a proud smile curling her lips as they walked to the center of the dance floor.

“Before the time of the Veil... magic was as natural as air. It flowed like a current, expanding time and the elvhen were lost within it. That was reflected in the dancing as well.” He lifted her arm and spun her gently before bringing her back in to where her chest was pressed against his, her hand resting in his to stay in a dancing posture. “They would last for hours, days, until they grew bored of it.” He took a step forward and she followed his lead, her eyes never leaving his as their bodies moved in the silent flow of the dancers around them. She could feel what he meant. There was a circular current of magic moving through the hall, potentially created by the dancers around them. The feeling was hypnotic, pulling on her spirit and encouraging her to follow. It was like a wave of energy crashed into her core with every move, filling her to the brim with foreign auras and awakening her own mana pool anew.

“How could anyone grow bored of this? It’s marvelous! I just feel...alive!” She exclaimed during a spin of a dance, instantly bringing her body back against his. He shrugged, gripping her hips and bringing her off of her feet as the group of dancers turned. They all moved as if they were programmed to do it, but she knew better. She could feel the moves coming before they needed to happen, as if the shared magic flowing through all of them was guiding her. No wonder Fen’Harel thought the elves of this world were Tranquil. There was no describing the feeling, even if it was just a fading memory.

“That I cannot say. Would you want to spend an eternity in a place like this?” He mused in an academic tone, sliding his hand to her lower back to support her as she bent backwards in his touch until her head nearly hit the dance floor. He used his other hand to trace down between her breasts and to her stomach and once he nearly hit her waist line he helped her come back into a standing position. The quick motion made her head spin but his touch fixed that. He had left a cool trail of magic tingling down her belly and she looked to him with hooded lids, nodding in response to his question.

“With you? Certainly. I can’t imagine anything better.” Solas paused, the bodies around them swirling in brilliant colors of gold, green, and blue. There was a creeping blush on his cheeks and she felt confident that she was still able to surprise him. He brushed his lips against the top of her hair, smiling and bringing her close to him.

“I – it is my turn to be speechless now, vhenan.” She took the rare opportunity of his stunned silence to grip his chin and bring him down for a kiss. He stilled, his hands flexing on her hips and bringing her in closer as a small moan escaped his lips. Athena grinned, matching his sound with one of her own while pushing with a fade-step to weave him through the ballroom and to the nearest vacant hallway. He realized what she was doing halfway through the turn, pivoting on the ball of his foot so that he pressed her into the wall when they found a hallway. A possessive growl left his throat as he trailed kisses from her mouth to the curve of her jaw, surprising her with a small bite at the back where the curve of her neck ended. She gripped his upper arms, closing her eyes while letting out an involuntarily cry. He leaned his body into her and pushed his leg between
hers to pin her more to her fixed spot. Out of instinct she pushed down onto him, grinding her sex on the tops of his hardened armored legs.

With a trail of kisses and tongue he moved down her neck to the center of her chest, kissing between the straps before moving his mouth over the peak of her right breast. He bit down gently, forcing another groan from between her clenched teeth, as he teased her nipple to a point so he could torture it through the cloth of her gown. She brought a leg up to bend behind him and pull him closer and hold herself up. Her hands supported her on his shoulders, eyes looking down and taking in the visual of his mouth on her chest. It was enough to drive her wanting to a level of insanity. As he pressed his tongue through the wet fabric she moved her hips down onto his thigh, keeping a rhythm with his mouth that began to increase the pressure within the base of her belly.

With a sudden snap of his neck he looked to the side, letting out a small growl of disapproval. “We are not alone, ma’fen.”

Athena groaned, pushing a palm to her forehead while letting out a whine. “What the fuck do you mean, we’re in the Fade. Of course we’re al-“

“Fen’Mae!!” Athena was instantly roused from her sleep by Lev’adin standing over her screaming in her face. She jerked into Solas’s body and threw the blanket over him just case he was as physically aroused as he was in their dream. The elven child was standing over them with her arms at her side and a bow on her back. Solas blinked awake and stared her down until she noticed him, flinching in a moment of fear before looking back to Athena.

“You’ve been sleeping all day! Dusk is in two hours and we still have to hunt before your story. Come. On!” Leafy grabbed the end of her mother’s foot and began to pull. Athena put her hands up in surrender before standing up from her lover’s side, shooting a glance over her shoulder at him.

“Don’t even think for a second we’re finished yet.” He broke his disgruntled expression and gave her a wicked smile in return.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, vhenan.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you as always for the continued support! <3
Athena had energy to burn. It felt like it had been a long time since they had a chance to be intimate in the Fade. And that energy! It was nearly addicting and it left her feeling hollow for more.

Lev’adin summoned Kain on the way down the stairs with a terse whistle using two fingers in her mouth. The wolf was loitering around the stable with Blackwall and instantly ran over to them, especially when he felt Athena’s magic stirring for a shift. She looked down to her daughter and smiled, rubbing her on the back between her shoulder blades.

“You brought your bow, darling?”

The elf nodded with a determined stare. There was something about her that Athena had not seen before, a kind of maturity in her actions? Running beside Kain made her look more graceful than she already was, and the girl was weaving through the trees like they weren’t even there. Was Skyhold drowning her spirit? Her personality? “It would be an insult to the hunt to use magic, Fen’Mae. The hunt deserves our best skill.” The girl gestured with her bow in between steps, her lips breaking into a smile as the main pack came into view.

At first there were just six of them, but the pack had nearly doubled in size. Kain ran into their midst and pressed his nose to their flanks. Once their greetings were all done they turned and looked to Athena expectantly. She looked to the side with a smile, nudging the young girl. “Alright. Claw and I normally lead the hunt. Claw, say hi.”

The alpha let out a small warning growl but then nodded his head up towards the girl. Athena ached a brow, putting a single word in her head and spreading it out to them through their shared connection. Daughter. Claw made a scoff of a sound but then let out a whine while walking over towards Lev’adin to press his nose into her hand. She chuckled and rubbed her hand over his head, bending down to kiss him on the nose.

“Hello, Claw. I’m Lev’adin. Can I hunt with you?” She asked politely, stroking behind the alpha wolf’s ear until he began to grunt in the low tones that showed he liked it. Athena chuckled under her breath, falling to her knees and into the shift in a smooth motion. When she was on all four she shuddered, and ruffled her white fur from the tip of her nose to her tail. Leafy looked in awe, running her hand through the softness of her pelt with her lips parted in amazement. “Do you think I could ever do that?”

The wolf paused, looking over her shoulder to her daughter before shrugging. I barely knew how to do it myself. Wisdom helped me there. How do I teach someone to do something that comes so
natural to me now? Claw came up to her side and rubbed his body along hers, nipping at the back of her ear affectionately.

Let us see if she can hunt first. Then we can speak of teaching her. You first learned by befriending us and sleeping with us under the stars in nothing but a bear pelt. The alpha was right and she let out a small huff of steam from her nostrils. It was visible in the cold air so with an excited bark she broke into a run with the pack at her back. The sun was slowly beginning to set so they had precious little daylight left to find even a single prey. Lev’adin didn’t need any additional instructions. She had her bow ready and her eyes trained on their destination ahead. Even though they ran quickly and spoke silently to one another, the young girl was able to predict their movements and follow along without getting winded through the branches and on the side.

The first thing they were able to track down was a fox. It didn’t hear them sneaking up on it and Lev’adin was able to pin it to the ground with an arrow through its back leg. Claw quickly ended its life so it wouldn’t suffer anymore. Before Athena let the younger wolves eat she heard her daughter make a small prayer of gratitude to the creature who lost its life in the hunt. She pressed her fingers to her forehead and whispered the short elvish prayer before nodding that she was ready again. The large white wolf walked and pressed her forehead against her daughter’s chest, grunting in approval of her presence and rubbing her maw on her torso.

Lev’adin laughed, the joyous sound filling Athena with a swell of pride. Athena looked up and pressed her nose to the young girl’s cheek. Bear! Claw snarled through the air, assuming a defensive position in front of them with his fangs bared. The group broke into a natural formation, surrounding the approaching creature. It was a large brown bear and instantly she thought of her encounter with a similar creature in the Hinterlands. Her left arm began to ache where her scar remained but she turned and curved her body around Levadin’s, keeping her behind them all while snarling from her throat.

The bear was not connected to them; it appeared mindless. With a gaze flushed over with the ferocity of the Wilds it roared and charged towards them, Athena specifically. Lev’adin pushed from the ground and rolled to the side as Athena took the blunt of the charge. She dug her fangs into the creature’s shoulder, her body hitting the ground with a padded thud from the snow around them. The bear rose up to wipe at her with its claws but was greeted with an arrow in the side of its flank. Leafy’s aim struck true and she quickly ascended a tree to get a better angle.

The wolves had the creature surrounded when it fell on all fours with Athena underneath it. She pushed off of its chest with her paws and scrambled to a standing position in front of its head with Claw and Kain at her sides. The three stepped forward in unison and snarled, the two males spreading out and striking with their teeth at the creature’s sides. Athena could tell it didn’t stand a chance against them, so she looked up to Lev’adin and let out a soft whine for mercy. Leafy looked to her and nodded, drawing back another arrow and letting it loose into the bear’s skull.
The large creature let out a final groan of life before flopping over on its side. Its blood stained the surrounding stark white snow and the wolves threw their heads back to rejoice in their victory. The elven girl jumped down from her branches and slid her bow over her back, collecting her arrows from the bear before putting them into her quiver. She looked up to Athena and then her eyes widened, all of the color draining from her face. The girl quickly redrew an arrow and had it pointed at a target past Athena’s body. The wolf tilted her head in confusion, a soft whine leaking from her lips as she turned around and looked at what Lev’adin was aiming at.

It was a wolf, a large black wolf with seemingly red eyes that glowed in the thick of the night. Instantly Athena understood her daughter’s fear and her gaze widened as well. *What trickery is this?* She thought to herself, sending a mental pulse to their pack that they were no longer alone since she did not have the words to explain what was going on to them. Why was her lover out in the forest, let alone in wolf form? He had accompanied them in the woods before as a silent observer. But this? This was new. The pack turned to him with fresh blood on their maws from the bear. The younger ones began to whine, instantly recognizing one of their kin but the older ones kept them back by putting their bodies as a blockade toward the front of the group.

*“Begone, Fen’Harel! You will make no trouble here!”* Leafy cried out in elvish, her voice strong and protective as she put herself next to Athena’s side with her bow string still taught.

The large wolf let out a noise that resembled laughter, shaking its head back and forth as a dark mana rolled from its fur. “*Surely a child of the People knows better than to run with wolves.*” The voice was a mixture of the Wilds and elvish and it held enough power to make Athena’s chest hurt. She shook the effect from her head, casting a barrier by placing a paw down in front of the rest of them. The black wolf tilted its head at the spell and she could see it arching a humanistic brow on its expression.

*“The wolves are my family. They’ve done more for me than your kind ever have.”* Athena’s eyes widened and the sheer panic that ran through her blood was almost enough to shift her back into her human form but she held her ground, putting her body at Leafy’s side closer so that her fur was touching her daughter’s side. Fen’Halel only laughed, aiming his maw towards the sky as the laugh rumbled through the trees. The other wolves were in a state of shock, Claw’s eyes never leaving her body.

*Friend?* He asked with worry in his tone, digging his claws into the ground as he bared his fangs with a snarl. Athena stilled but shook her head, not wanting to show that she knew the identity of the wolf in front of them. *But Solas wouldn’t be that stupid.*

*“You are bold, little one. It does you and your parents credit.”* The deity spoke knowingly, shifting his eyes to Athena and baring into her with the gaze as red as the blood on the snow behind them.
Leafy scoffed, releasing an arrow that drove into the ground at the wolf’s feet. “The credit does not belong to them. They have been gone too long. The credit is mine and my mother’s. You waste your words on us.” She spoke with such confidence it brought a tear to Athena’s eye. At her mention, she raised her posture and met the opposing wolf with a warning glance, stepping forward and snarling with a pulse of power.

Fen’Harel looked to the arrow as if it were a twig from a tree, stepping on it and smirking at how easily he broke it. The wolf opened its maw to speak again: “Mother?” but the girl let another arrow fly loose, except this time her aim was higher and the arrow scraped along the God’s side. Athena cried out in panic for her daughter and in despair for her lover, shifting back instantly and placing a hand in front of Lev’adin’s chest. “My heart, stay your arrow. Do not be foolish enough to shoot at a God.” She used her other hand to reinforce the barrier, looking down to Leafy with a caring yet stern glance.

“I fear not the Dread Wolf, Fen’Elgara. You shouldn’t either.” Leafy shrugged out of her protective grip and slid her bow over her chest, nodding with her head back to where Fen’Harel had stood. In his place was a single drop of blood but his body was gone without a trace. There were no footprints to track and the area was absent of any scent but theirs. Athena ran and dropped to one knee, dipping her fingerprints in the blood and rubbing it between her fingers. If only she practiced blood magic she could perhaps identify if it was his or not. The forbidden arts had their benefits, but per Solas they hindered a person’s connection to the Fade and now she needed that more than ever.

“Let’s get back to the keep, darling. Have you learned how to Fade-step?” She stood tall but kept her watch, a constant tension in the air keeping her hairs on the back of her neck on end. The young girl shook her head but looked to her, extending a hand for her to hold. Athena took it and summoned Kain to her side, furrowing her brow at the path in front of them. “Watch my casting and then follow at the next break we get, alright?” The young girl nodded which provided her the opportunity to look over her shoulder at the pack. “Thank you as always for your time, friend. I will see you soon in the coming days. Keep our family safe. Let’s go, little leaf.”

With a push from the ground she wrapped her magic around the three of them and pushed through the superficial layer of the Veil, launching their bodies through the forests and between the trees. They pushed for a stride before taking a break. Athena looked to her daughter and met her gaze, nodding before taking a deep breath and going again. It felt like she was having to use less magic with each go and towards the last strides Lev’adin broke from her hand and cast the spell herself. The girl’s magic was a mixture of ice and storm and her aura left a tingling trail through the air as she ran ahead through the branches of the trees. The rest of the way was a race and Athena was hindered by having to carry Kain within her aura with each step.

Lev’adin was jumping up and down at the beginning of the courtyard, making a mocking face towards her mother when Athena arrived with her wolf at her side. She bent forward and rested her hands on her knees, faking exhaustion with a smirk on her lips. “Gods, my girl. You learn quickly. Maybe you’ll be hunting with us yet.” She finished the sentence with a wink.
Leafy’s eyes went wide as she reached forward and grabbed Athena’s hands. “You mean it? You truly mean it?” Athena nodded and bent down, rubbing the tip of her nose against the elf’s.

“Of course I do. Now, go fetch your brother and I’ll meet you guys at the campfire for the story soon. Tell him I already have his role picked out, and he’s going to have to be ready to be evil!” She put a poor dramatic emphasis on the word, creating lightning between her fingertips to further the effect. Lev’adin scoffed, blowing a piece of blonde hair from her face, turning to the gardens where they rested.

“See you soon, Fen’Mae!”

Athena felt her heart melt as she watched her daughter nearly skip away with a new happiness in her step. She knew the story she meant to tell that night like the back of her hand, so there was very little preparation involved. With a lingering look towards her tower, she decided to give her lover his space. If that was him, was he just playing around? He had looked confident within the dream of Arlathan and she knew she felt buzzed from the energy of the memory alone. It must have been mutual between the two of them. Still, the thought was intriguing that he was willing to play with her in secret yet out in the open.

She shrugged, readjusting her scarf on her neck while walking towards the main hall. “Very well, ma’fen. Let us play.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you as always for the support! :)

Now introducing...The Dread Wolf!
It was difficult to get prepared for her story that night considering her stomach was a tight bundle of nerves after seeing what appeared to be the Dread Wolf within the forest. She was questioning everything she saw out there. Did he sound like the same wolf she saw before coming into this world? Why didn’t the air feel cold? Was he really that much of a master manipulator and conjurer of shadow? The questions flew across her mind, leaving her body numb and hollow as she walked out towards the campfire area where the children were expecting as. As usual, the children were sitting in the front row while the other interested adults filled the back rows. Athena wasn’t sure if it was for support or out of their own interest, but the higher party members were beginning to regularly attend her events, even if it was just for one song or a quick story. Dorian and Varric were playing a quick game of cards in the back row and Cassandra had her nose in a book.

When she walked out behind the campfire the dwarf looked up and waved at her with a quill that looked already primed with ink. Dorian flicked his gaze over to her and winked, making her instantly melt away from her doubt and smile back. Tobi and Lev’adin were on the side of the fire talking in low, whispered voices. Leafy’s expressions were hardened, her jaw clenched and her brow furrowed as she pointed her finger in the center of her adopted brother’s chest. “I told you what I saw, Tobi.”

“You have to be lying. It’s impossible!” Athena’s eyes widened and she instantly dropped to her knees besides them, gripping onto their shoulders to pull their attention to her.

“Children. Speak of this to no one.” The elf child jerked her gaze and instantly snapped back.

“But, fen’mae!” She squeezed their shoulders for emphasis and looked to both of them.

“But nothing. I do not fear what we might have seen, my darlings, but I do not want to instill fear in the others here. Do you understand? This must stay between the three of us.” She dropped her hands and put her pinky finger out for them to swear on. Shit. Is this a Thedas thing? Tobi instantly copied the gesture and looped his pinkie around hers, glaring at his sister with a confident and defiant stare.

“Come on, Leafy. Promise.” The girl groaned and rolled her eyes, sticking out her pinkie and shaking once before crossing her arms over her chest. Athena looked to Tobi and gave him a quick wink, dropping her voice low.
“But did she tell you she shot him with an arrow?” Tobi’s eyes lit up like lanterns and he pushed his sister playfully.

“ARE YOU SERIOUS!” Athena shushed him and poked him in the center of the chest. He shook his head and dropped his voice lower, wrapping his sister in a playful hug. “Are you serious?” He whispered again, laughing in the embrace as Lev’adin appeared to be disgusted by the entire thing. Her nose scrunched up and she pushed away from him, wiping the affection off of her body with a gesture of her hands.

“Enough of that. Mae, you said you had roles for us to play?” The girl looked to Athena with a smirk on her lips and she nodded, standing back up to a full posture. She wiped the dirt off of her backside and thighs while looking around at the campfire. Something was different. A rather large, white, wooden thing was different and suddenly it was outside. She blinked twice and then pointed it at the piano with a single finger, staring deadpanned at the instrument.

“How did that get there.” Tobi and Lev’adin looked in unison and then shrugged together.

“No idea, ma’.”

“Me either. It was there when we got back from the hunt.”

“Your voice gets tired. Straining, hands twitching, throat dry, will I get the next song right?” Cole materialized behind her and she didn’t jump, but the children did. Lev’adin focused her gaze on the spirit as if seeing him for the first time and then waved. The assassin gestured with his head over to the piano with a pleased smile on his face. “Dorian and Varric helped moved it, but they forgot. You have many songs in your head for tonight.” Athena nodded slowly and walked over to the piano, running her hand over its surface. It hummed back and she could tell from the strength of the vibrations that it enjoyed being outside. Even in the dream with Solas it was inside of the ballroom. Perhaps it had been a slave of its time as well. Unfortunately, that was a common theme throughout Thedas’s history.

“I – um. Thank you, Cole. I suppose I should get started then?” The spirit boy nodded and disappeared from the air, reappearing in front of Varric with his typical blank expression. The dwarf looked up from his card game and from her position on the piano bench she could hear him exclaim: “Hey, kid! When did you show up?” She laughed under her breath and she went through the motions of stretching her hands and popping all of the little joints in her fingers. It was a therapeutic feeling, releasing all of the tension built up in her hands through the days of casting magic and training. During the times of casting she didn’t realize it, but there were similar motions she went through that were attached to each spell. She hadn’t checked if those were the “official” movements for spells but part of her felt like they weren’t. Another odd thing to add to her list of quirks.
Athena cleared her throat and looked to the crowd. As if they were all waiting on her they paused and she swore they all scooted closer to the edge of their seats. “This story is one of the major classics of my world. We call it Beauty and the Beast. It has a lot more songs than my usual ones, so, sit tight.” The piano gave her a small indication that it was ready so she smiled and looked to the crowd again, somewhat angling her body to be able to talk to them easier.

“Once upon a time, there was a young prince who lived in a castle by himself. This prince, stuffed with power, was selfish and unkind.” Her gaze flicked to the side when she saw Solas try and sneak into the back row with the other two men. Their eyes met for a second and her chest flushed with a mixture of excitement and nerves. “One night, an old woman came to the castle door and offered him a single rose in exchange for a warm bed to sleep in. He refused her based on her appearance and went to shut the door. What the young prince didn’t realize was that this old woman was actually an enchantress. She was a powerful thing and due to his arrogance, she laid a curse on him and the entire castle.”

Athena looked to the campfire between her and the crowd, twisting her left wrist and lifting her palm up to the sky to contort the flames. They formed into a rose that flickered and danced with the barely present wind in the air. “The woman saw there was no love in his heart and turned him into a hideous beast; the spell went through the entire castle and all who lived there. The initial rose she offered was of course an enchanted one. With the curse the rose would stay in bloom until his 21st year. If he could not find love by then, the petals of the rose would fall and he would be doomed to be a beast forever.”

A few members of the crowd made small gasping noises, especially the children in the front. Athena smirked, turning her body towards the piano while keeping a portion of her magic extended towards the fire. This would be her first time splitting her attention but she had done both things separately so many times it was like clockwork. Multi-tasking wouldn’t be that much harder, right? “But now, we go to a small Orlesian-type village where we meet a girl named Belle.” The flames twisted as she placed her fingers on the piano to create a miniature version of the character she was thinking of.

“Little town, it’s a quiet village. . .”

Athena moved through the story with a smile on her face the entire time. This was one of her favorite movies growing up and the kids seemed to be enjoying it the most. Lev’adin summoned up some bravery to play Belle and dance around the fireplace when she felt compelled to. Kain was obviously Beast. He knew his cues with his connection to Athena’s mind and really added another
element to the story. Much to Tobi’s dismay, he had the opportunity to puff his chest and play Gaston with a younger child as his sidekick. It was less pressure to be adding the vocals from her piano bench. The instrument gave her another veil between her and the audience to hide behind and the pictures in the flames tore their gazes away from her. During silent moments, she could still hear Varric’s quill frantically scratching away in the back row. The thought of allowing him to publish was slowly growing on her, but he couldn’t dare know that.

The ballroom scene arrived and Athena slowly began to bob her body into the beat. Lev’adin was still too small for Kain to jump up and put his paws on her shoulders for them to do an appropriate dance. The girl laughed, shaking her head and breaking character. “He’s too tall, Fen’mae! You need to do this one!”

Athena froze, looking over at her daughter with a mischievous glare. She then looked back to the piano and let out a hum of consideration. If she could manipulate the flames from afar, could she do the same with the instrument? It vibrated under her touch so she continued to play the opening melody of the ballad and slowly lifted her fingers from the keys. Something clicked between her and the keys and they continued to move even though she was no longer mechanically pressing down on them. With her hands up in a tentative surrender, she stood up and backed away from the piano, afraid that it would suddenly stop. When it proved her wrong, she let out a sigh and turned towards Kain and patted her shoulders. He instantly followed her lead and adjusted his paws to get a better balance with her. The wolf licked her from chin to nose and she buried her face in his fur to wipe off the wet token of affection. Thanks, bud.

“Tale as old as time, true as it can be. Barely even friends, then somebody bends, unexpectantly.”

The wolf let out a small whine in his own attempt to sing along and she had to squeeze her hand into his back to keep from laughing. He was such a good companion for her. He could feel her emotions and act to help in ways that only he could.

“Just a little change, small to say the least. Both a little scared, neither one prepared. Beauty and the beast.”

The rest of the story finished with her using the flames as the main visual. She created a fire wall and manipulated the images on the inside to be playing like a kind of monochromic movie made from flame. Lev’adin and Tobi were completely hypnotized by the story and she could see that her daughter was silently crying when Beast fell. By the time the story finished, Athena glanced out and saw that the crowd had nearly doubled in size from when she first started. She swallowed
down a lump of nerves before standing and doing a quick bow, carelessly walking through the campfire flames to the other side where she embraced Tobi and Leafy as the crowd clapped and actually *cheered* at the conclusion of the story. They quickly exclaimed at how that was their favorite story.

“I don’t like that I played Gaston. He wasn’t all bad, he was just too late to change.” Tobi spoke wisely. Athena hummed and brought him in close for a hug.

“That’s part of the beauty of this story. How many people like him do we know, darling? In my world, most of these tales were used to try and teach meanings and lessons. The singing is just an enjoyable side benefit.” She smirked and pulled back from the children, running her hands through their hair while letting out a sigh. Lev’adin twisted her mouth to the side and then shrugged, rolling her neck to get out of Athena’s grip.

“The Dalish already have enough stories with lessons. What they don’t have is as many songs as you do. I come for those.” The young elf was growing confident as she aged, even getting the typical doubt that most teenagers went through. Athena was beginning to suspect that Leafy was showing animosity towards her clan for exiling her, even if she didn’t say it aloud. There were fewer mentions of her former friends, brother, and clan. She would need to ask if the girl wanted to go visit and show them how well she’s progressed, even if a small amount of it would have petty intentions to show *exactly* how better off she was.

“Ah yes they do. I’ll stick to the musicals for you then, darling. Should we go and see if Syla left us any treats out?” Lev’adin’s eyes got wide and she smiled a wicked grin, flicking her thumb across the tip of her nose before pushing Tobi towards the door. As they were leaving she heard her daughter tell Tobi in a not-so-quiet voice.

“I don’t know what lessons I can learn from a wolf chewing his way out of ropes, Tobi. I like Mae’s better.” Athena instantly flushed and rubbed the back of her neck, flicking her gaze over towards Solas. He was in a conversation with Cassandra, politely smiling to her with his hands clasped behind his back. He noticed her look towards him and smiled more in his conversation, casually dragging his gaze from Cassandra to her. She felt her core melt into a small thing of desire, even though her mind was still in turmoil over what had happened in the forest. Was this a game to him? If he was bold enough to show *Fen’Harel* to her, then perhaps her life was not in danger anymore knowing it.

Still. She knew Felassan’s fate and did not wish for it to be repeated.

Athena found herself walking over to the group before realizing it, resting her arm on Cassandra’s armored shoulder. The Seeker stilled and looked over at her with a hardened gaze. It then melted when she realized who it was and grinned a smile that betrayed her typical nature. “Yet again. . . I
thank you for such a lovely story. You truly have a talent, Athena.”

She scoffed playfully and rolled her eyes. “Like I’ve told Varric, they’re not my stories. I’m simply a mouthpiece for a world far away from here. Regardless, thank you, Cassandra.”

Solas opened his mouth to speak but a jarring sound disconnected all of them from the conversation. It was a deep horn that nearly vibrated the castle, sending a shiver down her spine while also instilling a sense of anxiety within her core. Her hand twitched and subconsciously she began to summon mana to her hands. The elf looked down to her hands, somehow feeling what she had done, before looking to her with question written on his face.

Cassandra clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth. “The Inquisitor and the Chargers must be back. I suppose we march for Adamant in the morning then.”

He then turned his gaze from the Seeker to Athena. She was no longer looking at them, she was sending her magic to Kain to run to the gates and see who had come with the Inquisitor. If Bull came back alone... there were things that could be done to make things nicer in the long run for her sister-friend. There were muffled words on the sides of her body but she could not move. Her eyes were fixated through the castle towards the gates and she found herself clenching her jaw and allowing any emotion to fall from her face.

“Athena, what is troubling you?” Solas gently reached out and touched her shoulder but she didn’t move.

“Rathein is back. I’m sorry – I need to.” She then moved out of his grip with a roll of her shoulder, pushing her way through the crowd towards the main hall. There was a grace and speed to her movements that wasn’t there before. There was a goal leading her movements and she used it to drive her through the normal crowd of people towards the main gates.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
Beauty and the Beast - Angela Lansbury (Obvi.)

This chapter gave me such a hard time but I think I ended up winning the fight. Thank you as always for your continued support.
Demands of the Qun

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The path from the story grounds to the main hall went by in a fog of anxiety in her mind. Millions of different thoughts flew her head but the main question was: Who did Bull choose? During all of her playthroughs, she had never chosen the Qun. In her opinion, it just did not make sense. The Qun were a people who sewed the mouths of mages shut and “re-educated” anyone who did not keep to the ways. They did not align with the ideas of the Inquisition even though they were going after the same cause. In the end, the Qun would always use the Inquisition for their own gains. They would use Bull against Rathein and the organization.

That couldn’t happen.

With a flick of her hand she pulled Kain back to her side, standing in the front of the crowd as the group showed up. There were a few wagons of trade and she could see one of the familiar elves from the clan at the base of the mountain directing their halla to the stable. They caught site of Athena and waved to her but she only tilted her head up in response, her gaze trained to the faces of the people coming in. The wolf let out a small whine while lifting his nose to sniff the air. She saw the tip of his nose twitch and he then shook his head, sneezing out the smells. Storm coasts? They all smell of salt and brine.

Athena nodded, running her hand along his head while her honey-colored eyes darted between person to person. There was a small break and suddenly a very tired Rathein came within her sights. The brunette was waving to the people waving and cheering at her but the Inquisitor’s smile broke into a grin when she saw her sister. They pushed through the crowd to embrace each other. Athena found herself pulling her closer than normal, dipping her head into her friend’s neck and freezing.

Rathein patted her back and then pushed back, keeping her hands on her shoulders while looking her friend up and down. “Fuck it’s good to see you. How was Redcliffe? Did you hold the fort together while I was gone?” The Herald patted her on the shoulder and gave it a squeeze. She must have seen the look on her friend’s face because suddenly doubt began to creep into the edges of her expression. “Athena, what’s wrong?”

She shook her head and looked past Rathein’s shoulders and through the crowd. “Nothing – nothing’s wrong. Where’s Bull?” The short-haired woman rubbed the back of her neck and then pointed directly behind her with a quick jerk of her thumb. The Qunari was carrying a large brown sack over his shoulder and wasn’t holding any specific emotion on his face. He looked to his kadan and arched a brow to why she stopped, his one eye slowly glossing over to Athena. He gave her a once over before smirking and nodding his head up.
“Hey, Alpha. How’s it going?”

She could have killed him. Hell, part of her was ready to if the wrong person walked in behind him. If he chose the Qun and stayed with Rathein until the end, she would be mocked across the countries years to come for bedding a spy that turned on her. There would be constant reminders of her heartbreak throughout Thedas and she would be helpless to do anything about. Athena was not. She gripped her hand into a fist and looked to the sack he was carrying, arching a single brow before asking through clenched teeth. “How was your mission, Bull?”

He hardened his gaze and clicked his tongue on the back of his teeth, throwing the sack down between them before leaning on it and looking at her. “Not as expected, that’s for fucking sure.”

“Uh-huh. How so?” She couldn’t hide the edge of vitriol in her voice, her gaze constantly flicking from him to the crowd of people spreading out behind him. He let out a small huff of air, scratching the area between his horns before nodding.

“I think we can do that over a drink. We’re still leaving tomorrow, boss?” Rathein nodded from in front of them, crossing her arms while looking at the air up and down. She mouthed the words what are you doing?! to Athena but she ignored the question and turned her body back to Bull. “In that case, hold up.” He turned to the side and cupped a hand around his mouth, smiling almost knowingly to Athena before calling out over the mass of people in the courtyard. “Hey Krem! Where you at with that cask?!”

Athena found herself running through the crowd towards the voice that called back: “Coming, Chief!” Bull chuckled behind her and turned into full laughter once she threw her body at the Charger’s Lieutenant and wrapped her arms around him. The force caught him off guard and the cask slipped from his shoulder but Dalish used a flick of her bow to keep it levitated from the ground. Krem froze with his arms held out. She could feel the heat his body from sheer embarrassment but he cleared his throat and spoke in a broken voice.

“H-h-hey, Athena. We missed you too.”

She couldn’t find the words to express exactly how overjoyed she was to have them back. Kain could feel her excitement and he took it out on Grim and Rocky, darting between the two men and yelping up to them. Rocky, almost a little too roughly, rubbed Kain on the top of his back and laughed a tired laugh. Grim simply let out a small grunt, bending down to a squatting position to gently pat Kain on top of the head in an awkward gesture. Stitches walked past all of them carrying his healer’s bag, shooting her a quick smirk before walking past Bull and towards the tavern. In the time, it took for Bull to walk over to them she had moved from Krem to pulling both Stitches and
Dalish into a group hug, successfully keeping the tears from showing in her gaze.

“D’aw – you smell like a campfire. Fuk. ‘Ay, we missed a story.” The archer tapped her friend with the back of her hand and Stitches visibly slumped, moving from the hug with a frown on her face.

“Shit, really? I thought we got back in time to see one. Come on, can’t the Chargers get an encore since you missed us so much?” The dark-haired elf wiggled her eyebrows and brought Athena underneath her arm to grind her knuckle into her hair. It took a second, but she was able to twist her body out of the trap and then run her hands over her hair.

“Can’t – sorry. Boss said to leave for Adamant when she got back.” Rathein confirmed the statement with a nod, smirking at the roughhousing going on between the Chargers and her sister. Athena then perked up, shrugging before stepping to the side to dodge another assault from Dalish.

“But – I think we all have time to squeeze in one last drink before we leave for the road tomorrow?” The group made general noises of acceptance and passed their duties onto the closest passerby so that they could rush to the tavern. She couldn’t help but grin watching them all walk past her. Their comradery was infectious. It was no surprise that Tobi wanted to join in their ranks, but the thought made her nervous. He was around thirteen; that was older than most boys leaving to be Templars. Both him and Lev’adin were growing out of their childhoods and into an early adulthood. That was the way of the world in Thedas. Back in her world, you didn’t have real responsibilities until you were sixteen, eighteen if you were lucky. The world provided for you until then.

In Thedas, you literally had to fight to survive.

“Horns up, huh?” Bull asked quietly, giving her a knowing smirk while walking over to her side with his arms crossed over his chest. Rathein gave the two a quick glance before winking towards her lover and blending in with the Chargers on their way to the tavern. Athena let out a sigh and clenched her jaw, slowly rolling her gaze up to the large creature next to her.

“Yeah. It worked then?” She asked nervously, looking back to the group of mercenaries one last time to make sure they were still there. Bull hummed, staying quiet for a moment as the crowd still swirled around them. She felt like time had slowed and all sound had been sucked out, creating a vacuum of time that was just the two of them. There were dozens of silent messages going between the two of them. He was astute; he must have seen her coming to the courtyard with an intention other than to greet him. If Athena was going to be honest with herself, she probably couldn’t have gone through with it. She still liked Iron Bull too much as a friend to her and to everyone. The thought was still there though, and that was the thing weighing heaviest on her mind. “Look, Bull – “
“You don’t have to say it, Alpha. You did good.” She paused, swallowing down a lump of nerves. She trailed a weary gaze up to him before arching a single brow.

“What?”

He chuckled low under his breath and patted her back a bit too heavy, forcing the air from her lungs. “If I were in your shoes? I would have done the same thing. You can’t control what we all do, but you know the options. Obviously by the sudden change in your body posture, my men were the right choice. They always will be.” He kept his hand on her back and rubbed between her shoulder blades. His voice then dropped low and he looked up towards the sky with a twinge of regret. “There. . .was a moment of hesitation. I looked at the dreadnought, and then to the cliff where my men were. Boss wanted me to choose and before I could open my mouth I saw your smug ass face lifting a mug saying ‘Horns up, Bull’.” Athena had to join in his chuckle, reaching over her shoulder to grab his hand and squeeze around the wrist. “But still. Tal-va-fucking-shoth.”

“Perhaps that it something that would be better soothed with a drink?” The voice came out of nowhere and they both looked to the side to see Solas standing there with his hands clasped behind his back. There wasn’t sympathy on his face, but she could hear it in his voice. He proposed it like they were all going to get tea and discuss the failings of Ancient Tevinter, which is exactly something he would normally do. Bull let out a low-pitched whistle before taking his hand from Athena’s back and rubbing the back of his neck.

“It’s going to take a few, you got the coin for it?” Solas nodded and gestured towards the tavern, walking along Bull’s side before shooting Athena a knowing glance over his shoulder. It left her the moment alone in the courtyard to look into the sky and thank whatever ancient nosy God that was listening for helping him make the right choice. Kain whined at her side, pressing into her palm with his cold nose. I missed them. Can we visit? He asked politely in her mind but with an impatient growl aloud. She chuckled and ruffled the fur on the top of his head, clicking behind her teeth before jerking her head towards the bar.

“Come on, let’s go then.”

What was supposed to be a calm night for everyone to decompress before Adamant ended up becoming a night of distracting each other from what was about to happen. The Chargers were
prepared to leave in the morning but they were determined to drink the bar dry before they left. Athena had already played songs for them to make up for them missing the show, accidentally discovering the Thedas version of an electric guitar along the way thanks to a combination of a minor lightning spell of her lute. They had made it through a drinking game but soon wanted something more interesting, particularly something from Athena’s world. They had gone through most of the ice-breaker games she knew, so there was only one thing she could think of when a bunch of people were gathered together with the purpose of getting shit-faced.

“Okay, now the goal is to bounce it or throw it into the cup on the opposite end of the table. These mugs are filled with water because Gods help me if one of you drink an ale that had a coin in it I’m knocking the blighted thing from your hand.” Dalish went to raise her hand and Athena pointed at her quickly and tried to sound authoritative but ended up giggling. “No – magic! Alright, it’s been a while but I’ll try to go first.”

She rubbed the coin between her hands and blew on it for luck before aiming for the cup in the direct center of all of the mugs. The bartender had been doubtful about lending them so many cups but then when he saw what they were up to his curiosity got the best of him. She closed one eye and tossed the coin through the air. It hit the rim of a cup but bounced into another and sunk to the bottom of the water-filled mug. Her side: consisting of Krem, Dalish, and Rathein, cheered and embraced one another in victory. The other side: Bull, Skinner, Stiches, and Grim, groaned and took a large gulp out of their drinks. Solas was sitting with Varric on the side of the table watching with a wicked curiosity.

“I’m starting to wonder how Athena remembers so much if she spent so much time playing drinking games.” Varric quipped as Skinner spun a coin between her two fingers and flicked it in the air. It landed unceremoniously on the table flat, cries of disappointment erupting behind her. The elf snapped her fingers and then rubbed the back of her neck. Athena couldn’t help but smile, raising her glass to the dwarf with a wink.

“Moderation, my dear friend, is key. Most of the time while there were games going on there was some macho show of strength happening on the sides. You know what alcohol does to people sometimes – ah! It’s alright, Krem. We all miss.” The Lieutenant blushed and drank from his cup, grimacing at the bitter and thick ale that Bull had chosen for the evening.

“No wonder the cask was so bloody heavy. This shit is awful.” He mourned, sloshing the drink around while looking into the cup. Bull scoffed, pounding on his chest with a single fist.

“Man up, Krem! That stuff is nothing compared to what we had in Seheron!” Athena looked to Varric and raised a brow, gesturing over to Bull with a teasing smirk.

“As I was saying.” The Qunari wasn’t finished, alcohol fueling his motions as he came to the side
of the table in between the two arrangements of cups. He pulled up a small stool and sat with his elbow firmly planted on the surface of the table with his hand open to anybody willing to dare.

“You want a show of muscle? I got it, but I doubt anyone can take me, right, Krem?” The mercenary leader winked to his second in command who winced and stepped back with his hands up in surrender.

“Uh – no thanks, boss. My arm still hurts from last time.” That was the general feeling of the whole group and Rathein was rolling her eyes, her hands fiddling with the half of a dragon tooth around her neck. Athena looked at all them and scoffed, flipping her hair over her shoulder with a melodramatic motion before standing across from him. She didn’t sit down because their size difference wouldn’t make it fair so she leaned over the table and met his gaze with an over-confident grin.

“Conditions, T.V?” He looked to her in question at the nickname but then pieced it together, squeezing her hand almost too tight with a dark grin.

“You can use magic to strengthen yourself but nothing to hurt me. If you win, shit, the Chargers help out with your next story.” Athena beamed and she squeezed her hand tighter, getting ready to start before he pulled her in to where they were almost nose-to-nose. “And when I win, you’ll tell me what would’ve happened, got it?” She pulled back and nodded grimly, stabilizing herself with her other hand on the table before waiting for Rathein’s go-ahead. The Herald counted down: “3... 2... 1... Go!”

Before she could even let out her breath from the countdown Athena’s arm was slammed against the table hard enough for two cups of water to spill onto the floor. She didn’t cry out; she wouldn’t give him that satisfaction. Her arm was twisted in a way it wasn’t supposed to be twisted and she bit into her cheek to still the tears. “Tomorrow, Bull. Not tonight.” He nodded, wiping his hands together before pushing back from the stool.

“Not quite so fast, Iron Bull. Perhaps a chance to win back the lady’s honor?” Solas asked coolly, placing a hand on Athena’s back while rubbing his thumb over the ridge of her spine. She stood up and smirked, nudging into him with her non-injured arm.

“I am not a maiden in need of defending, but I thank you for the gesture.” The elf gave her a look that she recognized. There was a dark playing at the corners of his eyes and in the curve of his lips. It did terrible things to the coil in her belly and her want for him, but it gave her confidence as well. He looked back to Bull and shrugged while rolling up the sleeves of his tunic.
“You do have time for one more match, do you not?” Bull slammed his elbow back down on the table, meeting the elf’s eyes with curiosity.

“Same conditions?” Solas nodded, gripping the Qunari’s hands almost gently. Rathein moved behind Bull and Athena stayed by her lover’s side. It was difficult to pull her eyes from his arms because with his sleeves rolled up it brought more attention to the tone of his forearms. It was the kind of tone that came from handling a six-foot-tall staff for ages, or, just being a God.

“On your mark. Inquisitor.” He looked up to the short-haired woman with a curt nod of his head, re-gripping Bull’s hand while steadying himself like she had done before. This time, Athena could feel a swirl of magic in the air. It was chill and familiar to her, sliding along her skin like it was his fingertips dancing instead of his aura alone. It wrapped around her core and squeezed, causing her thighs to tighten even as she stood.

“Alright, gentleman. Be fair. One...two... “ Rathein paused and looked to Athena, shrugging nervously when their gazes met. “Three!”

Unlike the last match, nobody won instantly. Their hands stayed completely straight up but there was obvious force coming from both sides. Solas had tightened his jaw and his entire right arm was flexed, his eyes completely fixated on Bull’s face. The Qunari was worked equally as hard, if not harder. There was sweat forming on his brow and there was a flicker of the ferocity that he showed as a Reaver on the battlefield. Rathein nervously chuckled behind him, patting him on the back. “You got this, kadan.”

Bull instantly stood up from the stool and used his full weight, only getting Solas’s arm back an inch or two. The Dread Wolf paused, looked over his shoulder to Athena with a knowing and cocky look in his eyes, and then turned his attention back to Bull. There was a drastic change of temperature in the air and he pushed forward on his foot, using his body weight to push Bull’s arm down to where his wrist touched the table in a loud thwam.

The bar went silent. Athena instantly beamed with pride, puffing her chest out in a smug gesture. Rathein’s jaw was slightly open, her eyes sliding from Bull’s hand, which was still open on the table even though Solas had stepped back, to her. She simply shrugged back to her friend, reaching forward, and touching her lover on the swell of his bicep. Even as neanderthalish as it was, there was something extremely masculine and attractive about winning a show of strength.

“Okay. Consider my honor won. Bull.” The Qunari flexed his hand before pulling it back into his lap, shaking his head back and forth with a chuckle. He then looked up to her and there was an odd happiness in his eyes, even from losing. “I’ll hold up my end of the bargain tomorrow, alright?
“I look forward to it. You try and get some sleep now.” He winked to her with his one good eye as Solas nodded to him picking up a coin from the table and sliding it into her pocket as they walked. Once they were out of earshot from the table she hummed in appreciation, linking her arm with his and resting her hand on the top of his arm.

“Now *that* was impressive, vhenan.” He smirked, squeezing her arm in return as they walked through the courtyard.

“Consider it a demonstration.” She hummed in question, looking over to him with a flush on her cheeks and a want in between her thighs.

“Oh? Of what?”

“I believe you have a hint as to what already, if earlier this afternoon proved anything.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the continued support! <3
His words had left her speechless until they got back to the room. Ever since their dream that afternoon before, there was an intoxicating confidence about him. If anyone else were looking in they would only see a subtle shift in his demeanor, but since they were intimate they stood out like glaring neon signs that turned her throat dry and tight at a loss for words. He wore a wicked smirk and a darkness around his eyes like he was a trained hunter assessing everything around him. At the tavern, he was speaking with Varric but would occasionally train his gaze on her. The phase “undressing her with his eyes” didn’t even cover how she felt under the weight of his eyes. Athena had been in a discussion with Stitches about a powder he had created that would temporarily close up even the most fatal of wounds until they could be seen by a magical healer. She then felt Solas looking at her, and the one flicker of seeing his face stole the sound from her throat. Flustered, blushing, she had to fight to find her place in the conversation again before being able to turn and face Stitches again. The Charger teased her by pressing his mug into her shoulder, but there were more moments like that slipping into her night.

He acted as if they didn’t happen once they crossed the threshold into the bedroom. He made a small comment about going downstairs to prepare for bed but the words were drowned out by the thrashing pulse sounding off within her ears. She mindlessly walked up to the loft and opened the windows, allowing the fresh air to come in and revive her senses. Beat by beat of her heart her hearing returned and she was able to calm her need like if she had stepped into a cold shower. The cold brought a shudder down her spine so she quickly shut the window and pressed her back against the glass, sliding down until her bottom rested on the small ledge that was in front of the window. The sound of him running the sink echoed through the stone walls and she had to smile at how domestic they could be sometimes. He had a drawer at her place, they cuddled together every night, and her dog approved of him.

Her gaze traveled from the ground to the right where the fresco painting of her rested. The moonlight filled the room enough so that she could see all of the details of his work and the small ridges of plaster. It was amazing how much work went into every piece, but the one corner that caught her attention put a literal sense of dread onto her mind. The Dread Wolf was at her back in the painting, but in the hunt earlier that day it dared to face her head on. It was the first time she had heard of the God showing his face in the woods, especially to one of the people. Lev’adin showed no fear but during the encounter she could hear her daughter’s pulse quicken at the sight of the creature, her breath hitching in her throat even as she pulled the arrow from her quiver and expertly aimed it towards the wolf. She had marked him, a graze just on his right side. Would Solas show the same wound?
He walked up the stairs and made a humming sound to pull her from her trance looking at the painting. He was already shirtless but had his pants on without the foot wrappings. She stood to meet him and winced, a hand protectively going to her back to support it. He closed the space between them and hovered his hands over her sides, looking her up and down with a small frown at the corners of his lips. “Are you wounded, vhenan?” Athena gave a simple shrug in return, controlling her breath as the sudden pain ached on her flanks. It hadn’t been there before, but she had adrenaline and liquor on her side to numb the pain before. Now that it was all fading off, something hurt. “This is no way to dress for bed, so it needs to be removed anyways.” He gave a small tug on her shirt and she lifted her arms for him to take it off.

Once she was only in her bandings and her pants he walked to her back, his fingers gently tracing over her skin until she felt them rest underneath her ribcage on her backside. He pressed into her skin lightly and she groaned, nearly falling forward at the sudden rush of sensation underneath his touch. “There is deep bruising here, did you fall?” Athena’s eyes widened and she let out a huff of a laugh, standing up straight again as she chuckled.

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“Fall? Not exactly. I was more tackled by a bear, but believe it or not that wasn’t the most stressful part of our adventure.” He pressed around the borders of the bruise, using some of his knuckle to distribute pressure over it. There were small pulses of his healing magic going from his hand and into her back and it instantly relaxed her muscles. The gestures started off as waves of pain but were instantly relieved by his healing touch. She let out a sigh that was a mixture of pleasure and pain, leaning back into his touch while biting down on her lip to try and stifle the sound. He steadied her by placing a hand on her bare belly, bending down and kissing the inside nape of her neck.

“Tell me what was. A bear attack seems like it would be a traumatic event.” She raised her left arm and wiggled her fingers to look at the scar.

“Yeah, been there done that. We had another hunter arrive and the more I think about it the more I think I’m going insane. That guy showed up, or so I think.” With her left hand, she pointed to the corner of the painting, crying out as he hit a particularly sensitive spot with his hand. He rubbed his palm over where he had healed, laying small kisses on her neck in rhythm with his hand. She could feel him turn his gaze up to follow the line of her finger and there was a small smirk on her lips.

“What happened then?” He didn’t discredit her, or show any signs of disbelief. That, she was thankful for. She arched her neck to give him more room for his affections as he stood and pressed his bare chest against her back, both of his hands resting on her hips with his thumb circling a light pressure onto her skin.

“What happened then?” He didn’t discredit her, or show any signs of disbelief. That, she was thankful for. She arched her neck to give him more room for his affections as he stood and pressed his bare chest against her back, both of his hands resting on her hips with his thumb circling a light pressure onto her skin.

“Lev’adin grazed him with an arrow.” He chuckled in a dark tone, the feeling of his hot air against her skin sending a jolt of sensation down her spine. Goosebumps decorated her skin starting at her neck. He gently turned her around to face him, smiling while shaking his head back and forth. Still
leading her with small touches on her hips, he leaned her against the wall next to the window.

“It appears she has already inherited your recklessness, ma’fen.” It was her turn to laugh and she rested her hands-on top of his shoulders. She leaned in for a kiss but he leaned forward and averted it, pressing his forehead against hers instead with a wicked grin on his lips. Athena couldn’t help the whine that followed as she attempted to tilt her head close to his to capture his lips. He slowly, gently, to where she could feel every movement of his lips as they pressed into her skin then lifted up, moved down her neck to the tops of her bandings. As if to mimic the dream they shared before, he kissed the peak of her breast, moving his hands to the back to undo the banding’s knot and allow them to fall to the ground. Instantly she shuddered, gripping onto his shoulders for support while tilting her head back against the wall to find her bearings. Even though the windows were closed, her hands began to tremble underneath his touch in anticipation for where his mouth would travel next. He kissed the center of her chest, quickly flicking her eyes up to hers. Once their gazes locked, he smirked, letting out a soft sigh of pleasure onto her skin.

His mouth moved around her breasts, around the most sensitive parts that she so craved for him to lavish with his tongue. She arched her back into his touch, her breath coming in shallow, fevered movements. He cupped her torso and rested his thumbs underneath the curve of her breasts, gently pushing her back into the wall before trailing with the very tip of his tongue to the peak of her breast. He tortured, a slow, hot circle around her nipple before taking it into his mouth. Athena cried out, fully gripping onto his shoulder with one hand and moving the other hand to the back of his head. He moaned against her breast, gently grazing her skin with teeth and sucking until her nipple became taut in his mouth. He was prepping the other with his hand, circling with frost magic around the nipple in matching motions with his tongue. She could not control her soft whines, eyes searching for his, silently pleading for something.

Without warning he switched to the other breast, firmly gripping the previous one and massaging it, using the motion to keep Athena against the wall. The contrast of ice and heat on her nipple brought a soft whine from her lips, her belly flaring and tightening everything between her legs and thighs. She already knew she was slick with arousal from his teasing onslaught on his neck and chest. Her head grew dizzy and it was difficult to draw breaths. Every new motion, every variation in his technique felt like it stopped her heart. Its beat was so rapid in her head she could barely make out or recognize the sound of her desperate moans.

Keeping her against the wall with one hand on her belly he trailed his kisses south, switching between hot-breathed kisses and flashes of tongue against her skin. He reached the top of her pants, using one hand to open the button while using his teeth to assist in pulling them down with her smalls. Athena came out of her lust-filled haze to see that sight, a sigh of desperation leaving her lips once the air hit her now bare thighs. Instinct caused her body to bend down to meet his in his crouched position but he pushed her against the wall, arching a single brow with a dark curve to his lips. “Don’t move, vhenan.”

Athena opened her mouth to protest but the sound was stolen when he gently pressed his lips to her navel, flicking his tongue inside and trailing kisses down below her waist. Out of anticipation, a
mewl heavy with want trickled from her lips. Her hands reached for him, yearned to touch him, cup his face, rest on his shoulders, anything to find grounding. He met her with his own hands, his thumbs rubbing small designs onto the tops of her hands as his mouth hesitated in between her legs. She could feel the hot, steamy exhales of his breaths on top of her sex, sending small shudders down her legs until they felt like jelly in his grasp.

Solas had complete control of her mind, body, and soul. In the pause, he looked up to demand her gaze, silently still asking for permission even though she would have given him her life if he had asked for it in that moment. She flipped her hands over to squeeze his hands, nodding as a hurried, heated plea fell from her lips. “Please, vhenan, please.” He released her hands and pressed his right hand in between her breasts, stabilizing her and giving her something to hold onto. The other hand gripped her hip, giving him purchase as he gently brushed his lips over the folds of her heat. Athena let out a heavy sigh, nearly falling forward if it weren’t for his hand holding her up.

He kissed her as gently below as he would above, taking his time with soft brushes of his lips, pressing deeper and heavier and lavishing upon her. Her core throbbed, craved his touch and her body felt like it was crafted from flame and desire itself. The first time he flicked his tongue against the tight bundle of nerves at the top of her sex she cried out, gripping onto his forearm, and opening her eyes to catch the sight of him between her legs. There was a wickedness to his expression, but a compassion within his movements that stilled her and filled her body with an undeniable love for him. He bent down and licked from the opening of her sex, through her folds until the tip of his tongue found the small, hard bundle of pleasure that was eagerly awaiting his touch.

The wet heat of his kiss drove her wild, nails digging into his flesh as lust washed over her mind. She bent forward, gripping his hand in hers and bringing it off of her chest so that she could take hold of one thing in that moment. He did not pause a that, even as her hair fell in a wave halo around her face and she kissed the tip of his middle finger. It wasn’t until she traced her tongue from the base of his finger to the very tip that he moaned into her sex, increasing his slow, tormenting speed that was growing the waves within her core. With every flick of his tongue she would repeat it on his finger, moaning at his taste of salt and the herbal drink he had in the tavern on his skin.

She drew a moan that resembled a growl from his throat when she closed her lips over his finger and brought it completely into her mouth, whining and sucking to where the entire pad of her tongue pressed against the bottom of his finger. With her lips and tongue she matched the rhythm he was creating on her sex, eventually bringing a second finger into her mouth and licking her tongue up the base of both digits. Solas paused, dropping his tongue to the start of her sex before dragging the slickness of her arousal up her folds and around the peak of her bud. His lips found its edges and sucked it into his mouth, sending a sharp flame into her belly that undid her. Quickly she built, arching her back and allowing his fingers to slide from her mouth as pleas fell from her lips.

“Gods, Solas – please – ah!”
He did not stop even as her body wracked and threatened to collapse forward onto the ground. He kept her standing with a firm hand between her breasts, relishing in how each movement of his tongue brought another shudder from her body and trembling of her legs. When he had enough he moved his hand from her chest and stood, catching her against his chest since it felt like her legs had no motion in them at all. In a smooth motion, he bent down and picked her up with an arm behind the curve of her legs, positioning her so that her head was resting on his shoulder within breath’s reach of his lips.

“You are so beautiful, vhenan.” He whispered between labored breaths, pushing off with one foot and fade-stepping down to the bed where he gently placed her on the mattress and knelt between her legs. He rested his forehead against hers, taking the moment to catch his breath and smile as she cupped his face with one hand, tracing the pad of her thumb across his bottom lip. He caught it between his teeth and flicked his tongue against it. Athena couldn’t help but let out a shaky sigh, her eyes completely transfixed on the shape of his lips and how they curved when looking at her. Solas let out a shaky chuckle, rubbing the tip of his nose against hers while bringing her palm to his lips. “But do not think I am finished with you yet, Athena.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the continued support! <3
A kiss, a simple kiss. It was the one thing she had been denied in their passion play upstairs and it was within reach of her now. Her body was still trembling from the throes of pleasure he had put her through with his mouth alone, but her sex continued to ache for him, throb knowing that his own pleasure was so close. Using one foot she felt the top of his pants and moved to push them down, a determined look coming across her face as she did so. He laughed, pushing up from the bed so that he could use his hand to slide down both his pants and smalls to the edge of the bed. Normally so clean and refined, he resided to keeping his clothes in a messy pile before coming back to her. He cupped her hands in his face and stroked her cheekbones with his thumbs.

“Ar lath ma, vhenan.”

Athena nodded, turning into his touch, and returning the kiss to his palm. It gave her pleasure that he shuddered under her brief touch, a blush coloring his cheeks and the tips of his ears. Her voice was hoarse and breathy, and her attempts to wet her lips failed from his pleasure stealing the words from her throat. “Isalan ma gara suin em.” I lust for you to come into me. She pled to him, meeting his gaze with hooded lids and a flushed chest. His breath hitched in his throat at the sound of his native tongue, a dark lust washing over his gaze as he bent down and finally pressed his lips against hers. She could have cried it felt so passionate to kiss him, electric sensations rushing to her core as her hands shook to bring him closer.

She flicked her tongue out and traced the lines of his lips, licking, and taking the taste of her sex from his mouth. He moaned into her kiss, eagerly deepening it so he could savor her taste and run his tongue along hers. He slowly moved one hand into the thick of her hair, balling it within his hand so he could pull her tighter within his embrace. Even with his arousal pressing against the inside of her thigh, she was obsessed and relying on his lips to make her heart beat. Her mind was hypnotized by the scent of herbs on his breath and sweat on his skin. Her fingers itched to roam every inch of his body. She quickly dropped one hand to his length, curling her fingers around it and squeezing. Out of reflex, he bucked into her grip and let out a shaky cry into her mouth, his body falling into her grasp.

Athena lived to see him react to her touch, to see his eyes flutter shut and his body lose control underneath the lightest of affections. Any other night, she would have dragged it out as long as she could until he was murmuring elvish phrases and pleas on her sweated skin. Tonight, she craved him like a drug. It caused her heart to pound within the confines of her ribcage and with her hand
she led his tip to the entrance of her sex. It was still slick from her previous peak and her body was not quick to forget how his mouth and lips felt against her folds. She was still lost in their kiss, her other hand gripping the back of his head and pulling him closer to her as if he carried the air that filled her lungs.

He gripped her hip with one hand, slowly sliding himself within her inch by inch. The sensation of her stretching ripped a cry from her throat. She pressed her forehead against his and gasped, arching her back and loving how he fit inside her so perfectly. It made her feel complete, like they were one body and spirit finally brought together in a moment of passion. He bent down and captured her lips again, stealing the soft sounds of pleasure that continued to fall from them. Slowly, his hips moved back as he drew his length back to where the tip was pressing at her entrance again. Athena pushed her hips down to meet his, opening her eyes and kissing the tops of his closed eyes.

"I cannot be broken, vhenan." The sentence was a statement and an invitation. When they made love, he always was gentle and careful with her. It might have been because she knew who he truly was or because he was still testing out her limitations, but she felt like there was a sliver of himself still being held back. She especially knew this that night because the entirety of his act upstairs was without magic. It was bubbling underneath his skin, sending shivers of cold down her body when he kissed her. She knew hers was flowing unrestrained, causing the air around them to thicken with heat and need. He opened his eyes to meet her heavy gaze, smiling at the challenge and nodding.

"Ma nuvenin, ma’fen." He leaned over her, supporting himself on his forearms at her sides as he brought himself inside her once again. She sighed in pleasure, eyes fluttering closed as she could feel her walls tightening around him. There was a small flare within her, a jolt of energy that went from her belly to her chest. Her brow furrowed in curiosity as she looked up to him and there she found her answer. He was waiting for her, arching a brow, and waiting for a nod, an answer to the question between them. Are you sure? Athena smiled, tracing her fingertips over his chest until she could grip her hands on his shoulders. He chuckled under his breath, bending down to kiss the top of her head before withdrawing and thrusting deep within her, a pulse of magic following his motion and filling her with a full energy.

The two sensations caught her by surprise, the sharpness within her core contrasted by the smooth and hard motion between her legs. He moved his arms to shelter her, keep her still, his hands gripping her shoulders and pulling her down as he thrusted up into her, sheathing himself entirely in strong motions. Athena could not help the sounds that left her throat, her head burrowing in the curve between his shoulders and his neck, kissing and loving on any skin that she could find there. He found his rhythm easily, alternating between filling her with his own sex and then with his spiritual essence. Her body couldn’t keep up and her breath was stolen from her lungs, sweat on her brow as she was helpless underneath him, trapped between the assault of his body and his magic. Gods knows what it would have felt like in the rawness of the Fade.

The swelling of her own pleasure was ignited by his magic interacting with hers, swirling like a
nebula within her core and electrifying everything it touched. Ice and flame battled for dominance in a metaphysical combat of wills, the battleground being the space between them and her core. He was beginning to speed up his thrusting, his breaths uncontrolled and mixed with moans of pleasure. She wrapped her legs around him and aided in his motions, bringing him closer to meet the deepest parts of her sex. Her second climax rose and came quickly and she cried out his name, wrapping her arms around his torso and bringing him as close to her as they could manage.

Solas’s grip tightened on her shoulders, pulling her down in the last of the thrusts until he spilt his seed inside of her, crying out and milking a few more sheaths until he rested completely inside of her. He moved to where he was holding her in an embrace, his sweat-glistened brow resting against hers as their bodies trembled and their breaths were shaky. Athena wet her lips, chuckling and tracing small designs into his back as she slowly regained control of her consciousness. The small movements sent a shudder down his spine, further twitching his length that was still in her. She moaned and halted, laying her hands flat on his back with a smile on her face.

“Eager, temptress. Are you trying to delay our fates in the morning?” He teased, lavishing gentle kisses across her brow and on her cheekbones. She let out a small groan, rubbing a hand into her eye and rubbing it.

“You are too quick to return us to duty, my heart.” Solas laughed, using his arms to help her sit up in bed. He tilted her chin up with his hand, eyes nearly sparkling with love and a slight bit of mischief.

“Then let us delay that fate even farther with a bath, vhenan. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to escape with you downstairs.” Athena stretched as she sat up, running her hands down his back until she could feel the curve of his backside.

“Well, I can think of a few things.”

Getting no sleep the day before travel was becoming a frequent theme for them. They awoke in a puzzle of blankets and limbs, her hands gingerly wrapped around the wolf-bone necklace that rested on his chest. Kain had found way to open the door with a combination of teeth and claws, allowing the sunlight and cold winter air to flood in. Solas only groaned, opening one eye in annoyance to greet the wolf that was bouncing on the bed.

*Everyone’s gathering by the courtyard!*
“I know, darling. I know.” Athena lamented out from underneath her pillow, reaching out until she could pet her companion behind the ears. Solas reached out and shut the door with a pulse of magic, flopping onto the flat of his back with his arms outstretched.

“We really must create a magical lock for your door that only we know the combination to. Otherwise we might as well sleep with the door open.” There was bitterness in his voice but also a bit of teasing. He wiped his face with his hand, letting out a resigned sigh before sitting up in bed. Athena followed his motion, looking around the room as Kain did his usual morning laps up the stairs and then down them. She noticed there were two packs already made leaning by the door with his staff. She arched a brow, nudging him and pointing at them. He chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck before sliding from the bed and standing.

“I quickly made them after you went to sleep. I assumed you would want to steal every minute of sleep that you could before we left. Was I wrong?” He smiled with a smug curve to his lips, giving her the opportunity to grab her pillow by the pillowcase and smack it into the side of his arm.

“No, you weren’t as usual. I’ve missed riding with Prince but I am not looking forward to riding through the Approach, let alone to Adamant. The place is absolutely cursed.” A nervous shudder went down her back as she looked into her wardrobe, pushing everything aside until she found a new outfit that was simply labeled “armor”. The last set of fighting fabrics she had used were her bear pelt and some boots, but this seemed much more formal, probably due to Vivienne and Josephine’s doing. The pants and boots were black, the pants being high-waisted to allow for her belt to hold potions and whatever accessories she required. The shirt was red and of thicker material, but there was excess material built into it so that it would create a scarf-like loop around her neck. There was then a cloak that hummed with magical energy that was black on the outside and a mixture of orange and red on the inside lining. Athena hummed to herself and quickly got dressed, bringing the supplies to put her hair up put keeping it down for the morning.

Solas was ready at the same time, wearing his usual casting robes with the furred sash coming over his shoulder to tuck into his belt. Athena ran her hand down it, smirking and straightening it out with care. He caught her hand, kissing the palm before meeting her gaze. “Are you ready?”

Her cheeks flushed, but she shrugged, gesturing for Kain to open the door. “We might as well see. Can’t turn back now.” He chuckled as the wolf led them out of the room and down the stairs into the courtyard. Thankfully they arrived at the same time as Dorian and Cole so they weren’t the last ones. The remainder of the soldiers and the entirety of the Inquisition party gathered, with two additional bodies.

“You really thought I wouldn’t come help you defeat a Venatori mage? Shit, Hawke.” The voice nearly stopped Athena in her tracks, her gaze looking in the crowd for Varric. The dwarf was
standing right beside the new voice, a smug smile on his face as Hawke rolled her eyes.

“I don’t want you to be in harm’s way!” She tried to exclaim, looking to Varric for validation.

He only laughed. “That didn’t stop him before, friend.”

The Hero of Kirkwall threw her hands into the air, defeated, before looking over her shoulder and seeing Athena. The woman smiled, waving her over towards them. Suddenly she couldn’t feel her legs, trapped with sweat forming on the back of her neck. Solas looked to her, his gaze assessing her up and down. “What’s wrong?”

She swallowed down a thick lump of nerves, trying to roll the anxiety away in her shoulders. “Oh – you know – just another one of the people I thought I would never meet in my lifetime. Hey, Hawke! Varric!” Athena smiled nervously and walked over with Solas separating from her to walk and prepare his horse. The dwarf clapped her on the lower back, gesturing to her up and down.

“Hey, Fenris! Meet Walker.” She rolled her eyes.

“Athena, please. It’s nice to meet you.” The dark-skinned elf looked to Varric, mouthing her nickname a few times before his face lit up in recognition. There wasn’t a smile, more of an amused brow-raise with a smirk. He nodded back to her then nudged Hawke on the side. All of the things not directed at her made her feel nervous and she clasped her hands before her back in a guarded fashion.

Hawke nodded, “Yes – she’s the one from the book I’ve been proof. . . read. . . ing.” Her words faded into silence as Varric shot her a glare that was sharpened from all of his years in the Merchant’s Guild. Suddenly her awkwardness over meeting Fenris vanished and she slapped the top of his shoulder with the back of her hand.

“Only with my permission, huh? What an opportunist you are, Varric.” Hawke cleared her throat and rubbed the back of her neck, kicking dirt around with the tip of her armored boot in an attempt to hide from Varric’s gaze. Fenris chuckled, crossing his arms over his chest.

“You’re right there. Don’t be worried; it’s not a bad read. You hopefully won’t be as mortified as I was whenever he released that Blight-forsaken book about us.” He then pointed to Hawke and himself with his thumb, letting out a small scoff. Varric shrugged and shook his head back and forth, winking to Athena before speaking.
“Oh come on, Elf. It’s not that bad. I don’t hear you complaining about the coin you get from the profits!” It was Athena’s turn to chuckle but the sound was soon knocked form her throat by two bodies colliding into her side. Fenris blinked, arching a brow at the two children who had their faces hidden underneath her cloak. She spun around, smiling and trying to get them to come out.

“Oh come on, you two! Behave!” She gripped Tobi by one shoulder and Lev’adin by the other, pulling them out of hiding and standing to the side of the group. She then looked over to the three, apologetically smiling before dismissing herself. “Forgive me, my children. I will see you on the road.”

As she led them away she heard Hawke and Fenris say in unison: “Children?”

Varric waved the subject away, watching the group step away from the courtyard. “It’s a long story.”

Lev’adin was almost bouncing at her side, feverish words spilling from her lips. “Wait! Was that Fenris? I had only heard about him from the other girls! Some of the orphans pass around Tales of the Champion but I don’t believe half of it. It reads like a Dalish story.” She then stuck her tongue out and Athena shushed them with a laugh.

“Don’t let Varric hear you say that; he’ll croak. Did you two sleep well?” They both nodded in unison. Tobi had his wooden sword tucked into his belt with a smile on his face.

“You have to be safe, okay, ma’? Bull says I can’t go on a mission unless he has your permission so you need to come back so you can say yes!” Athena assumed a façade of an overprotective parent, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Oh that’s the reason, huh? So you can go play around with mercenaries?” The boy stayed silent but nodded. She met his gaze and leaned over him, making him sweat for a second before she nodded and pulled him into a tight embrace. “Fine. You can go with them when we get back, but keep up your training, alright? You’re about the age when most boys are already being trained to be Templars or soldiers. You and your sister have catching up to do. Lev’adin?”

The young girl nodded dutifully.

“Keep your brother safe and check in on the pack for me. Hunt with them if you wish, but don’t
“Fiiiiiiine, Fen’mae. We’ll be good; We promise. You... just be safe, okay? I’ve heard about this place. It doesn’t sound good.”

“Inquisition! Prepare to move out!” Rathein’s voice echoed over the courtyard and the short-haired mage caught Athena’s gaze from the top of her horse. She waved, looking to the children before shooting them a goofy grin. The children giggled and stepped forward to bring Athena into a final hug.

“Go save them, Mae. It’s what you’re good at.”

“Yeah. Just come back, okay?”

Athena couldn’t help but get teary eyed as she hugged her children, bending down only slightly to touch her forehead to theirs. “I promise, my darlings. I promise.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the continued support, lovelies! Hope you all had an amazing weekend!
The road to Adamant was harsh and long. The weather changes alone were exhausting because it went from the thick of winter on the mountain to a fall-like weather the farther they got from the keep. The main set up of the riding party was Rathein with the Inner Council in the front and the rest of the party scattered with the soldiers as it went back. Hawke, Fenris, and Varric typically stayed together as a unit and were telling tales of their adventures to whoever listened. Athena appreciated the break from her telling stories and she took the chance to read a book Dorian had brought for her.

“I know the orb is elven, but we have a single book about them in Tevinter. The text is old and this one is poorly translated, but you will get the basic understanding of it. We called them somnaborium, you see, the “vessels of dreams”, whatever that is supposed to mean.”

As he was talking she was thumbing through the pages and looking at the drawings. There were mentions of connections to the Fade and how they theorized that the magic was related to that, but everything was just philosophy and hypothesis. There was nothing solid to go from. She knew that the orb was Solas’s and that the elven pantheon each had one, but she wanted to know where they were made from. The Gods were just stronger mages than the rest, was part of that due to their orbs? Athena licked her thumb and turned to the next page, scanning over the lines while keeping her place with her index finger.

“Interesting. I have a theory, Dorian.”

The Tevinter hummed, nibbling on a type of sweetened jerky he managed to steal from the kitchens before they left. A messenger had brought a small gift package from Syla and the kitchen elves before she left so there were small snacks in her own pack, but she didn’t want to show off her special goods in front of everyone. Athena waited until she caught a flicker of his gaze before continuing. “This book is before ancient Tevene, correct? So we’re talking ancient elvhen and Arlathan?”

Dorian nodded, trying to bring his horse as close to Prince as he could without the two creatures getting uncomfortable. “I believe so, oh, is that one of them with a foci?” He pointed to a fragmented recreation of a tilted image from a ruined temple somewhere in the north. She stole the jerky from his hand and took a bite before giving it back to him, thinking harder on how to explain her thought process without giving too much of what she knew away. Solas was behind them, pretending to not listen but she knew that he always took in this kind of information.
“It looks like it. See, it is rumored that a large group of the elvhen were dreamers, somniari as the Tevinters phrase it. What if those are connected? What if only those who are dreamers can make or effectively control these foci?” The meat she chewed reminded her of something teriyaki flavored, like it had been soaked in a mixture of honey and salt. Dorian used a small bit of magic to float the book over to his lap, reading the same passage she had just finished.

“Hm, that is a thought. What does that mean though? How did they use that connection to create such powerful objects?” His voice grew excited at the idea of experimental magic and she followed right along with them. If they could somehow level the playing field, create something with similar power to Fen’Harel’s orb, perhaps the Veil wouldn’t burn the world when it was torn down. Dorian didn’t know it, but she was thinking of the long game, even if it was just in hypotheticals.

“That is if your theory is correct. Tevinter books are often misleading and incorrect in their details of ancient elvhen magic.” Solas stated pointedly, opening his eyes from his Fade-trance on the back of his horse. Athena looked over her shoulder at him and shrugged, smiling with a blush in her cheeks at the thought of the few nights before. Dorian scoffed and rolled his eyes at him.

“Yes, yes, we get it! Tevinter bad. Elven good.” There was a deep rumbling of a laugh from her other side as Bull pulled up with Rathein in front of him.

“It’s about time you said it out loud, Dorian. We were beginning to worry.” The small group laughed but Dorian only frowned, tucking the book into his side pocket so it would be out of sight to everyone, including her. Rathein smirked to Bull and gave him a lingering stare, similar to the one that Athena had just been giving to Solas. The Qunari looked up and winked at her with his one eye, sitting a little taller on his own mount.

“She almost says the word sometimes, katoh. She tastes it in her mouth, sweet release a breath away, tongue tying it tenderly like you tie her. But she doesn’t. For you, and for her because it means more. A fuller feeling, a brighter burst.”

Cole appeared on the back of Athena’s saddle, even though his own smaller mare was trotting a few rows back by itself. She scooted forward to give him room, trying to hide the laughter that was bubbling in her throat. Rathein turned the shade of a tomato, looking forward while burying her face in her hands. Bull cleared his throat with a small cough.

“Yeah – uh- how’s she feel about you saying this in front of everybody?”

Rathein instantly answered and mumbled the words from underneath her hands. “If a rift opened up right now and swallowed me I’d be fine with it.” Athena had to chuckle, reaching out with her
magic to pat her friend on the back. The Herald sat up and looked over her shoulder with a deep
flush on her cheeks. She was embarrassed, but smiling in return at the gesture.

“Provided it tied you down first, one assumed.” The Inquisitor did not hesitate to find a piece of
fruit and throw it at Solas’s head. He deftly caught the apple and took a bite from it, a polite yet
smug smile on his face. Dorian, Sera, and Blackwall, who had overheard the comment, began to
laugh to the point where their voices echoed in the desert around them.

“See! He can tell jokes, Sera.” Blackwall rumbled, pointing to the elf in front of him. The rogue
stuck her tongue out and crossed her arms.

“Ay’! One good rip does not fix all of that- “She then gestured her hand to his entire body. “Elfy.”

Solas went to look over his shoulder and say something assumingly pointed but Athena grabbed a
piece of bread and lobbed it between his eyes. He snapped back and caught it again, looking at the
bread and then to her with an incredulous look. He gestured it to her, a silent question, she had to
chuckle.

“Just checking your reflexes, hahren. You’re still sharp.” She then shot him a playful wink while
Dorian attempted to wiggle his horse through the ranks to come up to her side. The Tevinter took a
drink from his flagon, which she suspected was filled with wine.

“About that idea earlier. . . “ Athena instantly shook her head and tucked a stray hair behind her
ear. “What? We have a trip before we get to Adamant and do Maker knows what.” She instantly
twitched her lips into a frown. It was really hard to forget what was ahead of them, and the small
reminder twisted her stomach into a knot of anxiety and made her throat feel tight.

Dorian could see the change and he made a small hum of acknowledgement, scratching the side of
his head with an awkward expression. “We can talk about it later. What do you need to do?”

She could feel Solas watching her on the side with a look of concern and she shrugged, running a
hand quickly through her hair before suddenly getting realization. “Hey, buddy, think you can
make it a smooth ride?” Prince raised his head and made a small neigh of approval, shaking his
mane to where it flicked across her face. “Ha- alright then. See you guys in the evening.” There
was almost an excited look on her face as she bent forward and rested her head against her
companion’s back, taking in a deep breath and rolling her mind into the Fade as her body fell
asleep.
“I did not expect you until tonight. What’s the early occasion?” Harmony was standing with a spear in his hand. He twirled in in a graceful fashion, sticking it into the ground before stretching to the sky. Athena looked the spirit up and down and noticed his horns were getting bigger. He looked stronger himself as a spirit. His essence was solidifying and he was further separating from his former identity. “Are you ready? Command has asked that I step in for some of your combat training as well. Two for the price of one, as you have said before.” He flashed a charismatic smile and she couldn’t help but make a sarcastic face back at him.

“I didn’t like sitting on the back of a horse, just riding. I feel the need to prepare, like if I’m not doing something then they are winning. Gods I get why Josephine and Cullen run around like mad now. It’s entirely unner-“Before she could finish her sentence she was blown away by a psionic blast from the spirit. He barely even moved, simply flicked his hand at her as if she were a gnat buzzing around his face. She put her arms up crossed in front of her body and slid back on the Fade ground, wincing before shaking the attack off. He was only scraping the surface; she knew that. He had the potential to delve into memories she didn’t even know she had. At one point, she had woken up suddenly remembering the names of everyone in her third-grade class and where they sat in the room. Brent sat in front of Stacey and they would separate their Skittles by color on top of the desk and eat them in order of least favorite to favorite.

Harmony pushed forward and sliced his spear up towards her, the sharp tip nearly glimmering with the speed of his movements. Athena let out a huff of hair, sidestepping before clapping her hands together and spreading them out. In between her palms came her staff of pure flame and spiritual energy, crackling in the air and snapping into place. There was a trident-style at the top of the staff and she pushed forward when he tried to stab at her, sliding to the side and using the shaft of her weapon to push him back. The spirit was unrelenting, using a combination of physical and mental attacks against her. She discovered the key to surviving in fights with him was to switch between having a barrier on her body and a fortification within her mind. She mentalized the image of walls being erected with gates, moats, and all sorts of defenses that he would have to break through in order to get to her memories.

One by one he attempted to shatter through them. It felt like he broke her nose with a quick jab of his horizontal staff, using the side to strike her cheek and knock her to the ground. There was then a pressure on her mind and she winced, digging her nails into the dirt to push up to a standing position. The spirit stabbed his spear into the ground and pressed his foot into her back, keeping her flat on her stomach. The pressure was becoming intense at the peak of her crown, eyes shut as she tried not to bite her tongue to keep a scream in her throat. Flashes of images went by, most recently the memories between her and Dorian at the bar in Redcliffe.

The spirit chuckled, kicking into her slightly before stepping back. “Children? I didn’t realize that was something you wanted.”
“You’re being awfully hard on her!” Inspiration appeared beside him and pushed him further away, bending down to help Athena stand up. When she first pushed herself up off the ground she fell back, coughing into the dirt with a groan of pain.

“No, he’s doing what he needs to. I don’t feel ready for this! It’s part of why I’m here.” She was able to get on all fours, her breaths coming shaky since the air was knocked from her lungs. “It all feels like it is coming so fast. I thought I had more time. I thought – “ Athena let out a sigh before using her staff to push into a standing position.

Inspiration rubbed her back while giving her an infectiously encouraging smile. She couldn’t help but to smirk at her friend in response, looking her up and down. The spirit was wearing a halter-typed maxi dress, her blonde curls falling to halfway down her back. “I have to ask the same question, children? I met this lovely girl the other night! She spoke of you a lot. Is she yours?”

Athena’s eyes instantly widened and her smile did as well. “Lev’adin? Young, elvish, blonde girl?” Inspiration nodded and dusted the fade-dirt off of her friend’s shoulders.

“She is my adopted daughter of sorts. You have seen her in the Fade? She spoke of bad dreams. . . do you know anything of that?” The spirit twisted her mouth to the side and nodded, her typical smile fading into a frown.

“She has been plagued by _Nightmare_ itself. It appears you are already working on handling that problem, however.” She reached forward and took one of Athena’s hands into her own, working her thumbs in small circles to try and comfort her. “I have so much faith in you, Athena, and so do your people. I feel drawn to them as you march to Adamant. Some of them hear your songs and your stories in their hearts; they see it as a silver lining in this terrible time.” Harmony nodded, crossing his arms and shooting her an apologetic gaze for the intensity of the training earlier.

She couldn’t help but shrug, rubbing the back of her head. “That . . . is oddly good to know. They are simple stories, really. Most of them are children’s stories.”

Harmony cleared his throat and smiled, “That may be, but they are effective. Fade help me, Athena, if I hear Inspiration sing that one with the fairies again, I may cross over the Veil myself and throttle you.”

Athena had to laugh, finally fully recovered from his previous assault. “Apologies, friend. Perhaps next time I shall choose a depressing love story that doesn’t end happy, just to mix things up.”
Inspiration cried out and squeezed the hand that was resting in her grip. “No-“

“You should not be thinking of such frivolous stories, girl. You have much grander things to prepare for.” Harmony scoffed with a wicked smirk and Inspiration froze in place, rolling her eyes to where only Athena could see. She chuckled at the gesture, flicking her tired gaze to Command before giving her a respectful nod.

“Good day, Command.” The spirit clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth.

“Evening, Athena. You have been training all day. Can you not feel the exhaustion in your bones?” She rolled her shoulders and hummed in consideration, finally letting her barrier down that she had been recasting during the entirety of their training. There was a certain revitalization that came when she was in the Fade for extended periods of time, but now that the warrior spirit mentioned it, she felt mentally exhausted.

“I suppose you’re right. My friends probably think I passed on through the Veil on the back of my horse. I will see you all soon.” She went to pull on the tether connecting her mind to her body but then she heard Command chuckle.

“There has been a development, child. The sight is now barren and in its place. . . was this. I was able to collect it before others did, but it is saved for you.” The spirit rolled her wrist and brought her palm face up. Within her grasp was a broken shell of sorts and Athena could feel the energy rolling off of it. She furrowed her brows, stepping forward to look at the object.

“What in. . . “ When she touched it the ring on her hand began to hum against her skin and then it hit her. Her eyes widened and she pushed the two pieces together until they were whole. It was the seed. Their seed of memories they had created with all of the other spirits. It had shrunk in size, but she was sure that was it. “How? When? Where is she?”

Command took the pieces back and allowed them to disappear into her grasp, smirking in a smug gesture. “I have not seen them. I would assume they are in seclusion, collecting their thoughts. Be warned, girl. They may not be the same as they were before. I do not know what we have created from the pool of memories, but do not raise your expectations too high.”

Athena could feel someone lightly touching her back in the real world and the cool sensation followed her to the Fade. She smiled and rolled her shoulders in the sensation, closing her eyes with a small nod. “I will remember that. Please, if you find them, protect them! I do not wish for
them to be found quite yet.” The spirits all nodded in unison as she pulled herself back awake. She instantly rubbed her face into Prince’s mane, reaching around and giving her an awkward hug from the back of the saddle.

“How the blazes did you stay on that whole time? Maker, Athena, I thought you were dead.” Dorian laughed from where they were settled. It looked like they had set up camp for the night and the majority of the party was beginning to unload the horses. Solas was on his mount next to her, face blank except for the small smile in the wrinkles on the sides of his eyes. He knew exactly where she was and she couldn’t help but feel that he was happy for her fade-walking.

“Prince likes me, that’s why. What did I miss?” As if she didn’t miss a beat she threw her legs over the saddle and jumped down. Prince instantly moved to bump his head in the center of her chest, his mouth searching for the snacks she kept on her belt for him when they rode. She pulled out a small piece of carrot and let him nibble on it, rubbing the side of his face with her free hand.

“Oh nothing much. Cullen was repeating the damned battle plans repeatedly until Sera finally threw something at him. Cole did his usual thing of making everyone uncomfortable. Sera may have stuffed your bag full of something – be careful when you unload.” Dorian walked over and pulled her into a quick embrace, patting her on the back while looking down to her.

“Well. It’s good to see things never change.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your continued support. <3
A Desert Oasis

The place they had decided to rest was an oasis of sorts. There was a small luke-warm pool of seemingly clean water with a trickling stream circulating and passing it down a creek in the base of the valley. The soldiers and some of the party members were looking at the water like it was Andraste herself. Athena had the luxury of passing out during most of the day but she could feel how her body was sun-drained from the harsh desert environment and her legs ached from holding onto Prince the whole time. It must have been a windy day because the ache was something deeper than just a day on the back of her companion. The tents were made and they were all silently eating dinner in scattered places around the large camp.

Dorian was leaning against a tree close to the oasis, sipping on a strong red wine that he had brought with him. Athena licked her lips, looking to the water then around at all of the soldiers. The want was plain on their faces. They wanted to go in. What were they waiting on? Rathein walked over to them and gave a shrug, crossing her arms over her chest while scanning the tent.

“What are you looking at?” The mage was looking like a soldier, a leader, but Athena couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Do you not see it, Rathein? We’re all dying to get into that pool but I think they’re waiting on you. We’ll get to Adamant in what? A day, two at most?” The Inquisitor nodded and relaxed her arms at her side. There was sweat visibly rolling down the sides of her face and she couldn’t imagine what was happening under the mage light-armored mail that she was wearing as well. Athena had packed her armor but was not wearing it until they were closer. She started out from Skyhold with layers because she knew the weather would change the farther they got from the Keep. Wintersend was upon them and soon spring would melt away the old and bring forth the new. “I think they need one last chance to wash up before they get Warden and demon guck stuck in their hair. I think I can smell your kadan all the way from over here.”

The Herald touched her dragon-toothed necklace out of reflex, eyes flicking over to the Qunari who was helping the Chargers unpack. Everyone looked, simply put, beat. Dorian let out a low-tuned whistle before nudging Athena. “Come on, someone has to go first. Let’s just throw her in and be done with it.” The Tevinter winked and stepped forward to grab Rathein but she back-stepped and smiled.

“Oh come on. It can’t be me; Some of us don’t get the luxury of fucking around.” Athena grimaced and put her hands up in surrender.

“Luxury, huh? Well if you aren’t going to do it, somebody has to. Here. Hold my jacket then.” She shrugged off her jacket, throwing it on top of the Inquisitor with no warning before bending down and unfastening the buckle of her boots. Dorian was right behind her, undoing the harness across
his chest and draping it across Rathein’s shoulders. They both quickly disrobed, smiling because suddenly more people were looking over at them and more importantly, to the tempting water. Athena stripped down to her chest bandings and a pair of legging-type pants that went down to her knees. They were typically worn underneath armor but she rode them for riding to keep her legs from chafing. Dorian was in something similar, minus the chest bandings, but he was wearing the most confident and charismatic smile she had seen on him in the days of their traveling. He tapped her on the shoulder with the back of his hand, walking slowly towards the oasis leaving the Inquisitor at his back.

Athena did not miss a beat, skipping forward until they were at the water’s edge. It looked clean enough, as clean as a random oasis in the middle of the Approach could be. She dipped her foot in and felt that it was warm, about body temperature. “Do you know any frost magic, Dorian? I think that will be the most refreshing, don’t you?”

The mage pretended to roll up his sleeves, wiggling his fingers and his eyebrows towards her as he walked into the middle of the water pool. At its deepest, the water came up to his chest so he raised his arms parallel to the ground and spun around slowly within the water. She walked to where the water level was about at her knees, smiling at how the temperature of the water decreased as his magic pulsed through it. Instantly it felt more refreshing and she didn’t hesitate in walking further, diving her body down to submerge her hair. Just getting the initial layer of grime off made her feel like a new person. She ran her hands through her hair, smiling before Dorian greeted her with a splash to the face.

He then let out a joyous laugh, waving over to Rathein with a playful yet stern expression. “Hey! Don’t throw those things around like it’s Solas’s rags! That’s made of fine Tevinter material!” The Inquisitor dropped their clothes in a pile unceremoniously, wiping her hands to rid herself of them. She then noticed more of the soldiers were slowly creeping towards the water with mischievous smirks on their faces, most of the leaders looking to Rathein. Loranil was preemptively undoing the straps across his chest and sliding the daggers out from the sheaths on his thighs and back. The Herald let out a sigh, pinching the bridge of her nose before flicking her hand out to the side.

She raised her voice and smiled underneath the words, “Alright. Go ahead. Have the night off before we march tomorrow.”

There was a mass shuffling of clothes coming off and people running to the cooling water. Athena and Dorian pressed themselves up against the wall that was at their back, guarding their positions with a chuckle under their breaths. “Well the water was clean, amatus. Oh, come on, Commander! You must be sweltering underneath that thing! Take a night off for a change!” The mage called over to the military leader, who was leerily looking at the water. Once he saw the two of them he shook his head back and forth with a small smirk on his face. Even though he was far away, she could hear his trademark chuckle trickling from his lips. The Tevinter then let out a sigh and leaned against the warm rock behind them. “Well it was worth a try.”
Athena couldn’t help but grin. “Don’t worry. You’ll see it eventually.”

Dorian’s eyes instantly lit up like a child at Christmas and he turned and grabbed her by the shoulder, squaring his body in front of hers, shaking her with every syllable that fell from his lips. “De-tails. NOW!”

She held her hands up in surrender with a wink. “Can’t yet. Just keep that little nugget in your mind for when you’re having a bad day. Tomorrow’s only a day away, Dorian. Ah – shit. Don’t leave me alone, okay?” Her voice dropped and she suddenly tensed, keeping her side touching her friend as there was a rather large shift in the water level of the oasis. Bull walked over to them, not even changing down to something lighter. He wore his typical heavy clothed pants with yellow and black horizontal stripes, like plaideweave.

“Alright, I’m cashing in my end of the bargain, Alpha. Now a good time?” Dorian looked to the Qunari, looked him up and down with a small scoff, before rolling his gaze over to Athena.

“What’s this about now?” Athena gave a genuine smile.

“Bull beat me in an arm-wrestling match but then Solas beat him. I still have to cash in for me losing. Alright, you want to do it here?” Bull looked around through the pool now filled with soldiers scantily clad in the least amount of fabric they could all get away with. Solas was on the edge of the water, looking leerily into its depths with Varric at his side. He flicked his gaze up to her, arching a single brow in question to ask if she was alright. She gently dipped her head back with a wink, turning her body to the Qunari and relaxing into the stone behind her.

“You sure, Bull? It’s not exactly the happiest of stories.” He reached forward and clasped her on the shoulder and she realized that the size of his hand nearly covered the distance between her shoulder and the curve of her neck. There had to be dragon’s blood in the Qunari somewhere because they were a force to be fucking reckoned with.

“Don’t worry about me.” Bull looked to Dorian and winked with his one good eye. “Can we have a minute? Don’t worry, Vint, you can have her back soon.” The mage curled his lip into somewhat of a snarl, unfolding his arms from his chest and shooting her a supportive glance before weaving slowly through the water towards Solas and Varric. When he left Athena kept her back against the rock, looking up the Qunari with a nervous glance.

“Ah – okay. So you understand that if you had let the Chargers, you know, take the hit you wouldn’t be Tal-Vashoth right?” He nodded so she decided to let it out in one go. She took in a deep breath, wringing the water from her hair and bringing it over her shoulder to start nervously
braiding it while she spoke. Even though she had been a Girl Scout when she was younger, she never learned how to properly braid. At one point she had just messed with it in class and figured out how to do something with her hair that appeared to be fashionable and it worked for her.

“Alright. So your communications with the Ben Hasserath would have continued and you would have gone on. Everything would be fine during the period of the Inquisition but then in a few years... we have a meeting with the Qun. Primarily a Viddasala.” Bull’s eyes widened at her use of the word and he clenched his jaw.

“Shit.”

“Yeah – shit is right. So she would have called on you since you would have still been under the Qun. And... we would have had no choice...” Her words failed her and there was sweat mixing in with the water on her face, her defeated gaze falling from his face and moving to the water.

“That explains a lot. I know you and I are good, but – man. That look on your face yesterday.” There was only a slight shift in his tone. It became more detached, probably to guard himself. She nodded, finishing her braid quickly before getting the courage to look him in the eye.

“It was for her. If you stayed with the Qun, her reputation would have been tarnished for falling for a spy that turned against her. I – Gods, Bull.” Tears finally formed in her eyes and she put a palm against her forehead, crouching back against the stone. She tried to fight it but her hands began to shake and she noticed that he moved forward to block the others from seeing her. “I – I – I can’t believe I even thought of – you’re family!” Athena pulled at her hair with the hand against her brow, shaking her head. “I’m sorry.” Her voice fell to a whisper and she shut her eyes in a poor attempt to control her tears. They didn’t stop though and she wanted to melt into the water to hide from them all.

She didn’t have much time to try to attempt her wish because suddenly her body was being lifted from the water gently, his large hands keeping her against his chest in a hug. He patted her back and she further hid her face in his chest. When he spoke, she could feel the vibrations and rumbling within his chest but his voice was low, soft, and oddly caring. “Hey – I’m still here. We’re all still here. None of us are going anywhere, alright?” Athena pulled at her hair with the hand against her brow, shaking her head. “You did good, Alpha. I would have done the same thing. Sh. It’s alright.” Athena couldn’t stop the silent sobs that racked her body and she was inwardly cursing him for being one of the only people that knew when she desperately wanted a hug. He was such a good hugger, too, it just broke through all her defenses and walls.

Once her body stilled she wiped her eyes, putting her hands flat on his chest and looking to him. He chuckled and smirked a half-cocked smile at her, squeezing her tightly against his body. “Better?”
She nodded, swallowing down the lump of emotions forming in her throat. “Y-yeah. Thanks for that.” She then jokingly beat a fist against the area near his collarbone. “You’re an ass, ya know? Using that Ben Hasserath training for good. It’s not very Tal-Vashoth of you.” She then winked and smiled, feeling warmth within her chest when he let out a chuckle that turned into a full-volume hoot.

“I guess not.” He then looked over his shoulder towards the sand and made a small hum. “But hey, let’s go over to the boss and talk about tomorrow. I know you’ve gone over everything with Lion over there, but I think the main group needs to know what’s going on now, don’t you?” Athena straightened her posture and nodded as he dipped down and put her on the ground. There were only a few soldiers that had noticed the exchange. Loranil was still on the side and his gaze was focused like a hunter’s across the water. She instantly rubbed her hands on her upper arms, looking over to him with half a smile.

He weaved through and closed the distance between them, gently touching her on the shoulder. “Are you alright, lethalin?” She smiled away the tears that were previously there, grasping his forearm in their typical greeting.

(Of course! Rest well tonight. We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow.” Bull pressed on her back and edged her to the shore where the main group was already starting to form. Solas was waiting with a blanket extended on the ends of his fingertips, his gaze captured by Cassandra and Rathein going over battle plans for the next day. Athena grabbed the fabric and wrapped it around her shoulders, instantly smiling because he had traced a warming rune into it. It was soft against her skin and it felt like the type of over-washed sheets that just smelled of home.

Rathein looked over once Athena was “decent”, nodding and gesturing a campfire one the side where Cullen and Leliana were buzzing around schematics of the fortress. Fenris, Stroud, and Hawke were eyeing it as well, pushing around small pieces indicating troops movements. The entire inner party, save for Vivienne because she was already in her tent, walked up to them and made different sounds of greeting. The Commander met each of their eyes, spending less time on Athena’s while clearing his throat and moving onto the next person. Bull nudged her on the side jokingly, looking down with a raised brow.

“Does Solas need to go get your clothes?”

Athena wrapped the blanket around her shoulders tightly and shook her head with a child-like grin on her face. “Nah. You all have seen me in less from our travels; I’m not worried about it.”

She could feel a small tracing on her back as Solas made a small design with the tip of his
fingertip, humming and flicking his hand backwards. All of the water from her hair, clothes, and skin followed his movement and wet the dry earth behind them. She blinked, looking down at her now dry and clean smalls and leggings. He hummed at his work, moving to where his side was brushing along hers as they stood around the fire. His hands were then clasped behind his back and his features were hardened once the talk turned to battle. Just to break the tension, she reached to his back and gripped on his forearm, rubbing her thumb over his skin just until she saw his gaze flick over to her with a ghost of a smile at the corner of his eyes. The subtle change in expression was enough to put butterflies in her stomach like she was a teenage girl.

“The fortress will be well protected. I have no doubt they will be anticipating this attack. Then there is the bit about the dragon.” Hawke noted with a grimace, flicking over a dragon-shaped wooden piece on the map.

Cullen picked it up and put it on the side. “That is handled.” He didn’t even look over to her but she could feel the intent of his words. With an almost smug puff of her chest she moved closer to the campfire since she knew most of what was happening the next day.

“We will move through the fortress with the Inquisitor and a focused party. Our goal is to get to Clarel; she is their leader and is key to changing the Wardens. Sorciere, is there anything to add?” Leliana asked, pulling back her hood and turning her gaze towards her.

She swallowed down a lump of nerves since suddenly everyone’s eyes were on her but she pointed to the main courtyard where the rift was. “There will be a point... I’m afraid its unavoidable with the events and necessary. The Inquisitor and I will go into the Fade. Physically.”

The group stilled and she could feel a flare of cold at her back but nobody around her seemed to shudder like she did. Dorian only smiled with a mad scientist’s glee, rubbing a small hand towel over his hair to dry it. There was steam coming from his hand so she assumed he was using magic as well and he hadn’t bothered to get properly dressed either, so it made her feel slightly better. Sera cursed and threw her hands into the air.

“No way. No fucking way.” Athena crossed her arms and nodded, moving the blanket to where it was only slung over one shoulder so she could move around the map more.

“Do not worry, Sera. I do not anticipate needing you. The only factor, is, well. There is a rather large demon that resides there. It is a Nightmare demon and it uses your most vulnerable and deepest fears against you. Typically its Avatar is defeated but – “ She kept her gaze hard on the map instead of looking to Stroud or Hawke. “It does not go down alone. I will not let that happen this time.”
Athena looked up, determined with her jaw clenched and gaze free of previous tears. “I know it is a lot to ask and is terrifying. Trust me, I do not want to imagine going there myself. But I’ve been training for this for a good time now – “

“It’s true.” Dorian quipped from the back, nearly glowing with pride at her talking. The rest of the group relaxed, if only slightly.

“But the more people we take in there, the higher chance we have of knocking this thing out. For good. My daughter has been affected by Nightmare recently; she hasn’t been able to sleep and my friends in the Fade tell me its due to this demon’s presence. Surely someone else is suffering from its reign as well.” Cassandra shuddered, looking to Athena and giving a nod of her chin with bags underneath her eyes. The Seeker then cleared her throat and pushed forward to the front of the group. Cullen and Leliana were waiting on her word and Rathein smirked, walking to stand at her side.

The Inquisitor put her hand on the flat of Athena’s bare back and gestured to the fortress. “Alright, friend. What do you suggest?”

She cleared her throat and turned back to the map. “Let’s begin.”
Hey guys!

Thank you guys for your patience and I still appreciate your support!

The plan seemed simple. Take as many people into the Fade that were willing and not cease until the demon was near the point of death. Then, the majority of the group could leave through the rift to handle the demons that were pouring out onto the other side. As trained as Cullen’s soldiers were, the inner party were still the most highly trained members in terms of battle experience and skill. Hopefully with the demon weakened, Athena could take it out and avoid the awful choice of who had to stay behind. That night she could barely sleep. They were laying in the bedroll but her eyes went through the top of the tent and into the beyond. Solas fed off her anxious energy, unable to sleep as well. He rolled towards her and draped a hand over her bare belly.

“How can I help, vhenan? My own companions in the Fade confirm your thoughts on the demon we are to face. It has grown fat with fear over time. The events revolving around Corypheus and the Breach have given it enough to sustain itself and then some.” His voice was soft but there was that edge of concern that came when they spoke of the demon. Athena, ever so bull-headed, wanted to try and take it down herself but was slowly coming around to the idea of allowing people to help.

Varric would fight to ensure everyone lived.

Cassandra would want to be there to bring justice to the creature that killed the Divine.

Bull wouldn’t let Rathein go in by herself.

Dorian was too excited to not want to go into the Fade.

Blackwall would go to prove his loyalty to the Wardens and stopping the Darkspawn Tevinter Magister.

Cole would go to help everyone.
Solas would go to help her, and to step foot into the Fade physically.

Sera and Vivienne would stay behind and guard the rift. Vivienne had an authority of the templars that could not be denied and Sera’s arrow never missed. Between the two of them and the Commander’s forces, they could hold the fort down.

“I do not know, Solas.” She rested her hand over his, stroking her thumb over the top of his hand. “I can’t believe we’re actually here. There are many trials still yet to come, but I am always in a state of disbelief when we’re at their doorstep. I’m not dreaming, right?” She turned to him with half a smile and he pinched the skin of her stomach gently, smirking when she recoiled with a chuckle.

“I’m relatively certain we are awake now, Athena. When we are in the Fade tomorrow, try to harden your mind to a cutting edge. The demon can only use what you allow against you. You are the master of your own mind.” He then reached up and poked with his index finger between her eyes.

“Thanks, hahren. Are you going to be able to focus or are you going to be too “holy shit we’re in the Fade?” He chuckled low within his throat, shaking his head back and forth while resting his forehead against hers in a position that filled her heart with comfort. When they were like this, his scent wrapped around her and filled her mind with ease. He anchored her to reality and kept her heart from going into an irregular beat.

“Do not worry about me; I will be fine. I understand that it is difficult. . . but do not fret. I have complete trust you and the Inquisitor will be able to lead us through the next coming days with great success.” He leaned down and gently kissed her on top of the head with a smile on his face. Athena huffed a small breath, smirking and looking down at the wolf bone around his neck, gently holding it within her hand.

“You say it so diplomatically, but thank you. I feel better knowing you will be in there with me.” It was somewhat true; the mission would be terrible regardless of who was involved. But was familiar with the Fade and gave her confidence in her actions, so that would take some of the pressure off. She leaned up from the ground and brushed her lips against his, cupping his face in one hand while meeting his gaze with a small shrug. “I . . . guess we better stop delaying the inevitable and pushing off sleep. Tomorrow is going to come regardless of what we do.” She flopped back on the pillow unceremoniously, letting out a grunt of disapproval towards the whole thing while rubbing her palms into her eyes. There was one final chuckle from Solas before he rolled onto his side towards her and brought him closer to her with a pull of his arm. The warmth of his body was a constant calming presence for her. Eventually, she submitted, curling on her side and lining up her back against his chest in a poor attempt to sleep through the night.
The day of the attack was upon them and Athena had maybe gotten an hour’s rest. Solas was suffering the same as she but he wore his exhaustion much better than she did. She had bags underneath her eyes and had her hair unrestrained flowing down her back in waves, layered thanks to Madame de Fer and the friggin Orlesian ball. There were chests set out from the Keep with the different members’ armor sets for the day. More armor? I thought ours was fine. She cursed to herself, scrunching her mouth to one side in confusion. Solas had gotten up before her and when she walked out she saw he was wearing a set of Keeper robes. Athena couldn’t help but smirk at the irony, running a hand through her messy locks while walking over to her own chest. There was something more refined about the chest. It looked freshly polished and sanded with an ornate metal design covering the edges.

“Well that doesn’t bode well.”

With a gentle kick of her foot she opened the chest and was not surprised by what was inside. It was a subtler version of something Vivienne would wear on the battlefield. There were black thicker pants with boots that went up to her knees. The leather of the boots was freshly shined, giving off a sort of glimmer as she looked at them. The bodess of the robe had a corset back with lacing but thankfully did not have a tail that went to the ground like the First Enchanter’s did. The jacket stopped just below the curve of her bottom and was brought together with a belt that had a silver wolf’s head for a clasp. Athena picked up the object, rubbing her thumbs over it with a smile. The corseted part of the outfit didn’t allow for much underclothes so she gathered everything into her arms and went back into the tent.

There was a dance of pulling on the tight pants and the boots with her back against the ground and her bottom in the air, her hands desperately pulling the fabric over the tough part of her sweated thighs. Eventually she got it and was able to get the corset on, realizing she needed someone to tighten it. Athena rolled her eyes, sending out a quick pulse of magic to poke Solas in the direction he was standing. There was barely a moment that passed between them before he stuck his head in the tent with a curious brow raised.

“How can I assist you?”

Athena pointed to her back with a tired smile. “My armor today is a puzzle and I still haven’t gotten the knack of tying them myself yet.” He cracked a smirk, bending down into the tent and getting on his knees behind her. His fingers daftly and quickly tied the strings, pulling to where it was taught against her skin and holding up her breasts to where they were supposed to be. She never understood how a lowered neckline helped in battle, but obviously, someone picked this for her. He went to pick up the jacket for her and dangled an amulet over her shoulder.
It appeared to be a deep sapphire wrapped around with an obsidian wire, holding it onto a leather strap. He hummed, resting his hand on her shoulder while helping her put on the necklace. There was a small spark between his fingers and the amulet as he reached out with his magic to assess it. “It appears to be an amulet of sorts, from what I can assess, it allows you to cast spells at a faster rate.”

Ah, cooldown reduction. Lovely. Athena nodded and reached over her shoulder to touch his hand. It allowed her to find a bit of grounding in what would probably be a blur of a morning. He squeezed at their contact, humming in what she assumed was supposed to be a vote of confidence.

“Whatever happens today, I am with you, Athena.”

Athena couldn’t help but to smirk, looking up into the heavens through the top of the tent with a soft sigh. “I know.” Her voice was soft, perhaps in some amount of disbelief. All of her thoughts were flying so fast through her head she barely noticed that he led her out of the tent and they were walking to the front of the marching formation. She was ripped back into reality by a firm hand on her shoulder pulling her from her stride.

“Maker – darling. You are nowhere ready to go out and lead the people. Sit.”

Two hands pushed on her shoulders to force her to sit on a chest. Dazed. Confused, Athena blinked her eyes and looked up to see Madame de Fer grabbing a makeup brush with some things from her own collection.

“Vivienne, this really isn’t necessary.”

There was a pressure in the air and she was almost convinced Vader was standing in front of her force-choking her. When she looked up the Enchantress was simply looking down at her with a cool look and a deceptively soft smile. “Darling, you must not understand the importance of days like today. It is your first time truly leading our troops, our people who look up to us. You must fit the idea that they have in your head for you. You have expectations to meet and bars to raise. Now sit still and look up for me, this will only take a moment.”

Vivienne ran a large, soft brush over Athena’s skin, quickly going back and forth between what looked like a foundation and some bronze-colored blush. She had no choice but to sit still. There were people running around them to clean the campsite for when they returned that night, well, if they returned. She swallowed a lump of nerves and was then gifted with a small thwack on top of
the head from the end of the mage’s brush.

“Sit. Still. I’m almost done. You’re only giving me the time to do basics but I suppose that will have to do.” Vivienne then bent down and used a pencil to draw a quick yet thick line of black winged eyeliner. She closed her eyes and felt small taps of fingertips across her eyelids and underneath her brow.

“Um. Thank you? I’m assuming you’re also the one who picked this out?” She gestured to her clothes and heard a terse hum from the person assaulting her with makeup brushes and hair pins.

“Lady Montilyet and I insisted. The Inner Party of the Inquisitor cannot be seen wearing the same armor the entire trip. It would make us look impoverished, ill-funded. We are beacon to all of Thedas, dear. Look up – now look down. You may think it trivial, but what we wear is a descriptor that will be used for all of time.” There was a terrifying accuracy to the speed of her movements with a makeup brush. Even though she had her own seamstress and designer, the Iron Lady still knew how to do her own work. It was surprising and weirdly personal for Athena to know that. She smirked, arching a brow before lowering it because Vivienne flicked her forehead at the gesture.

“I don’t see how my face being done or my hair having whatever you put it in through it will help.” Vivienne let out a dramatic sigh, standing up to full posture and rubbing a hand over the top of her crown.

“I’m positive a metaphor can be drawn from the way that you cast spells to the way your wavy hair danced in the wind like Andraste’s flame. You’re a creative person, dear. Act like it. Alright; it was the best I could with such short time but now you aren’t a complete disgrace to the Inquisition.” The Enchantress held up a small hand mirror, smirking with a puffed chest and smug expression as Athena opened her eyes and examined.

It was quick but dramatic. There was a type of smoky eye in the eyeshadows that brought out the honey color of her eyes. The red lip color contrasted from the blue and white trim of her corset and lighter gray enchanter’s jacket. Before she could even smile she saw Dorian come from the side and grin ear-to-ear. “Marvelous as always, Vivienne.”

The First Enchantress clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth. “That is all, dear. The Inquisitor and the Commander are expecting you at the front. Chin up – now go.” She felt a tug on her jacket and then a small push on her back towards the front. Dorian linked arms with her, glancing at her lack of a staff on her back.
“I will never get over how you don’t use a staff.” Athena shrugged, reaching back and feeling how her hair now had a bit more curl to it than normal. There was a confidence in her stride as they reached the front where Cullen and Rathein were examining the path. The blonde-haired warrior gestured for her to come over, a grim expression on his face. She abandoned Dorian by Solas and the others, crossing her arms over her chest in preparation for what he was about to say.

“The forward scouts report heavy defenses at the front of the castle. It is heavily fortified and unfortunately, they have the advantage from on the tops of their walls. There isn’t much wind today, Maker of all days we have nice weather, so we lose our dust coverage. We’ll be completely in their line of sight. I’m concerned at the damage the front lines will take, even with the siege equipment.” His voice was fast, focused as he pointed to different parts of the map on the small table in front of them. Rathein remained silent, taking in all of the details before speaking.

“Could we have the mages conjure the dust storm? It would be controlled.” The Commander shook his head.

“Unfortunately, they have mages of their own and could use that spell against us. We need something they wouldn’t expect, something they can’t control.” Athena smirked as a locust jumped up on the map and Cullen brushed it away with a swipe of his hand. She then gestured around the back of her neck because she thought she felt movement. Her jaw then went slack, eyes wide in a terrible yet fascinating idea. Rathein caught onto this, smirking and dropping her arms to her side.

“Uh-oh. I know that look. What do you have in mind, friend?” Athena let out a disgruntled groan, reaching down and extending her hand at the locust. It moved to jump away but then she extended a small pulse of magic, something similar to what she initially used with the wolves and the dragonling in the wyrm cave in Crestwood. Being a simple-minded creature, there wasn’t much convincing required. It jumped into her gloved hand and chirped contently. She stood up and stroked its small back, trying not to throw the insect away because being that close to a creepy crawly made her skin crawl.

“I have exactly what we need. Just, make sure the soldiers aren’t jumpy. Gods know I will be. I’m not going to be able to get the taste of lyrium off my tongue for days, but I think I have to try.” Cullen looked to her then to the locust, his mind processing before he smirked, only slightly.

“Well. That would be unexpected and I don’t anticipate that is something their mages could counter or control. Inquisitor?”

Rathein came to the same conclusion, sighing while reaching down and pulling excess fabric from her shirt above her nose. “Fine. We’ll use your spell as a fog and distractor for the people on the battlements. Can you make it thick enough for them to not see our siege equipment?”
The locust chirped again and Athena’s lips twitched uncomfortably. “I guess it depends on how big this guy’s local family is.”
There was a familiar song that entered her head as they came onto battlement and she made a mental note that it would probably be one of the stories she would have to tell. Perhaps it would be the one she included the Chargers in. The sun was beginning to set and it would only help with the spell she was going to try to cast. The castle was on the other side of a hill so thankfully they had cover for the moment behind it. Rathein uncorked a lyrium bottle and handed it to Athena, her eyes looking out on the horizon. “You sure about this?”

“I’m overwhelmed with confidence after that statement, thank you.” Athena grabbed the cork and upended the potion into her mouth, grimacing and swallowing down its contents before throwing the empty vial into the sand. She could see Cullen’s brow twitch from the corner of her eye and normally she would have felt bad. Now she did not have the additional focus to do that. Instead she moved to the front of the group, extending her hand to the side and summoning her staff in a smooth motion that reminded her of a Jedi.

The staff’s top was the bladed crescent she had grown used to using on her first staff with its length being a gnarled and twisted spiritual current. She kept the glow of the flame small as she took in a deep breath and dragged the crescent into the sand below, creating a protective circle around her. With a tracing of a barrier rune with her feet, she pulled on her previous experiences with casting this kind of spell. Her locust from before was sitting on the top of her boot, chirping happily as she coursed her magic through it. That small insect, the thing that caused her to shudder and grind her teeth when it jumped on her shoulder, was the beginning of her spell. She used its chirping, its communication, and spread it through the desert to anything like it.

With a spin of her staff above her head, she drove it down into the sand and allowed for the spell to explode around her in a force of magic. Rathein stepped back and clenched her jaw, looking around to make sure the spell’s effects were invisible and not expanding like a ring of fire. For a moment, the desert was silent except for the happy chirping of her friend on her boot. Athena was afraid to move, even with sweat dripping on her brow and down her back from the day of traveling through the desert and its harsh environments.

Cullen put a hesitant hand on the hilt of his blade, his trained eyes scanning the horizon. “Are we sure this is going to work?”

Athena instantly snapped in a terse voice low enough only for the immediate party to hear. “Trust, Commander. Isn’t that the reoccurring lesson between us?” She looked over her shoulder at him and then broke a small smirk so he wouldn’t be offended. He nodded, relaxing his hand while looking out. He went to speak again but Rathein raised a hand and cut him off with a wicked smile.
on her face.

“Hush, listen.”

They all closed their eyes to listen to the ambient sounds of the desert and Athena took the time to flick her gaze to Solas. He was listening as well but managed to somehow feel her looking at him. He opened his eyes and nodded his head to her, a wicked and dark expression in the corners of his eyes that showed some kind of approval for the unique spell she had cast. The sound Rathein thought she heard began to grow, a humming that filled the air with an uneasy certainty. Athena looked behind her and what appeared to be the darkness of the sun setting was in fact a large cloud of insects coming towards them, more specifically to her call.

Athena smirked and whispered under her breath: “I send the locusts on a wind, such as the world has never seen.” She then picked up her staff and turned, using the momentum to point her staff over the hill and towards the fortress. The sound of the swarm approaching made her skin crawl. She fought the urge to clap her hands over ears and crawl into a ball but they needed this; this was a change that only she could make that would hopefully save lives. Unfortunately, flying insects were high on the list of fears so it ended up being a training session for what she would face in the Fade.

As the cloud came closer, she sent out mental commands to them while erecting a barrier around herself that was roughly two feet out from her skin so that they would not collide with her or send her skin itching with their small little movements. The thought made her roll her shoulders and neck, letting out a deep breath through her nose.

*Cloud the troops.*

*Attack those who attack us.*

*Stay safe.*

The volume of the swarm increased as they passed overhead the soldiers. They followed Athena’s staff and moved over the hill and slowly crept in towards Adamant Fortress. Cullen unsheathed his sword and pointed it towards their target. “Forward march! Double time! Use that cloud as your cover and help the siege equipment get in close!” The soldiers cheered nervously but their voices were drowned out by the sound of the swarm. Athena gripped her staff tight within her hands, walking underneath it with a pseudo-confidence as they made their way to keep.
The cover had worked. It was able to get them close enough to the keep for the siege equipment to set up and fire off its first few shots towards the walls without being seen. With her command, the insects split open to allow a temporary hole where the boulders would fly through and strike at the wall. The archers on the wall were firing into the soldiers and thankfully the mages Cullen brought along erected barriers in front of the them to take some of the blows. They were ready with their Rites to cast and looking around for demonic targets; Athena actually felt confident in their battle plan and the changes that had been made.

After the second round of trebuchet firings went off the archers were using the small lapses in the swarm to fire down arrows. Athena arched a brow, clapping her hands together and separating them while sending a pulse of power through her creatures.

*Distract their archers. Do not kill them.*

Instantly the cloud of insects broke apart into miniature clusters that rained down upon the battlements. The archers were too busy swatting away at the stinging and the insects on their faces while screaming gurgled cries of panic to fire down and so the soldiers, accompanied by Hawke and Fenris, were able to get the ladders up and begin their own attack. Rathein led the group with the battering ram and called out attacks.

“On my mark, pull!”

The men and women pulled back on the ram with sweat on their brows and a grunt of effort, waiting for her cue before releasing it into the door. Realizing the force wasn’t enough, Bull joined in on their attempts and gripped it from the back, pulling it above his head and pushing down with an ecstatic shout of strength. The door was shattered and the soldiers were able to get through and clear the courtyard. With a wave over her with her staff, the Inquisitor summoned the party in the courtyard. Athena disconnected her mind from the swarm and allowed them to go off of her last command, trusting their instincts and her residual magic within them. She vaulted over a piece of debris and was greeted by a greater shade demon with old armor fused in with its back. It shrieked at her, sliding on the ground towards her.

She slid her boot on the ground, stabilizing her posture, before pushing her palm forward until it collided with the demon’s chest. Flames burst upon impact, pushing the demon within range of Cassandra’s sword slice. The freshly sharpened blade cut through the creature with ease, a final wail echoing through the air around them its remains dissipated into the air. The rest of the group had finished off the few soldiers and Athena made a small mental note that bringing more people was an added bonus, even if they were going to suffer through the Fade together.
Rathein turned and broke her hardened façade, shooting her friend a thumbs up before looking to Cullen. He came over the barricade and met the Inquisitor’s gaze. “We will hold this position as you advance – “

Athena knew the conversation, turning and looking up towards the battlements while drawing her hands back as if she were holding a bow and arrow. Solas arched a brow at her while Dorian smirked, taking a sip of water from his flagon while waiting to see what she was doing.

“Hawke is on the battlements and our soldiers require assistance in holding their positions and ladders. The swarm provided us the surprise advantage, but now their soldiers are putting up a hell of a fight. Once that area is cleared we can cover you.” The shade that peaked over the walls in the game showed its face and Athena made the motion of letting an arrow loose. In its wake, an arrow crafted from her pure spiritual energy whizzed through the sky and struck the demon in between its eyes. It instantly fell backwards and she let out a sigh, grinning and returning the thumbs up to Rathein and the Commander.

“That trick will never cease to amaze me, Wolfsbane.” Dorian joked while nudging into her. Harriet was resting on his side and she rubbed the top of the skull in an odd respect. The mage patted his hand over hers while she looked at the broken path ahead of them. Blackwall grunted, wiping blood from his sword on the cloth of his sleeve.

“We should try and sway as many Wardens as we can. They are a good people in shit situation; surely not all of them are on board with this awful plan of old Gods and demons.” Solas scoffed but Athena nodded to soon-to-be Warden, walking over and gripping his shoulder.

“There are some that can be persuaded; we will just have to be convincing.” Rathein hummed in agreement and looked out towards their group.

“Allow the ones who can surrender to do it. Anyone who is willing to help us turn the tide of this battle is a friend in arms to the Inquisition, for now.” The short-haired mage rubbed the back of her head and nodded to the Commander. “Let’s get to the battlements where Hawke and Fenris are. Stroud is covering out back to keep the demon’s off of us. They must need our help. Everyone ready?”

The group nodded. Varric loaded another bolt into Bianca and cocked the spring back into place. Athena stayed at his side while they ran up the broken steps through the fortress. The moment he had a good view he fired off a bolt into a demon and cracked a smile. His eyes then widened and he looked over to her. “Hey, remember that part in one of your stories where the dwarf and the elf kept count?”
She visibly twitched in surprise, slowly looking down to him as the chaos of battle erupted around them. “You’re kidding.”

He shook his head. “Nah. Something’s gotta break the tension while everyone is getting serious. Bianca’s excited! We’re tied by the way, now get going!” He was loading up another arrow while Athena could feel her competitive heart roar in excitement. She turned on her heel and quickly assessed the battle, pushing off from her heel into a fade-step. Her staff materialized in her hand with the crescent blade atop its peak and she sliced it up in an arch at the first Warden she saw squaring off against an Inquisition soldier, who had fallen onto his backside from a hit. Blood sprayed as her flaming scythe of a blade cut through armor, staining the front of her corset.

She didn’t care. The hunt was on and it was the force pulsing her heart. When the Warden in front of her attempted to lunge forward with her sword she side-stepped and flipped her staff over, stabbing forward with the sharpened end of her own weapon through his chest. Two.

She swallowed down a nervous lump of anxiety as Sera clapped her on the back. “Niiiice shot earlier! You were like “boom!” and the demon just – ah! That was great. Why you scared? We’re winning!” She exclaimed with a smile, gripping Athena’s shoulders and shaking them.

Blackwall looked over his shoulder and shook his head. “There is no winning in this kind of battle, Sera. We are doing what we must.”

Rathein joined in on his statement, doing a quick head count of the party before nodding. “Let’s keep going. We don’t want that rift of theirs to be open longer than it has to be.”

The group made quick work of the stairs and came upon the Warden group where there were soldiers backing away from their mage comrades whose eyes were visibly twisted by a magic that wasn’t their own. Athena could hear the sick singing of red lyrium in the air and it sounded like a discordant duet of broken violins, scratching at the corners of her mind. “Think of what you’re doing! This is madness! We want no part of this!”

Rathein ran forward and extended an arm to the side to keep the party stilled. The mages grabbed willing victims and slit their throats without question, raising forth demons that shrieked with new life into the air. The cacophony of otherworldly sounds sent a chill down Athena’s spine but there was a polite clearing of throats at their backs. She turned and saw Vivienne, staff drawn with a few mages and Templars at her command. “Dispel of those demons; use the tools the Commander gave you.” She tilted her head forward to gesture for them to go. Wolfsbane glanced to the side and saw
glowing runes within their hands. The mages passed their hands over the runes and a holy type of light burst from them in pulses like breaths.

The demons’ bodies contorted and their sounds turned to anguish. They were frozen in position and the Wardens used that advantage to cut the creatures down. The Templars focused their lyrium-fueled attention on the mages that had done the blood ritual, suppressing their abilities by slamming the ends of theirs blades into the ground and to push the holy power within them forward. Even though they were behind the whole scene, Athena felt her pulse quicken and chest tighten at the memory of what that power felt like. It was like a pure white-hot flame filling her body with pain, washing away every happy sensation she had ever felt while ripping thoughts from the spaces of her mind. The memory must have been apparent in her expressions because Cassandra grasped a shoulder in knowing to bring her back into the present.

“Are you all right, Athena?” The soldier asked, tilting her head to the side. Even though the words were caring the Seeker was focused, her face on the verge of being angry with small scratches present on her skin.

“I’m fine. Just thinking about what comes next is all. Thanks, Cassandra.” The warrior nodded and they turned to see the Inquisitor with her hands up approaching the soldiers.

“We mean you no harm! We have spared many of your kind already. If you fall back behind our troops you will be safe from the abominations.” Rathein pulled on her ability to command a group of people with her words and even still the nobility of her heritage shown through. Blackwall stepped forward to add his own piece.

“Please! No more Wardens need to die tonight. We do not wish to quarrel with you.” The Lieutenant of the Wardens looked to his men and nodded, bowing towards Rathein.

“Maker bless you, Inquisitor. Please, hurry, Clarel has gone mad. She and that mage must be stopped before they unleash chaos upon us all!” He pointed with his sword down a path for them to follow.

Rathein and the party followed without another word. The sounds coming from the battlements brought a sense of urgency to her movements. As the group ascended the stairs, Varric tapped his finger on the side of his brow as a reminder. Athena clicked her tongue in recognition, winking back to the dwarf while bringing the flaming staff within her palms to bear. Once they ascended the stairs to the battlement completely, there was a happy shout of adrenaline from her left. She looked to see the Hero of Kirkwall jumping into a fray with her armored fist, an arch of lightning coming behind it. “Ah. Force Mage.” She whispered to herself, running forward before being seeing a swirling light below on the stone. A Terror pushed through the Veil and knocked her to the ground, roaring in victory into the night sky. There were still residual fighters from her swarm.
that kept it distracted, condensing around its face to keep the demon temporarily blinded. Athena repositioned her staff forward and quickly traced a flame glyph on the demon’s chest, covering her face as it exploded and pushed the demon back into the opposing wall.

When it tried to stand again, a large broadsword removed its head from its body and its wielder hummed in pleasure with themselves. Athena blinked and sat forward, seeing Fenris flick his sword to the side to remove blood from it. He extended his hand to help her up and she fought not to blush, quickly jumping to a standing position. “Your staff. I haven’t seen anything like it.” His voice was grim and he focused his stern gaze on the glowing object flaring at her side. She opened her mouth to answer but was interrupted by an overly cheery and murderous voice behind her.

“Five, Walker!”

“The benefits of coming from another world, Fenris. Try not to hold it against me.” His eyes focused into a weary glare but eventually twitched his lips into a smirk, nodding to dismiss her back into the fray. She turned her body and took off, eyes widened as she saw that the group had run into the demon of Pride that was banging its chest like a creature that typically hung off the Empire State Building with a maiden in its arms. Solas had its feet trapped with an ice mine while Bull and Cassandra assaulted it with their blades. The demon threw its electrical whips out and caught Rathein by the forearms but she grinned wildly, pulling back and using the upswing of the whips to pull herself off of the ground and towards the demon.

The Inquisitor flew, leaving her staff on the ground and drawing forth an ethereal blade that only a Knight Enchanter could truly wield. It glowed and illuminated the area with a radiant light, leaving Athena in a kind of awe even as the blade pierced through the demon and continued its descent south through its body as the Herald used her body weight to end the beast.

“Damn, kadan, that was badass!” Bull praised with a grin, raising his hand to give his lover a high five. She did it, wiping her face with the back of her head. Athena rejoined the group and tried to avoid the cocky smirk that Varric was giving her. Solas looked between them and shook his head, pulling out a lyrium and health vial to offer to the party. Blackwall took a health potion and Athena took the lyrium, rubbing her thumb over the length of the small tube with a nervous glance.

They had cleared the battlements, but Inquisition and Warden corpses alike littered the stone floors. Athena knew that soon they would pass her favorite boulder with a soldier’s graffiti on it before confronting Erimond, and most importantly, his pet and what followed.

Chapter End Notes
The brief sentence of a song is from "The Plagues - Prince of Egypt."

Probably my favorite song to blare through my speakers and drive on the freeway too.

Thanks for all of the support! :)
Even at a sprinting pace, the Inquisition arrived after the elder Warden’s throat was slit by Warden Commander Clarel. Anguish painted her face like a mask and for a moment they all felt a moment of pity for the Commander. She was painted into a corner by the Calling, the threat of the falling of the Wardens moving them all to do unspeakable things. For a moment... Athena could feel sympathy for them, but that moment did not last long when she heard the Tevinter speak. His voice was like a palpable grease in the air and it made her feel like she needed to shower. He just exuded evil deeds.

“Stop them! We must complete the ritual!” The Tevinter shouted and Rathein instantly held her arm up to keep the rest of the party back. The courtyard was filled with Wardens, their breaths hitched in their throats waiting for the next order from their Commander. The Inquisitor stormed forward and met the leader of the Wardens with a steeled gaze.

“Clarel! If you complete this ritual, you’ll be doing exactly what Erimond wants!” The opposing mage rolled his eyes and stepped forward, failing to feign innocence and benevolence.

“What, fighting the blight? Keeping the world safe from darkspawn? Who wouldn’t want that?” It was at that moment Athena chose to scoff and begin shrugging off her jacket. She undid the wolf clasp at her belt and slid her hands out of the sleeves, throwing it on the nearest stone. “And yes, the ritual requires some blood sacrifice. Hate me for that if you must, but do not hate the Wardens for doing their duty.”

She began patting her pockets, looking for a piece of string or rope to use to pull her hair back. There couldn’t be any distractors from her flight around Adamant. The dragon was strong, powerful. She needed every advantage to keep it away from the group. If she could, she would use the distraction to save Clarel’s life, but with the choices the Commander had made... her life was not a priority.

“We make the sacrifices no one else will. Our warriors die proudly for a world that will never thank them.” Blackwall made a noise of disagreement but Stroud broke from the group first.

“And then your Tevinter ally binds them to Corypheus! We cannot afford to lose a single Warden.” Clarel’s face fell to pallor and Rathein hummed in agreement, her features hardened with her hands in fists at her side. Erimond’s next words were drowned out as Athena finally found a small ribbon to use to pull her hair back to keep out of her face. There were still a few strands floating around the sides of her face so she tucked them behind her ear and brought another lyrium potion from her
Dorian stepped forward, keeping his voice low with his gaze constantly on the Wardens in front of them. “Are you ready?”

She shrugged, tightening the laces of her boots before standing up to full posture and rolling her neck. The lyrium potion hummed in her palm and she could feel its pull to her magic. “As I’ll ever be I suppose.”

“Bring it through!” Their attention snapped to the center of the courtyard and Athena felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. The air grew thick with magic, making it difficult to breathe as the Warden mages swirled their spells and muttered their incantation to bring through the Nightmare Demon. In the window of the Veil she could see the scattered eyes of the large spider monstrosity and suddenly her stomach turned to stone, eyes wide. Dorian touched her back lightly, his voice having lost some of his strength.

“Try to stay mostly flame, dear. That way if the dragon tries to breathe on you it will go straight through like the lyrium did.” The mage rubbed his hand between her shoulder blades and she could feel the heat of his mana on her skin like a warm embrace. Solas’s presence combated her friends like a cold breeze. He came to her other side, face concentrated in a stony demeanor of focus. His eyes scanned the courtyard and he drew his staff as the Wardens began to approach them. With the rift open, his veil magic began to swirl and draw towards him in a swirling wind. Everyone was ready to pounce when ready. Hawke called out with a hand to the side of her mouth, desperation soaking her words.

“Please! I have seen more than my share of blood magic! It is never worth the cost.”

Stroud was at his side and there was hesitation as he drew his sword. “I trained half of you myself. Do not make me kill you to stop this madness!”

A deafening call from the Nightmare demon silenced all of them, a pulse of power shaking the earth they stood on as the creature moved to come from the rift. Solas reached to the side and gripped her forearm, pulling her gaze from the hellion of the fade to him. There wasn’t compassion on his face, there was no time for that, but there was a confidence in her that stirred adrenalin in her veins. He didn’t need to say anything, she knew. They were all there to topple the obstacle together, as corny as that sounded running through her mind.

“Please! We’ve spared your Wardens before! We do not wish to end an Order that had saved generation after generation. There does not need to be war between us. Help us take down
Corypheus once and for all.”

The Wardens all paused. Athena noticed that their grips weakened on their weapons as they turned towards Clarel for validation. The thrum of her pulse roared like an ocean in her ears, eyes scanning the sky for the best path. A stray locust jumped across her feet and she looked down with a smirk, bending down to get it within her palm and stroke its back. Perhaps there were still friends around that could help. The small creature chirped within her grips and she swore she felt a small vibration in her palm. Was that a sign of affection in insects? The whole thing still creeped her out and made her want to throw the thing in the air and run, but an ally was an ally.

“My master thought you might come here, Inquisitor! He sent me this to welcome you!”

Erimond raised his staff to call the dragon and Athena turned to Bull with a cry, downing the lyrium potion before calling: “Mayhem!”

Without missing a beat the Qunari ran forward and bent down, picking up her foot within his hand and growling with effort. He pushed from the ground with all of his might and pulled on his Reaver abilities to strengthen his body to the edge of its abilities. He launched Athena into the air and she used the momentum to spin and pull the flame from her core, melding her flesh with its until her entire body was a shining corona of her former shape.

The Inquisitor scoffed from underneath her and she could hear the smirk in her words. “I know. We came prepared for that.”

Erimond reeled back and Athena shot him a grin full of white-flame, turning her attention towards the dragon that was descending from the clouds. Before it had the opportunity to wreak havoc on the courtyard she clapped her hands together and pulled them apart, dragging lightning between them. Like an all-star pitcher in the 7th inning she launched the ball of lightning towards the creature, striking it on the side of its chest. It reeled, flapping its wings to recover but changed its line of sight from the courtyard to her.

Then it roared a horrible sound that made it feel like her spirit was pushed out of her body, but she realized that was just fear. Better use it to my advantage.

There was a chill on her skin as Solas cast a barrier over her but she was taking flight, pushing from the physical plane to enter a fade-step midair like he had practiced with her. Her body disappeared into a streak of red, oranges, and white, tracing through the sky. The dragon followed intently, spitting small orbs of crackling blight energy anytime she materialized from her escape.
As she popped back into existence, she looked over her shoulder and saw that the dragon was right at her heels. It only put fuel in her flight, a feral snarl tearing from her lips as she screamed in a feral, wordless cry to any ally that was listening. In the depths of her spirit, she could feel her wolves at Skyhold raise their heads to the sky and howl. The pack in the Plains joined into the chorus they could only feel like an instinct within their hearts. Even Thunder, the druffalo in Crestwood, urged his back to groan their guttural cries into the silent night. She felt them within her, a strange and fragmented family of animals that she had connected with her over her many months of being with the Inquisition.

There was also the sudden revival of her new local family. From the corpses of Warden soldiers and the sands of the desert, the scourge rose to her call. It was like a shadow had lifted from Adamant Fortress and came into the night sky. Where the beat of their wings once filled her with an anxious dread, it now gave her strength. Without even having to send a command the swarm focused around the dragon in its flight, clinging to every scale and trying to find weaknesses to exploit. A brave group of wasps, blasted things, landed around the dragon’s face and were repeatedly driving the points of their barbs into the flesh of its eyes.

The creature suddenly rolled behind her midair, tucking its wings into its body and commanding the wind to wrap around it and rid itself of some of the insects. The others still clung on, pursuing in their task to distract it. Athena could smell the blighted blood in the air streaming from the dragon and she moved forward with pushes of her wings, taking the dragon outside of the keep and over the army of the Inquisition. There were echoes of cheers from below but she didn’t have the fraction of a second to wave back at them. Bit by bit the dragon was beating through her defenses and gaining distance on her.

Its heated breath was felt at her feet and she closed her eyes and clenched her jaw as its blighted lightning passed through her flame form. It was disorienting. Everything about the magic felt so wrong, corrupting every fiber of her being. It sent her into a dizzying paralysis, her body descending into an unknown path into the keep. The impact through stone wasn’t as painful as the dragon following her and ramming its nose over her entire torso, teeth attempting to scrape at her flesh. Flame extinguished in a second and blood spurt forward from her lips, hands gripping over the teeth in front and pushing it off of her with a desperate scream.

There was a cry of warning to her left and it felt like time slowed as she looked to see the Inquisition group in their pursuit of Clarel. Things clicked into place and a hollow laugh left her throat when she realized: the dragon was still in the same place as it was in the game. It was still in the blasted battlements attempting to spit lightning at them. Except this time, she had at least done damage to it and kept it from reigning chaos on them for the majority of their time. It lunged forward with another desperate snap of its jaws but she had a flashback to the moment with the bear, her arm locked between its jaws as she summoned flame to cascade down its throat.

A lesson from one of her favorite movies flashed through her mind: dragons are nearly
impenetrable to flames on the outside, but the inside? Fleshy and weak, just like the rest of the creatures of the world. Athena flicked her gaze through the group of friends, taking in their panicked expressions before pulling on the flames again, curling her body up into a ball for the dragon to close its jaws around her. She could feel its teeth attempting to pull at her flesh but her skin was gone, folded into the fire once more but she grinned underneath it all. In a move of desperation and stupidity, she pushed herself from the back of its teeth down its throat. She pushed one hand forward and summoned a barrier around her like the aura of a comet, coming to a point in front of her slice through flesh and blight.

The dragon pushed back from the wall, crying out a crippled and gurgled cry. The pitch vibrated around her and sent her mind into a frenzied storm. Eyes wide, she snarled and pushed off from whatever hard surface from the inside of the dragon was near her, pushing her body through one of the necrotizing openings on the creature’s flank.

“Fuck! Nasty that is.” Sera exclaimed from below, pulling back an arrow and whizzing it through her fiery form into the exposed hole she left behind.

Vivienne was at her side and there was a subtle twist of disgust to her lips. She stepped forward and clenched her hand into a claw, bringing forth ice into her grasp before launching it at the dragon. It reeled and turned its head towards them, Athena cursing underneath her breath and moving back into the center of its gaze.

“Hey! We’re not done yet, Blightey.”

She allowed the flames on her body to condense into the wings on her back, the hatred plain on her face as she flicked her hand towards it and sent an orb of flame to its face. It shook the attack off like the annoyance it was meant to me, huffing with a beat of its wings before roaring at her once more. Athena turned with a twist of her body, pushing off from an invisible point in the air and pumping her wings again. She prayed that somebody had more lyrium potions because the flight was draining her more than her usual bouts of training. Logically, she knew that it was a combination of the adrenaline, the swarm, and the blight attacks that had been pushed through her body.

But logic was long forgotten as they came over the edge where Clarel was storming towards Erimond, her barrier standing as all of his attacks deflected side to side. Rathein and the group were behind her. The Trevelyans looked up into the sky and jerked her staff into the air. It was like a light blanket, but Athena felt a barrier wrap around her body and squeeze. In that moment, she smiled, until she felt a familiar pang of magic in the dragon behind it.

It felt carnal, instinctual, like there was a distant cord reaching out to the creature and pulling on its purpose in life. The dragon’s gaze glossed over with a red crackling energy, it snarling a cry of
blood and power, turning the focus of its attention down to the Warden Commander. Athena froze, instantly pulling back her hand and launching an attack forward as the dragon dipped down from the air.

“Clarel! Move!”

The blast of telekinetic energy sent the mage flying, her body landing with her on her back behind the Inquisitor’s party. The dragon snapped its jaws in the space where the Commander had previously been, redirecting its movements until it curved around and was landed on the bridge, walking towards them like Athena had seen it happen so many times before. Except this time Clarel was not exsanguinating from a dragon’s bite to the stomach, but it was obvious that she was wounded from the whole encounter. Athena fade-stepped down through the air until she was behind Rathein, her magic puttering out to where her wings dissipated into the air.

Bull quipped nervously. “What the fuck have you been doing?”

She instantly looked up the dragon, grinning for a moment as she saw blood trickling from its side where she had previously exploded from. In between pants of breath, she pointed up. “That.”

“In war, victory.” Clarel began to murmur, charging up energy within her hand as the dragon walked over her in an assumption that she was dead.

“Everybody hold on!” Athena cried out, strengthening her posture, and staring forward at the dragon.

“In peace, vigilance!” The resulting blast sent the dragon careening forward and over the side of the crumbling castle edge. The whole party shifted to run forward but Athena stayed still, denying the urge for every fiber in her body to try and escape. When the shocks shifted, Rathein turned around with a incredulous stare.

“Wha-!”

“It’s inevitable. We cannot outrun this fight. Stick together!”

The party hesitated but grabbed the person nearest them by the hand or forearm. There was a unison intake of breath as the rocks crumbled and fell beneath them, their bodies nearly catapulted
in the air by the force. Rathein cried out but instantly thrust her hand forward. Magic from the
mark twisted the magic of the Veil around them, tearing it open as if it were a sleeping eye. It
folded underneath her will and the Inquisition fell through into the Fade.

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun dun - It’s Fade time now!

Thank you all for the continued support, especially for the next few weeks when my
activity will be just dreadful.

<3 <3 <3
“Kaffas. That hurt.”

Dorian groaned from the flat of his back, looking into the swirling miasma of colors above him. There was a mysterious liquid on his pants leg that he knew wasn’t going to come out and it smelled of rotten poultry that had been left out in the Minrathous sun for two weeks and half an hour. He pushed himself up to a sitting position, wiping the dirt from his arms, asking anyone who was around him.

“Well, are we dead? I expected more virgins.”

And of course, the one person he did not want to get stuck in the Fade with answered.

“No. This is the Fade.” The elf had a solemn yet excited look on his face, and it was something that made Dorian extremely uncomfortable. He loathed to be on the ground anymore so he stood up and finished wiping the dirt and Maker knows what from his robes and pants.

“The last time I was in the Fade. It looked like a lovely castle filled with gold and silks. I met a marvelous desire demon as I recall. We chatted and ate grapes before he attempted to possess me. Perhaps the difference is that we are here physically.”

“Leave it to Tevinters to casually dine with demons as if it were a second thought.” Solas snapped back, looking around and making the same realization that he just had. They were alone. The Inquisitor and Athena were nowhere to be found, as well as the others. “The Inquisitor opened a rift. . . “ He stated slowly, pacing as if trying to retrace his steps. “We came through, and survived.”

“Good to see the fall hasn’t wounded your keen observational skills. How do we find them?” The rift mage ignored him, crossing in front of him while looking to the sky.

“Look. The Black City, almost close enough to touch.” His eyes were lost within their new location but Dorian threw his arms in the air with a scoff.
“Great. I’m alone here. Shit, where’s the Inquisitor? Or our lady Wolfsbane?” Dorian slowly looked out at the twisting and gnarled landscape, noting the multiple pools and unknown and forbidden liquid. He swallowed a lump of nerves, rubbing the back of his neck, and finding only more of the stuff that was on his pants. It smeared on his palm in a purple and black hue, leaving a bitter taste of bile on the back of his throat.

“I assume we have all been separated. Athena had stated that in what she had seen, there were not as many of us present in the Fade. I would not be surprised if the Nightmare demon has forced us all apart to take away any advantage we might have obtained.” Dorian felt some relief in how the elf’s voice changed when he said their mutual friend’s name, the edge of his typically hardened expression softening into something that potentially mirrored compassion. But from their shared adventures, the Tevinter doubted there was anything past that small flicker of actual kindness.

He pushed forward and out of the small clearing they were in, picking a path that appeared to twist and go through an area with the least amount of floating pools. There was a sickness in the air. He had felt it once when he was experimenting with Alexius. They had been testing out the different frequencies of their magic to find a harmonious place to where they could cast spells together. He had been taught that each mage had a flavor of magic that normally did not mesh well with others. It was like tuning two different high pitched instruments with another. However, Tevinter teachings also raised them on the important of individual strength instead of combined strength like in the Southern Circles.

The idea, frankly, made him sick. The sharp sound of a branch breaking startled him but he only saw the fade-walker move forward with his staff drawn. “Ah. Solas. You startled me. You’re always so... non descript.”

Solas stopped, looking over his shoulder before trailing his gaze from the mage’s feet to his face. “Please speak up, Dorian. I cannot hear you over your outfit. How is that supposed to be useful in the heat of battle?”

“How she puts up with the two of you I will never know. If it weren’t for her I would have abandoned you both here to find your own way.” A disgruntled voice called them from the side and they both turned to look. A bronze-skinned man stood with his arms crossed. He wore a basic white tunic with the sleeves rolled up. Dorian followed the top, even to its deeper neckline that showed off the swell of the muscles of his chest. As he assessed this new man quite generously, he arched a brow when he saw two golden horns curled up on the top of his head. He wasn’t Qunari in appearance; his frame was too narrow. But there was white hair pulled back into a tight bun of sorts between the horns.

“Ah. It is a spirit of Harmony. Do you know the location of the others?” Solas mused, clasping his hands behind his back in a way that made Dorian have to keep from rolling his eyes. The spirit nodded once, flicking his blue gaze between the two men with a smirk.
“As a matter of fact, I do. Would you both be so kind to follow me? Keep up and watch your step.” Harmony spoke with a deep sarcasm that made the Tevinter smile for the first time since entering the Fade. The scream of a wraith caught their attention but the spirit brought forth a spear from Maker only knows where and stabbed it through the throat, quickly severing its head and sending the creature to the ground.

“Impressive.” He looked the spirit up and down before smirking, following the horned creature with his staff drawn into a defensive position.

“That’s what Athena said as well. It’s sure come in handy for her, or at least I hope. Rage taught me a great many things, battle being one of them. I’ve done my best to pass those lessons onto others with this new life I’ve been given.” Dorian looked over to Solas with an arched brow, mouthing the words “new life?” to him while gesturing with a small nod of his head towards the spirit.

His answer was a smug expression, because of course it was. “This spirit of Harmony used to be a demon of Rage. He was reminded of his true nature by a friend of the spirits.”

“Oh Solas, how charitable of you.”

Harmony scoffed, looking over his shoulder towards Dorian and giving Solas his back. “Please, mage. You are more than just a pretty face; act like it.”

Things felt wrong, cramped, open at the same time. Gnawing, gnarling, twisting, biting, burning pain that filled the spirit with such anxiety it made him want to run. He could do that. Disappear, make them forget, start all over again. But he needed to help. The others relied on him now. He couldn’t disappear again. The Inquisitor was trying to find his friends, help them, so he could show them how sorry he was. He was only meaning to help those people, help Rhys.

“Kid, hey, kid. You alright?”

He was being touched. Eyes open, breath hitched in the middle of his throat. Varric. Varric was a friend, always a friend who wanted to help him. He was one of the first people to see him, truly see
him for something more. He made him want to be something, something more, something better.

“I-I’m fine. You are worried. You hate it here. You regret coming.”

The dwarf sighed, pushing up from the boulder he was sitting on while shaking his head.

“Not all of the thoughts you read are completely true, Cole. Sometimes people are angry, but just in the moment. This is one of those moments. A big friggin moment.” He ruffled his hair with a hand and sighed, looking out into the distance. “What about you? Aren’t you from here?”

Cole shook his head back and forth, dirtied blonde hair falling in front of his face. He back pedaled into a stone, nearly tripping over onto the ground. “I can’t be here. Not like this.” He patted his chest and let out a noise of disapproval. “Not like me.”

“It’s going to work out. We just need to find the others. The Fade . . . “ He looked around while letting out a low tuned whistle that sent a shiver up Cole’s spine. He wasn’t confident. He was scared, but trying not to show it. He was going to say just that but then he remembered that Varric told him to try and restrain how much he revealed people’s thoughts. It was rude, could be scary to others, he said. “It’s a lot different than I remember it. What about you, kid?”

He wanted help. He wanted to find the others, so did Cole. Rathein could help. Her mark was the key to getting them all of there. It sung, a sick, sweet, infectious song that played in tune with the Fade. It wasn’t supposed to be hers. They weren’t supposed to be in the Fade. “This place is wrong. I made myself forget when I made myself real, but I know it wasn’t like this.”

Varric sighed again, bringing Bianca from his back and loading it while shrugging. “I suppose we had better be off. I would rather stay in this place for as short a time as possible. What do you say?”

Cole hummed, wringing his hands nervously before taking off with determination down a path. With every step they took, wisps burst from the ground in a myriad of different colors and elements. The archer fired off bolt after bolt but they kept coming. With a flurry of knives, the spirit of Compassion went into action. His form became a blur, popping in and out of existence just to sink his knives into the ethereal forms of wisps. His weapons served as teeth, hungry for flesh, hungry for death, searching for their next dinner. He bit, clawed, and maimed his way to help them get through the path but they were endless.

Whatever part of the Fade they were in, it was not a friendly zone. It was guarded heavily by the
wisps whose minds screamed only one word: Nightmare. “These things. They are not good. They serve him.”

An explosive bolt fired off and struck the nearest wisp within the chest, bits of fade remnants splattering on them both. Cole felt like it burned. The very presence of the corrupted spirits threatened him, urged him to change into something he wasn’t. He was rare, spirits of Compassion were rare, he knew that. So easily did they turn to Envy or Despair. Wanting, watching, guarding, it was easy to fall into darkness out of wanting what they couldn’t have. Mortality was a burning flame that they could not go near in fear of being burned, or worse, turned. He had somehow crossed that bridge in the name of another, only to help.

Things weren’t as hot near the flame as he thought they would be.

A spiritual blast pushed him backwards but he launched from the ground, drawing on his natural affinity for the flow of the Veil and the Fade, flying through the air before digging his blades into the creature’s body. It shrieked but their attacks were not enough. The garden of memories was in fact a farm for the Nightmare’s followers. Wispy forms of different creatures kept rising from the earth, clawing their way into existence while feeding on their fear.

“Kid, we need to run! Come on!” Varric shouted, throwing forward a set of mines to give them cover as they turned to run through the Fade. Cole followed wordlessly, features hardened into focus as he spun through an area of demons with his blades out. A spiral of blood was left in his wake, both men climbing hills and jumping over obstacles to get out of the area they were in. With every turn screams erupted in their ears, faces of horror and friends passed flashing before their eyes. They appeared to be entering a clearing when a large demon of Pride jumped from an outcropping of jagged crystals, laughing while bolstering himself with a barrier.

“Shit. Hold tight!” Cole turned to see Varric launch a bolt square behind the demon’s eyes. It caught it before the poisoned metal had a chance to land, laughing and snapping the arrow within its large grasp.

The fear coming from his friend was palpable. It coated his tongue in a bitter swell of panic and he turned with new confidence in his actions. He regripped his blades and charged with a scream in his throat, leaping forward and using his blades to climb the front of the demon’s body.

“Cole, are you crazy? Damnit damnit!” The dwarf rushed to reload Bianca but was knocked back by a ball of lightning projected from the demon’s hand. Even as blood poured from its open wounds, it was relentless in its attacks. Cole felt it wrap its hand around his body, pulling the spirit from his chest with a gurgling laugh. The sun appeared to rise from their left in a sweeping wave of light and the demon looked, instantly being evaporated and dropping Compassion to the ground.
“A-HA! It did work! I am so telling Harmony.” A friendly voice. Singing, dancing, nurturing. Cole had heard this one before in Athena’s thoughts. She didn’t know, but the spirit was always watching, protecting. Even in her worst nightmares this spirit was there to protect the other-worlder from harm. She was the first to turn.

“Inspiration.” The name fell like a whisper from his lips, his body stunned from the fall as Varric dropped to his knees and shook him by the shoulders.

“Hey, you okay? Look at me.” He snapped his gloved fingers in front of the spirit’s face to bring his attention back from the radiant glow to the side. The spirit shook his head and pointed over to the side where the light was finally beginning to fade away.

“Are you two just going to sit around? We need to go find the others.” Varric finally noticed the new spirit that joined them, slowly looking from Cole to the young appearing woman with a questionable expression. Cole smiled. She felt warm. Blonde hair, pretty dress, sunhat that expanded past her head. But there wasn’t any sun there. Why did she need a hat in the Fade? It seemed impractical, but Compassion liked it.

“Normally I don’t trust pretty girls but I definitely do not trust them in the Fade. Who are you?” Varric asked, keeping a hand on Bianca’s trigger aiming it off of his knee at the spirit. Inspiration laughed, a full-bellied laugh with her hands covering her stomach as she bent over, her blonde locks falling in front of her face.

“Athena said you were funny, Varric.” The spirit gasped, falling to her knees besides Cole with a sincere smile. “Oh! You must be Compassion – no – Cole. It is so good to meet you two!” Cole nodded and lifted the brim of his hat slightly to get a better look at her. She radiated kindness. It was infectious and melted away the fright that was put there by the fall into the Fade.

“I’m in an odd position. Normally I’m the one who knows people, but I do not know you. Who are you?? The dwarf finally smirked, relaxing his hand on top of Bianca before moving to a standing position. The spirit smiled, helping them up before positioning her body to the side so that they could see the clear path from where she had come from.

“My name is Inspiration. You do not know me because you do not dream, Varric. Athena visits me when she dreams. We practice the songs you are so fond or writing down even when you think she isn’t looking.” The spirit scrunched her nose up with a giggle, gesturing for them to follow her down the path. They quickly left behind the area where so many of the Nightmare’s children existed, feeling calm in the presence of this spirit.
“Where is everybody else? Are they alright?” Varric asked, always thinking of the others. He came off like he was a selfish Merchant, but Cole could see through it. He remembered the name of almost everyone he came into contact with and little details about them. He tried to play it off, tried to say it was what made him a good spy. But he was just a good person. He helped people. It was why Cole wanted to be around him so much.

“Another spirit is fetching more of the lost. The Inquisitor has people to protect her and is slowly collecting her memories. We’re going to meet up with them soon.” The spirit almost skipped as she led them away, down a path that seemed to be of her own making.

“Do you not feel it? Crawling, tingling, invading? The spider whispers things in this place. How are you okay?” Cole found himself asking in a hurried whisper, looking up with pleading eyes to the fellow spirit. She paused, let out a sigh that broke her friendly demeanor, and looked over her shoulder.

“The whole Fade feels it, Cole. That’s why we need to end the damned thing.”

Everything felt cold. Hard underneath her back. Even though she knew it was impossible, the air smelled of rain. Where she was raised the smell of rain was normally accompanied by a soup that was made just for cheering up the family during times of bad weather. She gripped the earth underneath her hands and felt sharp bits of sand light up the sore nerves in her palms. She knew but it was hard to pull from. The smell of rain and the taste of broth on her tongue was remnants of a daydream, if those could be had when she was physically in the Fade. A soft groan of pain left her lips as she pushed herself up from her back, wiping her eyes with the side of her hand to get a clear view of where she was.

It was hard to see past the fog, but with a quick look to the side she saw the graveyard that held people’s darkest fears. At least she had landed somewhere familiar, somewhere she knew from the game. Athena pushed to stand but was stopped by a pain in her back. Her breath hitched in a gasp and her eyes went wide, hand shooting back to support her body as she sat back against the wall she was resting near. Must have been a hard fall then. All she remembered was the sky splitting open and they all fell through it. There was a wind, a wind that wasn’t supposed to be there. They were split up.
“Fucking perfect.” She whispered with a defeated sigh, hitting her head back into the wall with tears in her eyes. They were all supposed to attack as a united force. That was going to be the game-changing event that would weaken the Nightmare demon to where they could defeat it once and for all. It wasn’t only for Stroud and Hawke’s sake, but not Leafy was being plagued by the thing in her sleep. The child was still too young of a mage to fight off a demon, especially one by the name of Fear.

She closed her eyes and let out a sigh through clenched teeth, glancing over at the tombstones that would show their deepest fears. What would it read on her stone? The Inquisition had become her family over the past year. It was a surprise that much time had passed already, and it felt like there was still so much to do. Everything she did was to help them, make sure that their lives would be somehow bettered by her knowing what was going to happen.

It was a blessing and a curse. She had seen both sides in her time being here, but at that moment she felt cursed. Her body was drained of mana and beaten bloody by distracting the dragon. She wondered if Clarel had survived the encounter since her body hadn’t been chewed by Corypheus’s pet. That would be a game changer if the Warden Commander was still alive when they returned from the Fade. Well, if they returned.

“Self-pity is not a good look on you, girl.”

Her eyes instantly opened and she saw Command kneeling at her side, wearing the full set of dragon-scaled armor that fit her body to the T. The spirit shook her head, clicking her tongue against the back of teeth with a ghost of a smile on her lips. She reminded her so much of Flemeth at times it was terrifying, but perhaps that was just the personality of powerful, old beings.

“Command? Where is everyone else? Are they okay?”

The spirit nodded, her hair pulled so tight back into a bun that it didn’t move a fraction of an inch in the gesture. She pulled a vial of a glowing golden elixir from her waist and held it up to Athena’s lips, wiping blood from Athena’s forehead with her other hand. “They are fine. You should be more worried about yourself. Drink.”

On any other day, Athena would have rejected drinking a random potion from a spirit in the Fade. But Command had proven to be an ally, and she was in no physical condition to reject her offer. The liquid slid like honey down her throat and tasted of it too. The moment her tongue hit the sweet potion her eyes widened, her pulse racing as she could feel its magical effects shooting like lightning through her body. The magic resting within her core instantly recharged and pulsed through her. She could feel the large bruising on her back dissipating into her body and the scratch on her forehead instantly healed, leaving behind a patch of dried blood.

Frankly, she felt like new.
Without waiting another instant Athena jumped up from her sitting position and begun to pace. There was so much energy within her body that she felt like she was going to burst. It felt like light itself was pumping through her body and bringing to life old nerves that felt dead from her fall. She looked at her palms and flexed her fingers repeatedly, trying to catch up with all the sensations that were in her body. Command chuckled, standing gracefully before leading her over to the graveyard. Athena’s eyes began to bounce between each tombstone.

Cole: Despair
Dorian: Temptation
Cassandra: Helplessness
Varric: Becoming his parents
Iron Bull: Madness
Blackwall: Himself
Solas: Dying Alone

Her gaze focused, falling to one tombstone that she had not seen before.

Athena: Failure

“You’re not focusing enough. The demon can read your fears, project them onto you still. You trained, Athena. Use that training now. Harden yourself against its advances; steel your will.” The spirit commanded, resting her hand on Athena’s shoulder. She closed her eyes and tilted her head into the sky.

Wall after wall she set up her defenses that Harmony had walked her through. She built moats, mazes, and put visual obstacles within her mind that the Nightmare demon would have to break through in order to get to her deepest fears. Near the end, she heard a hum of satisfaction from the spirit behind her. “Much better. Do not fear failure, girl. I have lived long enough in this world and yours to know that failure only gives us opportunity for growth. No matter what happens. Ah. Right on time.”

“Athena! Thank the fucking Maker.” Heavy and quick footsteps echoed behind her. She turned slowly, barely having enough time to tighten her stance before Rathein collided into her with a tight and emotional embrace. She felt it as well, tears in her eyes and a sob in her throat as she pulled the Herald closer to her and buried her head in her neck.
“Fuck, where have you been? We’ve been fighting through demons looking for you guys. Wait, where are the others?” Rathein pulled back and looked around, constantly keeping her hands on Athena’s shoulders. She didn’t mind; it helped ground her a bit more. As the short-haired mage was looking around through the fog, Bull gave Athena a nod in greeting.

“Heya, you hanging in there?” She could only smile back to him, Blackwall, Cassandra, Stroud, and Hawke.

“I think better than you guys. I just woke -“

“Shit, finally. There you guys are.” Varric’s voice cut through the fog and they all turned to the side past the graveyard. The dwarf, Cole, and a familiar girl with blonde hair stepped into picture. Athena’s face went slack, eyes widening as she felt herself moving towards the spirit. Inspiration was waiting with a smile when she wrapped her arms around her and brought her into a hug, tears now fully falling down her face.

The spirit chuckled, emanating a type of warmth that made her feel at home. Athena whispered into her shoulder, shaking her head back and forth. “You’re real. Gods, you’re real. I thought you were all just a dream.” Inspiration turned and kissed the side of her hair in a friendly greeting, never letting go even as the spirit tilted her body to the side. Another friendly voice cut in and sent her heart soaring with happiness.

“If it was a dream, you certainly have a vivid imagination, Athena. And a lucky one.” She felt Harmony’s hand at her back and she transferred her embrace from one spirit to another, ignoring the fact that he stilled and had his hands up in an awkward pose. He glanced to Inspiration, raising a brow before patting her back and pointing over his shoulder. “Now please, take these two away from me before I throw them to the wolves.”

She could see a smile on Rathein’s face as she pulled her head back from Harmony’s chest, looking over the spirit’s shoulder to see Dorian and Solas come into view. There was a tightness of emotion in her chest, something she didn’t realize was there until she moved past the spirit and to both of them. Dorian gave her a friendly wink, spinning his staff in one hand while bringing her into a one-armed hug.

“Why didn’t you tell me you had a friend that looked like that, Athena?” The mage teased, kissing the top of her head before releasing her. As she moved towards Solas, it felt like time slowed, but she still heard her friend call out “Hey, I’ve danced with you before!” to Inspiration as her hand slid into the elf’s. He brought her close, their foreheads touching in a silent greeting as she took in his scent.
“Are you alright?” I did not anticipate we would all be separated.” She nodded, rubbing her thumbs in small circles on the tops of his hands.

“N-neither did I. I’m so glad we all found each other. I was worried.” He nodded in return, breaking from her hold to lead her back to the ground with a hand at the small of her back. Rathein was looking at the three spirits with an arched brow, doubt setting into her features. Cassandra was the one to speak first, looking to Athena for validation.

“We have already met with Most Holy. Are these spirits allies? Friends of yours?” The Seeker was looking for good news and Athena responded with a nod, coming up between Inspiration and Harmony with her hands around their shoulders.

“Absolutely. This one.” She squeezed Inspiration in closer, making the spirit chuckle before wriggling out of her grip. “Saved me when I first came from this world. They are all companions of mine.”

Cole smiled, looking to Inspiration with a warm expression. “They help others. They are good; they are here to help us.”

Rathein ran a hand through her hair, letting out a held in sigh through pursed lips. “That is good news. Now that we’re all together, let’s keep going and get the fuck out of here.”

Athena gestured away from the graveyard of fears, grinning with sarcastic glee. “Lead the way, Inquisitor.”

As the group left, their eyes all fell over the tombstones, quickly reading them and finding theirs. Athena gently grabbed Solas’s hand and helped him to tear his gaze away from his. She hoped to never let him be alone, even though deep down, she knew they shared a similar fear.

Chapter End Notes

Longer chapter ~

Thank you for the continued support and love! This is the busy week! <3 Sorry in advance!
There was a silent happiness among the group now that they were reunited. People said there were strength in numbers, and it was an obvious change how they felt bolstered in each other’s company. Rathein led the company out of the swamp area, quickly destroying an area of spiders around what looked to be a shattered mirror. Athena tried to hide the twitch at the edge of her expression when they approached it after the battle. The Inquisitor looked it up and down before running her hands along the jagged edges of the glass. “This looks familiar. I feel like I’ve studied it before at the Circle. Solas, you’re the expert of the Fade. Do you know what it is?”

The elf hummed with a short nod, clenching his jaw while assessing the item. “It appears to be an eluvian. They are an elvish artifact, used many years ago by the elves of old.” He stepped to her side and took in a deep breath through his nose while tightening his grip around his staff. Athena couldn’t help but feel a pang of pity within her gut. She knew he was trying to acquire them, and there she was, able to use them freely while having to keep it from him. She nibbled on the skin on the inside of her lip before adding a noise of her own.

“They were used to travel great distances in short amounts of time. It’s the closest thing to transportation, I suppose. Many of them have been broken over time but some still remain. There was one in the Brecilian Forest during the time of the Hero of Ferelden. Hawke, Merrill had one for a bit, didn’t she?” Solas turned around and hardened his gaze onto her but she ignored it, flicking her eyes to Varric and Hawke who answered her with a nod. Rathein scoffed in her throat. “Shit. Sure would beat fade-stepping everywhere. What’s this kind of thing doing here? Could they transport people into the Fade?” Athena bit her tongue. Hard.

“No idea.” She said with a shrug, turning her body before Bull could look at her face and call bullshit. She made a mental note to ask Varric how to bluff better but under the guise of talking about Wicked Grace. He was trying to teach her how to play, but even in her world she was awful at card games. She either got the rules confused or giggled when she got a good hand. Her worst tell was her flushing. It would start as something that looked like a rash on her chest and would spread up to her neck. It especially happened when she was lying or upset; this she knew from friends always asking if she was having an allergic reaction to something.

“It is shattered, so this particular eluvian will not bring us any trouble. We should continue, Inquisitor. The demon grows stronger the longer we are present in the Fade. Whether we intend to or not, it feeds on our deepest fears.” Solas added, gesturing for the group to turn out of the area where the broken elven artifact was. Athena swallowed down a lump of nerves, reaching out to Inspiration subconsciously. The spirit took her hand in return, squeezing it and sending a calming
warmth down her arm.

*You won’t leave me? When I must force them to leave?* She asked silently in her gaze, looking to her spiritual companions.

As if they could read her mind, and who knew it was the Fade, but they nodded their heads in response. All three of them gave her reassuring looks and even Command had somewhat of a smirk on her face. The party quickly made their way through the foggy and swampy area, coming across the spirit of Faith that had mirrored her image to the that of Divine Justinia. A swell of emotions rushed through her stomach and behind the walls of her mind she felt her memories rushing through in a stream of lights.

She had seen Divine Justinia get pulled back by the spiders. The leader of the Chantry, the hope for the war between the mages and the templars, it was the first sight she had seen when she was dragged into the Fade. The spirit was working to take down a barrier that would lead to the Nightmare and Athena opened her palm to summon her staff. The ring on her hand vibrated and the weapon popped into existence. Something looked different. Her gaze slowly trailed from the black end to the top, where it looked like there was a sun with sharp rays jutting out from the sides.

“Huh. That’s new.” Dorian looked over and huffed in a laugh, twirling his own staff in his hand before launching off a fire shot at a despair demon that had risen from the ground of the Fade.

“Fitting, *Fen’Elgara.*” He then nudged her in the ribs with his elbow before following Varric and Bull into battle, throwing barriers over them both. Athena stayed back and did the same, reserving her mana and firing off basic attacks at the creatures. Hawke and Stroud drew on a Pride demon’s attention while Solas moved to support them from the back. She was thankful that the battles were moving faster than she remembered, but that realization made her stomach twist into a knot. They were close. There was a thick dread in the air that put the taste of salt on her tongue.

Everything moved in a whirl and soon the battle was over. They began following the spirit of faith through a dimly lit cave. The spirit’s radiant light illuminated everything as it moved forward and even Harmony was squinting his eyes shut to be able to see. “*You must get through the rift, Inquisitor. Get through and then slam it closed with all of your strength. That will banish the army of demons... and exile this cursed creature to the farthest reaches of the Fade.*”

*But that doesn’t mean kill it.* Thankfully the thought stayed silent within her mind but she moved up towards Rathein, her gaze fixed on the new spirit. “I remember her.”

Cassandra made a noise of acknowledgement, coming up to her side. “You remember the Divine?
You – you came from the Fade. Did you see her before as well?” There was hope in her voice, hope that this spirit could be more than what she was. But Athena’s expression fell as she recounted the memory.

“I. . . I saw her, yes. Unfortunately, it was just a different angle of what happened to Rathein. I was far that way – “ She pointed back from the way they came, past the eluvian and where the party first fell. “Everything looked like it was so far away but I could see her ascent clearly. And then the rift shut behind her.”

Cassandra’s eyes widened. “And you were here until we found you. How did you survive here for days?” Athena glanced to Inspiration and smiled.

“I wasn’t entirely alone, thank the Gods.” Rathein was on their side, collecting a pendant from the spirits that she had apparently helped while the rest of them were lost. She couldn’t help but feel proud that even in the midst of the chaos, their Herald still found the time to help spirits. As time went on, she found they were more alike than she thought. The spirit continued to lead them but then Hawke stepped forward, a new hope lighting up the features on her face.

“Look, the rift! We’re almost there!” She began to run until the Nightmare demon and its Avatar rested in front of them. Varric cursed under his breath, quickly loading a bolt into Bianca without having to look and see what his hands were doing.

“Great, Hawke. Why not just dare the Old Gods to try and stop you?” Athena felt her pulse quicken in the tightness of her throat but she clenched her grip on her staff, withdrawing all of her emotion into herself so that she could focus. Bull noticed the change, huffing under his breath while speaking low.

“Get ready, Alpha. This is going to get messy.” He adjusted his grip on his large battle axe that was still dripping with the ichor of the Pride demon. Rathein led them slowly up the steps to face the Nightmare demon. Athena could smell the fear coming from the Inquisitor, but she didn’t show it in her face. Her features were hardened, cold, and determination lit up the blues of her eyes as she came within attacking distance of the creature.

The spirit came up from behind them, her light growing stronger as her voice called out to them. “If you would, please tell Leliana. . . ‘I’m sorry I failed you, too’.” The energy the spirit commanded crackled like lightning within the air, bringing all of the hairs on her arms and necks on edge. Harmony, Inspiration, and Command swirled their essences into the top of her staff to avoid getting blown back by Justinia’s fury. In a burst of explosive light, the spirit used up all of her essence to weaken both the Nightmare demon and its guardian. The spider combination creature rose and screamed at them, sending a shudder down her spine. Already she could feel its pressure on the barriers in her mind.
Stay strong. Harmony spoke through her staff. She could feel the powers of her friends within the object, invigorating her and filling her mana pool almost to the point of excess. The warriors broke into attacking while the ranged attackers set up their positions around the area. Glyphs, runes, and traps were set out all over the field and it appeared that there was nowhere for the Aspect of the Nightmare to run. Everywhere it turned there was a blade or an attack rushing towards it.

With a shriek, it disappeared into the ground, shouting out to them. “I grow fat on your fear!”

There was a change in the air and there was a tension on her mind. It felt like a piece of spider web that she had somehow walked through and it was itching on her skin to be wiped off. Every demon and spider disappeared from the battlefield and she turned to look for something to attack. “It’s bringing forth your particular fears! Be careful!” Rathein shouted, her own gaze wide as something invisible to Athena crept up and attacked. All she could see is a shadow on the ground where whatever it was began to attack the Inquisitor. Slowly she turned in a circle until she saw a circular stone creation jutting from the ground, with a deep, dark pit in the center.

“Fuck. Fuck.” Her voice fell to a croaked whisper, all of the blood draining from her face as she backed herself up into a stone pillar. This wasn’t the type of fear that would be displayed on the tombstones in the graveyard. It was the kind of fear that always haunted her when the darkness came in and when she was running up the stairs by herself at home in her world. Here, there were more realistic things to worry about, but somehow this particular fear found its way into the Nightmare demon’s arsenal.

From the broken pieces of a well, a pale and mangled arm came up over the side, gripping its broken jagged nails into the stone to pull its body up. Black hair acted as a veil to cover the little girl’s face as she literally crawled from the earth onto the Fade floor in front of her. Athena lost the ability to breathe. Her middle school nightmare had come to life in front of her and was combining with a different horror movie since there was an echoing sound of a hollowed croaking vibrating around her, making it sound like the girl was behind her.

No. There was a stone wall.

The girl tilted her head to the side. Sounds of her neck breaking popped the air and suddenly the girl’s pale deformed face shown through. Athena could feel dark energy pouring from the creature but found herself paralyzed, hyperventilating almost with her staff in front of her body. The girl took a broken step forward, her hands reaching forward to grab her. She could see the mottled skin of her arms, the dark bruising and maceration that came from resting at the bottom of a well for ages.
“It’s not real, girl. Snap out of it.” Command screamed from the end of her staff. The woman’s sharp voice brought her from the haze, a spark of electricity thrumming against her palm as an additional reminder. Athena shook her head, shaking off a deep shudder than ran down her spine. With a quick flip her staff she ran the object through the little girl’s face, feeling a grim satisfaction as her body fell back onto the ground and she bathed it in flame.

“Seven days my ass. Fucking. Die. Bitch.” With every word, she put another force of flame into the demon’s corpse until it was ethereal mush underneath her staff.

“With that kind of response, what did you see?” Blackwall asked from the side, his own face recovering from a kind of panic. He regripped on his sword, looking around for the Avatar of the Nightmare demon.

“It would be silly if I explained it. Ask me later. Let’s just kill this fucking thing so we can get onto the big one.” She picked her staff up from the ground and waved it out in a crescent shape, releasing a wave of basic magical energy to try and shake the demon from where it was hiding.

The thing hissed and rose from the ground, turning its body towards her with a scream. Everyone took onto it immediately with a renewed anger in their movements. The shadows of their fears danced across their gazes as they moved. Bull had the revived energy of a Reaver, pushing all of his emotions into his attacks with an endless fury. It was frightening to see how he tore into the Abstract of Nightmare with his own horns, dragging his head up with a feral roar that echoed throughout the entirety of the Fade itself. The demon gripped onto his horns and pushed him to the side, a dripping ichor sliding off of the edges of its claws and burning into the ground.

Blackwall and Rathein shared a look, silently communicating a plan. The warrior clapped his sword against his shield and summoned forth a war cry that stopped Athena in her tracks. She turned with her staff in hand, looking at the future Warden with a questioning gaze. The demon was successfully taunted, turning its full attention to him. It summoned a wave of small creatures that scattered across the ground. Cassandra intercepted some of them with her own blade while Hawke and Rathein came to the demon’s back. Rathein brought her hands together and summoned an ethereal blade. Hawke put her hands over the Inquisitor’s to add lighting to the radiant weapon. They raised the weapon simultaneously and thrust it in between the creature’s shoulder blades.

With a final shout that vibrated the ground and the Fade around them, it dissipated into black ash. Rathein and Hawke let out a sigh of relief since the immediate demons and fear hallucinations disappeared, but Athena hardened her gaze. The three spirits hiding within her staff appeared at her side and looked to her with confidence in their features. She didn’t see them at first. She was flicking her gaze from the open rift to the space where the monstrous sized spider would reappear and she was trying to think of a battle plan.
Looking around, it was obvious that everyone was tired. They were passing potions around but they were all looking at the rift, wanting to get out. She wouldn’t keep them if they didn’t want to stay. She was going to stay and fight to her last breath if she had to. Command stepped close behind her, leaning down and whispering against her ear so close the sensation of the warm air on her skin sent a shudder down her spine. “They will not all be able to stay. You know this, don’t you?”

Athena nodded slowly, catching a lyrium and health potion tossed from Dorian while faking as good of a smile as she could towards him. Bull arched a brow, instantly seeing through the façade but she didn’t give him the satisfaction of an explanation. “What will do you do, girl? I have something that will help you. But only you.”

Inspiration came to the side and gripped her hand to send a jolt of warm energy up her arm. Athena looked to her then to Harmony, letting out a deep sigh before walking up to Rathein. It was any second now. The monster would raise from the depths and attempt to block their path. The Inquisitor threw down an empty health potion and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “Everyone ready for round two?”

The group looked to one another but all made sounds of acceptance. Stroud and Hawke met gazes and nodded. The Warden strengthened his grip on his sword and readjusted his shield while Hawke rubbed her hands together, charging magical energy within the center of her palms. It was almost as if a clock struck on the hour because it felt like the spider arrived right when it was supposed to. A crack from the ground split the group down the middle and the spider formed together as if from the air. Filaments of black matter condensed to recreate the Nightmare demon. Even though the Aspect was defeated, Athena could hear its voice screaming within her mind as if it filled the entire space, owned it, manipulated it.

“You think you could so easily defeat me? I AM fear!”

The spider let out a shriek that was from the bowels of the Fade. Its high pitches sounded like thousands of nails on a chalkboard. Athena clenched her jaw, looking to the others. The roar had a stunning effect, much like a dragon’s in the wild. Except she had been prepared for this. With a wave of her staff she summoned a push of energy to jar them out of their spell, trying to mimic Inspiration’s energy as she did so. Then with a push of a fade-step she cleared the crack within the earth and began to run towards the spider. It turned and dug its legs into the ground, a pulse of dark menacing magic pushing her back. Her own jarring wave had roused the others and she could hear Bull shout as he pushed against the Nightmare’s psionic attack, his body physically fighting the invisible force that pressed against them like the gale force winds of a hurricane.

Stroud was behind him, using the Qunari’s body as a guard with his shield up, hoping to gain the advantage. The world moved almost in slow motion as everyone set into place. She could feel the pressure on her own mind, the individual defenses breaking underneath the raw pressure of the
Nightmare’s power in his own domain. Wall by wall the bricks shattered and a piercing pain struck her between her eyes. Rathein fell to her knees, the spiritual blade of her sword flickering in and out of existence. Command reappeared at Athena’s side, gripping her shoulder to draw her attention even as Bull, Stroud, and Blackwall reached the spider’s trunk. They struck strike by agonizing strike but she could see the amount of effort it took.

It like no matter what she did to change things, the universe would turn around to combat it.

“You are holding yourself back, girl. Why?”

Athena’s mouth was dry, pupils widened in fear to the point where it felt like her world was going black. “I-I-I don’t know. I’m afraid of what will happen if I let go.” Her voice fell into a whisper underneath the roar of battle and spells firing around them. Her hands were moving and attacks were launching from her staff but she did not feel it. Her mind was paralyzed underneath the true specter of the Nightmare in front of them. This was supposed to be the demon that led Corypheus’s army in the physical world. It was Fear, his general that would bring a reckoning to the world. The warriors all attacked at its legs with their blades wielded in wavering grips. Each of them held expressions that screamed pain, even if they were not vocally showing it.

They all felt the same mental anguish she did. The person who was probably the least worse off was Solas, but even from what she could see he simply looked more detached. His face was eerily calm in a sea of chaos, his spells turning colder with each flick of his staff.

They wouldn’t last long.

“What can I do?”

Command pulled down an invisible helm that materialized into something that covered just her eyes. There were two wings coming off the sides of her temples, black things vibrating with bright energy that made her eyes squint. “Brace yourself. They will be angry with you, but this is necessary. Are you ready?” The spirit looked over and even under the helm she could see the authoritative power of the elder spirit. With a nervous nod, she gripped on her staff and turned her body towards the group.

“Give me a few minutes, okay?” She spoke weakly to Rathein, who even under the deafening volume of the battle managed to hear it and turn in a slow motion towards her. The Inquisitor’s face fell in realization, the marked hand reaching out towards her.
Command reached up towards the skies of the Fade, pulling on her own power before wrapping all of them within a protective cocoon. Her red energy swirled and pulled them towards the rift. Each of them held some look of betrayal, hurt, regret. Rathein was the last to be pulled and from where she was standing she could see tears in their eyes. The rift remained open, but she was the last one standing in the Fade. Almost as if a weight were from her shoulders she let out a sigh and turned towards the spider, spinning her staff within one hand and facing it to the side at an angle.

“You should have kept your army, mortal. You stand no chance against me alone.” Fear spoke plainly. Its voice was a mixture of the screams of a million nightmares combined into one cacophonous voice of darkness. The sound was grating against her mind but she clenched her jaw and looked away. Command was at her side, pressing something large the size of a globe into her open hand.

“You’re wrong. I am not alone.” Athena’s gaze flicked down to the orb of red and white, arching a brow as it vibrated within her hand. It had a patched crack up the side but it felt warm, full of light. She sent a pulse of her energy within it to try and identify it but the chuckling of Command solidified her suspicions.

“This houses the echoes of hundreds of spirits, Fade-walker. You are the one to wield it.” Command reached forward and dapped her fingers on a cut on Athena’s arm, pressing the blood to the top of the orb. It responded with a swirl of power within, white lightning crackling around the edges of the object before disappearing into Athena’s hand. She flexed her fingers, throat dry and mind racing as a burning wind knocked her back, her feet sliding on the ground as she fought to hold her posture.

“You are alone. You have tainted these spirits against their true nature!” The heat grew more intense and with a sudden clap of thunder dark clouds blanketed the skies. Harmony and Inspiration bellowed out a scream that gripped her core, turning towards them as fear corrupted them. Harmony clutched his horns, falling to his knees as a burning flame ignited at his crown and quickly covered his skin. A forked tail whipped behind his back and the expressions on his face grew manic as the features of her friend faded away into Rage. The white hair melted into black as flames obscured his form, making only the whites of his eyes invisible underneath the corruption.

“Harmony!” The cry of a spirit behind her threatened to break her heart into two. Athena instantly turned to Inspiration, rushing forward and gripping her hands while looking into the woman’s eyes.

“No-no-no stay with me!” She pled, shaking her friend’s hands while wrapping her own magic around her.
Inspiration looked up with shaking limbs, cracking half a smile as the skin of her body turned scales and purple, horns sprouting up from her forehead. “Free us of Fear, Athena.” At the end of her words a smooth purr echoed from her throat, Desire levitating from the ground with an easy push. Command flickered in and out of existence, her own power drained from banishing the party and the attacks of the Nightmare Demon.

“You must fight, girl. You are not alo-!” The essence of Command screamed under pressure and disappeared within the air. Athena was hollow, all hope drained from her eyes. Her staff fell from her hand and dissipated into pure magic before it hit the ground. Helpless, she felt her body being trapped by flame, her arms locked and extended to her side and head falling forward. With rage at her back, Desire sauntered in front of her, flashing a look over her shoulder at Nightmare who only stepped forward, its thousand eyes focusing on them.

“Proceed.”

Desire rolled her gaze from the bottom of Athena’s feet to her head, cupping her face in both hands. “Shhhh now, child. It’s all right. Soon you’ll be happy and safe.” The demon stroked her thumbs across Athena’s cheeks and with every movement she could feel the haze being pulled over her mind. Her eyes went wide as tendrils of the Fade ensnared her, a vine resting on her forehead and plunging its magic between her eyes.

With a wordless cry into the depths of the Fade, Athena’s world went white.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your patience and continued support. <3
Things felt warm, light.

The sun broke through the stained-glass windows and filtered into their home, a myriad of spectacular colors illuminating their world. Athena opened her eyes and groaned, a hand shielding her gaze from the morning’s welcome. She sat up in bed and looked around, taking in the sight of their bedroom. She rested in the middle of a large ornate bed, quilts of blue and green thrown about from where she still thrashed at night.

She suffered from nightmares; this she knew.

With a push from her sitting position she swung her legs over the side of the bed and tried to stand, immediately falling back on the bed with a groan of effort. There was an extra weight holding her back on the bed, making it harder to stand. Hands explored her body until they curved over the swell of her belly. A sigh of happiness left her lips but tears formed in her eyes. Hot, angry tears fell down her cheeks but she felt herself smiling at the feeling of a kick underneath her hand. It was underneath her ribs, right where it always rested. For some reason, she knew this. It all was so familiar yet always at arm’s length.

She stood and grabbed the white robe resting at the edge of the bed. It was made of the softest silk and underneath her feet were a lush rug of what smelled like wolf. A distant gaze brushed over the corners of the large bedroom. There were two walls of bookcases, each row filled to the brim with texts ancient and new alike. Many of them were in ancient elvish, but she was able to read them without a problem. There were two armoires sitting next to each other and different stands for armor. She walked forward to the most familiar, running her hands down the wolf furred sash and the sentinel appearing armor.

Out of instinct she leaned forward and inhaled the scent of the fur, smiling at the familiarity.

It smelled of him. The scent wrapped around her like a warm embrace, filling her heart with joy and excitement to go out and see him. Before she left she caught sight of herself in the mirror leaned against the wall by their bedroom door. The image within it made her gasp. Athena looked to be almost ready to burst, her belly stretching the fabric of her dress thin. Her hands instinctively rubbed over where her child rested, a smile coming to her lips even as her mind betrayed her. The tears still flowed, a silent sob racking her shoulders. There was an internal battle between the past and now so she shook her head and wiped her eyes. She closed the robe and tied it above the curve of her belly, walking barefoot through the rest of their manor. When the walls weren’t covered
with large stained glass windows, there was art. Frescos of their adventures and their story covered the walls. ...and all she was hope and happiness between them.

The rise and fall of Corypheus was painted, as well as the party of the Inquisition. Things looked to be at peace in the world; there wasn’t the all too familiar sting of tension within the air. The taste of bile on her tongue was absent but she craved something sweet. As if she knew the steps by heart she walked into the kitchen and found a cup of hot tea sitting for her. Small swirls of steam rose from the cup, inviting her in to cup her hands around the side and breathe in the scent.

Vanilla.

It was her craving, something that soothed her soul every morning when she woke. Plus, it wouldn’t harm the baby like some of the harsher teas she preferred, even if he disliked the taste on her lips when they kissed. It was a compromise because she absolutely could not stand some of the roots he chewed on whenever he was in his study. She took the first sip and let out a sigh of pleasure while leaning back against the counter. The morning felt absolutely perfect. Then there was the added sound of laughter coming from the other room. One of the voices was deep, rich, and it stirred a love within her heart that could not be denied. With cup in hand she felt like gravity was pulling her towards the room, a pleasant smile on her lips that would not go away.

In their living room stood Solas with his back to her, wearing his normal beige tunic and green tinted pants. He was wearing navy blue foot wrappings that she had bought him for his name-day. She wasn’t sure when his exactly was and neither did he, so they had made one up together to celebrate. He had worn them almost every day after that.

“I thought we had discussed this, Suledin. What did we instruct you specifically not to do?” His words were serious but his tone was not, a smooth chuckle mixing into his words. Athena leaned against the open arch that led into the room, silently watching the conversation while sipping on her morning drink. She heard a muffled grumbling and he squatted down to a lowered posture, lifting the chin of the grumpy child in front of him that looked to be no more than five or six.

“Hunt without you.” The child tried to hide a bow and arrow behind his back but he was too small. The edge of the bow stuck out far above his head and the arrows were scattered in a trail of guilt behind him. Solas hummed, clicking his tongue against the back of his teeth.

“Then how would you explain this?” Solas lifted up an arrow with a rabbit sticking on the end, its body flopping lifeless under the pressure of the expertly shot arrow.

“I-I caught it.” The child confessed, a stubborn gaze never leaving the floor. Athena let out a
chuckle to finally break her silence, genuinely smiling at the child in approval.

“At least it wasn’t raven. I was getting tired of the taste.” Both gazes instantly turned to her and tears reformed in her eyes at how they looked at her in adoration.

“Mae!” The child ran over and wrapped his arms around her waist, being careful not to collide into her belly. Even if it was supposed to be a secret conversation between siblings, the boy whispered against her belly. “Good morning, sister.”

Athena raised a hand to Solas’s face as he came to her side, briefly brushing her lips against his in a morning greeting. Even with tea on her breath, he still greeted her like this every morning. “Sleep well, vhenan?” He purred against her neck, coming up behind her and wrapping his arms underneath her chest and above her belly.

She hummed in response, smiling down at their son. “I had the strangest dream last night. I can’t quite shake it for some reason.” The words fell from her lips but she felt like they were not her own, something pulling at her conscious from the back of her mind. She shook it off, like he had taught her to do so many times before.

“The one with the demon? I thought those had passed, ma’fen.” He kissed gently along the curve of her neck, slipping down the top of the robe with a single finger to gain more access to skin. She let out a soft sigh, closing her eyes under the sensation.

“It felt strange, fresher. I can’t explain why but it still haunts me. Tell me again how we got out of there, Solas.” She tilted her head and looked to her love, smirking as Suledin continued to speak to the child resting in her belly. He was telling his hushed tale of how he was able to sneak out at daybreak and hunt with some of the older children. His father had been teaching him how to use a child’s bow but he somehow acquired an adult’s and was still able to catch a rabbit. Even if it was impressive, they were trying to instill some obedience within him... even if he was the child of the God of Rebellion.

“Nobody was left behind. We defeated it as a team. We all made it out safely.” In between each sentence, he laid a gentle kiss on her skin, going through the routine they had danced through so many times before it felt like. She raised her hand behind his head, holding him there while using the free hand to rub the swell of her belly. Another kick under the ribs, a good-morning that happened almost ten times an hour. Sometimes they took the breath out of her but to her they were little nudges that their blessing to be was okay.

“Mae! Look at what I caught!” Suledin intercepted, running back and fetching the arrow with the
rabbit still on the edge. Athena curled her nose in reactionary disgust, her sensitive senses picking up on the rot that was setting in on the meat. It had been months since she was able to shift and hunt with her love, but the wolf senses still remained. But she plucked the arrow from her son’s hand and picked up the rabbit’s ears, allowing them to flop back into place.

“Wonderful shot, da’fen. What do you want me to make with it?” She twisted her mouth to a side, making different sounds of consideration while turning the rabbit left and right within her hand like a metronome. The boy’s hungry eyes followed it intently, the swirling blues of his gaze fixated on the product of his hunt. He then smiled and clapped his hands together.

“Soup? There’s a rain coming today.” She tilted the rabbit down into his grip and flicked her head to the kitchen.

“That sounds lovely. Put this in the kitchen and I’ll teach you how to skin it later. Make sure and get the thin knives from the drawer next to the stove. And - Oh – “ The breath was stolen from her throat as a rather firm kick into her diaphragm robbed her of her energy. She bent forward and immediately felt Solas’s hands on her shoulder, a hand rubbing in between her shoulder blades with soothing pulses of magic coursing over her skin.

“Be nice, Salahn.” Suledin hissed, pressing his hand over her belly button with a small scowl. She pointed over her shoulder and spoke in between breaths. Solas chuckled underneath his breath, keeping close to her for physical and emotional support.

“Be nice to your sister and go put the rabbit in the kitchen.” As their son nearly skipped off with his game, Solas knelt down in front of her, cradling her belly between his hands while pressing his lips against her skin. The view from her eyes was beautiful, perfect even. He was gently kneeling before her, completely full of adoration for them and their family that they had created. He rubbed his thumbs over the swell of her stomach, humming a soft elvish tune that had become a lullaby for their children. It was strange, but the movements of her future daughter softened. She knew that children in the womb could hear things going on in the outside, but the idea that she recognized his voice, his song, made her smile.

Suledin came back in from the kitchen and threw his arms around Solas’s body from the back, jumping up and awkwardly positioning to where he was sitting on his father’s shoulders so that they could both talk to the little girl growing within her. Athena reached forward and cupped her son’s face, stroking her thumb along his cheekbone even as his smile grew to a grin. Her eyes looked to his short but thick braided hair, much like his father’s, and the stormy seas of his eyes. Her gaze trailed over his features and rested on the edge of his ears, just like his father’s -

And then the sound of glass shattering filled her mind, the unusual tears returning to her face in hot streams.
“Vhenan, what troubles you?” Solas asked, his voice free of doubt or caution.

She shook her head to dismiss the worries, her emotions catching up in her throat as things began to clear. “Nothing, my hearts. I’m just so happy with all of you here with me.”

“You know this is not yours, Athena.”

The voice was calm yet assertive, entering into her mind alone even as the illusions acted as if they didn’t hear it. She couldn’t help but answer aloud, the tears freely falling down her cheeks now, the reflective crystals shattering on the floor at the feet of her lover.

“I-I-I know. Please, just give me a few more seconds. I can’t – “Her voice stammered and rejected her confidence, clinging to the last bits of happiness this image provided her. She cupped her son’s face one more time, memorizing every detail even down to the freckles that decorated his nose and cheeks. The boy smiled, leaning his head into her grip while gripping onto her hand.

“Ar lath ma, mae!”

Solas leaned forward and pressed his lips to her stomach, keeping her stuck within the cursed illusion for a second longer.

“Athena!”

The voice was familiar, but how? She knew that the Fade could do things to your mind, but that was impossible, at least in her current state. Athena closed her eyes and leaned her head back, looking up into the sky while silently praying to any of the Gods that were listening that what she was seeing could be real. A warm hand gripped on her shoulder and she knew it couldn’t have been any of them, any of her boys. Letting out a silent sob, she pulled in on all of her might and followed the warm touch’s path. The feel of her family faded into cold and the tears flowed endlessly down her face.

“How long have I been trapped?” Athena asked the voice, watching herself walk down a brightly lit hall towards her consciousness.
“Only for a few minutes. The rift is beginning to grow in size. You must hurry!”

Without thinking she began to sprint towards the light, her body being ripped from Rage’s grasp and falling to the floor. Whoever held the voice ran behind her and she could faintly see a blur of green. “Friends! You have been led astray!”

There was a pulse of warm light at her back and suddenly she heard two gasps, one of them turning into a half of a sob. “I’m so sorry, Athena. I...” She recognized Inspirations voice so she immediately pushed from the ground in a move to embrace her, being stopped by the all-too familiar voice that turned around to greet her. The familiar elf with a caring smile and a warm presence filled her gaze, a look of recognition melting over her face.

“Wisdom.”

The spirit nodded with confidence, looking beyond her to the Nightmare demon that was in recoil from some attack, presumably the spirit’s arrival.

“You were given a weapon, Athena.” Wisdom reached down and grabbed her left hand, flicking her gaze between it and Athena’s face. “Channel your will into it, use it to amplify your power. In here, you draw on the energy of the Fade. Your body was first introduced to this world with the Fade’s energy pumping through your veins. We and it are behind you.”

Athena looked down to her left hand, flexing it and pulling on the tension within the center of her palm. There was a small star-shaped mark, roughly the size of a marble, within her skin. From that mark Wisdom’s seed sprouted, crackling with her energy, and growing to the size of a globe within her hand. The power was too much. It sent shards of pain down her arm, the power lighting up within her veins like an infection. The sensation overwhelmed her and brought her to her knees, a wordless cry tearing its way from her throat as she gripped her forearm with her free hand to help reinforce it. Tears continued to stream down her cheeks, mourning memories that were still fresh within her mind from a life that never happened.

Wisdom came down on her knees in front of her, gently placing her hands-on Athena’s shoulders. “Let. Go.” There was a gentle pulse of warmth from the spirit’s fingertips and it reached into her conscience. She felt a physical click within her core and a hot fire coursing underneath her skin. The honey color of her eyes disappeared underneath literal flame, her skin melding away to the sensation. Nightmare shook off the haze from its attack, standing tall on its eight legs with a new confidence.

“Fear is ever present. It lives in every shadow, every corner, every mind.”
There was no verbal response because there was no need for one. The flames from her body engulfed the orb, growing and expanding with every beat of her racing heart. It acted as her core, flaring and spinning within her, pushing the boundaries and limits of her body. Her entire form disappeared into the inferno, a low pulsing growl trickling from it as her body retook a different shape.

She pulled on the Veil as if it were a well that never ran dry, sucking in every bit that she could reach onto. The swirling chaos that was her magic hovered from the ground in between the Nightmare and the rift, keeping the thought in her mind to protect her friends. Her family.

*Fen-Mae, I've been having these weird nightmares recently.*

The mass of fire twitched to the side, roaring and filling the space with her energy. It combatted against Fear, lashing out without any rational thought. It even caused the spider to back up in effort but she pursued it still.

*Fear is the oldest emotion. It predates even desire, rage.*

From the amorphous mass of flame extended a single large paw, its pads etching a scorch mark into the ground. It pushed against the ground and moved her essence forward, a second leg stretching out to keep her moving. Slowly the shape of her spirit took form from the flame, a spectrum of whites, reds, and blues dancing to the rhythm of the energy of the Veil. Athena could feel herself within the shape but there was no linear thought guiding her like when she was defending the elves on the plains, only thoughts coming like lightning within her mind.

Images of all of her loved ones played in a blur. She wanted to grit her teeth and cry out and that was when her maw formed, blazing white gems slamming shut as the energy became too much to handle. It hurt, the burden of the energy. She felt like she wanted to retch pure mana onto the ground, the feeling growing within her throat like a stone that would not budge. Athena shook her head and faced down to the ground, expanding her jaw in preparation for what she assumed was about to come. Her tail whipped behind her in wave-like movements, each sway sending out arcs of energy into the Fade behind her.

It was then she felt four gentle touches on each of her legs, each one carrying its own flavor of magic.

Inspiration, Command, Harmony, and Wisdom supported her from below, a single hand on her
each of her legs as she faced Nightmare.

“You think you can conquer me? I smell fear within you. It is what drives you, even now!”

For the first time, the demon sounded panicked. It was backing up but found itself against a wall and the wolf that was Athena grinned, her fangs dripping mana like acid onto the ground. The boulder that was her fear crawled up from her throat and she could feel the orb appear to hover between the space of her jaws, slowly bobbing with her relaxed breathing. The two were in perfect harmony and she completely surrendered herself to its magic, her magic.

“What are you? No mortal should be able – “

“You make assumptions based off creatures from this world. I am not of this world.” Her voice was mixed with the rush of power and the growl of her form, eyes flaring with every syllable as she took another step forward.

“I am a protector of this realm you threaten. I am a warrior for the minds you torture. You say my drive is fear and you couldn’t be more wrong. My drive is my family, my people, my friends. You have hurt them and that was your gravest mistake.”

The orb began to spin at her will, chaotic and uncontrolled energy shooting off of it in every direction it could manage. Perhaps it was the rush of energy, the true fear of not being able to defeat him, or the support of her spiritual friends below, but she felt empowered to scream at the demon with every ounce of her body.

“You ask who I am, Nightmare. I am your end. I. Am. Fen’Elgara.”

With a final roar from her maw, the orb concentrated her energy and directed a beam of flame and light in the eyes of the spider abomination. It twisted underneath her attack, contorted its body to try and run. It was helpless. The creature shrieked into the Fade as a final sound before the beam pierced its body and traveled through it, breaking through the stone wall behind it.

The attack continued for a few seconds longer. The moment the beam faded away she took sight of her work.

The demon had turned to ash, its existence blowing away within the winds of the Fade. There was
no trace of it left and the air felt remarkably lighter. The gnarled, twisted trees within the area began to blossom again with flower and the murky pools of unidentifiable ooze returned to small pools and ponds of water. Random spirits began appearing throughout the area, confirming if their suspicions were true. Inspiration patted her on the leg and instantly her body fell.

The flames of her form condensed down and she fell to her knees, taking shape of her human form once more. The orb rested warm within her hand, swirls etched into its surface of gold. She looked at it in disbelief, shaking her head back and forth. Her hands and arms began to tremble when Command fell to her knees in front of her, placing her hand over the orb. It disappeared back within Athena’s palm, resting underneath the small star-shaped mark on her skin.

“I knew you would be able to do it, Girl.”

Wisdom made a sound of agreement, looking over to the rift with a sad gaze. It was beginning to malfunction. Its borders were twisting and there was the ever-familiar sound of the Herald’s mark pulsing through it. The two older spirits grabbed her and helped her walk towards the rift, pausing as they looked out at the scene below. Rathein was standing atop the fountain in the courtyard, her hand held confidently in the air as she made the decision to close the rift. How long had it been for them, minutes? An hour? Even from here Athena could see the tears on her friends face so the decision must not have been made lightly.

“It’s going to be okay, Athena.” Inspiration spoke softly, coming from the back with pallor etched into her features. “You have...such strength. I am excited to watch your journeyst.” The spirit smiled as she repeated her words from the previous time they stood in front of a rift together. Athena had the energy to give her half a smile through the still-flowing tears, a free hand resting atop her belly as if it were still swollen. The spirit did not return the smile, stepping back when she went to embrace her.

“I am so sorry, my friend. I lost myself – we – lost ourselves again. We hurt you; You cannot forgive us.” Inspiration’s voice trembled as Harmony remained silent in the back. He averted his gaze and clenched his jaw, silently agreeing with his friend’s words. She took a step forward and nearly collapsed into Inspiration’s arms, her body void of energy except for the will to breathe. The spirit caught her, Harmony stepping forward to help keep her body up. Tears were flowing down her cheeks and she could not stop them, especially when her hand smoothed over the flatness of her lower abdomen.

“We were all lost. I could not have done it without any of you.”

Harmony shook his head and Wisdom pressed her hand upon her shoulder. “You must go, Athena. You can speak to us when you dream again.”
Command smirked, weakness setting into her features as well. “Rest. You need it.”

The rift flexed and began to close when Inspiration and Harmony pushed her body through it. There were no more words to be shared; they had all been through enough. Athena felt the transition between the dreaming world and the waking one, the cold air slapping against her face as she fell from the now closed rift. Colors of green and brown swirled in front of her gaze as one hand reached out to try and grab something, the other still shielding her stomach to protect the ghost of a dream she still cherished. There was a mixture of gasps from the ground and she heard a gruff scream from the side accompanied by the hurried thuds of his heavy steps.

“I’ve got her!”

She barely felt the two large arms that caught her, his body sliding along the ground as they slowed. His skin was warm, unnaturally so, and his musk almost acted as a waking agent. She was able to twitch her lips into an attempted smirk, her cheek resting against his chest. She wanted to pat his arm but her body did not respond.

“Bull.”

The Qunari winked at her, kneeling down on the ground as a blur of icy wind came from the opposite end of the battlefield to her side.

Solas took her from Bull’s arms, giving him a silent look of gratitude before kneeling down to the ground. There was a potion at her lips and she couldn’t help but begin to cry silently again. She closed her eyes and saw the image of him cast in a soft light, pressing his lips against her belly. Salahn. Suledin. They were in a dream far away crafted by the work of a desire demon, yet she couldn’t shake the scar they left from her mind.

The potion trickled down her throat and it granted her the ability to remain conscious. She felt a touch on her cheek, wiping away the tears. When she opened her eyes, she saw Solas’s cool yet compassionate expression. He shook his head, bending down to press his forehead against hers even in the midst of the courtyard with everyone watching. “Vhenan.” He whispered softly, cradling her head to his. She thought she felt him let out a tearless sob, his body twitching against hers before he regained control to let out a sigh.

Rathein called out from behind then, her voice trembling yet determined. “Everyone. Make camp for the night. We shall discuss your futures in the morning. For now, tend to your dead and
wounded. We shall do the same.”

Athena heard Stroud’s voice from the crowd. “It will be done, Inquisitor. You heard her, Wardens!” The ambient noise of the crowd grew louder as they began to depart. She almost drifted off to unconsciousness when she felt a firmer grip on her arm, it patting her roughly until it cupped her cheek. Eyes fluttered open to look at the Inquisitor, her friend. The short-haired mage had a face of stone, expression in disbelief.

“Get her to the healing tents, Solas.”

The elf nodded, pushing from the ground but wincing as he did so. There was a low chuckle and she felt Bull take him from Solas’s arms.

“You’re not in good shape either, Solas. I got her.”

She could feel the air around them still, the mage’s aura swirling in consideration. He eventually caved, nodding before draping her in a barrier. He then took off in a fade-step towards their camp. She assumed it was to prepare for her healing, but it took every ounce of energy to stay conscious. The steady thud of Bull’s walk nearly lulled her to sleep as well and there were random touched to her head with words of encouragement. The Qunari’s nose twitched as he looked down at her and she flinched, her mind instantly connecting his horns to that of Desire’s.

“You hurt, Alpha? You’re guarding your stomach.”

His voice was soft and yet she could still feel the concern behind it. She flexed her arm over her belly before shaking her head within his grasp, turning her head into the crook of his arms to hide the tears that flowed.

“Shit – I’m sorry. With what we all saw... I can’t imagine what you went through in there. Hang in there, we’re almost there.”

Athena twitched her head in a nod, keeping her body turned and hidden as he walked them both to camp.

Chapter End Notes
I'm not dead - just honeymooning!

If anybody is in the Paris/London area and wants to meet up for a drink, hit me up! ^^

Thanks for the patience with my posting time.

Longer Fade chapters for you Failisse <3 Back to my typical 2.5-3 k after this.
The potion that was slipped past her lips gave her enough energy to barely stay awake. She kept her eyes closed and focused on her breathing, even as Bull lay her down on a cot. He was quite gentle when he wanted to be. During her time playing the games she had only done half of his romance and then called “katoh” and run off for her Trevelyan to be with Cullen. This was still a nice thing to see, especially when she felt so close to the edge of darkness. He didn’t move his hand from underneath her head until she was completely comfortable in the cot. Even still, he sat by her side with his giant axe still dripping demon ichor within arm’s reach.

There was a flurry of activity in her tent. It was large enough for Bull to stand in without his horns touching the top. It also gave enough room for Solas to be quickly pacing through from table to table, mixing potions over a magically lit burner while collecting things he would need to treat her. There was a small table on her left with different bandages, wraps, and salves. If she could of, she would have laughed. What did they think happened to her, or even worse, what did she look like?

She licked her lips and found them to be cracked and dry, eyes finally opening and flicking to Bull. Her voice was hoarse but she tried, it coming out as something barely above a whisper. The paths of her tears were beginning to dry but there was that threat of breaking back into it again. Her hand still rested over her belly, fingers flexing to shield it every time she felt like someone was moving towards her.

“Bull. How bad do I look?”

The Qunari didn’t twitch in surprise at her awakening. Instead he huffed, cracking his signature mercenary smile that made her want to laugh even more. But the energy wasn’t there, the will for happiness was buried somewhere underneath the shock and the trauma from Fear and Desire’s assault on her mind. There was a flurry of the drapes being opened and Dorian pushed through, rushing to the side and kneeling next to Bull. Instead of the relieved look that everyone else had, he was furious.

“If you didn’t look so close to death right now, I swear to the Old Gods I would throttle you right now, Athena!” His voice was hurried and full of energy, his accent thickening his words as he threw his hands up into the air. He leaned his elbows on the side of her cot near her legs, resting his head in hands in a dramatic move of frustration.

She clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth, ignoring her friend and glancing towards Bull again. “That bad, huh?” She asked dryly. Even with the small movements her mouth made, she
could feel her skin and lips pulling and oozing blood at the edges. The Reaver nodded grimly, looking her up and down once while keeping his face flat.

“Like you’ve been through shit and back, Alpha. Boss wanted to see you but I told her to give you a minute. You probably fainted two or three times on the walk over so I doubt you want to talk about Warden politics.”

She gave the smallest nod she could muster, hands twitching as Solas came over with a soaked, hot towel. He rested it on her head and she could smell different herbs coming from the water used. Lavender? Vanilla?

Vanilla.

The taste of the tea was fresh on her tongue and she bit the inside of her cheek to keep from crying again. Solas gently pressed his fingers to her temple, tilting her head to the side. He hummed and she could tell the sound was through grit teeth. She was beginning to notice that only she felt the small intricacies of his aura. Even now, the room grew colder as he assessed her but Dorian and Bull didn’t notice or shudder. She did. The movement started at her head and went to her toes, bringing forth a wave of pain and soreness in her joints she didn’t realize was there.

“I need to fully assess her.” The healer stated with a cold tone, looking up to Dorian and Bull. The Qunari went to stand but Dorian remained stubborn, clenching his fists against his forehead. Solas did not surrender. “Please, Dorian.”

The Tevinter pushed from the cot with a scoff, throwing the opening of the tent behind him. Bull quickly followed, leaving the two of them alone within the tent. Solas waited until the air was still before he let out a sigh and looked to her, his fingers tracing the lining of her shirt. “Can you sit up at all? I need to assess if your injuries are physical or spiritual.”

Athena cleared her throat, pushing up from the bed just enough for him to remove her shirt with magical-aided speed. The bandings were scorched and dirtied in between her different shifts, the swarm, and the Fade. He gently ran his fingers over her skin, lifting her arm and looking for any physical injuries. There must have been small abrasions or cuts she did not realize because at certain points he dabbed a salve onto his fingertips and covered her wounds in them. He got to her stomach and her hand flexed against it, eyes closing as she waited for the question he had yet to ask.

“The Iron Bull is correct, you’re guarding as if you are wounded. May I look?” He asked gently. Inwardly she laughed to herself. He always asked for permission, both in the bedroom and outside
of it. As much of a creature of the hunt he was, he didn’t overstep his bounds. It must have been the proper elven gentleman in him, the dignified hahren. She weakly lifted her arm, making a gesture with her hand that was a small “ta-da” to show that there wasn’t a gaping evisceration under her arm like everyone was expecting. There was simply a flat stomach with perhaps a small section of road burn or rash from where Rage had her ensnared. He looked at it, arching a single brow. He must have sensed something because he did not ask it aloud, he simply waited in the silence with his hand resting in the middle of her stomach.

Tears again, damn them, but she kept them contained to just her eyes. “Not yet.” That was all she could say and he didn’t say another word. Instead he looked up to her with his free hand at the top of her pants, waiting for her silent approval before he continued doing his job as a healer. She gave it to him in the form of a deep exhale through her nose, her hand moving to where it could rest over his that was on her skin. He couldn’t hide the sigh from his lips. He moved his hand to where he could intertwine his fingers with hers, squeezing them while taking a few moments to breathe.

“I... I thought you were lost.” He admitted in a whisper, eyes glued to their shared connection of hands. She shook her head in small movements, squeezing back against his hand as a single tear escaped down her cheek. “The Inquisitor asked for me to look for you in the Fade, but I was persistently getting dismissed. The one time I was able to look through, I just saw Fear.” He stroked his thumb over the top of her hand before moving on with his routine, using a sharpened point of ice at the tip of his finger to cut through the fabric of her pants and boots to remove them in one go. He wrapped a wound at the edge of her ankle with a tender touch, constantly watching her face to see if there was even a subtle wince of pain in her face.

“I’m sorry.” She whispered through the hoarseness of her throat. Whatever potion they gave her was beginning to kick in because she felt the lines of her lips heal up and there was no longer the taste of copper hiding the vanilla on her tongue. Solas paused while holding her foot, looking up the length of her body.

“For what?”

“Kicking you all from the Fade. I – panicked.” It took great energy to form each word but she knew they deserved more of an apology. She had brought a great group of them in there to combat the Nightmare demon; she knew that. But when she saw them all bowing underneath the immense weight and pressure of its magic, something clicked within her. Something else had to be done and Command’s voice in her head only reinforced that fact.

“Considering you were successful in your mission, you owe nobody an apology. I will not allow for anyone to put their wounded egos onto your conscience.” He placed her foot down on the cot and pulled a blanket from behind him, slowly draping it over her until he folded the top just above her bandings. She moved her arm on top of it and he moved himself to where he was sitting at the top of the bed, his thumbs tracing small designs into her cheeks as he cupped her face from behind.
The world was fading in and out of reality of her yet she still clung desperately to the waking world. It would be a while before she trusted her mind to go into the Fade again. Things were fresh and the mental wounds hadn’t even begun to close. There was a gust of hot air as the tent flaps were open and she could hear labored breathing coming from the entrance.

“How is she?” Rathein asked, no, demanded. Her voice was carrying the authority of the entire Inquisition but Solas only briefly glanced to the side.

“Her mana pool is nearly drained and she is in need of rest. I will soon give her another potion; she should be stable given a few hours of sleep.” His hands froze on the side of her face and she took the opportunity to tilt her head into his hand, a small gesture of appreciation.

The Inquisitor did not see the small movement but she let out a heavy sigh. “Thank the Maker. I think we could all use some rest. I will soon give her another potion; she should be stable given a few hours of sleep.” His hands froze on the side of her face and she took the opportunity to tilt her head into his hand, a small gesture of appreciation.

The Inquisitor did not see the small movement but she let out a heavy sigh. “Thank the Maker. I think we could all use some rest. I’m going to instruct the others to try and catch a moment of silence. You should do the same, Solas.” She turned and paused, her hand resting on the flap of the tent. “Thank you as well.” And with that the leader of their party was gone. Athena opened her eyes to see her lover sitting above her, his gaze now looking at the entrance of the tent, presumably waiting for someone else to come in. With her free hand, she reached up and touched his cheek.

He twitched, quickly holding it against his face and placing a gentle kiss on the inside of the palm. The kind, soft gesture melted away a layer of the hurt that was keeping her awake. His presence brought a warmth to her body that made it feel like it would be easier to sleep. He gently placed her hand down over her belly, returning to his ritual of massaging her scalp and temples. That was the final straw, exhaustion and trauma catching up to her at once. The last thing she heard before she crashed was the familiar tune of a hum, one that she had only heard from him in passing before, one that he saved in her false future for their child of endurance, one that pulled on her heartstrings and brought forth tears in her eyes as she fell into the darkness of sleep.

What was only a few hours felt like an eternity of sleep. The image of the Nightmare demon ripped her from her sleep and she sat up with a gasp, hands fumbling around her body to make sure there were not any spiders or long black hairs from her wretched fear on her skin. Solas rested a hand on her shoulder from behind, squeezing the sore muscles underneath.

“Were you able to rest?” He asked quietly. There was a weariness in his voice that instantly told her that he hadn’t slept at all.

“Just enough to get me to function,” She responded flatly, turning her body to where her legs hung off the cot and onto the ground. Athena went through a test run of her body, rolling all of her joints and cracking her knuckles until she felt confident enough that she would be able to walk. There was
still a ghostly weight hanging from the front of her body but she refused her hands want to touch it. Solas moved and grabbed a fresh pair of clothes from her chest that had been brought in during their sleep. Thankfully instead of another Vivienne inspired outfit, there was a more suitable one for travel.

With sore muscles, she slipped on a basic black sleeveless tank top with a beige jacket over it. The pants were more difficult and Solas helped her to stand and pull the waistband up over her hips. Boots were packed in the trunk but she said a quick ‘fuck that’ to another energy expenditure. Instead, she reached for the emerald foot wrappings in the back of the trunk. He waited on standby to help her put them on but she managed on her own, pulling her pant leg down over the wrapping before standing in one push of movement.

It was a struggle, but she stood with her hands outstretched to help her balance. Solas rested his hands underneath hers, almost hovering for support just in case she needed it. “Are you alright?”

She nodded, looking down at the ground then to him. “As much as I can be. A single person cannot hold up the entire Inquisition in their path.” He furrowed his brows and nodded, opening the tent for them to leave. The camp was a mess with soldiers running back and forth. This was an impromptu setup near the edge of Adamant. She could still feel the accursed air lingering and it stuck to her skin like humidity. Athena grit her teeth and walked towards the outskirts where there were tables set up. Rathein was standing with the Inner Circle, going over details and pointing in different directions with each command.

Athena turned and touched Solas’s cheek gently in a silent good-bye. He nodded, holding her hand to his face for a moment before disappearing within the camp. The ring on her hand vibrated when he left and she couldn’t help but wonder if the thing watched her for him. When she approached the tables, she leaned her weight onto one that held the blueprints of the castle. Cullen noticed her first, his brows raised as he walked over to her with her arms extended.

“Andraste – Athena – are you alright? You look like you’re going to fall over.” She frowned and looked him up and down, pushing against the center of his breast plate.

“You try going into the middle of the Fade and tell me how you look or feel, Commander.” Her words were icy, the sarcasm lost within the tiredness of her tone. Rathein caught onto it and scoffed under her breath, thumbing the tip of her nose and gesturing for her to come over to the table they were around. They were positioning different squadrons and groups of soldiers for the return home, but the obvious question was still there. The Herald didn’t hesitate to ask.

“What are we doing to do with the Wardens?”
Leliana and Cullen shared a similar look, the spy-master stepping forward with a nod. “It would be a loss to Thedas if we exiled them now. Corpyheus has an arch-demon for his companion; it makes sense to keep them around. Otherwise that leaves us vulnerable for attacks from the darkspawn.”

Cullen hummed in agreement, crossing his arms over his chest. Athena could hear the sound of metal on metal as he did so, but her current state of mind and body upped her sarcasm game. She rolled her eyes, waiting for Rathein to look at her. The Herald did so with an expectant smile, gesturing with a hand for her to go on.

“Exile.”

Cullen’s eyes widened. “What! You can’t be serious.”

Athena shot him a look of warning, her hand clenching on the table as a wave of weakness caused her legs to tremble. Thankfully he didn’t see it, he was too flustered by the expression on her face. Instead he stood down and nodded for her to continue. “It will function both as a punishment and a preventative.” She paused, wondering if she should disclose the information swirling around in her head.

Fuck it.

“Corypheus uses the blight within their blood to control them. That’s how the binding spell put them under his spell. Not only that, but he can use the blight within them to transfer his essence from Warden to Warden. It’s how he survived Hawke ‘killing’ him and it’s how he’ll be able to survive any future attacks for a time. Exiling the Wardens will not only keep us safe from their corruption but will keep them out of Corypheus’s range of influence. It protects both us and them but this way if we tell them what he can do, they know we still respect them and their livelihoods.” Her voice was curt and to the point, eyes flicking to the Council members that were looking at her as she spoke.

Rathein hummed for a minute, playing with a small gryphon-shaped wooden piece on the table. “After hearing that. . . I agree. You can’t deny that having the Wardens away would be safer.”

Athena raised a finger and then pointed to Leliana. “Perhaps an alternative instead of Weisshaupt? There is a Warden Keep in Amaranthine, correct?” The Spy-master nodded with an amused expression. “Could we write a letter to King Alistair or his Queen, the Warden Commander, about perhaps sending them there?”
Leliana smirked. “Rumor has it the Warden-King Alistair will be attending the Wintersend Ball that Josephine is throwing together once things are settled. I have no doubt that you and I can convince him. If the Wardens begin their journey, we could intercept them with a raven and have them change paths. Regardless, it would put them out of our way.”

The Inquisitor looked to Cullen for more input but he simply nodded, relaxing his arms and resting one on top of the hilt of his sword. Rathein clapped her hands together and hailed a messenger from outside. “Grab Stroud and Hawke. Tell them I will be addressing the Wardens soon. Have Clarel’s cot within ears’ reach so she can hear me too.”

Athena’s eyes widened, her fingers flexing on the table to give her a better grip to stand with. “She lives?”

Rathein turned with a smirk, winking at her while resting her hand on her hip. “Yeah. I’m using Solas’s word here, but your ‘reckless’ ass ended up saving some people. Thanks, Madame Sorciere. Why don’t you go see her? I’m sure you can answer some of her questions.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for the continued patience and support!

Flying back from the honeymoon tomorrow! I will be able to get back into the swing of things soon. <3
I've been re-reading and editing all of the past chapters and that made me forget to post the most recent one! <3

The healing tents weren’t far off and Athena made a bee-line there before she could run into someone else familiar. Typically, she would want all the comforting, mushy attention she could get. But this was one of those things that would be difficult for others to understand. First, she would have to admit that she fell underneath the influence of a demon. No matter how forced, a person was viewed as weak when that happened in this world. Perhaps with Leliana as Divine that was something that could be changed. Even the Spy-Master had been under the influence of a demon before. The Warden and her party were ensnared by a demon of Sloth for days, as well as Cullen and all of the torture he went through at the hands of the abominations. Athena’s had only been for a few minutes but it had left a mental wound that she couldn’t quite shake. Second, she would have to explain that she was mourning a world, a memory, that didn’t exist. She barely knew how to form the thoughts for herself, let alone explain them to someone else without getting the all too recognizable look of pity with the clap on the shoulder. Thirdly, it would mean beginning to let go... and Suledin’s image was still too fresh in her mind to let that happen.

As she passed through the first line of Wardens she saw Stroud and Hawke. They both looked like they had seen better days. Fenris was at Hawke’s side, his gaze constantly scanning the crowds for any signs of a threat with his great sword at his back. He was in the courtyard when she fell; that much she barely remembered. He didn’t get sucked into the Fade with the rest of them. She was thankful for that. It would have been another person she was fond of to be responsible for and the group of them that was there was enough on her mind. Athena tried to find the tent with Clarel in it but Stroud caught her first. The Orlesian Warden tapped her with two fingers on her shoulder, gesturing with his head towards one of the darker tents in the corner. It was one that could be easily looked over, which was smart considering how many people were upset with the Warden Commander at that moment.

“You are looking for Clarel, yes, Lady Athena?” He asked, waving a hand to the two guarding soldiers at the door. She responded with a curt nod and followed him directly at his heel.

“She should be able to march in the morning. The healers suggested she rested due to fractured ribs and a wounded arm... some of which was done by your move to push her out of the dragon’s grasp.” He lifted back the entrance to the tent, pausing and looking to her. She felt some sort of weight behind his gaze but she was honestly too tired and fatigued to decipher any of it. Instead, she raised her brows and waited.
“You spared her, when so many people would have let her perish for her acts. Can I ask why?” Athena lifted her shoulders in a slow shrug.

“You spared her, when so many people would have let her perish for her acts. Can I ask why?” Athena lifted her shoulders in a slow shrug.

“Too many have already died. The Wardens are going to take a large hit for their betrayal against the Divine and Thedas. Her blood is on their hands. It’s going to take every effort to bring them back to glory and having the – I’m assuming – Former Warden Commander to help guide them will be beneficial. There aren’t enough high ranking officers to let even a single one pass. Do not mistake my action for support of hers.” Her voice was cold and cut through the ambient noise of soldiers passing and the camp recovering from the night before. Thinking about Clarel sent a wave of anger over her mind. It took form in a flush that started on her chest and worked its way up to color her cheeks. She didn’t have the patience for people that didn’t deserve it with how little energy she had in her veins. Stroud made a huff under his breath, nodding and opening the way for her to crouch down and enter. Clarel was resting on a cot supported by pillows to where she could sit up and read through scrolls. When Athena entered, she paused, face lighting up in recognition as she put the scrolls down.

“Lady Sorciere.” The greeting was terse so Athena answered in kind with almost a sneer on her lips.

“Clarel.”

The two shared a glance before the Warden pinched the bridge of her nose and gestured to the seat next to her. Stroud stood at the front of the tent as a guard with his back faced towards them. He looked over his shoulder and gave her a look that instilled some confidence with her, but she was more filled with annoyance and anger towards the Warden Commander. It didn’t make sense to her how it seemed like a logical idea to summon demons to defeat the Old Gods. She agreed with Solas, their romance aside, it was an idea where they didn’t think of the repercussions. They didn’t even fully understand the Old Gods, let alone what would happen if they suddenly ceased to exist.

The closest they could get to knowing was the Architect, but he disappeared after the Warden let him go. Well, that was at least how it went in her playthrough.

“I hear the Inquisitor is speaking with her council about our future.” The Commander’s Orlesian background shown through as she straightened her posture and gave Athena a look that was akin to a librarian looking over a pair of glasses. The Game was afoot.

She was not phased, however. Athena did not have the time or patience to have any of it. “She has indeed. That is why I’m here for she will be making the announcement soon. Are you able to walk?”
The Commander looked down to her body and then nodded. “I believe so, yes. Tell me, Lady Athena. I hear the demon that was meant for me is no longer. Is that true?” There was a slight hope in her words that normally would have made her feel somewhat pleased. Now it only further boiled the bitterness in her core.

“Yes. Not without costs.” Her hand twitched to guard her stomach but she simply rested it on top of her thigh, combating the Orlesian’s poised expression with an icy one of her own. She could feel the muscles of her body straining to remain upright. They called for more rest, more sleep. She would deny herself that leisure until they were back on their path and out of harm’s way. She could not risk going back into the Fade. It was too painful, and even the comfort of the darkness had the slightest chance of dreaming of that place.

“I... I am sorry, Sorciere.”

Athena’s lips twitched into a frown, lips pulling back to show the sarcastic smirk that she wore instead of the snarl that urged to happen. “You do not understand how sorry you would need to be for me to accept an apology. Do you have any idea of what you were trying to do, Warden Commander?” She pushed from the ground to stand above her, using her new position to stare the fellow mage down. “Your desperation cost you. Not only just you, but every one of your soldiers that followed you blindly. How did you think that a demon army would solve your problems? Were you so wrapped up in your seclusion that you did not see that the rest of the world was suffering too because of the Breach?”

The Commander’s eye twitched and she could tell that she wanted to snap back. Underneath all of the anger she knew she was right. Athena’s breaths came quickly, hands threatening to tremor at her sides. “I did not kill the demon for you. You do not owe me an apology. You owe an apology to all of the Wardens out there who pledged their lives to you and will now have to deal with the consequences of your actions. Do not choose me as your receptacle for your misplaced guilt simply because I cleaned up your mess!”

“Lady Athena, please.” Stroud intercepted from the door. His words were firm but the expression on his face showed that he agreed. He was the one who was in self-exile to keep separated from their plans. In her eyes, he was one of the only logical ones left. She nodded back to him and looked over to where Cullen stuck his head in.

“We’re ready now, Athena. Everyone is gathering.” He paused, waiting for her. She rolled her shoulders and glanced over back towards Clarel.

“It would behoove you to use this second chance as a way to payback the Order you betrayed. Do not fail them again or I will not be as kind in the future.” She pushed forward without a proper farewell, moving past Cullen into the open camp. Sunrise was upon them, light trickling in through
the dark clouds that loomed over the cursed Warden Keep. Cullen looked her up and down, extending his arm as an offering to help her walk. She looked to it for a second, blinked once while feeling her legs almost buckle just from standing.

“Thanks, but I’m trying to not appear damaged this morning.” She patted his arm in gratitude and walked him towards the area where Rathein was standing on top of the fountain, waiting to address the Wardens and the Inquisition alike.

“Do not think of yourself as damaged. What you went through – “His voice dropped down and she knew the tone well enough. It was sweet; he was sweet. He just had the worst timing with saying the right things. Typically, she would have wanted to hear the encouragement, the statements that she wasn’t alone. But not yet. She clenched her jaw, digging her nails into the palm of her hand to keep her expression flat.

“Cullen.”

“Athena – don’t be so hard on yourself –“ He pressed, turning his body towards her. She could see glimpses of the Inner Party standing together on the side of the Inquisitor. They looked more well rested than she did, which gave her some relief.

“Commander.” She cut him off again, barely turning her head towards him. His gentleness, the way he wanted to help, it was almost as painful as the wounds themselves. He would understand more than most of the people there, but opening up to him was another step she just wasn’t ready for. Tears stung her eyes but she kept them down, closing her eyes for a moment while letting out a controlled breath through her nose. “I’m sorry. Not yet. Please.”

He hummed in disapproval, letting out a sigh while dropping his extended arm. “As you wish. Let us join the others.”

Fuck. Athena swallowed down a stone of nerves within her throat, clenching her hands into fists at her side. Cullen led the way through the crowd and stood near Josephine and Leliana. She paused, looking over towards the other members of the party when a hand wrapped around her wrist. Her initial reaction was to pull away but there were no words, only presence. Honey colored eyes dropped down to see Cole’s pale hand supporting her. His hat nearly brushed against her skin he was standing so close but his eyes were focused on Rathein.

Thank the Gods he knew.
She turned sideways next to him, meeting her friend’s eyes up on the pedestal. The short-haired mage nodded and steeled herself, clearing her throat before facing the large group of soldiers. “Thank you all for waiting as we recovered from this victorious battle!”

There was a cheer from the Inquisition soldiers and she raised her hand to quiet them, a pleasant yet tired smile encouraging their shouts. They hushed their voices down at her cue.

“But we cannot forget the men and women we have lost in this struggle. Their bravery will be remembered eternal within our hearts and minds. Their bodies were cleared from the Keep so we can ensure that they will have a peaceful rest outside of this cursed place.”

Cole’s hand tightened on hers and she could hear him whisper underneath his breath. “Still not safe. This place. . . is dark, twisted. Too many deaths. Too much loss. Too much corruption.”

She nodded and moved to where they were holding hands instead, fingers intertwined. He looked at their shared touch up to her face. His head tilted in confusion, brows furrowed. “You have lost. . . but not really. Ghosts, memories, at the front of your mind but they’re not real. None of it was real.”

Athena looked to him with a warning glance. “I know, Cole.”

He kept on, his voice barely under a whisper. “But why hold onto it? It was a dream, only a dream. Let me help! I can help you forget!” She could feel his influence brushing against her mind and she brought up a barrier and pushed him out, a wince flashing across her face as she did so.

“It was a very real dream, Cole. Just. . . I need time. I don’t want to forget it. Can you understand that?” The spirit of Compassion thought for a moment and nodded. His grip never left hers and silently he looked back to the Inquisitor.

“The Wardens turned and assisted us at a pivotal moment in the battle, helping us to prevail over Corypheus’s influence. The Inquisition knows this and will never forget this, but there is something you must know.” Rathein paused, glancing down to Athena with a nod before turning back to the crowd. “Wardens, your connection with the Darkspawn is what Corypheus took advantage of.”

There were murmurs and hums of consideration, all eyes still trained onto the Herald of Andraste. “It is what he uses for his own livelihood and it was how he so easily brought your mages
underneath his power. Saying this. . .” She steadied herself and stood up taller. “It has been decided for your safety and for the safety of Thedas that the Wardens will be sent into exile, until the Tevinter Magister Corypheus has been defeated.”

Cole stilled beside her and Athena quickly gauged the reaction of the group. Bull and Varric frowned, both of them crossing their arms almost in unison. Solas nodded in agreement with the Inquisitor. When he felt her eyes on him, he simply glanced to the side and kept his gaze locked with hers. Even still, seeing him, it brought everything back. The hardened features of his face now melted into the soft memory that she clung on to where there was no war, no chaotic future ahead of them. She blinked hard and looked back to Rathein for support.

“She has decided for your safety and for the safety of Thedas that the Wardens will be sent into exile, until the Tevinter Magister Corypheus has been defeated.”

“Use this time wisely, Wardens. Rebuild, grow again and come back stronger as the Order that has been around for generations. From Blight to Blight you have saved us all and we will count on you in the future to do so again. Your legacy does not end today. Move to Weisshaupt and find your purpose again!”

Hawke and Stroud pushed through the crowd into view. The Warden Officer raised his sword while the Champion of Kirkwall raised her staff. She started first. “We will help lead you there. It is a long travel and there is still so much work to do but we can accomplish much together!”

Stroud nodded, meeting the eyes of the soldiers he had trained himself. “No matter what the future holds, the Wardens will prevail. In war, victory.” The other Wardens nodded and repeated the final words with him, their voices wary but full of confidence. “In peace, vigilance! In death, sacrifice!” Rathein stepped down from the fountain and began to walk towards them. The gears were turning in her head on what to do next but Athena’s eyes widened, an idea clicking into her head. She tucked in her lower lip and whistled towards Bull, catching his attention. With a nod of her head she brought him over towards Cullen and the other members of the Inner Council.

“Hey, Bull. How much of that "stuff that isn’t quite gaatlok" does Rocky have?”

The Qunari paused and looked her up and down. “A shit-ton. Why?”

She looked to Cullen and pointed to the Keep around them. The Commander followed her train of thought, mouthing the idea out loud for her. “Destroy the Keep while we’re here.”

“We still have the mages that could ignite the powder around the castle. It could be done rather quickly if we act fast. Leliana, we have collected most of the deceased, correct?” The Commander asked his colleague, lightly touching her on the arm to grab her attention. The red-head hummed and gave the smallest of nods, looking around at the keep in a constant state of high alertness.

“The quicker we move the better. We need to move our troops back to Skyhold. We are vulnerable to Corypheus the longer we are here, Commander,” She stated simply.

Cullen clenched his jaw, a flicker of annoyance flashing across his face. “I’m aware. Well, Iron Bull? How soon could we have it set up?”

The Qunari puffed his chest and wiped his jawline with the pad of his thumb, a cocky smile coming to his lips. “Give us an hour or two to set up and we’ll be good. We’ll bring the powder – “ He the poked the Commander in the chest. “You bring the boom.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all of the continued support!
The powder was set up in weak points around the Keep, which were not hard to find due to its crumbling nature to begin with. Darkness had crept into every feature, aging it faster than nature would have allowed. Athena stood ready with the other mages, her hands twitching for some kind of spell to happen. Bull jogged out from the center with a smirk on his face. He looked her up and down, pointing over his shoulder back towards the Keep.

“This was your idea and I’ve got a biiiiiiiig ole pile of that shit in the dungeons. I don’t know anyone else who can walk through flame like you can. I figure I’d give you the honors of starting it off.” He then sarcastically yet ceremoniously handed her a lyrium vial from the center of his hand. She took it without so much as a smirk, giving him a tired look of gratitude but it was all she could muster.

“Are you kidding? She looks like she is going to fall over.” The voice that came from the side made her head hurt, eyes rolling over to see Dorian fluffing his feathers like the mother hen he tried not to be.

“She can do it, Vint.” The subtext was obvious: she needs this. She flipped the cork off with one flick of her thumb and downed the contents, throwing the empty vial at Dorian’s feet with a glare as it shattered. He stomped over it with his boots, pushing her on the shoulder with a furious expression.

“How foolish can you be?” He tapped the side of his temple with his middle and index fingers, getting close enough in her face that she could smell the wine and concern on his tongue. She raised up on her toes, getting to where their noses almost touched. Every instinct in her wanted to break down and sob within his arms, but her stubbornness won out. The satisfaction in seeing Adamant fall would help bring her closure, or at least she thought it would. The look on her face stole the words from Dorian’s face because he scoffed at her, looking from her eyes to her feet. “I will not watch you throw yourself in harm’s way again. And. Again. You’re not some fucking martyr, Athena.”

She kept quiet, letting him process before barely whispering out. “This is for me.” *Fuck.* Her tone revealed how close she was to breaking it was painful for her to hear. Her tone made her voice sound unlike her, the emotions swelling within her throat, nearly garbling her voice to a point where it was washed by unshed tears. His anger broke and there was the look she dreaded, the softening of the features to where he put his hands up in surrender and moved to touch her.
jerked from his grip, even so much as fade-stepping back out of it with a warning glance.

“Don’t.”

“Athena – “

“We’re ready, Alpha. Go on inside.” Bull hovered his hand over her back and gestured for the way into the keep. Without allowing another moment to pass she soldiered on through the line of mages and the warriors waiting to see if anything came from the Keep. They were prepared if more demons came from the rubble, but they did not anticipate them respawning so soon after the rift’s closure. She quickly moved down stairs and ignored the soreness of her calves, thighs, and back. They could all be fixed later. She needed to see this place and all of its memories torn to the fucking ground.

She found the basement where they had set up the gaatlok impersonator. The dust was like a fine gunpowder and its smell was offensive to the senses. Athena reeled, her lips curling over her teeth in a snarl of disgust. She put her back near the closest set of stairs, preparing to run from the blast as quick as her feet would take her.

A spark from the sky marked her signal, the blue flare carrying no familiar mana fingerprint that she recognized. Must be one of the ally mages. She thought to herself, pulling the sleeves of her jacket down to get comfortable. Weak mana bounced between her fingertips, the sparks barely enough to make her palms warm. Still, she clapped her hands together and summoned a fireball of blue flame, throwing it to hover over the pile of gaatlok as she moved her body up the stairs. There were small windows within the staircase so she was able to keep her eyes on the flame, ensuring that it hovered until she deemed it time. Her hand trembled while attempting to control the thing and she finally let it give up when she was in the optimal point to escape.

The flame fell and she turned her body towards the exit, a fade-step fresh on her heels. The blur of her body moved through the Keep as the first explosion went off. It rocked her and knocked her out of her spell, the wall catching her as her body slammed against it. The blast pushed her body against the stone and she gasped, the burning air filling her lungs. The second stretched on into infinity, eyes wide as she clawed her way to the nearest opening. The building was beginning to shake, it’s very foundations shattered due to her attack combined with the pile of gaatlok. She pulled on the fresh lyrium running through her veins and broke into a fade-step again, pushing against falling bit after falling bit until her body cleared the edge and Bull caught her with a firm arm against her stomach.

That ripped her from the spell, breath being tore from her lungs as the mages contained the demolition behind her with a series of barriers and runes. The Keep crumbled, shaking the earth and everyone around it. The Qunari stepped behind her and supported her until she had the strength...
to stand. “Alpha, you alright? Come on, you gotta give me something or I have to grab someone.”

Athena gripped her hand around his arm, squeezing it gently as the only gesture she could think of that she was okay. She then felt a potion being pushed against her lips and she drank it down without question. The soothe of elfroot on her tongue took away some of her pain. It was just a simple health potion but she was too weak to refuse. The mercenary at her back continued speaking low and she didn’t fight him off. To be honest with herself, she couldn’t.

“We all saw some terrible shit in there, Alpha, but we know you got the brunt of it. Take your time. Do what you need, okay? I got your back on this. We’re not going anywhere.” Athena nodded, instinctively wanting to fight and crawl away from his grip. Instead, she let the health potion work its magic. The air returned to her lungs and the weight disappeared from her chest. She let out a sigh, pushing against him to where she could stand before nodding.

“Thanks, Bull.”

He huffed, patting her on the back while shouting over to Krem. “Lieutenant, how do things look?”

“Adamant is all rocks, Chief! The boys were able to get some goods when they were putting the boom-stuff down. I’ll send it over to the Commander. The lads are all packed and set to leave before dusk with the rest of the Inquisition.” The soldier looked to Athena with a soft smile, nodding to her in recognition before waiting for Bull’s orders.

“The Commander’s men can finish up here; we did our job. Get everyone ready to leave as soon as possible. Got it?”

“Got it, Chief!” The man did a sarcastic salute before heading back towards the Charger’s camp. Bull went to join him but she reached out and touched his arm, lips drawn into a tight line.

“Hey, Bull – can I hide out with you guys? I’m not. . . I –“ He smirked, putting his large hand on the center of his back to bring her closer to his side.

“I get it. Sure. You can help the horses get ready. They’re a bit spooked, but you can calm them down. I’ll meet you there.” He rubbed the back of his neck and sighed, looking down at her with an assessing gaze. “Gotta go update the boss.”
Athena’s eyes widened but he waved her off. “I know. I know.” He patted her on the shoulder before heading back towards the main camp while she walked towards the Chargers. If they were back at Skyhold, she would have immediately run into the forest and went into seclusion with the wolves. They didn’t ask her questions; they just knew. Bull was kind of like that, in his Ben’Hasserath spy kind of way. He had survived Seheron, the Fog Warriors, all of it. He knew what hurt and trauma looked like on a person. He knew when to step back.

In the back of her mind, she knew she probably needed to go to Solas about this. She loved him, and he loved her, but...for some reason there was no way to put into words what she was feeling. *I’m mourning the loss of our children that we have yet to have? I don’t know if that will ever happen because you’re going to tear down the veil and try to return your people back to glory. I’m clinging to a dream that a demon implanted in me.*

“Yeah. Sounds logical.”

Whatever Bull had said worked. Nobody from the Inquisition came to bug her for the hours that they traveled. She kept to the horses, whispering kind words under her breath but doing tasks that would keep her out of the people’s eyes. Bull had thrown her into a wagon and asked that she inventory everything. So, with only a mage light to guide her she quickly scratched down numbers and things like arrows, pockets of gaatlok, and grenades so that they could properly restock when they got back to Skyhold. The seclusion didn’t last forever. They pulled up to their camp for the night and she suddenly felt her stomach turn to stone. The color drained from her face, eyes slowly turning towards the opening of the wagon to see who would stick their face through.

Thankfully it was Dalish, who so kindly threw a bread roll at her face that was already buttered. The oily pastry bounced off of her face and landed in her lap. She blinked twice, picking it up and nibbling on it after raising it to her in a toast.

“Oh come off it, Athena. Everyone’s sitting around the fire. I’m not going to let you mope.”

She instantly frowned. “I’m not moping.”

Dalish brought her bow out from behind her back, wrapping her magic around her waist and tugging gently. It felt like there was a cool tendril around her belly, focusing specifically on her lower abdomen. The sensation twisted her mouth into a snarl, making the two of them look like an animal control employee wrangling a rabid dog. The Charger did not stop until Athena was
standing outside of the wagon.

“There! Better! Now!” She then pointed her staff towards the camp on the other side of the trees, arching a demanding brow. “Don’t make me drag ya there me’self.”

Athena kicked the dirt, avoiding the elf’s gaze almost like a child. There were so many emotions running through her head and the two that dominated were loss and shame. She was always one to wear her heart on her sleeves. She prided herself on being a shoulder for other people to cry on. But this? This was too much to explain in words. Instead of talking she took a large bite of the roll, chewing angrily while meeting Dalish’s gaze.

“Fine.” She garbled through a mouth full of bread, following the Charger through the path to the campfire. All of them were already eating and they were in the middle of a conversation she knew she was going to dread. She went to pivot and turn around but Dalish stabbed her bow into the top of her foot. Thankfully the bread still in her mouth muffled her cry, eyes rolling back into her head while she processed the throbbing pain in her foot.

“I saw my brother Bartrand. He was crazy on the lyrium – I don’t think I could have put a bolt in the thing fast enough. But yeah, that shit was awful.” Varric went on, looking to Athena with a sympathetic glance. Yet again the one she was trying to avoid. She breathed deeply out of her nose, flicking her gaze over the crowd. Solas was sitting almost immediately to her right. He didn’t make an obvious turn to look at her. Instead, she could feel his magic pressing against hers as a greeting. She pressed back, crossing her arms over her chest and leaning against the bulk of a tree at the edge of the fire.

“What about you Walker? It seems we all saw something different in there. Old friends, warriors, weird creatures, fathers – “ He looked to Dorian who knocked back whatever he was drinking. “Blackwall said you said yours was weird and well, he has me curious.”

Athena huffed. “Of course, you are.” She muttered just loud enough for him to hear. *Fuck, might as well start now.* This was going to be easier to talk about, as opposed to what happened under Desire’s influence. She ran a hand through her hair and looked into the sky for courage. “I’ve told you about the movies we had in my world, right? This was going to be easier to talk about, as opposed to what happened under Desire’s influence. She ran a hand through her hair and looked into the sky for courage. “I’ve told you about the movies we had in my world, right?” The group all nodded and made different sounds of agreement. She fought the shakiness in her voice and continued. “Well, we have horror movies. They’re meant to tell a story, but mainly to scare you. There were these two back to back that featured young girls with long black hair. They haunted my dreams for years. Hell, I could barely sleep without a light on for at least six months after seeing the first one.”

Her voice was flat but it grew to a normal volume as she went on. Still, she remained in her guarded posture with her gaze glued to the fire. “When the Nightmare tried to use something against me, that bitch crawled from a well. Varric said it best. I couldn’t kill her fast enough.” The
dwarf smirked, rubbing his hands together to get the crumbs from dinner off.

“What about after, Athena?” Cassandra asked softly, hands clasped in front of her like a prayer. Athena made a noise of disagreement but the Seeker raised a hand and continued. “After that spirit pushed us out, the rift remained open in the courtyard.” She licked her lips and went to speak again but Dorian cut in instead, his voice weighed down by emotion.

“Sound traveled through, small parts, but enough for all of us to think you were dead.”

“Not all.” Solas cut him off, shooting a warning glance to her friend.

“I told them not to do this.” Rathein mourned, putting her head in her hands. Bull rubbed between her shoulders blades, looking to Athena with an expression that just screamed “Sorry!” She clenched her jaw so hard she felt like her teeth were going to break, gaze falling to the dirt below her. Her eyes began to sting but she refused for any tears to fall.

“Fine.” Solas’s magic flared against hers but she raised a hand to let him know it was okay. “I initially brought you all into the Fade because I thought the extra man power would help defeat the demon. I was wrong. I apologize for pushing you out, but I had no other choice. Once you were out, a Desire and Rage demon subdued me.”

“Maker’s mercy.” Cullen whispered under his breath, pinching the bridge of his nose, and leaning forward.

“I was trapped, for however long you heard what you heard. It wasn’t...until...” She took in a deep breath, hand clutching the amulet that was still around her neck. In a motion of anxiety, she closed her eyes and brought her aura in skin-tight. Solas’s lips twitched, head inclining only slightly so that he could see her. “A spirit of Wisdom freed me and assisted me in defeating the Nightmare demon once and for all.” She opened her eyes just in time to see the shift in her lover’s expression.

His brow furrowed, processing exactly what she had said. It didn’t take long for it to click, and when it did, the sight was beautiful enough to almost bring a smile to her face. His eyes widened, a genuine smile coming to his lips that lit up his entire expression. He hid it by covering his mouth with his hand, rubbing along his jawline.

“I apologize. It may take me a couple of days to get back to pace. Just for the love of the Gods,
stop looking at me like I’m a beaten puppy. We all went through shit, but it’s behind us now. Let’s just focus on our victory and work for the next one, alright?” Dorian leaned back and handed her a drink and she did not hesitate to raise it up to the group and then to her lips. It wasn’t the harsh gasoline that he normally drank. Was this her sweet line that she liked? It went down her throat like honey and soothed some of the worry coursing through her veins. Rathein grinned, clapping her hands together to address the group.

“You heard the lady, everyone get some rest. We’ll start marching again first thing in the morning back to Skyhold. Agreed?” Everyone moved from their spots and went their separate ways towards their separate tents. Dorian walked over and paused, allowing his hand to brush against hers, a faint smirk on his face, before going to his tent. Solas stood and turned, giving her a look that screamed joy, and walked to their shared tent.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the spaced out chapters; I'm working through some stuff right now.

Thanks for the continued support.
The camp cleared quickly, the majority of the Inquisition looking forward to a good night’s rest outside of the walls of Adamant. The quiet desert air brought about a sense of peace, even with the singing of Athena’s swarm of friends that lingered around the troops. From what she could gather from their chirps and songs, they liked feeling useful. They were overlooked by many people, so being used as they were gave them a burst of energy. Well, that was as much as she could interpret from their translated thoughts which were typically one or two word fragments followed by a bunch of insect gibberish in her head.

The fire warmed the front of her body, bringing light to the ache deep within her bones. Solas had left her a bowl of soup to eat by herself away from the gaze of her friends. The small gestures, like the soup, the light touches when he was healing, the allowed silence to help her heal, melted some of the hurt away. He understood pain, he understood tragic loss, and it was something that connected them, whether he knew it or not. The soup was something simple and it was easy on her stomach. She fished out a small bit of potato and idly chewed on it, eyes transfixed by the dancing of the fire. A realization made her huff out a bit of laughter in the form of a deep exhale through her nose.

In her world, she always thought she associated more with the element of water. It was mysterious, dancing, always ebbing and flowing in whatever environment it existed in. But somehow, here, she felt more at home with fire. It warmed her skin and brought her comfort in the form of an invisible blanket of heat. She used that feeling to recharge some of her mana, a heavy sigh escaping her lips as she put the soup bowl down. Her hand twitched around the bowl, an urge gripping her heart. Her free hand instantly went to her belly and she cursed herself for the action, her outstretched hand clenching so hard into a fist she thought she broke skin by pressing her nails into her palm.

A frenzied gaze scanned the area and confirmed there was nobody close by and a pulse of mana reconfirmed it. They were all in their tents, and that gave her plenty of room. With a wave of her hand she summoned a barrier in a dome around the campfire, locking it into place with a snap of her fingers. She then pulled back on something she had seen Rathein do before, a silencing rune. *We used to use it for official matters at my family home.* Athena stood from her bench and touched the barrier with a shaky hand, quickly drawing a rune with the strongest intent she could muster before pressing her palm into it. It activated and sprung to life, vibrating the dome barrier before settling with a soft hum.

*Shit how do I know it worked?* With a slow roll of her neck she looked to the crackling fire, realizing there were small pops and groans from the wood of the fire. She positioned herself to where she could stick her head out of the barrier and realized that the sound completely disappeared once she was outside the barrier. With a quick jerk of her body, she plopped down on the bench and allowed her body to completely relax in a horrible posture, her back arched and head
hanging low in her hands. “Thank the fucking Gods.”

The fire danced underneath her magic, even the ambient dust that came from her barrier. It called to her in a way, yearned for a connection. A stray moth fluttered and landed at her side, its wings pulsing to the rhythm of the flame. It chirped at her, its small head tilting to the side. “I’ll be alright, little one.” Her left hand returned to her stomach, thumb stroking gently over the fabric. The fire was her canvas, blank, waiting to be filled with her thoughts. The only thing that came to mind brought tears to her eyes. She reached out and twisted her hand slightly, fingers flexed as magic poured from her hand into the flames. Like her stories at Skyhold, they twisted and contorted until they danced in her desired shape.

A wild boy... with pointed ears and a bow at his back, thick hair braided backwards with a daring look in his eye. A sob caught in her throat, a ghost of a smile coming to her lips as she looked to the memory that never was. His voice rang in her head, excitement and triumph filling every syllable. *Mae! Look at what I caught!* The smell of rabbit filled her nose once more and the taste of vanilla revisited her tongue, like old friends. Here, in the middle of the campfire, she knew it wasn’t real. Athena wetted her lips, not realizing that tears were freely falling down her face. Her body began to tremble, a hand outstretched towards the fire before falling limp in her lap.

She began to hum, a song for the son that would never hear it... and something for herself. “Yes, I do. I believe, that one day I will be, where I was, right there, right next to you.” Her words started off whispered, hushed, even with the strength of the silencing barrier above her. She felt ashamed, speaking to an illusion like this, knowing it wasn’t real. But it felt so real. The weight in her belly, the warmth of her child’s face within his hand, the glow from his smile. Children were never something she desperately wanted. Back in her world, she could have given or taken them even with the dream of having the nuclear family with the dogs and the white picket fence. Here, now, after seeing them in the flesh, she couldn’t imagine a world without them. Her body felt hollow, rejected, a dull pain radiating underneath her hand where she rubbed.

“And it’s hard... the days just seem so dark. The moon and the stars, are nothing without you – “A sob cut off her words, eyes shutting as she tried to control herself. Like a floodgate something within her mind clicked, all of the pain, the smells, the memories that she tried to push back coming to light. She held no anger towards her friend Inspiration for her actions were not her own. They were all defeated by Nightmare at first. Even with all their training and her foreknowledge. The demon was going to be Corypheus’s general for a reason; it was mighty and terrifying. Was mighty and terrifying.

“Your touch, your skin, where do I begin. No words can explain the way I’m missing you.” The sad broken song continued as the image of her son flickered in and out of the flames. She could see him waving the arrow at her that had the rabbit still perched on it, its lifeless body flopping from one side to the other in time.
“And I, this emptiness this hole that I am inside, these tears, they tell their own story. Told me not to cry when you were gone. But the feelings overwhelm me... it’s much too strong.” Athena buried her face in her hand, rubbing away some of the tears and the stinging in her eyes. They still came, as stubborn as her own mind for not letting others in to help her. Dorian’s own anger had finally broke and she knew he would understand some of this. It was he who was her conversation partner for children. Scarlett and Lucian, their future surrogate children with the gorgeous looks and charming personalities. Even still she didn’t have a firm image of them, nothing compared to the beautiful boy in front of her. Helplessly she swallowed down her emotion, using her sleeve to try and clear her face. Desperation clung to her voice and rang truth and she realized, even as crazy as it was, she would trade anything just to get a moment of Desire’s curse back. It was so carefree. There was no danger, only light, only warmth. Only family.

“Can I lay by your side next to you? And make sure you’re alright? I’ll take care of you, I don’t want to be here if I can’t be with you tonight. Fuck!” A shudder ran down her spine and she thought nothing of it, contributing it only to her overwhelming emotions. She cried out, running a hand through her hair and gripping onto the roots, slightly pulling to use the pain to re-anchor herself to the living world. This was also the danger of sleeping, of being a Dreamer like Solas was. She could reenter this dream when she wanted it. It was her memories after all. She could pull on those tiny strings and revisit that place that was only a dream, a far-off destination that had no port. She didn’t trust herself enough, not yet.

“I’m reaching out to you, can you hear my call? This hurt that I’ve been through! I’m missing you, I’m missing you like crazy – “ Her words stumbled back into silence, her body racking underneath soft sobs that shook her to her core, until a soft touch jerked her from her misery. Athena pushed to the side of the bench, raising a hand with a palm outstretched while guarding her abdomen with the other. Mana swirled within her palm at the unknown assailant, but Solas put his hand against hers, interlocking his fingers with hers to help lower her hand.

He looked up the barrier he had broken and quickly reinforced it with his own magic, a silencing rune clicking back into place at the apex of the dome. Suledin’s image was there, frozen within the fire, as her words were torn from her throat and replaced with shame. Her lover paused and looked at the whole scene, eyes taking in every detail. They started at her guarded posture, slowly sliding over to the fire. When he saw Suledin’s form, his eyes widened, lips parting in a kind of awe. She imagined his body rejected the calm persona he was trying to keep, because a soft smile broke his expression and curled his lips. “He... he has your eyes.” His voice was barely louder than a whisper, supportive and kind.

Athena pulled herself into the comfort of his arms using their shared touch of hands, burying her face into his chest. He instantly wrapped his arms around her and brought her close, guarding her from whatever was out there with a tight grip while he murmured comforting words against the top of her head. He allowed her to cry, to weep, tears uncontrolled falling from her face and soaking into the fabric of his tunic. “Oh... ma vhenan. What happened to you?” He asked in their shared language, the rhythm of his voice soft and melodic. Her hand twitched against her belly and she swallowed down the hurt in her throat, wetting her lips in an attempt to speak.
“Fear. . . he . . . He turned Inspiration and Harmony against me. Desire and Rage, they trapped me, took me into a future I didn’t even know I needed. They used you against me, vhenan.” Athena turned to where she could look at the fire, feeling completely safe to speak within his grip. “This. . .this is Suledin.” Solas let out a small huff of air, the smile returning to his face as he looked upon the image of their child. He gently stroked her back in between her shoulder blades, kissing the top of her head.

“I see so much of us in him. Desire is unfortunately one of the most dangerous of the demons. Because this. . . fills people with nothing but happiness while you are trapped in it. But look how it has hurt you so.” He tilted her head up towards him, kissing her forehead and her cheeks. He rested his forehead against hers and she readjusted her body so that she was sitting up next to him. “You continue to guard your stomach. What – Oh.” He looked back to the fire and then down to her belly, his hand covering hers on top. She could feel his fingers flex against hers and there was a soft sigh. “I understand. . .you were – “

“With child. Heavily so. Suledin called her “little sister”.” He raised a brow, lips drawn into a line before he clicked his tongue against the back of his teeth softly in a whisper.

“Salahn, correct?” Something broke within her and she caught herself smiling for the first time since the entire trip into the Fade. He remembered their names, the somewhat drunken ramble she had gone on after Dorian’s father left in Redcliffe. Like she, he somehow cherished this thought that there was a happy ending with the stable family and the stable world, even with their future looming ahead of them. “I am so sorry, my heart. This . . . is not something one should ever go through, especially alone.”

Athena let out a small shrug, feeling lighter with every word they spoke between one another. She switched back to Common, clearing her throat and wiping her eyes with her sleeve. The tears had stilled and the fire had begun to blue the image of their son but it kept snapping back into clarity, and she wasn’t sure if it was her magic or his doing it. “Do you think there is hope for a future like that? No chaos, no darkness, no creatures trying to tear the world apart?”

As she spoke she felt her head being turned towards him by his soft touch under her chin. He held somewhat of a sad smile as he stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers. The gentle and caring touch sent a shiver down her spine as he leaned down towards her. The first brush of lips was testing the waters, each of them gauging the other’s reaction to pave the path ahead. When she let out a sigh of relief he moved his hand from her cheek to the back of her head, weaving his fingers in with her hair to cradle her against him. The kiss deepened with a tilt of his head. Each small movement, each new sucking of his lips against hers, the brushes of his fingers on her side, wiped away the darkness that was looming over her mind, the curse that was holding her back from moving forward.

She sat up and moved her hands to his sides, pulling him closer so that she could feel her chest
against his. He chuckled in between their kisses, breaking off to pause and meet her gaze. “I believe Thedas’s history is paved with chaos and darkness.” Athena made a small move to frown but he placed a single finger against her lips. “But – in the midst of all that, if any happiness can be found, one must steal it and never let it go.”

She had to smile, the happiness spreading into the core of her chest, kissing him gently on the tip of the nose before gesturing to the direction of their tent. “Thank you, Solas. You. . . pulled me from a place I wasn’t sure if I was going to escape from.” He nodded with a smile, cupping her face in one hand while stroking her cheekbone with his thumb.

“Whether you knew it or not, you have done the same for me, vhenan. Come, let us get some rest before the morning comes. Skyhold is still a far journey away and I am positive the Inner Council will still expect much of you.” He helped her rise, breaking the barrier above them with a nod of his head. It dissipated in a soft transition, the sound of the fire blending back into the ambient noise of the desert. Athena turned towards the fire and nodded as well, withdrawing her magic slowly from the flames as they walked away. Their tent was one of the closest to the fire so it didn’t take long for Solas to bring them inside of it. Without hesitation, she stripped down to her underclothes, letting out a pent in sigh as her body lay flesh against his with him at her back. He wrapped a hand over her, pulling her in closer to him while resting his hand in the center of her chest. “Will you come into the Fade with me tonight? I believe we have some catching up to do with our friend.”

It felt like her heart was beating against his touch and she smiled, mind drifting in and out of the comforting darkness. “When you go there, apologize for me. I am not quite up to it yet due to what has happened.” He hummed sleepily into her back, nodding his head before nuzzling into the back of her head. His scent wrapped around her and she let herself fall into it, her consciousness slipping away into the utter darkness that was the sleep absent of the Fade. As her mind faded all of her magic withdrew into her, the campfire finally releasing the image of their future that had yet to come.

Chapter End Notes

Song:

Sam Smith - Lay Me Down

Almost done editing; should get back to somewhat of a regular posting schedule again soon!
The next morning came sooner than she would have wanted. The ache was still present in her bones so it was difficult to try and move from her spot with Solas without something hurting her. Today, it was her back. He moved at her back and rubbed his face into the pillow, ridding himself of the Fade-dust that was at the corner of his eye. Even though he had just been dead to the world for six hours, he looked overjoyed. His grip on her became tighter and he kissed her back gently, continuing his trail up to her neck without any motion to stop. Athena woke begrudgingly, trying to process the ritual of waking up while enjoying his affections at the same time. She arched her back against him and pressed against his morning arousal, smirking at the soft sigh that came from his lips as she did so. “Sleep well I take it?” She asked, tilting her head to capture his lips for a second. Youth was nearly glowing from his pores as he grinned, kissing her again with a slight nod of his head.

“I still am unsure how you did what you did, but. . . thank you.” Athena blinked, rubbing her eye and answering in the most innocent tone she could imagine.

“Whatsoever do you mean, what did I do to deserve such a greeting in the morning?” He went back to kissing the crook of her neck, slightly biting when she refused to verbally understand what he was talking about even though she obviously knew.

“I spoke with an old friend last night; one I have not seen in some time. They were unsure of the details themselves, but they somehow retained most of their memories and experiences. Wisdom has returned to their part of the Fade.” He spoke with a smile on his lips and it was infectious to see him that happy. Athena yelped as he nibbled at her again, quickly turning onto her back to get out of reach of his mouth.

“Ooooooh. You mean that. That’s a trade secret, I cannot tell you.” She winked and he pushed off from the ground to be above her, his hand cradling her face as he looked down at her lovingly.

“Harel.” He accused, calling her a trickster in his mother tongue. Athena couldn’t help but wink and smile at him, running her hand up his chest to where she could grab onto the wolf-bone necklace that now hung between them.

“It was a ritual Command knew of, a gathering of memories of sorts. I have never seen so many spirits in one place. They all came and small mage-light things fell from their hands into this center seed we had created. Each addition made the thing shine brighter until we ‘planted’ it into the ground. They had told me that the seed was gone and the spirit had returned just before Adamant, but I didn’t want to say anything just in case the results were different.” She spoke fondly of the memory, thinking back to the adventure with Dorian and Cole into the Korcari Wilds. At the time things had seemed dire, but it was worth every bit of pain to see how happy her lover was.
“That ritual is unknown to me. Still, I am entirely thankful. Never before have I seen a gesture so large made for me. It is... well... thank you, Athena.” He bent down and kissed her softly, gently, pulling her against him to feel as many bits of her against him as he could. He lavished her with affections until she sighed content and placed her hand flat on his chest.

“No thanks are needed Solas. Thedas is in need of Wisdom, for now and for the future. We could always its presence. I’m going to have to be honest, it is nice with you knowing. I hated keeping that secret from you but I didn’t want to tell you and have it not work.” She spoke with half a laugh, rubbing her thumb across his bare chest and shuddering at how his gaze turned wickedly dark.

“I am quite impressed that you could keep a secret from me. You have an easy tell when you are lying.” He stated with a smirk, poking her in the center of her chest with his index finger. She instantly knew that he was speaking of her flush and how it was blossoming even now with him being so close to her. Athena puffed her chest with pride, raising up to a sitting position to where they were almost nose to nose.

“Well I am a crafty wolf after all. Who knows what else I am keeping from you?” She teased with a wink, kissing him on the cheek gently while feeling a strange tug to the star-shaped mark in the center of her palm. Her orb, well, whatever it was, could wait until she figured out exactly how to make it work. In the Fade, it felt like a constant reminder, an undeniable heat within her hand that needed to be expressed. Here she barely noticed anything. Solas flashed a wolfish smile, quickly dipping down and wrapping his arms around her to pin her to the ground and kiss her deeply.

Instantly he broke through and traced his tongue along hers, pulsing his magic into her core and stirring up the heat that resided there. She let out a gasp of surprise, her hands gripping on his back. He broke off suddenly, whispering with his lips barely separating from hers. “I look forward to uncovering your secrets then, ma’fen. I imagine it will take some convincing.” He moved to a standing position in one smooth motion, leaving her body to feel suddenly cold.

“Consider the feeling mutual, vhenan. Hand me that, won’t you?” She asked while pointing to her shirt from the day before. He tossed it over his shoulder skillfully and she didn’t even have to move her hand to catch it. Within a minute they were both dressed, sitting next to one another and applying their foot wrappings. Much like a child in school she would occasionally nudge him with her side to distract him from his work, smirking as he subtly did the same back with a more subdued smile on his face. They exited the tent and dragged their shared trunk to the outside, combining their magic to break the tent apart and fold it up neatly for the Inquisition soldiers to load up onto the wagons. Before she could even process another thought she heard a sound of relief, a flicker of magic behind her and growing closer.

“A-ha! Now that looks like the Athena I know and love. Come here, you troublemaker. You had
me worried!” Dorian swept her up into a hug that spun her body from the ground, her feet reaching down to grasp something solid to hold onto. In the end, she relented, wrapping her arms around her friend with a laugh and succumbing to the spin.

“Yes, yes, good morning to you too, Dorian. How did you sleep?” She asked with a giggle as he spun her one more time, landing her down next to Solas who only had an amused expression on his face. The grins, the smiles, the carefree chuckles, those were only for her. Dorian huffed and ran his hand through his hair to soften it after tossing in the night.

“Not well, but I’ll sleep better tonight knowing you’ve recovered. Gods you had me worried. What did you do to help her, Solas?” The elf smirked and opened his mouth to speak but Dorian instantly waved his hands in front of his face in a dismissive gesture. “Wait. No. Never mind. I don’t need those visuals before I’ve had my breakfast. Come on, everyone is waiting for you.” He gestured back towards the campfire and led them off with a smile. Solas flicked his gaze to the side and grabbed her hand, squeezing it once before moving his hand to the curve of her lower back.

When they entered the campfire area there was a general cheer of welcome. She couldn’t help but raise her hands in the air and wink at them, changing her gait to something more of a saunter. “Gooooooood moooorning, Inquisition!” She greeted, spinning on the heel of her foot before catching an apple that Sera threw from over the fire. On the next beat, she took a bite into it and was immediately thankful that the rogue didn’t throw her a rotten one.

The sweet juices nearly spilled down her chin so she stopped her kidding and focused on chewing what was already in her mouth. Rathein entered the circle soon after and the group had the same welcoming reaction, looking at one another with joking smiles. Bull was right at her heel, stretching into the air while letting out a mixture of a roar and a yawn. Athena moved the apple to one to one side of her mouth, waving at her sister-friend with a smirk. The Inquisitor instantly took notice of her changed demeanor, smiling, and waving back.

“How’dya sleep?” She asked after a quick swallow of apple, leaving Solas and Varric to their morning conversation. Krem let out a groan from his position around the campfire, scratching the side of his head with a bemused expression on his face.

“Not very long from what I could hear. Apparently, the Chief has a thing for crumbling fortresses.” Rathein instantly blushed but Bull let out a guffaw, walking up to slap Krem on the back in a not-so-subtle way.

“Oh come on. Didn’t it get your blood pumping to see that thing explode? It was about time too, the foundation looked shitty when we were placing the gaatlok down. Hey, Sera! Bread me!” The Qunari opened his palm and caught the bread that Sera threw with a flick of her wrist. She was seated in between the bread and the fruit baskets, taking her pick of whatever was within reach.
“Gave me an ill-feeling in my stomach, yeh. That place was awful. But it didn’t get me quite as riled up as you. Maker Bless the Inquisitor for loving you, Bull.” The lieutenant joked with a smirk, nodding to Athena when she smiled at him. The Qunari sat down next to his growing group of Chargers while Athena stood next to Rathein, who was recovering from her quick bit of embarrassment.

The Herald gave her a once over and smiled, catching a piece of flying fruit that was headed in her direction. “You’re looking world’s better. Sure, you didn’t have my idea last night?” Rathein then took a bite of what looked to be a pear, winking, and smirking as she ate. Athena shook her head, smiling, and nudging her hip into her sister’s as they watched the group form for the morning. Prince was now just waking up and was making his morning sounds, kicking his hooves against the sand while shaking the dirt from his mane. Things felt to be coming back to normal and Athena couldn’t have been gladder to see it.

“Nah, didn’t have the energy honestly. It was so nice just to get a peaceful night’s sleep. What’s on the agenda from here, Inquisitor?” Rathein rolled her eyes and swallowed the bit of fruit in her mouth, eyes rolling to the sky as if it was projecting her large itinerary on it.

“Josephine is in full swing back at Skyhold trying to get the Wintersend Ball ready. Emperor Gaspard, Marquise Briala, King Alistair, they will all be in attendance so we have to be prepared. After the stink of wine clears Skyhold, we have to send half of the group to the Emerald Graves and the other half to the Emprise du Lion. Cullen has some leads on his former comrade Samson that we need to look into. There is also a guy named Fairbanks in the Emerald Graves that has some useful information and men for us.” Athena nodded knowingly, groaning at the memory of the frigid cold mountain side with the surplus of Red Templars.

“Yeah, I know exactly what you’re talking about unfortunately. If I don’t go to Emprise, I can at least mark the location of the letters you’re looking for on the map. They’re located in these slaver locations where you’ll also need to free some locals that have “disappeared” from the local town.” Her friend let out a low-toned groan, its volume decreasing as it went on.

“Shit. That sounds dark. Hopefully we can clear it out quickly and get them out of there. I’m sure the Commander would appreciate your help on that matter in particular. Maybe since you’re so familiar with it I can bring you with me? Leliana says when you’re involved our anticipated complete time normally at least halves because we’re not scrambling around for details.” She stated academically, taking another bite of a pear with a cocky yet teasing smile on her face. Athena sighed, giving a small wave to Cullen as he entered already holding what looked to be three different half-open scrolls. He looked to her and then his eyes widened and she turned her body back to Rathein before his conversation would start.
“Of course, she did. We can talk about it after this ball. I’m sure you know, I’m so looking forward to seeing our dear Emperor Gaspard again. He’s such a peach!”

“Ye! Something squishy aaaaand pop!” Sera added, throwing a peach into the air before expertly shooting an arrow to pin it to the tree that Vivenne walked by. The juice splashed on her face but the Enchantress paused, wiping the drops off with a single finger without even adjusting her gaze. The noblewoman walked through the camp with a purpose before stopping in front of the Inquisitor.

“Darling, I am headed out before the main party with some of the mages. There are preparations to be done and Lady Montilyet requires my assistance. Does that complicate any of your travel plans?” Rathein’s expression did not change a single detail as she bit into the pear. With a quick gesture to the desert with her pear-filled hand and a shrug, she shook her head. Like the proper lady, she made sure her mouth was free of food debris before speaking next.

“Not at all, Lady Vivienne. We appreciate your assistance in this event since we are bringing two mighty countries together under our house hold. It is important that we are as prepared as we can be for what could happen. Safe travels, my friend. Please do give my regards to Lady Montilyet and the rest of the Inquisition.” Vivienne nodded with a pleasant smile, giving Athena her own gesture of farewell before walking through them with soldiers on her heels. She waited a beat past when the Iron Lady’s visage left her vision. She then slowly arched a brow and turned her gaze towards her friend.

“I appreciate your assistance? Why did you just feel the need to kiss her ass? I meant to tell you. The look on her face after I burst out the side of Corypheus’s pet. Priceless. I wish I could have it painted in oil and hung above the mantle at the tavern.” Rathein snorted out a laugh, hiding the sound by resting the back of her hand against her mouth. The two women chuckled together and the sounds eventually evolved into full-bellied laughs.

“You-You know. She would probably like that, consider it a compliment or something.” The Herald spoke in between bouts of laughter, wiping a tear from her eye. Athena giggled and nodded, running a hand through her messy locks while shooting a playful wink in Solas’s direction when he looked over to them in curiosity. “It is safer to stay on the nice side of the Iron Lady instead of the other options. Her presence here has connected a lot of resources to us, seriously. It’s impressive. She’s not all Game and glamour, Athena.”

“Ugh. I know. It’s funny, from what I knew of her before, I always respected her as a person and how she played the Game. After seeing it here in person... and after she suggested that I danced with Solas as a political statement... “ Athena’s voice tapered off into silence while her friend processed the information.
Rathein’s eyes widened, jaw hanging agape slightly. “No, she did not.”

Athena crossed her arms over her chest. “Uh-huh. The night of the ball. Came into my room talking about how we’re kindred spirits and all that. The whole speech made my skin crawl and ever since I’ve kind of made a point just to annoy her in any way possible.”

“You should at least get on neutral ground with her. Be the bigger person, come on. For me. Surely there is something you could do to get on her good side.” Athena rolled her eyes and then pinched the bridge of her nose, nodding slightly with a groan low in her throat.

“I know exactly what would work. Has she asked you for the heart of a snowy wyvern yet?” A hum from her friend verified that she had. She then let her arms fall to her side while she shook her head back and forth. “Let me collect it for her. I’ll take a small party to the side and that will allow me to scout the area to make sure that Gaspard’s troops have left the old Dalish camp and burial grounds be. If he hasn’t him and I are going to be having a lovely chat during the Wintersend Ball.”

Rathein rubbed the back of her neck, eyes surveying the area before she nodded. “Take Sera and Blackwall since I’m assuming Solas is going with you. Once we get closer and out of this desert we can break off.” She then sarcastically cleared her throat and puffed her chest, bowing to Athena in a way that made her scoff. “The Inquisition honors your willingness in this situation, Lady Sorciere.”

“Do that again and I’ll set your robes on fire.”
The party had arrived at the splitting point and they were each gathering their supplies from the main wagon before going their separate ways. Rathein was taking the bulk of the Inquisition party back to Skyhold while Athena was taking Sera, Blackwall, and Solas to the Exalted Plains to gather the heart of a snowy wyvern for Vivienne, much to her dismay. It always felt like a quest that was out of the way in the game and it felt that way even more so now that she was a part of it. Just as they were about to leave a messenger arrived and came to the group. He paused, obviously overwhelmed by the people in front of him, and saluted with a letter in his free hand.

“Message for you, ser!” He stated simply, clicking his heels together in a formal salute. Rathein smirked, offering her hand but the messenger shook his head and pointed to Solas.

“It’s for him, Inquisitor. It’s from –“

Solas’s eyes widened and he stepped forward, taking the letter before the boy could finish his sentence. He scanned the letter and flashed a quick smile, looking over his shoulder towards Dorian. “I am called away for a small time, Dorian. Could you take my place in the Plains?”

The Herald arched a brow and then formed her mouth into an “o” shape, getting what was going on even though Athena was completely lost. She threw her sack of her shoulder and cleared her throat, gathering the attention of the two men who were discussing mission details and swapping potions.

“Are you going to share with the class, Solas?” She made a child-like reach for the letter but he responded in kind, holding it high above her head where she couldn’t reach.

“You said the feeling was mutual, correct? In wanting to know each other’s secrets? Allow this to further the mystery.” He grinned and put his arm behind his back to still keep the letter out of her reach. “I won’t be gone for long, two weeks to three weeks at the most.” He stepped closer to her to try and have a personal moment but Dorian chuckled behind him, clapping the elf on the shoulder and pulling him back.

“Don’t worry! We’ll take good care of her, right group?” The mage grinned to Blackwall and Sera who could only chuckle to themselves as well. Sera dragged her eyelid down and stuck her tongue out in a gesture to Solas, which only made Athena’s sarcasm grow further.

“Fan-fucking tastic. I’m in such great hands. Hey, wait, you better not leave me alone for that
damned thing Josephine is putting together.” Solas paused, adjusting his pack over his back before walking over to her and touching her shoulder lightly. He smiled and she could only scrunch her lips to the side and meet him nose to nose in a childish show of posture. “I can’t promise what will happen to Gaspard if someone with a cooler head than me isn’t there to hold me back?”

He laughed, gently stroking her cheek with the backs of his knuckles. “And why would I do that? He is a deplorable man and I believe you have the judgment to handle him appropriately.” He then leaned forward and gently kissed her on top of the head, taking in her scent while whispering into her hair. “I will be back as soon as I can, vhenan. Please be careful in the Plains.”

She let out a groan of reluctance, holding onto his hands gently until he walked away from them and waved to the rest of the group. With a final glance over his shoulder, he smirked and stepped off into a fade-step down a different road on the crossroads they were standing on. The sound of his spell cracked like lightning and there was a gust of wind behind him. Sera let out a deep sigh, allowing her body to slouch over as if she were being folded in half like a lawn chair.

“Now I can breathe without all that around.” Blackwall chuckled under his breath and Athena shot them both a playful glare, turning her body towards Rathein and the other group that was preparing to leave. She extended her hand towards her friend, clasping her forearm and pulling her into a hug while making a sound of contentment.

“Have a safe journey home. This shouldn’t take us long. We’ll kill this thing and be home just in time to get you all prepared for Wintersend.” The Inquisitor rolled her eyes, rubbing the back of her neck with a scoff.

“Yeah. Really looking forward to it, Athena. I thought we were done with politics for a while at Halamshiral, but this? At least we are hosting it. It gives us the power and the advantage instead of them.” The short-haired mage sneered, itching the shaved side of her head while smirking towards Bull in her peripherals. Athena made a sound of agreement with her, crossing her arms over her chest while raising a brow towards the Commander as he was walking by with a patrol of soldiers.

“Yeah, but I don’t think that is going to save our precious Commander here from another onslaught of potential wives. Except this time, he will have to fight off both Orlais and Ferelden. Remember, Cullen, sword sharp!” The Commander paused, looking to her with a playful glare with a light blush on his cheeks.

“Oh for the love of – If memory serves, I was saved from that nonsense by our duties. Perhaps I will find myself in a similar situation?” There was a smile on his face and Athena felt herself fighting off a blush. She was the one who had pulled him from the jaws of the Orlesian maidens and onto the dancefloor to give him a breath of fresh air. It wasn’t a romantic gesture, just something a friend would do, like how Dorian danced with her to make her feel safe. She shrugged
and began to turn back towards her group, waving to them as Solas had just done before his departure.

“I don’t know. Leliana and Josephine have me playing entertainer for the night. You might have to find another partner. I’m sure we could find someone.” She glanced to Dorian with a wink, picking her pack up off of the ground and slinging it over her shoulder. Prince grunted and butted his head against her shoulder in anticipation of the travel. The Tevinter chuckled under his breath and nodded, bowing sarcastically towards the Commander.

“Oh - it would be my pleasure. Ta-ta, Inquisition!” The four of them loaded up on their horses and began to travel down the road. Once they were out of ear-shot of the other group he leaned over to her and asked to where everyone could hear.

“Solas only told me of our destination, but what exactly is our mission again?” Athena had to laugh while pulling her hair up off of her neck and into a high ponytail. Since they were still off the mountain, the travel and the warmer weather made things uncomfortably sticky. Hopefully there were spring clothes to replace all of the long-sleeves and heavy fabric in her wardrobe. Valerie had been asking her what her fashion was like in her world, and she tried to describe what a pair of jeans felt like but had difficulty picking the closest fabric out of a pile of swatches. The Orlesian tailor was crafty though and could create masterpieces out of thin air so whatever she made would be suitable.

It was why she would trust her to make her Wintersend gown, which she had the perfect idea for.

“We are to find a snowy wyvern in the Exalted Plains and remove its heart from its chest.” She pulled the sack where they would be storing it from her saddle and waved it in the air. Sera snorted into a laugh at Dorian’s obvious disgusted look as he ran a hand through his hair.

“Fantastic.”

Blackwall looked over with a curious brow, motioning to Dorian’s still put together look. “How do you get your hair to do that, Dorian? With magic?”

The Tevinter snapped back: “With proper hygiene and grooming. Maybe all three of you should get acquainted.”

Athena groaned, flexing her thighs to urge Prince between the two of them and down the road.
“Hopefully this mission goes by fast because I cannot stand another trip with two grown men bickering the whole time.”

Unfortunately, that did not happen. Sera would often take Blackwall’s side in petty arguments which would leave Athena to stand up for Dorian when the soon-to-be Warden would make jabs about his heritage. They had all managed to go a ten-minute period without arguing while trudging through the swamps that led up to the wyvern area. Her friend had made a comment under his breath about how the mud was sinking into his boots and Blackwall made a scoff under his breath.

“You have something to say, mage?” Dorian looked to Athena and motioned, communicating in a single gesture ‘See? I don’t start it!’

“If I have something to say, I would say it.” He tried to cut it off by bringing out his water flagon and taking a deep drink from it, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. She could tell from Harriet’s ambient glow on his hip that he wasn’t reigning in his emotions well. The eye sockets of the skull would occasionally glow a dim purple when he was upset or working on a small experiment. Now was the former.

“That’s it? I’d expect more from a man who can’t stop talking about how clever he is.” Athena and Sera let out a groan in unison, glancing to one another while sharing expressions of annoyance. Even though she was with Solas, the rogue and her managed to get along in their childish antics. When Blackwall and Dorian found themselves in another spat the two women would fall to the back and talk about different nobles. Sera already had an entire plan for how to sabotage the ball but Athena talked her down to booby-trapping some of the rooms, more specifically, the Emperor of Orlais. Sera had a cache of baby lizards in a cage in her room and Athena could use her influence to get them in the former chevalier’s sheets.

It was petty, but it would make her smile nonetheless.

“And I’d expect no less from a brutish thug!” Dorian snapped back, unable to contain himself. Sera stepped onto a dry spot and smacked Blackwall on the head with one of her arrows but he was too riled up.

“Better that than a pompous brat!” They were approaching the sides of the swamp, trying to avoid the rest of the wyverns that were sleeping peacefully in the afternoon sun. His voice echoed through the open area and Athena turned on her heel and pushed against his armored chest, sharing
an angered glance to both of them.

“Shut. The. Fuck. Up.” She then pointed over her shoulder towards the white-scaled wyvern that was sleeping underneath an almost fallen tree. It roused in its sleep, clawing outwards towards the dirt and stretching its back along the ground. Sera already had higher ground on the side with her bow drawn and Athena could feel an itching in her left palm underneath the small scar. Would she even be able to summon it here? She wasn’t sure if she wanted to.

The two men instantly quieted and Dorian drew out his staff, looking to her for the go-ahead as Blackwall quietly unsheathed his sword. She looked to all of them, creeping up on the creature before nodding. It felt like a million things happened at once. Sera unloaded an arrow directly into the wyvern’s eye, laughing with glee as it shrieked and began to thrash in the water. Athena swirled her hands and erected a barrier with a silencing rune so they wouldn’t draw the attention of the creature’s kin.

Blackwall charged to the front and began slicing at the dragonling’s legs, making it an easier target for Dorian and Athena’s spells. They combined their flames with lighting to further stun the beast, moving in synchronized movements that could only come with being so bonded. Their arms rose and fell in unison, her hands twisting and spiraling energy as he moved his staff. With one step forward they stood back to back and unleash their spells on the target, quickly subduing it with barely a bead of sweat on their brow. Sera kept watch with her back to them, keeping an arrow notched with one hand while using the other to take a bite out of jerky that she had stored on her belt pocket.

“A’ight. What do we do now?” She asked, looking over her shoulder just in time to see Athena kick the wyvern to its side and bend down. With a flick of her wrist she turned her hand into a white flame, using that heat to slice through the scale and hardened flesh underneath as if she were using a scalpel on an operating table. “Fucking hell. That’s wrong that is. Is this for you?”

Athena bit down onto her lip as her hand broke through the ribcage, feeling that the blood was still warm as her hand searched around for the heart. “Ugh – Fucking – Not me. Not my business to say, Sera.” The rogue made a face of disgust and leaned against the gnarled swamp tree the creature was previously sleeping under.

Dorian and Blackwall made an uncomfortable glance towards one another, immediately turning away and taking steps apart. Dorian came over and leaned against the dead carcass of the wyvern, chewing on the inside of his cheek, glaring at the warrior. Athena couldn’t be bothered to intervene with her arm elbow-deep in wyvern torso. The blood was beginning to soak her shirt and she grimaced as her hand found the heart. So she wouldn’t ruin the tissue she shifted her hand into claws and separated the organ from the surrounding blood vessels so it would be easier to remove. “You two need to play nice.”
“You can’t exactly play mediator when you’re dissecting a dead creature, Athena.” He stated plainly, arms crossed over his chest with a frown pulling at the corners of his lips.

“Sure I can! Oh fuck, gross, I nicked its lungs.” She shook her hand off while still inside of the creature’s chest, using a nearby bone to remove some of the flesh from her hand. “Look. You both have been through shit. It’s obvious. Put your egos aside for the rest of the trip. We’re allies after all and – gggraaah!” Athena pulled out the heart with a groan, smirking as its size was greater than the size of her hand. The mage recoiled in disgust, hands reeling to shield his face from the splash of blood that followed her hand. His gagging caught Sera and Blackwall’s attention and they had similar reactions.

“What the Blight, Athena?! That smells awful.” The warrior choked, hiding his nose into the crook of his arm while turning away. Sera climbed onto his bent back, bending her knee and shrieking back with her tongue sticking out.

“Nasty. Nasty that is! Only a mage would put up with that? Elfy?” She asked, reading Athena’s expression as she wrangled it into the sack. When her face didn’t twitch, the elf shook her head and then nodded. “Viv. Asking someone to retrieve that is torture in itself. Of course, the bitch wouldn’t get her hands dirty and ask someone else to do it. You know she’s got to get off from this kind of shit, making other people do her dirty work. Huh?” She then tapped Blackwall on his back to try and get affirmation but the soldier shook his head, running his hands over his face to try and get the smell from his sinuses.

Athena wrapped the sac in a small barrier to keep the smell in, jiggling the thing towards Sera and Dorian as blood caked her sleeve all the way up to her arm. They both recoiled again and she laughed, breaking the sound barrier she had created while walking past them. The other wyverns were beginning to stir from their afternoon naps so she wanted to get out of the swamp before they all came upon the carcass of their friend.

“Maker that is horrid.” Rainier mourned, adjusting his back since Sera did not feel like getting off of it, leaving them in a piggyback ride type of scenario.

“That much we can agree on, Blackwall.” They both had a small laugh and Athena looked over her shoulder to Sera, giving her a blood covered thumbs up for the moment where the two men were getting along. “Think we can camp by the river, or will we be swarmed by the beasts running around?”

This time it was her turn to have a proud grin. “We should be able to. We’re in Fang’s territory, so the pack will protect us here. Plus, I need to get this shit off my arm. It’s starting to harden.”
Sera snorted. “That’s what she said.”
I finally got to see LP live.

If you go back and remember the song I introduced you to, 'Tokyo Sunrise' when she was singing while Solas was gone after All New, Faded for Her... I saw THAT singer tonight.

Ugh. Transcendent in terms of talent.

Wanted to share that with you guys!

They were all able to find the river and relish in the cool current that ran past the fields that formerly housed demons. There was something peaceful in the Plains now, well, at least for her. Fang and his betas were resting on the bankside while the rest of the pack played around them. It was difficult to count, but there were literally dozens of the black and grey furred creatures that considered her ally. Dorian was used to it by now, sharing his soaps with her while fashioning her hair into a cascading braid that came down around her shoulders. Sera was playing an absurd game of fetch with a wolf. The ends of her arrows had dead meat on them from the leftovers of their ram. She would shoot it as far as she could and the wolf would run until the breath was nearly gone from its lungs to bring it back to her.

Still, it was nice to have peace in the valley.

“So, this ball thing. What’s the purpose? Just to have the uppity ups schmooze and be up all in one another’s junk?” Sera asked, picking her teeth with the end of a hopefully clean arrow.

Blackwall let out a chuckle, rubbing the back of his neck. “Probably. You know they don’t need many reasons to throw something lavish and extraordinary.”

Athena let her lips betray her and twitch into a frown. Even if it was just an extension of the Game, she understood why Josephine was doing it. “It’s for morale.”

Sera scoffed and shook her head but she pressed on, mostly focusing on Blackwall since it was his love interest who was planning the whole thing. “Adamant was shit, right? The soldiers are going to come back exhausted and troubled. That kind of thing can spread through a Keep. With Wintersend, we get to start the year anew. It will do them all some good to let loose. Josephine has
been working hard to make sure the countries are going to be satisfied under one roof.” The warrior blushed and took a large swig of water from his flagon before she chuckled under her breath. “Plus we all know the real party is going to be at the tavern when all of the nobles have gone to sleep.”

The trio that accompanied her raised their flagons with grins, Dorian smirking especially before pulling something from a flask on his belt. Blackwall noticed, arching a brow and gesturing with his hands for the mage to toss it over. The Tevinter looked to the flask, shaking it to make sure there was enough to share, before tossing it over to the future Warden. He took a sip and closed his eyes in relief.

“This is so much better than that swill at the tavern. Dorian, I still can’t believe you drank that.” Sera took the flask from him and took a gulp down of whatever was inside, letting out a hoot of excitement before tossing it in Athena’s direction. She caught it with one hand outstretched, her other focused on manipulating the fire in front of them.

“I can’t believe they served that swill at the tavern. What is Skyhold coming to? You think with your lady love’s connections we could at least get something good in the basements.” Dorian stretched his foot just oh so gently to the side to catch Athena’s attention and when she looked to him there was only a smile, something brotherly that made her heart warm.

“Then why did you continue to drink it?” The bearded man asked with a laugh in his voice, all previous judgment and bitterness towards the mage fading away.

“I couldn’t stop. With each sip, I was like ‘It can’t be that bad, can it?’ Before I knew it, I was analyzing the nuances of its flavor, observing its effect on my nausea. I was in a catatonic trance, fueled by the stench of disgusting dwarven ale.” Athena chuckled into the crook of her arm, finally taking a sip of the brandy that Dorian had packed away. It was full of flavor and there was the lingering taste of citrus on her tongue after she swallowed the smooth liquor.

“Or you’re a drunkard with a terrible taste.” Sera chortled at Blackwall’s finisher and Athena shrugged with a smirk. She then handed the flask back to her friend who only smiled and raised the silver object to the warrior.

“There is that. Say, Athena, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you get on that level of intoxication. Even Blackwall has gotten far in it during his card games. What gives?” He asked playfully, nudging her foot with his again. She instantly blushed, sitting up and rubbing the back of her neck as one of the younger wolves came and lay belly up at her feet.

“I – uh – I’m a talker when I’m drunk. I’m kind of afraid of what I might give away if I’m
completely inebriated. Plus, I’m flirty and touchy. Nobody would be safe.” They all chuckled but Sera leaned forward on her elbows in a poor attempt to catch her gaze.

“What would you give away? Big ole Inquisition secrets?” Athena took the opportunity with a wink.

“Nah – weird stuff. Like people from my world think you’re some kind of secret mage!” Instantly the elf’s face turned into something of disgust and she pushed up from the dirt.

“No! Shut it with that! Maybe you shouldn’t drink if that’s the kind of stuff that’s going to be coming out of that mouth of yers. Piss it!” She kicked the log they were sitting on with a groan, throwing her hands up into the air before running them down her face.

Dorian hummed, rubbing his chin while looking into the dancing flames of the campfire. “You know. . .that would explain your profound natural ability with a bow!”

“That’s it. I’m going to bed. Blackwall and I are sharing a tent so you two magics can blow flames out of your arse in your sleep or whatever it is you do.” The rogue left for the tents, nearly dragging the helpless warrior by the ear so she wouldn’t be alone. Dorian chuckled under his breath and scratched the back of his neck, kicking some loose dirt into the fire.

“We should probably get some rest too. Big day of travel tomorrow. Hey! You let that go, that is fine Tevinter fabric you’re gnawing on.” He flicked the nose of a wolf pup who was playfully teething on his removed glove. It yelped at the gesture but broke into a ferocious growl that made a laugh burst from her lips. She snapped her fingers and gestured the pup over, bringing it into her lap while scratching behind its ears.

“Be nice. Teething is a painful process. They’re just looking for some relief.” Dorian scoffed, picking up the rest of his things and standing from the log.

“Aren’t we all? Speaking of, as a Dreamer, you and Solas have mentioned seeing things together. Can you bring other people into your memories, the memories of places like this?” He gestured with an open hand to the plains and she shrugged.

“I wouldn’t want to see this place’s memories. Can you feel how thing the Veil is already? It would just be more bloodshed and I’ve seen my fair share for the week.” He nodded and sighed, bending down and dropping his things onto his side of their tent. There was an odd stillness to him
now that made her stomach uneasy. His features hardened and she could feel his mana withdraw to his skin. It was a similar thing Solas did when he was trying to hide his emotions. Stubborn men.

Athena put the pup down and joined him, placing a barrier around the fire so that it would not expand in the middle of the night. The wolves all took their places around it to absorb some of the heat onto their fur. Snores were already trickling from Sera and Blackwall’s tent so she didn’t hesitate in tying the tent and turning towards her friend. He was in the process of removing his boots and armor, pieces of it already spread out at the bottom of his bedroll. Most of hers was already taken off from the bath earlier but she still had to peel out of pants and a long-sleeved shirt.

Her friend was uncharacteristically quiet in the tent, applying his nightly face cream and running the remnants through his air. Even though the scent was supposed to be pleasant and aide them in sleeping, there was a palpable tension in the air. Athena’s lips twitched into a frown, eyes furrowed as she sat back onto her bedroll and lay back. Normally there was some bed time conversation between them, probing questions about her relationship, or he asked her to play songs to help them sleep. There was nothing that night, and all that she heard was the roaring absence of sound.

It was deafening, but she gave him the space he was silently screaming for. She rested her forearm over her eyes to block out the ambient light of the campfire, letting out a sigh before she let out a growl in the back of her throat. “Okay, tell me wha –“

There was a sudden shifting from the other side of the tent, pausing her words in the middle of her throat. She felt movement, a shuffling of his bedroll and then suddenly there was warmth. His arm was draped over her stomach and he slid his arm underneath the back of her neck. Athena froze, slowly lifting her arm and glancing over to him. There was a pained expression on his face, brows knit in frustration but there was a gloss over his eyes. “Not a word, ‘Mata.” He spoke curtly, reducing his pet name for her to something that sounded sharp.

“Dorian. . . “ Her posture against him softened as she slid up to where they could be more comfortable. She was a touchy person herself so it did not bother her, but he was rarely one to openly show his affections. Solas at least let his guard down behind closed doors, but Dorian rarely did. Even under the influence of booze he kept all of his emotions walled up behind years of negligence and pain.

“I’m tired of dreaming of that place, Athena. I didn’t want to say anything because you went through your own shit, but fuck – I haven’t slept more than five hours since Adamant. I just need . . . not to dream of that place.” She let out a sigh, turning her head so that the tip of her nose almost touched his. If it was anyone else she would have been worried about the romantic implications that this could be, but he was home; he was part of the family she had made.

He needed her.
“I can... try. I’m normally on the receiving end of this, but for you, anything.” There was a flicker of a smile on his lips as she raised her hand, swirling energy from the Veil and running her hand from the front of his face to the back of his head, pulling on his own ambient energy to lull him into a sleep. It took a moment, but his eyes fluttered closed and the stress of the world melted from his shoulders. There was a connection to him, she could feel it deep within her heart, so she threw away her own fear of the Fade and rolled her mind back into it. The area was illuminated by a color of red, blue, and white. Like spirals they flowed from her body and she arched her brow to try and find the source, her gaze falling to her left palm.

Already the orb flared to life and appeared as if it were going to burst light in the area. She felt a wave of panic go down her spine. She used her right hand to try and push the orb back into its resting place within her palm. In the physical world, she had barely felt its presence, but here it was always a nagging sensation that needed to be released. The light was contained to a dull crackling of lightning with focus, but it threatened to burst again when she heard a voice come from the side.

“Is that a foci? Fascinating! How did you manage to acquire one since we last talked about them on the road?” Dorian was standing right behind her in the Fade, a relaxed smile on his face. The color drained from her face and she dropped her free hand to her side, pausing a moment before slapping her palm into her hand to try and get the orb to disappear back into its home.

“I mean – I don’t know – it just kind of happened! I don’t think it’s a foci in the traditional sense but -Ah!” She continued to gesticulate with the hand that had the orb in it. Her frustration only continued to grow when she realized that his gaze never left the object in her hand and the mad-scientist grin spread on his face. “Are you even listening? Dorian!” She slapped him on the center of the chest with the flat of her free palm. He threw his head back and laughed, running a hand through his hair to rest his hand on his neck.

“Your luck astounds me. You live in the Fade and survive, teach yourself magic, turn into wolves, and somehow stumble upon an ancient elven magic amplifier. Does that kind of luck rub off?” Athena smiled darkly, flipping her hand over and allowing the orb to roll over her skin as if it were magnetically attached.

“As lucky as time magic is. Amatus – “ The use of the word brought all of the levity from the conversation, his gaze focused onto hers with the utmost concentration. “My life depends on this secret staying between us. I have not been able to summon it in the physical world yet, but this allowed me to defeat the Nightmare demon.”

“You have failed in summoning it because it needs composites in the physical world. Here, it feeds from the energy of the Veil and the spirits that created it. There, it is a hollow shell, waiting to be filled.” Command’s voice pierced through the scene and the armored spirit arrived, arms crossed.
over her chest.

“Composites? Like ingredients? Fascinating! What do you think we could use?” He added in, not missing a beat.

“It would need to be something powerful, something worthy of such an object that could only continue to further its power. You need to choose wisely, Athena. Do not waste its potential. You know of this world; you know of what is worthy or not. Be wise.” The spirit walked forward and rested her hand on top of the orb, flicking its surface and forcing it back into her palm. “And be controlled. Your training sessions will need to continue after all.”

She nodded, a smile coming to her lips when she felt a familiar call at her back. Her eyes widened in a moment of panic, glancing down to her palm that was now empty. There was a thin veil draped over her hand, containing the orb and the magic within. She gripped her hand into a fist, nodding and patting the spirit on her pauldron. “Thank you, Command. I do not know how I can repay you for all of your assistance.”

The spirit, in an almost creepy way, grinned. “There are no thanks needed. Ridding the Fade of the Nightmare Demon has created a shift for power. There was a large vacancy. . . “

Athena let out a laugh. “That you have filled. Well, I trust your judgement, Command, may you lead and protect the spirits well. I think someone is knocking at my door, so to speak.” The spirit nodded before dissipating into the Fade with a chuckle on her lips but her friend instantly began to rebel.

Dorian shook his head, waving his hands in front of his face. “No no no. This is my weekend with you; he chose to leave on that mission to Val Royeaux.”

“Wait, Val Royeaux? Why there?” She arched a brow towards him and he instantly backpedaled, clearing his throat while fighting a flush on his cheeks.

“No-no worries. Where are your other friends? The dancing girl and the cute one?” She had to laugh at the light blush on his cheek and she poked him in the center of the chest.

“Cute one, hm? Glad to know it’s mutual.” Harmony appeared behind them, placing one hand on Dorian’s shoulder and the other on hers while putting his head between them. He winked towards the Tevinter, laughing at how the mage slinked out of his grip and choked on his words.
'Now – ah – you must be mistaken, spirit.” The horned spirit leaned his elbow on Athena’s shoulder, shifting his weight as he crossed one foot over the other. She crossed her arms over his chest and smiled at the both of them, feeling some happiness that they got along and then a sadness that this could only happen in dreams.

“Nothing is mistaken in the Fade, Dorian. Come now, you’re smarter than that.” Harmony nearly spat at him while still holding somewhat of a flirtatious tone. Athena hummed, looking around with a whine.

“Hey, where is Inspiration?”

Harmony frowned, shaking his head while rummaging through his thoughts. “She has been... unlike herself since Fear. She feels terrible and we can’t bring her out of it. Maybe seeing you will help though. Do you think you’re up for it, Fade-Walker?”

Athena nodded, raising up and gripping her friend’s arm. “Of course. Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

Also:

Maker help me, 150 chapters, over 150 bookmarks, over 23k hits, and almost 1500 kudos.

I do think I will ever have the words to explain how grateful I am for my readers. This fic has helped pull me out of some dark places since I started writing it in September, as well as the response from you guys. So, thank you thank you for continuing to read and making my days a bit better. You're the best.
The closer they got to Inspiration, the more the Fade began to twist. Typically, the spirit liked to be location in bright fields or the memories of open marketplaces with people whirring about, full of nothing but content. Now, there were clouds in the sky and the air was thick with the anticipation of rainfall. Spirits passed through them on their way to their own locations, occasionally shooting a glance at Athena as if she were kin and then recoiling at Dorian who was amazed and spouting off at every new thing he found.

“Where are all of these things coming from? I have never seen them acting so. . . “

“Freely?” Athena asked with a blank face, looking over her shoulder at him with an arched brow. She didn’t mean for it to come off as a snap but his face instantly fell, a frustrated flush coming to his cheeks.

“In my homelands, you never hear of them like this. They are, unfortunately, taught to be tools, something to strengthen your own training.”

Harmony let out a scoff, the light shining particularly bright off of his horns as he looked over his shoulder at Dorian. “You didn’t tell me he was Tevinter.”

Athena chuckled under her breath, rubbing one arm up and down the other in a gesture of anxiety. “Figured it would come up eventually.”

Dorian rolled his eyes and tried to walk up closer to her but Harmony intercepted him with his body, acting as if the mage wasn’t even there. When she looked back to the spirit, he had a mischievous smirk on his face. It was difficult to get under his skin; he had learned from his time as Rage and wasn’t as quick to react. Harmony was something Athena needed desperately, considering that before the two had met she had almost punched the Lord Seeker in the middle of the Summer Bazaar at Val Royeaux.

“It’s forgivable, considering how close you two are. Ah – here we are. Be careful now, she has been. . . not herself since Adamant. I’ll leave you two be.” He grabbed Dorian’s shoulder and held him back from the clearing, shushing him preemptively to keep him from spouting off. She didn’t even look at the two, because in front of her was an image that broke her heart.
Inspiration sat on a bench with her head in her hands, loose curls falling in front of her face like a veil. There was a dimmer light to her presence, the normal chipper happiness faded from her guilt and regret. Her lute was resting on the bench next to her, and even its wood was not as shiny. The strings looked withered and old, ready to snap at any minute. The air felt off, in the middle of a change that she was not ready to accept.

The spirit needed help.

“My friend. . . “ She called out softly, dropping to her knees in front of her companion while resting her hand on the spirit’s thighs.

The blonde-haired spirit instantly gasped, twitching up and back on the bench out of her grip. “Athena – what are you doing here? I did not think you would return so quickly – not after. . . Fuck.”

The cursing sounded extremely violent and foreign coming from the normally peaceful spirit’s lips. She flinched and retracted in response, raising her hands up in surrender with a soft smile on her face. The Fade-walker pointed over her shoulder to Dorian with half of a shrug. “We. . . both needed an escape tonight. He hasn’t been sleeping well and I am tired of the lonely darkness in between my days. I missed you, all of you.”

The spirit shook her head back and forth. “But we hurt you – I hurt you. That vision I showed you; It was so beautiful and it was snatched away.” Before she could stop herself, Athena winced and guarded her stomach, hands flexing at a flat belly. Inspiration began to cry, streams of Fade tears falling through her form and onto the bench below. “How can you call me friend after going through that?”

Athena leaned forward, bringing the spirit’s hands into her own and not letting go when she twitched again. “You were not yourself and neither was Harmony. Fear ruled us, but only for a moment. It no longer has sway over our actions and we have returned to ourselves. I forgive you, Inspiration, even though you were not at fault in the first place.”

There was a flicker within the spirit’s core, a yellow glow that filled her for a second before doubt resumed its conquering and took over. “T- Truly?”

She nodded, bringing the ethereal hands up to her lips and kissing them. “Truly. Here, scoot over, let me share something with you.” Inspiration moved to the edge of the bench and Athena took the
lute into her hand, noticing already that its original sheen had returned and it hummed within her hands, ready to be plucked and played. Music had connected them in the past. Inspiration allowed the Fade to be a place where she could revisit her old memories and old habits, like dancing a night out or just laying on a bed while listening to music. They were little things that kept her together in her old world and worked the same in this one. She tested out a chord before gently stroking her fingers over the strings, a soft hum coming to her lips. Harmony brought Dorian over and she noted they were standing closer than before.

“If you ever find yourself stuck in the middle of the sea, I’ll sail the world to find you. If you ever find yourself lost in the dark and you can’t see, I’ll be the light to guide you.”

Inspiration began to smile, the tears fading from her face as her fingers drummed along on the tops of her thighs. Dorian playfully rolled his eyes, making a smart-ass comment under his breath about how “cheesy” the song was. Harmony nodded, elbowing the mage in the side with a soft smile on his lips. “That’s how these two are. I’ve found it to be endearing.”

“Find out what we’re made of, when we are called to help our friends in need. You can count on me like one two three – I’ll be there. And I know I can count on you like four three two – You’ll be there. ‘Cause that’s what friends are supposed to do – oh yeah.”

The area returned to its normal form, the grass springing to life with glowing green tendrils of light. The radiant blonde locks bounced around the spirit’s face as she laughed, the joyous sound spreading through the area like warmth itself. Dorian touched his fingers over his chest, obviously feeling the spirit’s effect as well. He smiled. “Now there’s the girl that danced with me all those months ago.”

Athena put the lute down since she had received the desired effect, bringing her friend into a sideways hug. Inspiration sighed and returned the gesture, leaning her head against the woman’s shoulder. “I can feel that you still have the spirits’ gift. Have you seen Wisdom since you have returned?” There was a gentle, radiant warmth emanating from the spirit now, filling Athena with joy even as she shook her head.

“Not quite yet, no. Tonight is Dorian and I’s night exploring the Fade; I figured she would be near Solas all night. And as my friend has said...tonight is my night with him, not the other.” The spirit laughed, summoning her typical summer hat and plopping it down over her voluminous curls. The black sunhat draped over her face but it could not dull the shine from her smile.

“That is right. We both needed a...night off of sorts. We have another ball coming up, my dear. Do you have any input?” He winked towards the spirit, knowing it was one of the perfect things to help cheer her up. She instantly clapped her hands together, looking to Athena while dropping her
gaze to the hidden orb within her palm.

“Why don’t you take us somewhere? You’ve grown stronger, surely you can explore the Fade now! See if you can go through memories of where you are at.” The Dreamer winced and shook her head, thinking back to how many brutal battles took place in the Exalted Plains. Watching an entire race being attacked did not seem like her idea of a good time. The spirit nodded, following her train of thought. “Or not. What about some place from your memories, some place we can dance at?”

Athena glanced to Dorian and then smiled, thinking back to the club that she had taken Solas to. He didn’t seem to like the dancing as much as what followed, but the music that played in those types of establishments would be better received by her current group of friends. She swirled her hand around them to twist the environment and bring them back to the exact club where she had dance with Solas last. Her and the spirit of Inspiration were sitting on a bench close to where her and Solas had enjoyed each other’s company the previous dream here. The music pounded over the speakers and Dorian looked around with amazement, eyes reflecting the pulsing lights of the room.

“This is a memory of your world? Maker Athena, what is this place?” The mage turned around and then immediately side stepped as a shadow of a former memory walked in front of him.

“This was an establishment just for dancing from my world. Typically, there was lots of alcohol but we’ll have to improvise.” She rose from the couch and walked over to Dorian, sliding her fingers along the length of his arm before coming up to his shoulder and spinning behind him. It was similar to a move that they had practiced in their routine or the ball at Halamshiral and he caught on immediately, grinning and catching her hand to spin her around into his grip.

“I think this is a place I could grow to be fond of. We can’t show up with a dance we have done before; the foreigners will find us dull and the Orlesians will gossip. We need something fresher, something with a bit of spice, I think.” He nonchalantly spun her again and pulled her to where she was dipped with her hair nearly touching the floor. With a quick gesture, Inspiration nudged him out and took over, flipping her friend back up to a standing posture with a wink.

“This is where we come in, isn’t that right, Harmony?” The spirit looked over to her friend, smiling at the horned creature as he rolled his eyes.

“If it pleases you, friend.”

Without missing a beat, she nodded and began walking Athena through some of the first steps. “Alright, let’s begin!”
Hour went by with the pairs going back and forth to learn new steps. When Dorian was having trouble learning the lead part, Harmony would step in and lead him instead, which left the mage flustered with a confused blush on his cheeks. At one point during the dance Athena allowed her orb to come out from hiding so she could gain better control of it. It was resting on the couch close to them, blinking in time with the music like some sort of fade-disco ball that she didn’t have the patience to master that night.

In a way, she could understand Sera. The orb was real. It was tangible. It meant that she unfortunately was now in a place of power...and that she could play a part in the chaotic future that was going to unfold. It was an uncomfortable thought, and something she wasn’t ready for yet.

“No no no, you keep messing up the pivot. For someone whose name means Peacock you’re awful heavy on your feet. Try again.” Harmony insisted, squeezing his temporary dance partner’s hand with a teasing smirk. Dorian rolled his eyes with half of a scoff, repeating the move and then gesturing that he had finally gotten it right.

“This is my first time being the companion of a Dreamer on her escapades in the Fade. I believe that earns me a break of sorts.” The Tevinter returned in front of Athena and walked through the move with her, pressing chest to chest against her with a frustrated smirk. She arched a brow, looking over to Inspiration with a shrug. They got along better than most people did with Dorian. Few could tolerate his Tevinter background as well as his rather large personality. Thankfully she knew him underneath the front he put on for people, but it was nice to see that other people could see through his guard as well.

“I’m surprised your boyfriend hasn’t made an appearance.” He teased, pressing his forehead against hers for a moment before spinning her out from him. At the end of the spin she extended her other hand, allowing her body weight to cause her to fall and spin on the floor before he used a magical tendril to wrap around her wrist and pull her back up against in a smooth motion.

“Oh he has been trying. Like you said, this is your weekend. Perhaps we can fix that move? I don’t know if it will work well in my dress that I want to wear.” He hummed in amusement while taking a step back from her. His gaze went from her head to her toes, taking in the basic clothing she would have been wearing back at Skyhold.

“Well, let’s see it then so I know what I am working with.” He gestured to her impatiently, a mischievous twinkle lighting up his eye. She let out a sigh, closing her eyes and trying to think of
the dress that Solas had put her in whenever they had visited his version of a ball. There had been a black collar of sorts but she exchanged that for a lace-decorated scoop neck crafted of black lace. The rest of the gown was form fitting, accentuating her curves in a shimmery gold material that flowed to the dance floor below her with a subtle slit up the side of her left leg. The lace acted as straps and support while two gold loops fell from her shoulders to accessorize and bring attention to her shoulders and toned upper arms.

Athena spun in a circle with her arms out to show him the details of the dress as he stalked her like a predator for fashion. He made considering noises before stepping up to her back and pulling her hair up into his hands. “You will need to wear this up with that kind of neckline. I think... perhaps a circlet as well? Right here.” He dropped her hair and then poked to the top of her head where a tiara or something similar would rest. She laughed, itching her head where he touched before running her hand through the rest of her locks.

“Good, you have the image then? I need to draw up something for Valerie, Vivienne’s seamstress, but I am shit for drawing.” Harmony scoffed with half a laugh muttering under his breath just loud enough for her to hear.

“Yeah – don’t ask her to draw up battle plans. Half of your troops will be lost while the other half will be defenseless. It looks like a child playing with a piece of charcoal.” Inspiration slapped her companion on the shoulder with a scoff of her own, frowning playfully while shooting a wink to Athena. He was right. She had attempted to draw up battle plans for the Nightmare demon and it ended up being a mixture of stick figures and arrows.

“Do not worry, Harmony. I will be illustrating this wondrous creation she has prepared for me. You’re going to be glowing for someone who is playing the – what otherworlder word did you use for that thing in the main hall?”

Athena smirked. “Piano.”

“You’re going to bear wearing this playing the piano. Nobody will have time to focus on petty politics!” He spun her one more time, pulling her into a tight embrace. She giggled into the crook of his neck, resting a hand on the back of his neck to stabilize her posture. Harmony and Inspiration smiled at the two of them. She noticed there was a slight blush on her horned friend’s cheeks, but she didn’t point it out to keep his dignity intact.

Suddenly, things grew very cold.

It wasn’t the normal friendly presence that she was used to when Solas arrived or was asking
permission to enter her dream. There was an immense pressure within the air of the Fade, like an overlooking shadow that was breathing down their necks. Harmony snarled, flicking his hand out and summoning up a sharpened spear. Inspiration put her hand on his arm to still him, shaking her head back and forth.

Dorian grabbed Athena’s hand, squeezing it tightly. “I think it time for us to leave the Fade, don’t you think?”

She couldn’t move. Something felt off about the magic that was in the Fade. Anytime there was a chill, it was a pleasant sensation she looked forward to because it was a trigger of his magic. This was like a suffocating pressure squeezing around her, making it difficult to think or breathe. But still somehow... the magic felt familiar. It wasn’t Solas’s. It’s source was on the tip of her tongue but she couldn’t form the words. Instead, she looked to the warrior in front of them. “Does this feel malevolent, Harmony?”

The spirit shook his head. “No, simply powerful. It would be wise for you two to leave. Get him out of here, Athena.”

Dorian made a sound of protest underneath his breath but she turned to him, cupping his face in his hands while stroking her thumbs over his cheekbones. In that motion, she wrapped her magic around them both and brought them back into the waking world before the foreign yet familiar presence could catch up to them. When they woke, they were still wrapped in one another’s arms. His cheek rested on top of her head and he held her protectively, one arm firm on her back with the other underneath her neck. He twitched his lips from side to side, his mustache following the movements in small flicks. She sighed and nuzzled her head into his hand, taking in the scent of his lotions and oils that he normally applied.

“Thank you, Amatus. I needed that sleep.” He leaned forward and kissed her on top of the head before sliding his arm out from underneath her. He flexed his hand a few times to get feeling back before sitting up on their bedroll.

“It was mutual, Dorian. But let’s go home.”

Chapter End Notes

Song: Count on Me - Bruno Mars [Cheery little song I looove.]
Even with them being out of the Fade, something felt off within the air. Blackwall was cooking them a quick breakfast of ram meat and eggs on their skillet but she was off in another world. The power from the dream the night before was lingering on her skin. It felt like a film, stuck to her mind and body that would not leave. She felt as if it were in the air on the current, watching them from wherever its origin was. She narrowed her gaze on the horizon, ignoring Fang as he nipped at her hand to get her attention.

*Your mind is heavy.*

Without even thinking, she answered aloud, her eyes fixated on swaying blades of wheat on the edge of the hills. “Strange end to my dream last night. I can feel something weighing on me, even here. I don’t know what has followed me, but I do not like it.” A small shudder threatened to shoot down to her toes but she hardened herself, grinding her teeth together while training her hunter’s gaze on the area around them. Fang nodded, his hackles slowly raising in defense as he stood by her side. Suddenly he became the alert hunter like she, a low growl trickling out of the back of his throat.

“Bark bark bark – does anyone else understand that?” Sera asked while chewing on a piece of ram. Athena didn’t glance over her shoulder but Dorian chuckled.

“No and I would be worried if you could. Are you all ready to head home? As much as I love camping and trecking through the Fade with you all, this man could use a stiff drink and his bed.” He then pointed into the center of his chest with his thumb, nudging Blackwall as he stood from his position on the fallen log by the campfire.

“I agree. Something about this place makes me uneasy.” Athena made a sound of agreement, nodding while looking over her shoulder.

“Dorian, do you think you could take Prince back to Skyhold for me? I was going to scout the old Dalish campgrounds to make sure Gaspard has pulled his armies back before he arrives for the Wintersend ball.” Before they could even answer she walked over to her mount and brushed her hands over the sides of his neck, pressing her forehead against his while whispering quick farewells under her breath. He could sense her uneasiness. Without even having to say anything she could feel how nervous he was staying in the Plains. The feeling wasn’t present the night before, had it followed them from their dream? She patted on the sack that held the heart of the snowy wyvern and looked to Dorian. “Just make sure and put this in my room, preferably with a frost rune.
“on it so the ingredient doesn’t spoil. I should be home within a day or two if the winds aide my fade-step well.”

Blackwall took the orders like a soldier and immediately began to pack up camp. Dorian assisted him with a wave of his arm, practical magic flowing into their belongings. The bedrolls sprung to life and compacted on their own, the tents breaking down into small bits with the poles on their sides. Their horses’ blankets were lifted from the ground and placed on their backs with the saddles following that. Still, the Tevinter walked over to her, speaking low underneath his breath while his thumbs stroked idly on her shoulders.

“You feel it too?” There wasn’t any anxiety in his voice, just a subtle curiosity.

“Young, same thing from last night. It was my dream, so if its following me I would rather split and not have you guys be a part of the target. I think I’ve encountered the thing before, but unfortunately I cannot tell you where from.” She blinked, finally looking away from the horizon and their surroundings to focus on his face. He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck, before pulling her into a quick hug.

“Do be careful. I would hate to see you arriving in a box with the same fate as Duchess Florianne. However, I would decorate your box with roses and lilies to keep the smell out.” The three threw themselves onto their horses, leaving her with the pack of wolves and her pack and bedroll alone.

“Be safe, Fur-ball! We’ll see you back on the mountain.” Sera winked and waved with two fingers coming from her forehead in a small gesture akin to a salute, kicking the sides of her horse and breaking into a trot down the Path of Fire. Blackwall followed and Dorian was the caboose of the trio, looking at the area as a shudder went down his spine. She felt somewhat glad that they could feel the situation as well, but it didn’t bode well that the presence had somehow followed them from the Fade into the waking world. She looked down at her left hand and flexed, feeling the energies stirring within it.

“Powerful components, huh? Too bad Vivienne is using that heart, I could probably have tried that, huh?” Fang bumped his nose into her palm, forcing her hand over the top of his head as he walked through her grip. The pack was ready to follow her through the plains and escort her. The younger pups were running freely between her legs as she walked and the group was making a formation with Fang at the top of the V with her at her side. Without warning she smirked and pushed forward into a run without shifting. The warm wind of spring slid over her skin as she ran along the river’s edge, using small bits of magic to push her over obstacles like boulders or large bits of fallen tree.

The strange pressure of foreign magic followed her, feeling like it was always a step behind wherever they went. She couldn’t help but feel on edge, protecting herself with a barrier as they
passed the first set of ramparts that led up to the river in front of the Dalish encampment. The Orlesian warriors had taken over after the wolves and Rathein defeated the demons that existed there. There were strange whispers from them as they ran by and she had to give them a wicked smile, saluting quickly as her body blurred amongst the mass of large black wolves. The soldier on the receiving end of the salute visibly flinched, one of the younger recruits waving to her as they ran by. Gaspard had “won” the civil war, so these soldiers that served underneath his name were loyal to the Inquisition. They wouldn’t dare give her any malice this close to the Wintersend Ball, even if she had threatened to burn half of a squadron down herself. The memory put a magical boost in her step, a wolfish grin flashing across her face as she curved by the river where Wisdom was initially murdered by the mages. Even though the seasons had come and gone, there was still a scorched mark in the earth where Solas had ended the life of the mages.

Athena bent down on her knees, running her hand over the blackened area of earth. She understood it now, when Solas made statements about the Veil. The air felt heavy in the area, like the humidity thickened in her lungs to press around her body. It was as if the Fade were only a breath away, a destination that she could reach with a flick of her hand. She knew that was not so, but the mages meddling with spirits and binding had weakened the Fade here. A hollow laugh fell from her lips, even as the pressure of magic grew thick around her since she had stopped in her run through the Plains. The wolves around her whined, hackles and fur still raised on edge at the pressing magic around them.

*It still follows us. What is it?*

Fang growled, saliva dripping from his maw onto the ground below. Athena twisted her lips to the side and glanced over her shoulder from where it felt like the magic was coming from. “I don’t know. But if it’s following us that means it isn’t following my friends on their way home. Let’s keep the trail going. Do you still have the stamina?” The question was answered with a series of barks and yelps, the younger ones continuing to bite at the bottom of her foot wrappings to try and get them to unwind. She flicked them on the nose while walking on the outskirts of the plains, keeping the water to her right until she arrived in front of the edge of the elven ruins. There were strict orders to *not* hunt the halla that had been left behind, even though a stray pup attempted to run after one of the graceful creatures. It was unable to catch the halla and trudged its way back to the pack with its tail between its legs.

The pressure continued on the back of her mind as she wandered near the edge of the elven burial grounds. On her first hunt through the lands with the Plains pack, they had rid the area of demons without touching the stones. It appeared as if they had been trampled through since then. Fang’s nose twitched as she put her hand on his back to steady him, his lips pulling back into a snarl. *Smells of iron. Soldiers.*

She nodded and slipped her pack off of her shoulder to lay it by the entry to the ruins. “We need to lay them back to rest. I don’t sense anymore soldiers, so keep watch for me, okay? There is a cave in the back of the old elven campgrounds. Tell your beta to take the other half of the pack there and settle for the night.”
Fang turned around and let out a howl. To anyone else, it would sound like a howl signaling a hunt, because in their narrow minds that is all the sound was used for. She could hear the intricacies of the sound, the interswirling commands going through every note change. They departed and she could feel Fang pick up her pack with his maw and awkwardly hang it off to his beta on the way to the campsite. Good boy. Athena carefully moved through the elven ruins, keeping her barrier low while manipulating the rocks to recover the bodies that had been unearthed. There were a few despair demons and wraiths floating about but she moved to fix the ruins that were out of their reach first.

It wasn’t until the fourth ruin out of six that the stream of frost hit her back. She felt it creeping up on her barrier so she pushed from the ground and rolled to the side, allowing the despair demon’s attack to coarse up the completed ruin she had just finished. With a feral growl on her lips she pushed forward from the ground, using her hands like claws to slash at the demon. Fire followed her movements, alighting her nails aflame so that every impact ripped through the rags of the demon. Athena exhaled a stream of flames following a deep inhale through her nose, exterminating the first of the demons. It had been a few days since she had been into battle.

Her nerves were alit with excitement, mana tingling through her body and focusing in her palms to ready the next coming attacks. The wraiths shifted from green to blue, taking in the essence of the surrounding despair demons. They shot at her with balls of frost but she was able to side-step their attacks and counter with small burst of flames launched from quick jab punches. This stunned the wraiths as she fade-stepped to the two despair demons. One of them knocked her back with a stream of ice, which caused her to illicit a snarl. Athena moved with a feral grace, using the currents of magic to twist and turn her body in anticipation of their attacks. She knocked into one of the despair demons with her ice-covered side, using the collision to shatter their previous assault while exploding her barrier to bathe the demon in flames.

The final despair demon fell back to between the two wraiths, summoning up a wall of ice between the two of them. She huffed a laugh, running a hand through her hair and looking around. They appeared to be the last ones.

She could have a bit of fun.

Athena pushed off from the ground and spun, pulling on her wings of flame to vault over the ice wall and appear in front of them. The wings dissipated as she clapped her hands together and summoned her staff. The wraiths were defeated with two rapid stabs of her weapon, leaving the final despair demon. It backpedaled but then attempted at one final exhale. It used the attack to push its body backwards against a stone wall but she grinned, raising her hand and using her barrier like Cassandra would her shield. She pushed through the attack that acted like a gale force wind, her body barely moving even though she pushed with all of her might. By the time she reached the demon, her arms were covered in small abrasions from the ice shards flying past her. Both their attacks and defenses shattered so she reached forward and gripped its robes with her dominant
hands, squeezing the fabric within her grip and creating fire within the center of her palm. The shrouded creature couldn’t move and neither did she until it was completely covered in her flames.

The foreign magic was still at her back but the air felt lighter within the burial grounds. Athena picked up the demon rags with her left hand, arching a brow and humming when she realized they still had some magic imbued within them. With an audible pop, they disappeared, the images completely melding into light and disappearing underneath the scar on her left hand. She let out a wordless cry of surprise, pacing and running her hand through her messy brown locks.

“Fuck, when they said components, I didn’t think they meant fucking demon rags!” She exclaimed to nobody that was listening, throwing her hands into the air with a snarl of frustration. So, Command meant it could literally be any component with power, not just what she chose? She made a mental note to be more careful about what potentially powerful artifacts she held with her left hand. With frustration fueling her steps she finished repairing the rest of the runes, mumbling an elvish prayer she had heard Lev’adin whisper while they hunted. There was a subtle buzz in the air when she was finished, which she took as an ancient sign of amusement.

There wasn’t anything else left to do so she walked out of the ruins, heading down to a location that put a wolfish smirk on her face. The statue of Fen’Harel weathered through time, its gaze cast out on the horizon. It’s offering tray had been turned over time, the traces of the tea she left scattered among the wind. The magical pressure finally caught up to her, buzzing like a vibration between her ears. It only confirmed her suspicion. She knew she had felt the magic before. It wasn’t cold, it was simply powerful, something she had never encountered in another being. Minus one.

With scratches still fresh on her arm, she lifted her left hand above the offering bowl, allowing a single drop of blood to fall atop the remnants of former gifts. “The Keeper said you had my scent, well, now he’s right.”

As soon as the blood touched the bowl, the pressure stopped. It was ripped from the air around her like a vacuum and she let a nervous smile grace her lips. Her hand shook where she held it over the bowl but she clenched it into a fist, ripping off a piece of fabric from her shirt to wrap around her hand and arm where the majority of the scratches from the ice were. The blood soaked through the light fabric but she kept her calm as she walked to the old Dalish camp site as the silence around her stilled the air. It caused her heart to pound so loud it was echoing between her ears, sweat beading on the back of her neck as she walked into the safety of her pack.

They greeted her with small nods of acknowledgement, their noses raised to the air as the scent of her blood. She shrugged them off, making a straight line for her pack so that she could remove an elfroot potion from the side pocket. She lifted the potion to her lips and quickly downed the potion, attempting not to choke on it when she heard a mixed voice behind her.
“You called, Da’len?”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the last few chapters being meh.

Working out my life stuff and trying to get it figured out, but things are definitely looking up.

You guys are the best! :)
“You called, Da’len?”

The power returned like the flick of a light switch, it filling the cave with a pressure that nearly forced her to her knees. Athena persevered, strengthening her mind and body while turning to who she knew would be there.

The Dread Wolf stood in the opening of the cave in a casual posture. He sat straight with his head tilted to the side, all six red eyes blinking at her simultaneously as if he were a cat snoozing on the windowsill at Skyhold. Instantly all of the wolves around him reacted, snarling with their fangs bared and surrounding him on her behalf. She clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth, raising a hand to stop them as she walked into the line of what little daylight was left in the sky.

“I believe it was you who called first, Ma’fen.” She was hoping for some reaction from him at the title, some hint that it was her vhenan underneath the black fur and ominous presence. All she received was a scoff of a laugh, or that was the closest she could come to describing it. He shook his fur and looked to the other creatures as if they were ants underneath his paw. There was a flex of power from him, something that went immediately over the wolves’ minds. As their alpha, she could feel the intrusion and she took a step forward, changing her posture into an offensive one. “It is an insult to enter the den of another and try to influence their pack, Dread Wolf. Or has it been so long since you have graced these lands that you have forgotten social graces?”

Her wolves created a chorus of growls and cheers at their alpha’s jab, Fang placing his body directly next to hers as defense. Fen’Harel did something that sent a chill down her spine, he grinned. “I am assuming you are the mother of the child that shot an arrow towards me? Only in her have I seen such open defiance of a God.”

It was Athena’s turn to scoff, hands clenching at her sides. “Yes, she is mine, as are the creatures you see around you. What purpose do you have in following me from the Fade, Wolf? It was you who sought me out there, was it not?”

The black in his fur rippled like water as he looked off to the side, arching his brow at a rather particularly excited pup. It ran forward at him until its mother grabbed it by the nape and pulled it under her protective posture. “You are correct. Your name has been on the lips of my people for some time now, Fen’Elgara.” At the mention of her title she stiffened but held her head proudly, gripping her hand that now only ached from the healing wounds. “I simply wished to learn more about the one they will soon be proclaiming as Goddess.”
The “G” word brought half a laugh from her lips and she clapped her hand over her mouth, realizing how nervous it probably made her look in front of him. This was her pack; these lands were protected by her. If he was her love, he knew that. Then what game was he, or whatever this creature was, trying to play? He stood up fully and motioned his head to the outside, keeping the left side of his gaze focused on her. “A moment of your time then? Since you are not attacking me, it can only be assumed you wish to hear what I have to say or wish to answer my questions.”

_Trickster_. She thought quickly, swallowing a dry lump down her throat before nodding. Fang nipped defensively at her hand as she walked forward out of the safety of her pack, giving them one last glance before exiting the cave. There was something exhilarating about being near the God, about feeling the power crushing around her. It was an intoxicating kind of feeling. Solas and Dorian often spoke about how she weaved magic as if it were air, not relying on the words and incantations of spells but using her will to shape the magic around her. This was something similar, or it was the closest she had seen to what she had done by instinct since falling in the world.

The pair walked in silence with her a few paces to his left, never getting within biting or arm’s reach. The whole situation made her uneasy but curious at the same time. If this was her lover, if this was really Solas feeling himself out in his old furs, then it could be some sort of bonding between the two of them, a flirtation of types. Athena wasn’t sure which wall she could drop and which she should fortify. The Wolf paused, flicking his glance over to her with a bit of a smirk on his maw. “If you would join me, I think that would make this conversation equal, do you agree?”

Athena stilled, looking out towards the sun setting on the edge of the horizon. The spring wind sent a shiver down her spine and she used that motion to shift into her wolf form of pure white, flicking her tail in somewhat annoyance at him. She moved forward to continue walking through the plains but he wasn’t moving. She turned and made a sound of question in her throat and she had to restrain herself when she saw him. He was simply looking at her, openly looking at her with the complete weight of his gaze. It was unsettling, especially now that they were in a shared form. There was something vulnerable about being in the open without her pack around her, to shield her, to protect her from the unknown that was the presence in front of her. The wind moved through her fur and normally would have caused her to shudder but her guard was so firm she dug her claws into the ground and stilled herself. “You said you had questions?”

She always the one to break the silence. Extended periods without sound made her uncomfortable; it had been a trait she had since grade school. Back then she would tap her foot on the supporting pole of her desk to make a small thud sound that would keep her sane, or she would click her pen at random intervals. _Anything_ to break the silence. The wolf next to her nodded, striding forward with such confidence it was as if he were walking on air.

“You have a great burden on your shoulders. The People are beginning to look to you for guidance.” She clenched her jaw and let out a huff of air from her nose, rolling her shoulder in a gesture of annoyance while matching his stride.
“I am waiting for a question.” The Dread Wolf let out a sound that resembled a laugh, shaking his head back and forth.

“What will you do with their combined trust? They put it to you. I am only curious what you are to do with such a responsibility.” It was Athena’s turn to laugh. She stopped in her position, clicking her tongue against the back of her sharpened fangs while looking to the sky for guidance. The two moons glowed down on them, illuminating the serenity of the plains even with all of the mystery making the air tense.

“Many of them still have bonds, whether they be visible or not. I wish for them to be broken, for them to be truly free and able to do whatever their heart desires.” He hummed in response and she noticed he took a step closer to her casually as they walked. Out of response, she took a step further, scoffing inwardly.

“Is that what you wish for your daughter?” The question wasn’t malicious, simply curious. Athena felt on edge due to the God’s history of being a trickster, spinning information to his benefit. She did not want to withhold information because she had a feeling he would be able to tell.

“Is that what you wish for your daughter?” The question wasn’t malicious, simply curious. Athena felt on edge due to the God’s history of being a trickster, spinning information to his benefit. She did not want to withhold information because she had a feeling he would be able to tell.

“I simply wish for her to have the freedom to make her own decision. Whether that be who she worships or what she does with her future. I want her life to be hers and hers alone.” He sat beside her, tilting his head to the side by a fraction of an inch, just enough to show that he was actively listening. Athena turned to the side but refused to sit. She felt too anxious.

“Worship who she desires?” The tone was playful but she knew Solas’s feelings on the old Gods. It felt like a test so she clicked her teeth together and nodded.

“If she desires to receive her vallaslin, I will take her to her clan. If she wishes for her face to be bare the rest of her life, so be it. I am not her master nor her Keeper. I am her Mother.” At the mention of the elven blood writing the black wolf across from her allowed a low growl to trickle from his throat. She noticed that his fur began to stand on end but she stood her ground, strengthening her posture while never allowing her gaze to break from his.

“You would allow her to mark herself for the old? To make tribute to the – “

Athena cut him off, her aura manifesting with her emotions and whipping out from her body like a flame. “Elvhen such as you?” He paused, opening his mouth as if to respond before closing it. His power began to respond to hers, creating the pressure within the air that she felt before. It closed in around her like heavy stone walls, pressing down upon her skin and her own essence but she persisted, pulling her lips back over her fangs to snap back. “Do not worry. She is not fond of your
kind. To be frank, neither am I.”

The Dread Wolf pushed forward from his haunches, nearly coming nose to nose with her. He did not growl, he did not need to. The change in the air around them let her know how he felt about what she had said. The increase in power was not harmful, there was trepidation that at any second he could show his true self, the side that he was known for over thousands of years. “And why would that be?”

To break out of the tense posture she walked past him, almost letting her side brush against his as she flicked her tail near his face to get the cool and collected expression off of it. She needed to see something: anger, hurt, sadness, wrath. Anything that would break the passive mask he was wearing in the guise of a wolf form. No matter which form she took, her emotions would be displayed proudly on her sleeves. “If people like who you are appearing to be exist in this world, you have watched as your People fell. Where were the elven when the Exalted March came across these plains and forced your people into alienages? Where were they when the Shrines and Temples of the Gods were scattered to rubble across these lands and forgotten? Where were they to correct the patchwork beliefs that the Dalish have clung to as their last scrap of what was?”

“You speak of things you could not possibly understand!” There it was. She had broken the façade. A wave of power rushed through her fur and she turned to see him in a defensive position, paws digging into the earth in something that resembled restraint with his tail straight back. Athena turned to him with strength in her words and her spirit, raising her nose and puffing her chest. “You asked. I answered. Has your curiosity been satiated of me, or do you wish to know more about this other worlder before you?” He let out a huff of air, pacing one or two times before her silently. There was an obvious difference between his posture and Solas’s. The wolf before her was confident, powerful, unabashed in his actions and words. There was still the polite mask but the feral spirit of the beast was more present. Was this his true nature, or just another side of him? Athena was excited to find out, the initial anxiety finally fading away. If he wanted to kill her, he, or whatever this creature was, would have done it already. There was purpose to letting her live and it probably wasn’t for her pleasantry.

“Obviously the latter. But perhaps that could be saved for another time.” The growl disappeared from his voice, his gaze darting to the side. She didn’t need to look to know what he caught sight of. There was a deer roughly fifty feet behind them. Female, from the lighter sounds it was making against the dirt. The Dread Wolf looked to the beast, a mischievous wolfish smirk curling his lips.

Athena arched a brow. “You are kidding, right?”

The wolf shrugged and in that gesture, she saw a layer of his hardened personality melt away. There was something hopeful there, flirtatious almost, and that was more off-putting than the
power that had been following them around all day. She took a step back, glancing to the deer with a pit of dread in her stomach... which quickly alerted her to how hungry she was. The sound reverberated against her skin and she growled underneath her breath, suddenly pressing her belly low to the ground to hide amongst the tall leaves of grass. She completely stilled her body, bringing her aura in skin tight to conceal her presence. Her pupils constricted to focus on the small details: which way the deer was facing, the way the wind was blowing, how Fen’Harel was already running –

Shit.

The white-furred wolf pushed off with a boost of fade magic to pass in front of him and lead the hunt of the deer. It bounded off through the plains, its light body moving in a zig-zag pattern as its legs moved as fast as they could. Athena didn’t even spare a glance behind her. If he was testing her, she was going to win. She pushed off with her hind legs and became airborne, sinking her teeth into the back of the deer’s neck. They rolled together but she never let go of her grip, sinking her teeth in deeper until she felt a rush of blood pour into her mouth. It took many months and hunts to get used to the sensation. At first, she retained much of her humanity, absolutely separating the two and keeping them in separate boxes.

But the more she harnessed her shape-shifting magic, the more she accepted it as part of her being, the more primal things no longer bothered her. She opened her eyes and looked to the Dread Wolf as he approached her prey. Out of instinct she growled and jerked the creature closer to her, asserting her dominance and possession over her kill that she beat him to get. He only tilted his head, giving her a humanistic look that screamed: “Really?” She released the deer and looked to him, momentarily feeling her walls fall down before him. If he was willing to hunt with her, he wouldn’t bring her harm, right?

There was one thing she hadn’t gotten used to, and that was eating the animal raw. In a shift of energy, she changed back to her normal form, cracking her neck to the side and rubbing the back of her neck with a blood-covered hand. The other wolf stepped back, hesitation obviously holding him back. Gotcha. “Raw meat does not settle well on my tongue. I joined you in your preferred form, perhaps you would be so courteous as to join me in mine?” Athena met his gaze and dared him silently, a slight curve turning her lips into a smirk as she pulled a thin dagger from her thigh. She used it mainly for skinning and preparing animals for meals but it was handy if she ran low on mana or if somebody surprised her. The wolf stilled, knowing he was being challenged, but he shook his head.

“Perhaps another time, da’fen.” His form then disappeared into a cloud of black smoke. It was something similar to what she remembered Flemeth doing in the game. Athena’s lips twisted into a snarl. She groaned stabbing the dagger down into the center of the deer’s chest to quickly end its life. So the Dread Wolf would stay in hiding for now, with his true purposes hidden. She was conflicted. There was something exhilarating about the thrill of the hunt, but at the same time it was frustrating if it was truly Solas in disguise. She would have to be patient for now, and measure her responses with loaded words to try and get him to break.
“Fucking coward.”
Athena woke in the midst of the pack, her head resting on Fang’s abdomen with her legs covered by some of the younger pups. Her bedroll was still completely packed up and leaned against the opening by the back of the cave. The sun burst into the cave through the clouds, shining a particularly bright beam onto her face. She groaned, rubbing her face into Fang’s side while stretching forward and hitting two or three other wolves that were all curled together. The pups instantly woke up and began to lick her face and the face of the rest of the adults, their little tails smacking against her cheek and body as they found their next target. “Alright alright I get it. I’m up.”

She pushed up from the ground and let out a sigh, realizing exactly how many joints and muscles were sore from the way she slept but she wouldn’t trade those nights for anything. There was something harmoniously peaceful about sleeping amongst the pack. There were certain periods in the night where she could feel their breaths synchronizing and it was a serene sensation, being a part of such a large group. In a strange way, she could feel that their “influence” was growing. When she tapped into the pack, she could feel where they generally were. Those locations were starting to spread out. There were wolves in Crestwood now that would pop up like little blips on her radar and even one or two more druffalo in the same area. Did the animals talk to one another? It was an interesting thought, and one she would have to ask Cole about since he could tap into their minds like she could.

Thankfully the wolves didn’t follow her as she made her way to the river to wash her face and then relieve herself. It had taken quite a bit of adjustment getting used to going outside. Indoor plumbing was such a gift; she was thankful that Skyhold’s many different enchantments and runes allowed for some semblance of technology and advanced plumbing. When she got back to the pack she knelt down and pressed her forehead to Fang’s head and some of the pups that were already awake.

*Travel safely. Howl when you’re home.*

The wolf whispered into her mind in his protective way, growling in sadness as she left but quickly returning to the cave to sleep. They would make their way back to the Dalish camp over the next few days to protect them and keep any traders on their toes as they passed through. She kissed him on the edge of the nose and turned around, immediately taking into a fade step. The plains went past her in a blur and she noticed that since the last time she traveled like this the world was going by quicker. She knew that through training and experience she was growing stronger, but the changes were enormous.

Athena was leaping and bounding over large clearings as if they were nothing. It took much longer for her to stop and drink a lyrium potion. The sun was still high in the sky but she had already ran past the elven baths where her and Solas had stayed. That night felt like it was years ago, but the memory still put a grin on her face. Heat flushed her cheeks and chest, her hands ghosting over the
skin where his lips had touched. The next two weeks couldn’t go by fast enough. Each day since
Adamant had been better in terms of her own recovery. She found that she was guarding her
stomach less during lapses in conversation and that her mind did not drift to Desire’s dream as
often. Day by day the pain lessened, but the hollowness remained within the pit of her heart. The
dream could be one of two things: something she strived to have or a glimpse into something she
could never hope to have.

She liked to think she was somewhere in the middle. That would have to do for now.

She worked herself through a few minor stretches before continuing again, smiling as she passed
the trail that led to the Dalish camp. That was her landmark; home wasn’t far away. Using the last
bit of her lyrium, she pushed herself up the mountain until she was at the edge of the trees by the
bridge that led to Skyhold. Her breath came in ragged pants, sweat beading on her brow, chest, and
back. It felt good to let go and run by herself every once in a while. In those strides, she was free
from her responsibilities, free from Skyhold, and free from that fucking ball coming up. She
understood why it had to happen, she understood what it meant for morale and posturing, but she
was not looking forward to wearing the mask of her role of Sorcière, Hand of the Inquisitor, Witch
of the Inquisition. That mask was heavy upon her face and her background.

She wasn’t raised to be anyone grand with titles. She was raised to live a normal life, saving
people’s lives in a thankless job and living a normal life with the cutely decorated house and the
animals running at her feet. Being in a position of power, having influence, having people that
actually looked up to her and relied on her for guidance. . . she wasn’t sure how to process it still.
Athena let out a sigh, pushing forward from the protection of the trees and the wild to walk pass
the guards that manned the gate. They smiled at her, one of the elven soldiers giving her a nod of
respect. She noted that his face was unmarked and she didn’t recognize him, which meant he was
probably one of the recruits from Halamshiral.

Athena paused, giving him a slight nod in return. “What’s your name, lethallin?”

The elf smirked, rubbing a hand along his jaw before tucking a long strand of nearly black hair
behind his ear. The other half of his hair was braided along the sides. She saw two daggers hidden
along his back underneath his bow. “Illrith, Lady Athena.”

“How goes the keep since we’ve been gone at Adamant?” The soldier smirked, moving into
somewhat of a relaxed posture, his hand rubbing over the top of his thigh to get some dust off.

“It’s been busy. Lady Montilyet works endlessly to get this ball prepared.” He lowered his voice,
taking a step closer to her without even shooting a glance at his human partner on the other side of
the entrance to the bridge. “Some of the people are nervous about the amount of nobility coming.
Many of the Comte’s and Baron’s in attendance are familiar to us. There is fear among the ones
unable to defend themselves that moves will be made in the shadows of the evening.”

She clenched her jaw, hardening her gaze on him with a small nod. “I’ll see to it that the necessary precautions are made. Let them know they will be kept safe. I swear it.”

The elf tapped his right fist over his heart and nodded, leaning his back against the stone pillar that marked the start of the bridge. She made a mental note to memorize his face and name before heading across the bridge. The fresh mountain air cleared her mind and gave her a moment’s peace before she hit the courtyard. Illrith was correct, it certainly was buzzing. There were different people running back and forth with fabrics and materials in their arms. She noted there was an increase of masks in the population and that alone made her roll her eyes, pushing a little faster off of the balls of her feet to turn as quick as she could and make her way up her staircase.

It felt like there was little time before the event and there were things to be done. Dorian said he would take care of getting her dress design to Vivienne’s seamstress Valerie when he got back. She needed to consult Wisdom in the Fade to figure out what the deal was with the Dread Wolf finding her in person. And she desperately needed a bath if she was going to confront Madame de Fer and give her the heart of the wyvern. . . which Dorian had put right in the middle of her bed. She groaned and dropped her bag by the door, picking up the note that was written in a font that came off sarcastic.

Frost rune included. Hope it doesn’t stink, love! -Dorian

Thankfully there was no smell coming from the bag, which it appears her friend replaced with something consisting of a finer material, but she put the object on a table across the room from her armoire and next to the door that led to the battlements. Athena took a moment to breathe in the smell of her room, resting her hands on top of the table and breathing in deeply through her nose. Kain had been here recently but someone had also cleaned, spraying her sheets with some of the vanilla oil that she wore on nice occasions.

Still, she wished she had more time to enjoy the peace. For now, there was business. She tried to take her time but hurried her way through a ritual of a bath with an application of the magical red gel to remove hair that grew on her trip to Adamant. When she picked her outfit for the day, her eyes regretfully fell to the side of the wardrobe that Vivienne stocked. From there she pulled an emerald green corset with a white and black overcoat that formed her body and accentuated her curves. To pull more attention to the color of the corset she kept to black pants and matching boots with a heel, also from her Vivienne side of the wardrobe. She quickly pulled her hair up into an updo with a swirl at the back with the use of pins. Just to keep her face from being plain she tapped some gold eyeshadow on the tops of her eyelids and painted her lips a shade pinker than her normal. Athena moved to walk from the room, swinging the sack with the heart in at her side with a sadistic kind of glee.
When she arrived, Vivienne was at her desk reading a tome so she cleared her throat, waiting for any cue from the First Enchantress to approach. What she received was the raise of an eyebrow and the turn of a page. It was the closest she would get so she stepped forward and gently placed the sac on top of her desk and silently waited. The mage finished the line she was reading before flicking her gaze to the object. With all of the grace in the world, she closed the book and placed it on the corner of her desk, slowly opening the sac before looking into it. Athena honestly didn’t expect a reaction. The mage was adept at keeping her emotions hidden as part of her agenda, but she almost had to stifle a gasp when she saw the slightest softening at the corner of Vivienne’s smile and the sombering of her cat-like demeanor.

“I do not understand. I requested that the Inquisitor fetch this item for me. Why are you bringing it to me instead? Is this a task she pushed off onto you, Madame Sorciere?” With each word, the tone of her voice changed from formal to accusatory, eyes flicking up to meet hers.

Athena shook her head, her lips curving into a soft smile. “Quite the contrary, Madame Vivienne. If you recall, this is the item I used to identify that I knew about this world and of your origins. I understand the public reveal could have been rude and uncalled for but I was in a compromising situation.” She gave the mage a polite smile, relaxing her posture and resting a hand on the outside of her thigh. “Is this what talking like a mature adult sounds like?! “I wished to give you this myself as a token of good will. Women like us need to stick together, after all.”

Vivienne paused, blinking slowly once while gently grabbing the sac with the heart in it and resting it in her lap. She closed the tie and made a perfect knot before resting her hands-on top of it. “This is unexpected, Madame Sorciere, but you have my thanks. Do you have a moment? Take a seat.”

She was in no place to refuse or make up a lie of where she needed to go next so Athena pulled up one of the high-backed chairs lined with a fine blue velvet and sat in front of Vivienne’s desk. “It is no secret that you and I are not the closest of allies.” Athena smiled, allowing some of her sarcastic nature to drip into the expression. “However, I believe there is a mutual respect between us, am I incorrect in assuming this?”

She shook her head once. “No, that is not wrong. I admire you a great deal.”

The mage nodded, standing up from her position while keeping the heart within her hands. “And I have grown to respect you over time as you have proven yourself worthy of such respect. When I first met you, you were immature, naïve, and blind to the responsibility laid at your feet.” Athena managed a twitch of annoyance, but she could agree to the statement. It was just difficult to hear. She was a terrified person when she fell through the rift. She was handling keeping her own secret while learning magic during a time of war. She had the privilege of only learning about war in her
textbooks. She had never seen it first hand or ended someone’s life in an act of violence or self-defense.

“You have changed, my dear. When I said women like us, it was a statement of respect.” She tapped her fingers against the heart and focused her gaze on Athena. “You have taken a great many burdens onto your shoulders. You are an Advisor to the Inquisitor, a reluctant member of the Inner Council, Hero to the Elven People, and a mother figure for two orphans. Did you ever see yourself being in a position like the one you are in?”

Athena made half of a laugh, shrugging while crossing one leg over the other. “I knew I would have to apply my fore-knowledge of the world in one way or the other. The path I am walking is the one the I chose, not something that the world has laid out for me. Would I have expected it? No, honestly. Do I want it to change?” She paused, biting on her bottom lip while casting her gaze to the side. “No. I’m in a position to help a great amount of people.”

Vivienne actually smiled and it was both endearing and unnerving at the same time. “Great things are going to happen, my dear. Make sure you are a part of them. Now with this upcoming event, you aware of the dangers and repercussions from Halamshiral, correct?”

She nodded, lips twitching into a frown as she pushed from her chair and walked to the back of it so she could rest her arms on top of the chair. “Yes, an ally of mine alerted me of the talk as soon as I entered Skyhold. I am making preparations as soon as this meeting is over.”

The curl left the mage’s lips as she focused, nodding with a grim expression. “Be wise in your actions. The Game is not a thing to play around with like your dreams in the Fade. People cannot simply be brought back if you try hard enough.”

_How did she hear about that? Never mind._ Athena remained silent, drumming her fingers along the sanded wood of her luxury chair. “I am aware, Madame de Fer. Any advice given regarding this matter would be greatly appreciated as the days get closer. If you do not mind I am going to begin making preparations right away.” Vivienne raised her brows and then nodded so Athena turned to move, scooting the chair into the desk before turning.

As she left she heard a simple question come from behind her. “Does it work?”

She stopped, inwardly cursing herself but not turning around. “You know of the future, Madame Sorciere, does this work?”
Athena bit down on her tongue, letting a deep breath out of her nose before turning around with a blank expression on her face. It was one she had practiced many times before during her bedside care. It was the face she used when discussing bad news or delicate situations. “I used to be a healer of sorts, Vivienne. Many would ask me the same question you are now. Sometimes I would give them the answer they sought, and instead I would let them try. Women like us... need to know we did everything we could. We fight until the very end and do not accept fate until it is dragged from our claws.”

The First Enchantress paused without response, waiting for a definitive answer. She did not give it. She clenched her jaw and met the woman’s gaze with a ferocity and confidence of her gown. “I am not the one to deliver your fate to you. You need to fight for it—” She then looked down to the heart of the wyvern. “With everything you have. If you do not, you are not the woman I have come to respect.”

Using that as the last word she left the mage’s area, letting out a deep sigh the moment she was out of hearing. The encounter left her hands shaky but she gripped her hands into fists, taking a back way out towards the tavern.

She needed to see a woman about some lizards.
“You need them for wha’ now?”

The elf stood in front of her cages filled with roughly three dozen small lizards, arms crossed over her chest. The creatures were making various sounds and Athena could not help but admire the many different colors they had. Thankfully this particular brand of lizard was close to chameleons. They could hide amongst whatever environment they were in, which worked perfectly for what Athena wanted to try.

“Spies.”

Sera blinked, looking to the lizards and then back to the woman who was still dressed in her finest after her meeting with Vivienne. “Uhhhh-huh. I thought we were going to put these in Gaspard’s pillow.”

Athena grinned, moving her hands to press against her lower back so she could be in a more relaxed posture, even against the support of the wyvern bone she was wearing. “Perhaps afterwards. Look, the big people that are coming in my want to hurt my little people, so I want to put some un-seeable eyes and ears all over the place to prevent that. I’m sure that’s something you can appreciate, right?”

“Appreciate, yeah, sure, great. Like it? No, not really. It’s still weird, right? You can talk to lizards. Ugh!” She paced for a moment before scrunching her lips up to the side, picking up one of the cages and shoving it into Athena’s hands. “I want em’ back, yeah? I like what you’re doing. Not too many of the high and holies would want to do something like that.”

She adjusted her stance with the weight of the cage, smiling as some of the lizards ran across the pad of her finger. Even when she spoke to the insects, they were fragmented one word things. At first, she assumed it was because they couldn’t think of more than that, but now she knew it was because her powers weren’t quite at the level to communicate with all animals as well as she did her wolves. This would require a bit of training and bonding with the little creatures. “Many of the people in danger I helped get from Halamshiral and other places. It would be shitty if I just let them get hurt again.”

Sera shifted her weight from foot to foot, finally flopping back on her cushions by the window. “Yeah – I got you, Athena. I’ll start setting up for the real party after.” The elf winked and Athena could feel her cheeks flush slightly, a smile on her face.
“Leliana and Josephine say it’s not a real party unless someone’s lace underclothes are being pinned to a Chantry wall. Think we can top that?” They both were grinning at one another with a type of child-like glee.

“Definitely. Good thing we have some time to plan. Leave that part to me!” Sera pointed her thumb into the center of her chest, grinning before falling back into her pillows with a laugh. Athena rolled her eyes and quickly exited the tavern, noticing that the Chargers were still not back in their usual hangout spot. They changed training places all around the castle but most of the time on weekdays they were on the battlements doing drills. She ran home and placed the lizards in the loft above her bedroom, keeping them in the line of sunlight so that they wouldn’t get cold while putting a tepid warming rune underneath the cages. She wasn’t sure how Sera managed to take care of three dozen lizards, but she wasn’t about to let them starve or go cold.

Athena walked through the courtyard, thankful for the warming weather. People seemed to give her a better reception now, waving at her or nodding their heads in respect as she walked by. When she had first arrived, they were all afraid of her since she was the stranger from the otherworld. By the time she reached the bottom of the stairs leading up to the battlements near Cullen’s office she heard the familiar grunts of a Qunari and the rest of the Chargers as they ran through their drills.

She instantly smiled, thankful that they were back to some sense of normalcy within their Keep. In between large events it took people time to heal; that was why things like the Ball were necessary. But the people clung to every little bit of the mundane that they could, praying that existential events like Corypheus would soon become a distant dream. She reached the top in her Fade-forsaken heels and immediately froze, arms crossing over her chest as she raised a single brow in a mixture of suspicion and disapproval.

“Come on, Tobi! You keep leaving your left wide open. A templar could easily come in and boom – gone.” Krem was instructing the young lad dressed up in basic leather armor, holding not a wooden but a sword made of steel. He was a part of the drills that they were running and from the look of the scrapes and the dirt on his face he hadn’t just started doing it.

The sight put a fire in her stomach that obviously reflected on her face because Bull winced from the side and quickly side-stepped to put himself between him and Krem with his hands up in surrender.

“How’s it going, Alpha?” He asked cheekily, smirking as Dalish laughed into the palm of her hand.

She flicked her gaze through the Qunari towards her son and back up to him, making a hum of question before shifting her weight from one foot to the other. Something about her outfit made her...
feel powerful, even in front of the towering giant holding a battleaxe on his back.

“The Iron Bull. I see you have a new recruit.” He huffed and crossed his arms as well, looking down at her and actually leaning over to where his face was over hers.

“Yeah. We do. He’s got a lot of catching up to do, but he’s got heart.” She twitched her lips into a protective snarl, trying to keep her voice low because it sounded like Krem was keeping Tobi distracted with another drill of sword-play.

“Yes. He does. He seems a bit young, doesn’t he?” Bull instantly shook his head, cocking half a smile.

“Nah. Besides, in the Qunari he would have been fighting about five years ago. We were built to be soldiers.” Something within her broke because she felt it snap within the center of her chest like a cord wound too tight. Steam left her nostrils in a deep exhale and his face broke, eyes widening for a moment in a comedic moment.

“Oh -shit!”

Athena pushed off from the stone with her heeled boots, using the strength of a fade-step and everything she had in her body to push Bull across the battlements and into the stone wall behind them. He grunted and let out a deep-throated laugh even as all of the Chargers whipped their heads and turned around to see them. Rocky hooted, cupping his hands around his mouth and cheering while Dalish and Skinner passed gold between them, obviously making a bet. She knew in the moment she couldn’t beat him; she just had a point to make.

She was able to land a right hook against his jaw, the strength whipping his head to the side. He ran a hand along it, humming in a moment of appreciation before turning his focus, and full strength, back to her. He grabbed each of her hands with his, pushing her off while keeping a hold of her to pin her to the ground. The impact of the stone on her back forced the wind from her lungs but she steeled, feeling a surge of confidence when she heard a voice from the side.

“Come on, Ma! Get up!” She didn’t open herself up for an attack by looking to the side but she knew the voice was Tobi’s. There was a timid excitement within his tone. He probably felt conflicted cheering against his new leader. Still, knowing he was on her side, even if he didn’t know the context, gave her the strength to flash a wolfish grin at Bull.
She pushed with her might against his chest, using the sharp end of her heel to twist over an already existing scar. Bull flexed against her but winced back when she hit a sore spot, releasing one of her hands to guard the spot before she broke skin. She used that advantage to roll out from underneath him, breaking from his other hand to jump onto his back and pull back on his horns.

“Fuck – not fair, Alpha!” Bull stood up and rammed backwards into the stone wall, knocking the breath out of her again but she held on, wrapping her legs around him to try and get a better hold. He took a step forward and quickly turned around, wrapping his large arms around her forearms and jerking forward with a roar that only a Reaver could produce.

The resulting move was dirty, and something he knew only she could survive. Her hands instantly lost grip around his horns and her body was vaulted over the side of the wall. She met his gaze as she fell in a kind of slow-motion state, shaking her head back and forth as she cleared the edge of the wall. It took a second of falling before she could twist and removed her jacket. Vivienne would kill her if she ruined it. The moment it left her back she spawned her flames and pushed with a pulse of magic, soaring up the side of the Keep and using that momentum to tackle Bull into the ground again, elbowing him in the chest while reinforcing the pose by placing her free hand over her clenched fist to strengthen the blow.

He immediately fell on his back and she landed in front of him, allowing her flames to extinguish while dropping her jacket. She jumped on him again and they began to wrestle, moving from one pin to the other while a string of curses fell from their lips. She almost had forgotten what they were fighting for when she felt two strong arms link underneath hers and hoist her up from off of Bull, calling out in a tone so focused it silenced all of the battlements.

“Enough!” Tobi’s eyes widened and she looked to him, winking to let him know that she was okay, even though Cullen’s grip was overstretching her left arm by just a hair. She could feel a drop of blood going down her left cheek and when she glanced at Bull she saw that she had scored a hit or two. There was no contest in their strengths, he was the obvious winner. The Commander released her and wordlessly pointed into his office, looking at both of them with a hardened gaze.

She took her jacket from Skinner’s hands, winking at the elf triumphantly before sauntering into the office. Bull was right behind her, suddenly composed like the military leader he was. The moment the door shut Cullen nearly burst. “What in Andraste’s name was that about? You two were acting like children.”

“Not entirely. Apparently, children are allowed to take up arms and fight in a war.” She glanced over to Bull with a shrug, breathing deeply in through her nose and out through her mouth in an attempt to get her pulse and breathing under control.

Bull let out a sigh and rubbed his hand over his face, chuckling when he saw that there was blood on his hand. “Alpha – er – Athena was not aware that her ward, Tobi, had shown interest in being a
Charger. Today was the first day she had seen him doing drills.”

Cullen’s lips twitched but other than that his expression did not change. “Even though he has been doing drills with the soldiers left behind since we left for Adamant?”

“He what?!?” Athena exclaimed, taking a step towards the desk with a renewed vigor. Bull reached over and put a hand on her chest, making a curt shake of his head to show that Cullen was not joking around like they had been before.

“He is of age. He came to me and expressed interest. It is right.” The blonde-haired warrior stated plainly, resting his hands on top of the hilt of his sword.

“But he is a child! Weren’t you his age when you were recruited?” She asked, pleading that he would somewhat sympathize with her plight.

He only nodded. “Yes, and I was considerably older than the rest of the boys in my class. I was behind, as is he. Bull is right, he needs to start on his training.”

Bull huffed his chest, shooting an apologetic glance to Athena, who was now holding back angry tears. His expression softened, his whole posture relaxing as he tilted his body to try and tear her livid gaze off of Cullen’s. “Hey, Alpha. The people in your world, how old were they before they could train?”

She dragged her gaze to his, rejecting her body’s urge to cry. The phantom pain revived itself within her gut and she was fighting the reflex to guard her belly. “Eighteen. Eight-fucking-teen.” She looked back to Cullen with a dark expression. “You were a full-fledged Templar by then.”

He hesitated but gave her a curt nod. Bull moved to open the door and she let her anger get the best of her. She threw her jacket on in a flourish of a movement, tightening it on with a tug of her arms before relaxing her hands at her sides. “And how did that work out for you that young, Commander?”

Cullen visibly winced but she was too angry to care, moving past Bull and out of the office towards the warm reception that was the Charger’s. Krem pushed Tobi to the front, who confidently pushed out his chest and rested his hands on the hilt of his blade like a certain Lion did.
“Hey, Ma’.” Tobi said, slowly giving her a smile that melted away all of her anger. She sighed, running a hand through her now messed hair before pulling him into a cheesy hug that was sure to ruin his reputation.

He immediately returned it, burying his face into her clothes and wrapped his arms around her. “Missed you.”

“I missed you two – where is your sister?” He pointed out towards the woods, still keeping his face near her chest. “Probably out in the woods with Loranil. They’ve been hunting together. Ma’ what’s a vallathlin?” He mispronounced, taking a step back with a twisted expression of confusion. “She’s been talking about wanting one, but I don’t get why.” Athena looked to sky, cursing whatever God that inspired her children to want to grow up so young.

“Never mind that. This – fighting, being a soldier – is this what you want? You’re just a boy, Tobi. You have time to decide.” The boy, no, teenager shook his head, running a hand through his dirtied, short brown hair.

“No, Ma’. This is what I want. I was too young and weak to protect my parents, at least this way I can help protect you and Leafy, my family.” Athena cupped his face, stroking his cheek while letting out a sigh full of contentment.

“Well. How can I say no to that? I know you didn’t need it, but you have my blessing.” The Chargers all let out different sounds of excitement, Krem meeting her gaze with a smile of his own. “Just know, they aren’t going to take it easy on you. You have the three best leaders of the Inquisition teaching you how to fight.” She pointed from Krem to Bull and then behind through Cullen’s open door. “Do not take them for granted. Learn everything you can, soak up what they give you. You are a smart kid. Do me proud, Tobi.” She lifted his chin with a soft flick of her hand, winking at him.

His bottom lip quivered, eyes glossing over. He stepped forward and hugged her one more time, nodding into her clothes before stepping back, his expression and posture hardening back into the warrior she had seen when she ascended the stairs. “It’s a promise.” He turned around and went back to Krem’s side. The Lieutenant nodded at him, patting him on the back as he walked by and went to go back and drill with the other Charger’s. He then smiled at Athena, gesturing over his shoulder.

“We have a few more drills to run through, but do you want to eat dinner with us all after? Tell us about the wyvern hunting!” She winced and rubbed the back of her neck, trying not to look over her shoulder at the door that was now firmly closed.
“I wish, but I think I need to muster up an apology dinner.” Bull huffed and rolled his neck, drinking an elfroot potion that Dalish snuck him.

“Aw, thanks, that would be awesome.” The Qunari then winked when she stammered to start an apology of her own for him. “None needed. Don’t worry. I know you’re protective over your family. It’s a good trait, Alpha.” He then pointed with his thumb back towards Cullen’s door. “Might want to throw in something good like those breads Syla makes. Whatever you said? That felt deep.”
Apologies are Hard to Swallow

Athena let her hair down and ran her hands through it on the way to the kitchens, allowing the waves to form from keeping it up in a wet bun all day. Dinner was in full steam when she snuck in through the back door, catching a quick embrace from Syla who noticed her immediately. The red-haired elf grinned, grabbing a basket from by the door before wordlessly filling it with different treats and a fresh load of baked bread filled with fruits. “Lady Athena! How was Adamant? Did my package sustain you for long?”

She smiled, relaxing against the counter at the less-busy end of the kitchen. “They were fine, Syla. Really it’s unnecessary. Here, let me get that for you!” She hurried through and snuck into the cooler, grabbing a bottle of wine and hiding it at the bottom of the basket underneath the bread and other cheeses.

“No, I can never pay you back, truly. Even if the chef is – “ Her glance darted over her shoulder, her plain face flushing in frustration. “Hard to get along with, it is better than my working conditions at Halamshiral. You have done me a service I can never repay. Ooh these are freshly delivered – take some of these.” The elf stuffed what looked to be chocolates into the basket before covering the lot with a cheese cloth type of material.

“Any decent person would have done the same. Hey, do you know an elf named Illrith?” The woman blushed, perking up with a nod. Athena could only smirk back and take a bite of an apple that another elven worker threw in her direction with a hoot of greeting and a wink.

“Yes. We worked together back at the Winter Palace. Why? Is he in good health?” Athena nodded and relished in the taste of the sweetness of the apple, swallowing it down before wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. She stepped forward to where her forehead was almost touching her companion’s and spoke low.

“He spoke of some...anxiety in relation to the upcoming event. Do you agree with this rumor?” Syla nodded wordlessly, her entire posture and facial expression hardening. “Do you know the names of the people who came from Halamshiral and the nobles they were related to, or who could have been offended by their leave?” She nodded again, hands rubbing off on the tops of her thighs. Athena stepped forward and brought her into an embrace, making sure that the juices of her apple did not drip onto her friend.

“Your talents are truly wasted here. You and I will speak tomorrow. I have a plan but I need names, physical descriptions, where they will be staying. Leliana and Josephine can help me with some of those details but you have the most crucial things.” Syla smiled, nodding with a new energy while looking up to the ceiling.
“I – yes. I can help with this. Do you have an office I should meet you at?” Athena paused, laughing through a fresh bite of apple while shaking her head.

“I suppose I don’t. Maybe we’ll work on that tomorrow as well. Get some rest, Syla! Thank you for dinner. I’m sure it will be delicious as always.” Athena kissed her on the cheek quickly casually before leaving, waving at the other people in the kitchen before taking off back towards Cullen’s office.

**How did that turn out for you?**

She winced, filling her mouth with apple to keep from cursing at herself. It was rubbing salt into a wound, she knew that. Bringing up his past, Kinloch Hold, was a dirty trick and she did it in anger. It took a big person to apologize when they were wrong, and that was something she was working on. Sunset was a busy time at Skyhold with people retiring from their duties and heading to either the mess hall or the tavern to unwind. Blackwall gave her a nod of recognition as she headed up the stairs and at that point the basket was so heavy she temporarily held the apple in her mouth. She nodded back to him, smiling over the green fruit before skipping up the stairs.

Athena knocked on the door by kicking it. Immediately she heard Cullen ask: “Who is it?” His voice still sounded angry. She winced underneath the apple, fumbling with the basket when she heard another sound on the other side of the door. Kain was barking excitedly, running over to the door and scratching at it. He obviously had dragged the Commander along because there were some reluctant footsteps before he opened the door. The black wolf ran out and around her, jumping up behind her and kissing her ears and any open skin he could find.

Being silenced, she glanced down to the basket in her hand before looking back up to Cullen with an innocent shrug. He at first raised his lips in a snarl, but then curiosity got the best of him and he looked underneath the cloth, taking in a deep breath of the scents that were hidden underneath and losing in his fight to not smile. “You remembered I liked the – Oh for Maker’s sake get that thing out of your mouth and come in.” The Commander ushered her in and she smiled at how there was another Kain-sized pile of Cullen’s clothes on the ground near his desk with a worn in circle in the middle where she assumed the wolf slept while she was gone.

Athena walked to the desk and put the basket down, looking around and realizing there weren’t any extra chairs. “Did someone rob you of your furniture?”

He chuckled, walking over to the ladder that led up to his loft. As he ascended, he called down to her. “No, Lady Josephine sought it fit to upgrade my office while we were gone. I assume she wanted to do it while we were absent so I could not argue with her.” There were things rustling up
in his loft before he climbed back down with a blanket thrown over his shoulder. She was spending her time keeping Kain from the food, dropping down to her knees and kissing the tip of his nose.

_I am glad you are safe._

_Yeah, me too, bud. Missed you._ Athena whispered into his mind, scratching his ears with both hands while flicking her gaze up to Cullen, who was laying out the blanket for them to sit on for dinner. “You know she is going to replace them with some Maker-awful upholstered chairs that make you look like a dignitary, right?”

The Commander rolled his eyes, sitting down at the edge of the blanket while gesturing to the basket. She sat on the opposite side, bringing it over her shoulder and between them. They set out the meal in silence, anxiety rooting itself in her stomach. “Cullen...”

“Let me eat first. I could smell this bread from up by my bed.” She chuckled and broke him off a piece before slathering her own piece in a tart raspberry jam. They snacked in silence, each of them making different sounds of appreciation at the quality of the food. Athena used the small dagger on her thigh to open the bottle of wine, giving them each a glass. She leaned back on her hands and looked up around his office. _Anymore lyrium? _She asked the wolf next to her, who only let out a groan that meant no.

“Oh right. Waiting is making me nervous. About earlier.” Cullen looked over the edge of his glass of wine, raising a brow in her direction that suddenly made him look smug. She deserved it, she knew that, but in that moment, he looked like the brother that knew he was right. Damnit, he was. “What I said was a really low blow and I’m sorry. If anybody knows what you went through it’s me but I was just scared looking at Tobi. He’s just a kid, you know? He’s already been through enough. I’m just scared of how much time keeps slipping through my fingers and I feel like there are things I’m missing - Why are you looking at me like that?”

The Commander shook his head, trying to hide the look full of sympathy, no, pity he was just wearing. Athena nudged the bottom of the foot with hers, bending down to find his gaze again. “I-I appreciate the apology, Athena. I understood you did not mean it. You said you understood what I went through, but you only spoke briefly of what happened the night after Adamant happened.”

She cringed, a hand slowly going to rest on her belly out of habit to guard it. He didn’t notice, emptying what was left of the wine in his glass into his mouth. She grabbed the bottle and filled both of their glasses back up when he was done, processing exactly what she wanted to say. “You are aware that I am able to walk through the Fade as Solas does, correct?” He nodded and she continued, letting out a heavy sigh before looking up towards the ceiling. “My first friends in this place were spirits. I had managed to influence a Desire Demon enough that is became a spirit of Inspiration, my best spiritual companion. Then, months later, I did the same thing to a demon of
Rage and it became Harmony.”

Athena wetted her mouth with wine, sighing at how it gave her temporary liquid confidence to talk about it. She had told Dorian and Solas, Rathein was going to be next if she brought it up. The more she talked about it, the easier it would have to get. “When we were in the Fade, the Nightmare demon poisoned their minds. It turned them against me and they turned to their former selves. Rage was at my back holding me in place and Desire then attacked my mind.”

“Maker- Athena.” She raised a hand to stop him, drinking more wine and wincing as it left a taste on her tongue. “I had been training for months, knowing Nightmare would try to do the same thing. I had fortified my mind and body, making sure that it would be nearly immune to demon influence. But I had just forced everyone from the Fade knowing they would be hurt if they stayed too long, and I had just seen my friends tortured into forms that did not reflect their true selves. I was weakened, it was a moment of weakness and that’s how the demon was able to get in.”

Kain whined at her side and she began to idly stroke her hands over her fur to keep her body busy. She could feel in her stomach that she was close to trembling. There was a tension in her muscles and that normally led to shaking, crying, or a combination of both. “Desire was able to find my deepest wants, something I thought I had given up on long ago.” Athena sighed, feeling her chest shake. “A family, children, some form of stability. I looked down into the eyes of my future son and heard his voice so clearly in my head even now it feels like a memory.”

Cullen didn’t say anything but she couldn’t stop herself, the words tumbling from her mouth like water overflowing from a dam. “In that dream, the bitch made me pregnant. Gods I must have been close to bursting. That’s why when I came out I couldn’t hear anything. I couldn’t listen to others, I couldn’t be around people, I had to be focused on the next task.” She gesticulated with her free hand, putting a pin in each statement as tears filled her gaze. “I’m sorry I snapped at you that day as well. I wasn’t ready to hear kind words – “

She had been too busy keeping her gaze fixated on the ceiling to notice him moving but with the grace of a cat he was able to lean over and pull her up into an embrace from his kneeled position. Her breath caught in her throat, face suddenly pressed against the fur of his overcoat that smelled of elderwood and armor polish. “You did not have to share that with me, but thank you. I am sorry for what you went through. Nobody deserves to go through that, Athena.”

Athena let out half a sob, shaking her head in the fur as a denial to herself to fully cry. He strengthened his grip on her, gloved hands pressing into her back while he spoke low and calm next to her ear. “You were not weak. You did everything you could, Athena. We all know that. Has anyone even thanked you for ending the Nightmare demon?”

She couldn’t help but laugh with a bitter tone, shaking her head while mumbling into his fur. “Do
you get thanked every time your soldiers are successful in a mission due to your training? It is expected of us, Commander.”

He pulled her back to where he could look at her, shaking his head back and forth before sighing. “That is different. You went beyond what any normal person would, could do. Ending that demon probably saved countless lives that didn’t even know they were in danger. So, on behalf of all of the silent people out there, thank you. You did magnificently on the battlefield for someone with no military background prior to coming.” When he spoke in military terms he regained some of his conversational confidence, brow furrowing as he dropped his gaze down to her lap and found his words.

Athena chuckled, wiping her face with the palm of one hand. “Th-thanks, Cullen. For the words and the hug. You all aren’t really a touchy bunch compared to where I’m from so it’s appreciated.”

Cullen straightened his posture, letting out a hum of amusement while rubbing the back of his neck. “Mia was the same way. I was lucky if I could breathe when she wasn’t hanging around my neck.”

They both chuckled, her gaze falling into her lap when she noticed there was a blush on her cheeks. She wiped off residual tears before reaching forward and grabbing her wine glass, raising it to him. “Drinks for the thankless positions we hold?”

The Commander turned around and grabbed his own glass, tapping it against hers before drinking with a smirk on his face, his gaze never leaving hers as they both drank. Afterwards he wiped his mouth with his hand and returned to sit, but not as far away as he was before their conversation. Athena swirled the wine within her glass, arching a brow at him with a mischievous grin. “Commander perhaps there are sweeps or missions that need your supervision during the time of the Ball. Surely a military leader such as yourself is too busy with important things to make time for frivolous dancing, music, and politics.”

He scoffed sarcastically, digging through the basket until he found one of the chocolates. He popped one in his mouth and then shrugged. “I do not think you’ve ever found yourself on the receiving end of Josephine or Leliana’s scrutiny. It is not a position I want to find myself in. The power those two women hold... Maker help the person that angers them.”

“Noted. I am going to have my hands full with performing, training lizards to be spies, and not murdering Gaspard when he comes within ten paces of me.” The Commander nearly choked on his wine, coughing into his gloved hand until his cheeks and chest were flushed. She calmly sipped her drink, realizing she was now working up a buzz that would hopefully help her sleep that night.
“You’re doing what with lizards? That sounds... like Sera’s doing.” Athena grinned, clicking her tongue against the back of her teeth with a nod.

“Some of the people we rescued from Halamshiral are nervous about the ball so from now until the ball I’m going to be training on my shapeshifting magic to try and ‘bond’ with the lizards. If that’s successful, I will place them all around the Keep and be able to communicate with them to keep tabs on what’s happening during the Ball. They can camouflage themselves with their surroundings so they will be my invisible eyes and ears through the whole thing. If anyone wants to try anything, I’ll know it immediately.”

Cullen blinked, looking into the bottom of his wine glass while squinting. She assumed he was wanting to make sure he heard the words right, but he shook his head with a laugh on his lips. He continued to laugh until she frowned, kicking the bottom of his foot with hers. The wine was bringing a flush to her chest and neck, making her frustration look that less powerful. “Hey – stop laughing! It’s going to work!”

The blonde-haired warrior cleared his throat, giving one last chuckle while setting his wine glass down. “I assume you are going to tell Leliana of this? If you can pull this off – I don’t think the Spymaster is ever going to leave you alone. If you can mobilize and communicate with animals like that on a wide scale, what else do you think you could do it with?”

It was Athena’s turn to look at him almost deadpan, the wine catching up to her. “Fuck. I get your point. Ravens – shit.” She pulled her knees up to her chest and groaned, hiding her face within the fabric of her pants. Kain began licking her skin wherever he could reach: her hands, her ears, and the little bits of her cheeks that were showing. “I never asked for this. I don’t want to be some kind of weird, witchy animal spy-master that listens in on people but I don’t want my people to get hurt either.”

She felt Cullen pat her on the head, his hand ruffling her hair as he huffed under his breath. His voice dropped low and she could feel him scoot closer to her, his other hand petting Kain on top of the head and then under his chin. “I did ask for my position either, Athena. Add it to the list of the thankless jobs that have fallen into ours hands.”
Athena and Cullen finished off the bottle of wine over talks of the ball, his sister returning his letter and potentially visiting, and Kain. The wolf had been going back and forth between them the whole meal, begging for scraps from Cullen while appearing like the most trained Mabari when he was at Athena’s side. It was disgusting to see the contrast. Cullen helped her to her feet and was walking her back through the courtyard to her corner of the battlements on the opposite side of the gates. “You spoil him.”

“I do no such thing.” The Commander stated smugly under his breath, glancing down at the black Hinterlands wolf who let out a whine riddled with guilt. The wolf ran underneath his gloved hand, nibbling at his fingers where there had just been a piece of bread from dinner.

“An over indulgent parent and a liar. Not a good combination, Commander.” She teased at him, climbing up her steps and realizing how easily the wine was affecting her. Each step felt like a mountain and she found her gaze narrowing and focusing on the tasks ahead. He beat her up the stairs, apparently unfazed and much better at handling his liquor than she was, and opened the door for her. Kain immediately ran onto the bed and snuggled up next to a small form that was curled up on her side.

Athena arched a brow, leaning in the doorway to let some of the moonlight in. What she saw made her smile. Lev’adin was curled up wearing one of Athena’s tank tops, which was probably long on the thin elf’s frame. She was bundled up under the blankets and already fast asleep. Her mouth fell open in a kind of awe, gaze softening as she walked towards the bed. Cullen chuckled underneath his breath, closing the door behind him soft enough to not make a sound.

The woman sighed before tip toeing over to her wardrobe, pulling out one of Solas’s shirts from his drawer. She quickly removed everything and left it in a pile on the floor before slipping his beige and striped shirt over her form. The fabric hung to her mid-thigh but it was enough for her to climb into bed next to her daughter. She slipped onto Solas’s side, gently sliding her arm underneath the young girl’s neck to support it. Leafy furrowed her brows, nuzzling her cheek into her arm as a series of small whimpers came from her lips.

“Fen’Mae. . .I thought you wouldn’t be home yet.”

“Shh da’assan. Sleep now. I’m home.” Kain pressed himself against the young girl’s back, keeping her in place as she faded back into sleep. Athena smiled, letting out a sigh and relaxing into the mattress. Something was comforting about being home. It wasn’t her room, or the mattress. It was - it was the smell of him still in the pillow that she slept on. The smell of the woods and his potions clung to the fabric of his shirt and she sighed in missing him as she slipped her mind into the Fade.
The green wisps of energy passed through her hands like she was passing through water, a soft smile coming to her face as she felt a cool breeze that accompanied it. Without even thinking she rolled her shoulders and put her magic into the movement, clicking open the barriers that kept out intruders when she dreamed. Where her hand was weaving through the streams of magic appeared another hand, his body materializing in a wave of energy and color until his fingers laced with hers.

“Vhenan.”

The greeting was simple and flirtatious, his lips curved into a smirk that melted the guard over her heart. Before she even had a chance to speak he pulled her in close, wrapping an arm to hold her against him at her lower back. He pressed his lips against her hair, taking in her scent as he fully solidified within her dream.

“Val Royeaux, huh?” Athena asked, not even waiting past their greetings to call him out on the detail that Dorian had accidentally let loose. He chuckled into her hair, pushing her back so that she could see his amused expression.

“It is a favor for Lady Montilyet. There is a large list of books she wishes me to acquire and I can assess their authenticity for the people who are requesting older editions of the tomes and literature. I also have my own personal list of requirements for my studies and the Inquisition’s libraries are lacking.” He raised a brow, waiting to see if she would react or not. She twisted her lips to the side and crossed her arms over her chest, taking a step back from him.

“Uh-huh. That’s totally a secret worth keeping.” He gave her a wolfish smile and she rolled her eyes, flicking her hand at him in a dismissive gesture. “Fine. Keep your secrets.” He continued to smile, taking a step towards her. Like a dance, she stepped back, smirking in return.

“How was your hunt?” Athena paused and that stilling allowed him to close the distance between them and wrap her in his arms again. He bent down and brushed his lips against her forehead, sending a quick shudder down her spine. There was something oddly confident about him and she knew she was thinking too into it, still, she hummed at his question and gave him the response he was probably anticipating.

“How did you know?” She could feel his lips curl into a smile against her skin, his grip tightening on her shirt that she was wearing.

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succumb to his embrace. She pressed her cheek against his chest in her usual spot, twirling the string of his wolf bone around her fingers.

“Well, I didn’t so much hunt with my pack as I did lead them around. The real hunt came with someone that looked. Well. Too familiar.” She wrapped her arms around him and nuzzled her face into his shirt, breathing in his scent knowing that she was getting the aroma both in her dream and in the physical world. There was something calming about sleeping in his clothes, knowing his presence was there even when he wasn’t. It was something real, tangible. On Earth having a drawer at your significant other’s house was a big step, so it felt right that they had done the same thing in Thedas. Things as simple as a drawer bridged the gap that the game left and it made their relationship feel more stable, as if it strengthened their foundation.

“Too familiar? What do you mean by that? Are you alright?” Solas persisted, allowing her to break off and walk away with almost a coy smirk on her face. If the wolf in the Plains was him, he was toying with her somehow. Either he was testing the waters on how she would react to his true presence or he was getting his strength back being able to shapeshift. Something felt different about the wolf in the Plains and the wolf that she remembered bringing her into Thedas. Perhaps it was a gut feeling, but she prayed that they were not one in the same.

“Remember how I said that Lev’adin and I had an encounter with something that paraded as the Dread Wolf?” He hummed in answer and she turned on her heel to him, now walking down a path framed with trees backwards with a shrug. “Well it happened again, only this time I was alone.”

Her voice was clipped, almost annoyed about the whole thing. She rubbed the back of her neck and let out an overdramatic sigh. She looked over her shoulder at her lover and saw him sigh as well, pinching the bridge of his nose in contemplation. “What did this apparition say?”

“Oh, asked my plans for the future of the people and my opinions of the Elvhen Gods. I really don’t think he liked what I had to say about the latter part.” Athena was overly relaxed about the entire situation on purpose, trying to prod at him, trigger some sort of reaction. But he was a God of over thousands of years. He would not be so quick to crack or show any triggers unless he allowed her to see him. It’s how he was able to hide his identity from an organization like the Inquisition for so long.

“I do not believe you and I have discussed them at length. What opinion do you have of them that he would find so distasteful?” Solas followed her step like a shadow, staying somewhat out of sight but close enough to where she could feel his aura at her back. Athena let out a laugh, wringing her hands in front of her with a genuine smile on her face.

“Solas, I think that is a conversation best saved for in person when there is something to lubricate my confidence. Honestly I am not as knowledgeable as you in the subject but I.. am not the biggest fan of the Elven Gods. They seem selfish, too wrapped up in their own agendas at times to look at
their people and see what is actually happening.” She put her hands together and pointed them to the ground for emphasis with her words, slowing in her gait so that she could see his expression. His face was neutral, but kind, curiosity lighting up his features.

“You speak in the present tense, vhenan.” Athena flushed on her cheeks, rubbing the back of her neck while looking to the sky. When she spoke of them, she more focused on Mythal and what she knew of that Goddess.

“I think it foolish to completely dismiss an entire Pantheon that once ruled the world immortal and ageless. Things like that, do not just disappear overnight, correct? Their presence lingers, clinging to the years as they pass.” Athena felt movement next to her and she realized that it was in the physical world, her brow furrowing. She looked off to the side and sighed, shaking her head back and forth. “But. Like I said, a conversation for another time. Leafy is waking up and I have a meeting with the Spymaster.”

Solas came behind her, wrapping his arms around her abdomen to pull her against his chest. He kissed the top of her head gently, allowing his lips to linger on her skin before he bent down and kissed the skin directly underneath her ear. The heat of his breath sent a shiver down her spine and the reaction caused him to smile. Athena reached up and held his head there, turning hers just enough to where she could kiss him gently. “The Spymaster? What are you planning?”

Athena shrugged, pulling on that cord that connected her to her body. “Oh, nothing large, just amassing a spy network using animals. Ar lath ma, Solas.” Her body disappeared from the fade, her fingers stroking along her cheek as she pulled herself awake. The sun was beginning to peak in from the stairs that led up to the loft so it was time for them to get up anyways. Lev’adin was twitching in her sleep, elvish mumbling trickling from her lips in a hurried tone. Athena moved and kissed her daughter on the back of her head, nudging her head with her forehead.

“Wake up, sweetheart. You’re having a bad dream.”

Leafy scrunched her face up and whined, instantly hiding her face in her arms while jerking her knees to her chest. “Not a bad dream, just, running.”

Athena sat up on the bed, pulling the blankets off both of them while walking downstairs to begin running a bath. She ran her hands over the faucets and flexed her fingers to crack her joints before running water that was so hot steam began to crawl up the sides of the tub. “Running from anything specific or just running?” She called out above, tilting her head slightly.

A slightly deeper voice responded up from the loft, exhaustion intertwining with each syllable. “Just running, ma’. She’s had these since you’ve been gone.”
It took a fade-step to climb the stairs and stop in the loft. . . where Tobi was waking up from a pile of blankets and pillows next to the mural Solas had made. She let out half of a laugh, leaning back against the wall of the stairway. “I’m gone for Adamant and you two decide to move in? You know once Solas comes back it won’t be like this. I’m sure Bull has a bed with you for the Chargers, Tobi, and Loranil could probably find a bunk close to his for you, Leafy. Until he gets back, you’re both free to stay here.” She crossed her arms over her chest and let out a sigh, opening her arms to allow Tobi into a morning embrace. Thankfully she fell asleep wearing her bandings and her smalls underneath her lover’s shirt, but they were her adopted children so part of her didn’t care.

Leafy came up behind her, the growing girl resting her head on Athena’s side and coming in for a side embrace. “Alright you two, I have to get ready for a meeting with the Spymaster. You can use my bath after I’m done. Leafy, stay up here until I say it’s safe okay?” She quickly kissed both of them on the head before nearly skipping downstairs and slinking out of her clothes and into the bath. Normally she would have wanted to start the day with something aromatic but since it was only a meeting with Leliana she wouldn’t need to jump through the same hoops and ladders that Vivienne would expect.

In under ten minutes she bathed, dried her hair with hot air from a spell she conjured, and was dressed before approaching the loft. The kids had curled up under the blankets again, allowing the sun to come in. Tobi was holding Leafy protectively, shielding her from whatever was causing her to run at night in her dreams. Athena could not help but grin at her two loves. She bent down and pulled the blanket higher on their bodies before opening up her cage of lizards and bringing one onto her arm. Kain stayed at her heel, staying within arm’s reach at all time while shooting cautious glances to the lizard.

*Hide.*

It was her first command but it was worth a try, glancing to the small thing on her arm that couldn’t be bigger than her palm. The lizard scurried up and down her arm before flicking its tongue out onto her arm. It paused, shook its head back and forth, but eventually came up to her scalp and hid within the waves of her hair. She smiled and moved through the castle on the way to Leliana’s office.
Leliana was up in what Athena titled the “Crow’s Nest”. Even though they were ravens, the title seemed apt. The Spymaster was sitting behind her desk with the morning’s latest batch of letters nearly falling off of her desk. Athena bent down and snatched one from midair as it was on its way from the table to the floor. The redhaired woman looked up with a nod of her head. “Lady Athena. Madame de Fer informed me that you would be coming by.”

Athena cleared her throat and nodded, smirking at how Kain was beginning to antagonize the ravens. Leliana paid him no mind but gave her all of her attention. “I am sure you are aware that we might have upset some of the lords and ladies of the court when many of their elven workers came with us after Halamshiral.” The Spymaster tilted her head ever so slightly so Athena took that as a sign to continue. “Some of the ones we have brought into our force have made me aware that there are concerns about potential backlash when these same nobles are coming to Skyhold for Wintersend. I have a potential plan.”

Come.

She held up her palm and smirked as the lizard ran from the midst of her hair down her arm until it rested in her palm. Leliana saw its shape about half way down her arm and smiled as well. The lizard’s camouflage fell off when it reached her palm, its normal green skin reflecting the candle light. “Sera is letting me borrow about three dozen of these and I hope to plan them around Skyhold and on the freed people themselves. Unfortunately, I will be the only one able to communicate with the creatures but we will have eyes and ears around strategic locations in the castle. If there are any plans for backlash, I plan to hear about it and intercept.”

Leliana pulled her hood down and let out a hum of consideration, her hands sifting through her papers before she pulled out a map of Skyhold. She placed two paperweights on opposite corners and looked over it for a moment. “We would need to test this first with our own people, to see how accurate the information can be collected? Have you done something of this magnitude before? It sounds like there would be a lot of chatter to sift through going through your mind.”

Athena nodded, twitching her hand and allowing the lizard to up on her shoulder. As its body calmed and its breathing slowed the color disappeared from its skin until it completely blended in with her shirt. “The closest I have come to something like this is when I hunt with the wolves.” She pointed out of the window towards the forest and smiled. “Typically, we communicate with movements and a kind of pressure directing us where to go and of course there is the language of nature, but my magic allows me to communicate with about half a dozen of them. From here until the ball I was going to train with them, find ways to bond and expand this magic. I know this is a risk, but I feel responsible for telling them they would be safe with us. I need to keep on that promise.”
There was a pause as Leliana began to roll up the maps, tying them together with a small leather string with a sigh. “I can assess the foundation of the keep with Cullen and Josephine. Lady Montilyet will know where the nobles are staying and their affiliations. Do you have someone willing to help you with all of this? Somebody you trust?”

She smiled softly, pointing with her thumb down the stairs at her back. “Yes, Syla. From the kitchens. She is a friend of mine. She – “

“Was the first one you saved. I understand. This is a large project, Lady Athena. Your bedroom is not a suitable space of operations for it. You are the only Inner Council member without some kind of working space.” She paused, pulling up different pieces of paper before looking to her. Athena had a sort of shocked look on her face, excitement lighting up her features. “Is there something wrong?”

Athena put a hand over her mouth, trying to hide her expression and smile but failing incredibly. Instead, she chuckled and shook her head back and forth. The lizard buried underneath her hair to hold on and Kain instantly came to her side. “I don’t know. I had this whole presentation prepared in my head because I was expecting some kind of argument or large amount of mistrust.”

Leliana smiled and gestured down the hallway, nodding with a hum. “You have earned our trust, Lady Athena. It is not as if you just fell from the Rift. You have...suffered, with the rest of us. You may have a difficult time convincing Commander Cullen to trust the words of lizards on shoulders, however.” They began to descend the stairs together and Athena couldn’t help but scoff in laughter.

“He seemed amused by the idea last night at dinner. He thought you would try to get me to do the same thing with your ravens.” Leliana paused in her step, laughing herself while pulling her hood back up over her head.

“The idea was not far from my mind. Let us consider the lizards a test run. If it is successful, we can attempt to expand.” The two walked as if they were on air. Leliana’s bard and rogue training helped her blend into crowd’s and Athena was doing her best to follow, shooting a playful wink towards Dorian on the way down the stairs while mouthing “later” when he began to start interrogating her. They passed through the rotunda and she couldn’t help but smile at how the place buzzed with his magic even when he wasn’t there. There were obviously wards in places that she could not identify, but with a quick pulse of her own aura she felt like there was a gathering of magic around his desk.

“Have you thought of what you are going to play at the ball? Josephine has received letters of
interest from those who heard you sing at the ball.” There was a teasing tone in there but Athena ignored it, smiling at the Ambassador when they entered her office.

“At first, I was thinking songs that reflected my winter holiday like the one I played you before, but now that we’re growing closer I think love songs would suffice. I am still trying to familiarize myself with your holidays, but doesn’t Wintersend typically come with marriage proposals?” Josephine nodded with a smile from where she stood behind her desk, her body bent over her papers and books.

“Yes, our poor Commander will not know what hit him. How can I help you ladies?” Leliana swayed her hips in her gait, touching Josephine lightly on the cheek before stealing her chair behind her.

“Our Sorciere needs an office of her own. You are more familiar with the available space of the Keep than I. Do you know of any place suitable?” Josephine looked to the Spymaster with a nod, gesturing for both of them to follow her out. Leliana rolled her eyes and scoffed since she had just gotten comfortable, kicking up from the chair and following at the back of their steps. The three women passed through the main hall again and cut down the stairs that led to the kitchen.

“This was a thought already on my mind, Lady Athena. If you are to be the Hand of the Inquisitor, you are in need of your own work space. Leliana and I have received multiple letters addressed to you and either discarded them or handled them yourself, but I think it is time we begin to teach you the Game.” Leliana made a small sound, purposefully nudging her shoulder against Athena’s as she walked by.

“She already proved herself during the Ball, Josephine. She means we mean to expand your knowledge of it and improve it. Vivienne spoke highly of your potential. You know how high of a compliment that is coming from her.” Athena sighed uncomfortably, squirming and rubbing the back of the little lizard on her shoulder. It readjusted itself and nestled down into the thin fabric on her shoulder.

“Yes, her and I came to a middle ground yesterday. How did you find this place, Josephine?” They were in the room directly underneath the throne room with the large columns with the paintings on the walls. Athena knew that the kitchen was close and she could already smell whatever bread Syla and her companions were working on. The rooms that held the small basement library the room with the good liquor were in front of them but they headed to the left, to a door underneath the stairs.

“I wanted to bring more attention to this room and make it a place for nobles to visit. By having an office of a member of the Inner Council down here, we will revitalize this part of the Keep.” Josephine exclaimed with excitement, pushing open a door that led into a place that was filled with
light.

Because there was no back wall. Much like the undercroft where Dagna crafted her odd weapons and armors. It was a larger space, like Cullen’s office, where the back wall of stone had been blown out either by an attack or time. The view that was left was the mountains and the drop below. It faced the back of the air current so it wasn’t as strong of a gale force as what her bedroom loft received when the window was open, but it was enough to circulate the air and send a chill down her arms. “Dorian had spoke of how you liked to fly on the missions and I wanted to give you a place where you could well, depart whenever you needed a moment alone. This faces the back of the castle so not many people would be able to see you. Plus, the might of the room and the risk of your guests falling adds to your, well, character Madame Sorciere.”

The Ambassador teased her, gesturing to a large wooden desk that was already in the center of the room. Athena smiled, walking over and running her fingers along the top of the freshly sanded wood. “I... do not have the words. Thank you, Josephine – Leliana as well.” The two women smiled and Leliana knocked on the walls, realizing that the sound echoed within the cave-like room.

“I think it fits you. You and the Commander both chose crumbling places for your residence. You allowed us to repair yours but he still insists on sleeping underneath that hole in his ceiling. This isn’t decrepit, it shows that you thrive in chaos, can handle the storm.” Her calculating eyes looked over to her and Athena felt the gaze, turning and nodding with a wolfish smirk.

“I will use this to my advantage. I will begin warding it and repairing it to make it safer for myself and my helpers, but this will be perfect. Lady Josephine, Leliana will inform you of what I need for the upcoming ball. I’m going to be scrambling for the first few days studying and trying to communicate with my new creatures but... this will work.” Athena turned around and leaned on her desk, fully grinning with appreciation at the two women. “I do not know how to begin thanking you.”

Josephine smiled, her bright personality lighting up the gloominess that came with the cave. “It has been a long time coming, Lady Athena. Your help to the Inquisition and the Inquisitor is immeasurable. Shall I brief the Inquisitor on what you will be working on?” Josephine arched a brow, looking to Leliana with a curious gaze.

Athena raised a hand and shook her head. “No, she will have other stressors to deal with. As her Hand, this burden is mine. Do not keep it from her or lie, but do not shove this in her face either. Hosting an event such as this will require all of her patience. This...this I think I can do alone.”

Leliana nodded and began to walk towards the door, stilling when she saw it was already opened and Dorian was walking in with a low whistle. “Ooh – new digs I see. Perfect for jumping out of when the talk of politics arises! Strategic move, my dear.” He winked at Athena, waving at the two
other women that walked by him. They nodded to both of them in respect before closing the door behind them, the sound bouncing off the walls. Athena hummed, tapping her finger on her chin while circling around.

“I wonder if a silencing rune on the walls will stop the echoing effect. . . ” Dorian nodded, pointing to the two opposite walls.

“Yes, and will keep any sounds in that you do not want to get out. I see you’re rising in your responsibilities. What spurred all of this —” He waved his hand in front of him with a teasing smile, wrapping his free arm around her. “Ambition? For someone who hates the Game and the politics so much, you are diving head first.”

Athena rolled her eyes with a grin, pulling him into a full embrace. He was freshly bathed, his colognes stirring within her mind as she let out a sigh. The lizard that was on her shoulder trekked across her back and rested on her beltline. Dorian kissed the top of her head and then took in a deep breath of the crisp air that flowed through the room, letting out a sigh of contentment.

“So, the ball is coming up, the Inquisitor says we are to split up and go to the Emerald Graves and Emprise du Lion afterwards, and Solas is out of town. What do you want to do today?” He pulled back and squeezed both of her shoulders, looking down with a smile that screamed adoration.

Having him near was the closest she could get to family, and she was grateful for every moment that they spent together. Kain licked the creature on her hip, which caused it to scurry underneath her shirt and to her shoulder again. The feeling was ticklish, a surprised shout bursting from her lips as a shudder racked down her spine.

The green lizard shuddered as well, thinking back its first word that she was able to hear. Sun? Athena blinked at it, smiling with a nod. “Dorian, it’s hard to explain, but I have to learn how to talk to over three dozen little lizards and this one is telling me he wants sun. Do you have a place you like to lay out on to get a tan?”

The happiness on her friend’s face was indescribable. The smile spread over his face and crinkled the skin at the corner of his eyes. He reached down and grabbed her hands, bringing them to his lips so he could kiss them for emphasis. “My dear, I thought you would never ask. I have the oils, you bring your things with you and meet me by the library.” He looked out at the view, squinting his eyes with a smirk before turning them towards the door. He went up the stairs towards his personal room by the garden and she took off towards her room with a Fade-step.

Athena whizzed through the courtyard and burst through her doors. Both of the children were gone but there was an excited chorus of greetings from the dozens of lizards in their cages. She opened the doors and put her hands on the ground, allowing them to run up her arms and find spots to hold onto. Their hands had a sticky texture to it, meaning they would be perfect to stick to walls or
people as the night went on. They found refuge underneath her shirt, atop her breasts, and in her hair. It took a moment but she grabbed her emerald green smalls and bandings, thankful that she had managed to do some self-care before she met with Vivienne.

The only thing she was missing was a pair of sunglasses, but she figured Valerie or Dagna could fashion something similar to them if she asked. Athena took in a deep breath of morning air before heading out to meet with Dorian with three dozen lizards finding their resting places on her body.
Soaking up the Rays

“Okay but tell me where we are going first!”

Dorian was dragging Athena along the battlements, a giddy smile on his face as they nearly collided with people. Kain had abandoned her to go run with Lev’adin in the forest, stating that the young elf felt like running. She completely understood, because with Dorian’s excitement she had a feeling she would be tanning under the sun all day. She had been able to grab a head of lettuce and greens before meeting with him so the lizards would have something to snack on throughout the day. He led her to what she knew to be the abandoned tower that would soon be turned into a Templar training center or a mage’s tower. There were some workers already fixing the foundation but he led them up a ladder.

“I found this – ergh – when we were first getting settled. Us Tevinters require a certain amount of sunlight and warmth to keep this youthful glow we have.” He paused on the ladder and gestured to his face, winking towards her when she rolled her eyes at him. “Vivienne has joined me here once or twice when we had a day to relax. I’m so glad you finally asked! Ah – here we are!” He helped her up to the rooftop, wincing in disgust when his hand touched a lizard. Athena stuck her tongue out at him before climbing up over the side. They were on the roof of the tower where nobody could see them if they laid down.

The top of the wall was around three feet tall so it was perfect for their desired activity. Dorian crouched on his knees and stripped down to his smalls, which were shorter than the average man’s, and sat down on a blanket that he had brought with him. The blanket had plenty of space for the both of them so he rubbed oil on his skin before passing the bottle to her. Athena looked at the set up, arched a brow, and then shrugged. The lizards moved down her body as she removed her clothing, folding her shirt and jacket in a nice pile while carefully switching out her normal bandings for something that would match and resemble a bathing suit. She had to crouch underneath the safety of the wall to change everything out but once she was comfortable she took the bottle of oil from Dorian and spread it on all of her skin that was showing.

She kept the ribbon to pull her hair up between her teeth while she did it, making sure to get every part that was susceptible to burn like her ears, the back of her neck, and crux of her breasts. Other men would have been watching her do the ritual but thankfully Dorian was not like other men. He had a lizard in his hands and had a curious expression on his face. “You know snakes are the token animal of Tevinter?”

“Oh? Is that why all of your textiles and flags have snakes on them?” Athena teased, pulling the ribbon from her lips and pulling everything up on top of her head in the shape of a messy bun so it wouldn’t get stuck to the oil on her skin. Dorian and her decided to get their backs tan first, turning onto their stomachs and interlinking hands with a soft sigh. She turned her head towards him and smiled as the lizards all moved into the sun between them on the blanket. A few of them moved into her hair and hummed at how the light brown of her hair kept warmer than the blanket, making
it the perfect nesting place for the cold-blooded creatures. Dorian let out a similar sigh, resting his head on a small pillow he had brought with him. There was a lingering smile on his face and she squeezed his hand, bringing his attention to her face.

He opened his eyes and raised his brows. “What?”

“You’re smiling about something. Come on, spill. We literally have all day and I can only stand the silence for so long.” He turned his head and pressed his forehead into the pillow to try and fight his blush.

“Aren’t you supposed to be focusing on ‘bonding’ with these little squirmers?” Athena smacked his hand with hers, taking it back into her grip before smirking.

“Come on, spill. The next week or so is going to be miserable if all I’m focused on is work work work. Moments like these with you are what is going to keep me sane. So, please, mata’?” She asked, sliding in their pet name for each other which caused him to roll his eyes. The sarcastic expression faded back into his boyish smile, his mustache curling up at the edges with his lips.

“I’ve just. . . been having good dreams lately, alright?” Athena paused, focusing her gaze on him before suddenly sitting up in realization.

“Wait – seriously! That’s so sweet! I knew you two had chemistry!” She was too excited to see his smile turn somewhat saddened, his gaze falling from hers to the pillow underneath him.

“I think you are the only person in Skyhold that would be excited over me having dreams with a former demon. It’s not sweet – it’s complicated.” She rubbed her thumb over the top of his hand, trying to coax him back into the relaxing positions they were just in.

“I understand complicated, Dorian. Regardless of what it is, I’m happy to see you smile like you just were. Happy suits you.” The Tevinter smiled and turned his face back towards her, the flush on his cheeks fading as the sun began to rise over the edge of the battlement’s walls. They went for hours flipping roughly every thirty minutes and catching up with her talks with Vivienne and the plan for the balls. During the periods of silence, she was able to actively communicate with six of the lizards when they were crawling all over her, and four at a time when they weren’t touching her. Their original thoughts came in short fragments, as if their minds were racing a thousand miles a minute. She was able to find out that they liked the lettuce she grabbed and that the stuff Sera fed them made them sleepy.
She herself was falling in and out of consciousness when she heard a hoot of a laugh from at her feet where the ladder was. Dorian snapped his head up and scoffed, kicking his foot out at Bull who was shooting them a shit-eating grin. “Alright, now this is a view. Boss! Get up here!” The Qunari looked over his shoulder and Dorian had the decency to stand up and put his arm over his smalls. Athena didn’t care, in fact, she wriggled into the blanket to further plant her position. The lizards all made themselves visible and hid into the safety of her skin, most of them crawling over her belly and making sounds of enjoyment at how warm her skin was.

Rathein came up besides Bull on an opposing ladder, raising her brows at the tanning pair. She winked at Athena and looked to the lizards with an amused expression. “Ah – what the Fade, Athena? Are those Sera’s lizards? I thought she had put them in Solas’s... Oh never mind. What are you doing?” The short-haired mage and her lover both climbed the ladders and came to sit on their sides. Dorian made a sound of discomfort before closing his eyes and tuning Iron Bull and his lingering gazes out.

“Learning how to speak with three dozen lizards at once while getting a spectacular tan due to Dorian’s help. We both needed a day to relax since it’s our first day back together from Adamant. Did you guys make it back okay?” The Inquisitor nodded, allowing one of the lizards to crawl up onto her hand. The one in question happened to be one of the ones she had connected with so she was able to hear its stream of thoughts as it went from one woman to the other.

“Not as warm. Hand feels weird. Hot! Hot! Suddenly hot. Better now, under sleeve.” She smiled and closed her eyes as Rathein lifted up the edge of her banding to see the difference in tan underneath. Athena didn’t care, they were like sisters and they had both seen enough of one another for it to be normal. Unfortunately, Bull had seen all of her as well so there was no point in shirking away from the touch.

“Yeah. It looks like you’re doing good work here. Would you mind if I join you up here? It’s a pretty good hiding place and Bull only knew about it – “ There was suddenly a blush on the Inquisitor’s cheeks but she cleared her throat and continued. “From his sweeps of the place. I have some letters to catch up on and it’s too pretty of a day to be stuck behind my desk.” Bull made a sound of consideration and shrugged, patting on the top of his thigh.

“I have something I need to read as well. Alright. We’ll be back!” They began to descend their respective ladders while Dorian scoffed under his breath.

“I didn’t think he could read... “

“I heard that, Vint!” The mage then sat up and held up his bottle of oils as if he were going to throw it.
“I meant for you to, you menace!”

She laughed at all of them, opening her palm for the lizard that was on Rathein to walk over and sleep on. Dorian leaned on his side, looking her up and down with a small shrug. “How’s the progress going?”

Athena shrugged in return, flicking her gaze over to him and slowly turning on her side so the lizards on her stomach could move and the ones on her side could relocate. “Slow, but, good. I mean I didn’t turn into a wolf overnight but this . . . is harder than I thought. They think really fast too so when I do get a connection it is hard to keep up.”

He moved his hands until the space between them was forming an orb-sized sphere. He raised a single brow. “Why not use your foci thing? That’s what it is for, right? Amplifying your power?”

Athena reached over and quickly slapped his hands with a flush on her cheeks, her head whipping to the side to make sure nobody was around them to hear anything. When she spoke next her voice was low and hushed, anger and fear intertwining to speed up her words. “What about on my life did you not hear? Plus . . . it hasn’t come yet, at least not as easily as it did on the other side. I think I need more ingredients. I accidentally ‘donated’ some demon rags to it. I need something stronger; maybe after this I will go to Dagna and see what we’ve picked up that she isn’t using.”

They both layed back down and took the moment of silence before Rathein and Bull came back. They weren’t as graceful as they could be but the couple ended up using the empty space above Dorian and Athena’s head to cuddle next to each other and work. Rathein had a clipboard similar to Josephine’s to write letters on and Bull had some sort of book in his hands on the history of Fereleden army tactics. The scratching of the Inquisitor’s quill against her scroll was actually kind of comforting, the sound reminding her of Solas and how that was the same sound that filled his rotunda most days when he wasn’t working on his masterpieces or reading a tome written in another language she couldn’t decipher.

Thinking of him put a cold feeling in her stomach, a hollowness that made her realized she missed him. Even in the moments like this he would be sitting close to her, barely allowing his thigh to maybe touch some part of her since they were being watched. She smiled and let out a sigh, Bull catching on immediately.

“Hey, when it he going to be back?” She opened one eye and looked over to the Qunari, who was giving her a cheeky smile that made her want to wrestle him again.
“I don’t know. He said he’s in Val Royeaux – “

“Oh! He told you?” Another voice came from the ladder, Cassandra’s face lighting up with excitement at something Athena obviously wasn’t getting.

“About his mission from Lady Montilyet to retrieve books from the Inquisition? Why does that have everyone so excited? Unless he is getting you another chapter of Swords and Shields . . . “ Athena teased, pushing her foot against the book that the Seeker was carrying.

The dark-haired woman made her typical noise of disgust, hiding the blush that was on her cheeks when Dorian and Bull gave her a look and gesture of ‘what the fuck’. Athena pretended not to notice, laying back as another lizard walked across her face and fell asleep on her hairline. Cassandra sat on Athena’s right in the shadow of the wall, pulling out the latest chapter of Swords and Shields with a smirk in her direction. “To answer your question Bull, I have no clue. Honestly, it’s kind of in the back of my mind with this ball coming up. You guys need to keep a body wall between me and Gaspard at all times or I might slap him if the feeling rises.”

Bull scoffed, looking up from his book as Rathein adjusted her position against him. “I could watch that instead of the dancing. I like that this one is on our territory, but it doesn’t mean they still aren’t planning to do some shit.”

Rathein whined, sitting her head back to where she was looking directly up at her kadan. “Don’t even start. I’m looking forward to throwing a party; it reminds me of back home. The civil war is over, we are making progress with Corypheus. I just want to have a good night, surrounded by my friends and loved ones – “ She then reached up and touched Bull’s face with a wink. “And drink heavily when all of the nobles are gone.”

Dorian broke from his silence to laugh, pinching the bridge of his nose while shaking his head. “I think that sentence was proof enough that we are related, even distantly.”

The group had a small chuckle, Cassandra huffing under her breath while casually turning a page. Athena felt at home in their small group, her hand reaching out to grab Dorian while her other stretched up and touched against Rathein’s thigh. When she had first come through the rift, she didn’t think she would ever get any kind of stability. Corypheus was still out there looking for elven ruins, Fen’Harel was at her tail, and the future was still so uncertain, but in that moment her heart was content.

The rest of the day passed with them making small conversation and Dorian eventually giving up on tanning. He slid his clothes back on, fetched a book, and sat with his back against Cassandra’s.
The sun was close to hiding behind the stone walls and Athena felt enriched from the sun’s rays but mentally strained from bonding with her creatures the whole day. She never hit more than ten at a time and even then, it was like chatter. She felt like Dorian was right; she had a power source in her hand but it was a matter of using it. It felt like the group was about to fall asleep when there was the sound of a door slamming.

“What do you mean you haven’t been able to find her? The War Council was supposed to meet an hour ago.” Cullen’s voice rang out through the room below them and Rathein shrunk down to where her head was hidden underneath the scroll she was working on.

“Oh-oh.”

Bull extended her arm over the Herald’s stomach, protectively pulling her close. Cassandra shut her book and sat up straighter while Dorian looked over his shoulder, already smirking at the thought of the Commander climbing the ladder. Athena met his gaze, grinning madly with a newly formed mischief. The lizards all scurried off of her body and into their own pile at the edge of the blanket, munching on the last bits of lettuce she had packed for the day.

“Ser, it’s not so much that I couldn’t find them, just they did not want to be disturbed.” Athena recognized Loranil’s voice and she had to cover her mouth to hide her chuckle, her heart pounding in anticipation for every vibration that she felt from Cullen ascending the ladder. The elf climbed the opposite ladder, leaning his arm on the root when he got there with a forced serious expression on his face.

“There are many strategies to go over before Wintersend and – oh Maker.” Cullen had chosen the ladder that ended up with him looking from her feet straight up her body. Athena felt comfortable, what she was wearing was the equivalent of a bathing suit in her world and it was what she wore when she cleaned herself on her travels in the creek with the rest of the party members. The Commander’s face instantly fell, his eyes slowly rolling up her body as she sat up with a smirk on her face. She saluted him with two fingers from her forehead, running a hand through her now sweat-slicked hair to push it out of her face.

“Oh come now, Commander, certainly even you knows the importance of a day off. Besides! She was working the whole time!” She pointed over her shoulder, smiling when she caught his gaze and saw the deep blush on his cheeks and neck. Loranil couldn’t help himself, whistling with a small wave.

“Evening, Fen’Elgara.” He spoke in their shared tongue, mischief filling every syllable. She stuck her tongue out at him and rolled her eyes, standing up to where she was looking down at both of the men.
“If I say we will be in the War Room in thirty minutes, will that please you?” Cullen cleared his throat, regaining control over his features and nodding.

“C-considering you are already late, any sooner would be appreciated.” He looked to Loraniil and nodded, descending the ladder quicker than he climbed up and walking out towards the battlements. Bull chuckled low in his throat, patting Rathein on the stomach.

“Alright, you two. Go work. We’ll be at the tavern when you get off.” Athena slid her clothes over her bandings and stuffed the extra fabric in her pockets. She then whistled, sending a pulse to the lizards and chuckling as they scurried up her pants legs and finding places to sit while she went down the ladder. Rathein soon followed, grabbing her hand to lead them off to the War Room with a grin on her face.
Athena had a drink with everyone after their day off atop the crumbling tower that would soon be a place for the templars or the mages. Supplies to completely repair Skyhold were coming in daily so it wouldn’t be long before they had found enough logging stands or quarries to repair everything. Leliana had mentioned that the hole above Cullen’s bed was at the top of the list and that the Ball would be the opportune time to send a mage, a builder, and some supplies to his loft while the rest of them were in the ball.

The poor Commander wouldn’t know what hit him.

There was still a pit in her stomach, something that she couldn’t shake with a glass of Dorian’s favorite wine or one of Rathein’s favorite chocolates. She had only been able to get connected with six or seven of the lizards, and even then, their thoughts were choppy. She realized she never had a formal education in terms of magic like most of the mages there and there was so much she could do on “natural talent” alone. It was frustrating. She went to bed silently, only exchanging few words with Tobi and Lev’adin, before falling asleep before they did. They stayed up in the loft telling stories of their days with the window open while she drifted into the Fade, instantly putting up a barrier so she had some time to herself before allowing her lover or other spirits to come in.

It was her little corner where she could be irrational and senseless. Athena let out a wordless scream of frustration, throwing her hands into the air while summoning up a comforting scene with a large couch that looked to be a mixture of a bed and a loveseat. It came out far enough so she could collapse on her side and lament with her responsibilities, knitting her brow while chewing nervously on her bottom lip.

Why did she volunteer to try and train a lizard army of all things? Wolves came more natural to her. She could shift into them, tap into their pack mind, and they were her favorite animal. Lizards... used to freak her out. She used to get geckos around the door of her house and they would live on top of her trash can. She would wait for them to move out of fear of them jumping on her when she had to take out trash or come through the door where one was sleeping right where she needed to put her hand. Everything just felt so off about them.

There was a probing at the edge of her barrier that immediately put her on edge. She wasn’t ready for anyone yet. The feeling wasn’t the normal cold she would be expecting at that point. It was kinder in a way, softer as if someone was placing their hand against her magic. Athena’s eyebrow twitched in annoyance and she let the presence through, instantly regretting her rage when she saw the image of Wisdom appear within the room she had created in her mind.
“Your mind is heavy, Athena.”

The damned spirit had a habit of breaking through her walls, to the spots where she was most vulnerable. Tears stung her eyes, instead of running down her cheeks they floated to the side and evaporated like strange wisps of magic. “W-wisdom. You look well.”

The spirit smiled and slowly broke into a chuckle, crossing her arms over her chest. “Thanks to you. The memories from before my passing are still being pieced together, but I remember much of my past. You have grown immensely since I first saw you, Victoria.”

The name stung almost like an insult and she visibly winced from it, crawling back on her couch with a hand up to guard her from the spirit’s kind words. “I guess so. There has been a lot on my mind lately, I suppose that is why you were drawn to me?”

The woman nodded, walking up and gesturing to an open end of the couch where they were sitting. Athena glanced to it and nodded, bringing her knees up to her chest in a self-conscious gesture while continuing to nibble on a piece of dry skin on her bottom lip. “Your friends have informed me with what they could. You have a large task in front of you, it seems. Even still you are in unique situations we have not seen before.” The spirit huffed a laugh, clasping her hands in her lap while relaxing her shoulders. “I suppose it is your other-worldly background that gives you this creativity.”

“I signed myself up for a task I thought would be easy. Every other thing I have done just kind of came to me naturally. Solas says I use magic in a way he hasn’t seen— She flicked her eyes to the spirit with a small shrug. “In a long time, but still. What if I can’t get it right? I don’t want people that I have promised to protect to be hurt. There are people actually looking to me now for guidance and protection. I was better when they were all afraid of me. That was easy – to keep to myself and try and help the Inquisition in small ways.”

Wisdom let out a sigh, looking to the side and gently placing her hand atop Athena’s knee. “Do not think of your help as small. I once told you to use what you knew to do something and you have don’t just that. I would not be here if it were not for that knowledge and planning. There are many who owe their lives to you and trust in you because you have proven yourself time and time again. I have been around for longer than most mortals can imagine and have seen the rise and fall of great leaders. It is rare to find one who is willing to look down when they have already made their way to the top. You still care, Athena.”

Athena slowly released her knees and sat in a normal sitting position, gripping the cushion of the couch beneath her as some sort of refuge in the conversation. “There are just so many thoughts, possibilities swarming around in my head I don’t know what to do? I need to be able to speak through three dozen creatures while protecting all of those we saved from Halamshiral. Racist
nobles don’t normally concede easily, this I learned from my world.” She scoffed, rolling her eyes at some of the politicians and high-ranking officials that were in her country. She never understood how someone could hold so much hate in their heart for another individual, but those types of personalities seemed to travel across worlds.

“You have the tools, Athena.” Wisdom jabbed her finger into Athena’s left palm and at the swirling energy that was itching there. She twitched her fingers and effortlessly summoned the orb within her palm. It was already glowing in a soft white light and pulsing in tandem with her breaths. She twitched her lips into a frown and closed her hand, dismissing the object before it grew too tangible within the Fade.

“I’m. . .I’m afraid to use it in the physical world. People want this sort of thing for themselves. I’m tired of collecting secrets that I cannot share with the people closest to me.” Wisdom pressed her lips into a line, looking out past the barrier into the twisting landscape of the Fade.

“That is the burden of power, Athena. You must do what is necessary. You would not have come as far as you have if you were not willing to. You have nearly given your life multiple times already. You will not grow if you do not use the tools already in your arsenal. Your struggle is one shared by powerful women over eons of time.” There was a vibration of her barrier, a rush of cold air running over her skin. Athena turned to Wisdom with a hum of slight confidence, placing her hand on her companion’s shoulder.

“Thank you, my friend. You still manage to pull me to where I need to be, even when I do not always wish to follow.” She allowed her barrier to flicker so Solas could enter and he smiled at the sight of them together. The spirit placed her hand over Athena’s, smiling with a slight nod.

“I am always here, if you ever require my counsel.” The spirit then dissipated into the air around them, her form breaking down into small, glowing bits of spirit dust that flowed with the energy current that existed within the Fade. Solas walked up and looked to his love, sensing that something was distressing her. Instead of sitting next to her on the couch, he walked up in front of her and dropped to one knee, taking her hands into his while meeting her eyes with a caring gaze.

She took one of her hands and cupped his face, leaning forward to capture his lips to find her moment of solace within her dreams. He brought her hands to his lips next, brushing them across the tops of her knuckles. “I see why Wisdom found you. Your mind is full.” Athena couldn’t help but chuckle, scooting forward on the couch to where she could lean forward and touch his forehead to hers. He sighed and rested one of his hands behind her neck to hold her there, running his aura along hers until they were intertwined. It sent a shudder down her spine but it was a welcoming sensation, a minor form of release that stole the tension from her shoulders and back.

“Yes. I wasn’t as successful in my experiment today as I thought I was going to be.” She paused,
dropping her eyes to the ground while knitting her brows. “Do you ever . . . feel like you’re standing on the precipice of something that could change you? Like you might not be able to keep going the way you were?”

There was silence between them. His fingers flexed on the back of her neck, keeping her still as he took in a deep breath and sighed. He then uttered his answer, barely a whisper that was drenched in something that resembled sorrow. “Yes.” He allowed them to separate so he could look up at her with a gaze full of knowing. He brought both of his hands to hers and stroked his thumbs across the tops of her knuckles with a sigh. “It seems you are realizing the burden of duty, vhenan. Do not let it weigh heavily on your heart.”

Athena let out a defeated sigh, leaning forward to kiss his forehead because even that small bit of touch brought some peace to her mind. “I did not sign up for this.”

He chuckled, the tone hollow and soft. “The best ones never do. For some inexplicable reason, the universe has given you this burden, and you are one of the ones strong enough to bear it.” He then broke a smile, looking up and catching her chin gently with his hands so she could feel the weight of his gaze. “It is one of the reasons for I care for you so much. You are stronger than you know, Athena.”

Looking into his eyes, seeing the deep blues of his gaze reflect the colors of the Fade, put a knot in her stomach. It was partially from the anxiety of the situation and the rest was her wanting and missing of him. She smiled, catching his hand to kiss the center of his palm. He made a hum of appreciation from the gesture before she turned to him. “If that’s the case, I have some work to do. You work on coming home to me, okay?”

He smiled in return, happiness lighting up his features as he moved to stand. “That I will. My work here is slow. The Orlesians are not quick to move for someone with pointed ears.” Athena scoffed and rolled her eyes, finally leaning back onto the couch.

“Excuse my French but that is so fucking stupid.” Solas raised a brow, processing what she said but quickly chuckled, nodding in agreement before sitting next to her. She realized that she had used an Earth phrase, her eyes widening with a smirk. “Sorry, that’s a saying from my world. Here it would be like a Ferelden saying ‘Forgive my Orlesian’ before releasing a slew of curses like a sailor.”

The elf leaned back and laughed, rubbing the back of his head. “That is fitting for them. Perhaps that is a phrase you could start in Thedas? With the ball coming up, I am sure it would catch on quickly.”
Athena stood up from her spot, feeling like she couldn’t sit still. There was too much to do, too many things to plan and figure out. Dreaming like this, spending time with him, felt selfish. Solas stayed on the bed, nodding when he pieced together why she was standing. “Go, ma’fen. You have the hunt in your eyes. I cannot tear you away from that, but I am grateful for the moment I was able to spend with you.”

She turned back towards him, stepping forward into an embrace here he kissed the top of her stomach and she stroked her hands over his neck. There was a flicker like lightning through her heart, where she realized that this was close to the same position in her nightmare where he was kissing her belly that was swollen with child. She blinked it away, closing her eyes with a wince before groaning. “Alright. No rest for the wicked, I suppose. Dream well, vhenan.”

The dream dissolved around her and she woke at the same time the sun was peeking through her loft window. She quickly dressed, making sure to wear her two enchanted rings and the cooldown amulet she received before Adamant. It was going to be a day of work so she quickly threw her hair on top of her head in a high ponytail, securing her fly-aways in place with a thick ribbon that acted as a headband.

She went to the mess hall, quickly grabbing an apple from the end of the table before finding Dorian in the crowd. He was sitting across from Varric and Bull eating when looked to be a plate of breads and jams. The dwarf was in the middle of a story when she came up and slid in next to Dorian, taking a large bit of an apple before winking across the table in greeting to Bull. “I’m telling you, Sparkles. Bianca is the one story I don’t tell. She’s just a one of the kind weapon; that’s it.”

Athena scoffed and rubbed the juices from her mouth with the side of her hand, Bull instantly catching onto the sound with a small smirk. Varric looked over at her and rolled his eyes with a melodramatic groan, slamming one hand on the table while pointing the other finger at her. “Watch it, Walker. Don’t be –“

She put her hands up in surrender, noting the slight change in his tone from playful to serious. “Don’t be what? You’re right. Bianca is a one of a kind weapon. Hey, Dorian, you free today?”

The mage arched a brow and popped a grape into his mouth, looking to the two men before looking back to her. “Yessss, it depends what you want though? As much as I enjoyed our day yesterday, I couldn’t sleep because I felt like one of your friends came home with me.” Athena couldn’t help but giggle, trying not to choke on her apple while she laughed into her free hand.
“Um – experimental magic and tinkering with things we’re probably not supposed to in my new dungeon of an office.” Dorian’s face broke into a smile and Bull grumbled something about magic underneath his breath before drinking ale from mug that looked large enough to fit a gallon of liquid in it.

When he was done taking a sip he licked the foam from his lips and gave her a hard stare. Athena met it, reaching over and grabbing his mug to tag a long, slow drink from it with her gaze never leaving his. She liked to poke at him when he was trying to use his Ben Hasserath tricks on her. It’s not that she found herself immune, she just knew he was a liar by trade and always looking for something to poke through. When she put back the mug he glanced down to assess how much she had drank and huffed a laugh. She was doing her best to contain a cough with how strong the ale he chose was.

She settled for a clearing of the throat, nodding to him as her eyes began to water. Bull then broke into a smile and gestured with a quick jerk of his head towards the door. “Alright you two, play nice.”

Dorian picked up a piece of bread and took it with him to go as Athena nearly dragged him out of the mess hall. They walked into the main hall and he looked to her with a grin. “What do we need, trouble maker?”

Athena couldn’t help but grin in return, clapping her hands together and resting her lips on her fingers while thinking. “Get what you need for casting. I need to get some ingredients then meet me in my office.”

“Your office. Look at you being all important.” He puffed his chest to mock her, twirling the end of his mustache even as she shoved him in the chest.

“Go! I’ll see you in a few minutes.” Dorian turned on his heel and left towards his room while Athena went down the stairs next to the Inquisitor’s throne and went into the dungeon. Dagna was sitting at her crafting table, pounding on a white hot piece of metal with her hammer with different varieties of runes next to her. Athena put a barrier over her eyes to keep any shards from spraying her while she hollered with her hand cupped around her mouth.

The dwarf perked up and smiled, putting the metal and her hammer down with a nod. “Lady Athena! Ooh! I’ve been making progress on our project!” She whispered the last part under her breath, pulling out a box and removing the false bottom from it. There was a Silverite-lined prototype for a prosthetic, different lines of hollowed out metal going from the elbow joint down to the hand. Athena’s eyes widened in surprise, her fingers running over it.
“Wh-What are these? This is amazing, Dagna!” The Arcanist beamed with pride, itching the side of her head while pointing to the different areas.

“These are going to be lyrium veins and up here I plan to inscribe runes that will make this less painful to wear while also being secure enough to draw mana from their motions and will. Here is where they’ll strap themselves in using this type of fabric because it has shown to be more resistant over time – did you ever get the wolf armor I finished? Oh wait here it is!” The woman spoke quickly and without taking a breath, showing her different levels of design while gesturing to another box underneath the armor crafting table that was roughly the size of a wolf.

“I’ll have someone come and get it. Do you have all of the crafting ingredients down here? I need some for my own research, if that is okay.” Dagna’s face lit up and she pointed over to a well-organized and categorized wall of things, going from basic to rare items. Her neat handwriting was underneath every drawer and shelf so it made it easy to find what she was looking for.

Masterwork.

“What are you researching?” Athena scrunched her mouth to the side, opening the and on her hip to put the different materials in.

“Elven magic. Dorian found a book and we’re going to test some of the spells on powerful objects.” She lied, glad that she was facing away from the dwarf so she wouldn’t see the instant flush on her cheeks. She made sure not to take any items that were unique and only grabbed the ones that had extras in them, and only grabbed them with her right hand, her left hovering to the side so she wouldn’t accidentally ‘absorb’ anything like the demon rags.


Her hip-bag was beginning to be weighed down so she waved to Dagna and raced up the stairs, keeping her hand on the pack so it wouldn’t slip off and pull her pants down with it. It was difficult to slip through the main hall without making quick pleasantries with visiting nobles or familiar faces from the Keep, but she managed to keep it to a couple of interactions. Dorian was waiting for her in the office and towards the backend near the cave opening he had set up a containment circle like when they had begun to train her phoenix-form.

Instantly she smiled and walked into the circle, catching a lyrium potion with her left hand while
“Alright, so what are we doing, Mata?” He asked while spinning his staff within his hand. He turned around and put a magical lock over the door and reinforced it with a ward so people couldn’t come in unannounced.

“Well, doing what you wanted to do.” She took out the object and started with the simplest one, placing the halla horn in her left hand. There was a tingling underneath her palm so she fueled her magic into it, the object lighting up with her magic before disappearing. Dorian turned around just to catch the last half of it, his jaw slightly slacked open in awe.

“I see. You’re trying to summon it? That is exciting. You’re pulling power from these objects – “ He pointed to them all with the end of his staff. Athena confirmed his suspicions with a nod.

“Yes, to power this in the physical world. It was crafted in the Fade and is imbued with tons of spiritual energy. I tried to pick ingredients that would be fade-sensitive to help strengthen the connection, like the Silverite and fire essence.” She then picked up both materials and one by one absorbed them. The sensation in her hand began to mirror what she normally felt in the Fade but much more subdued. This felt like she had a rock in her hand that was gently pressing down into her skin.

“I want to say be careful, but then the mad mage in me also wants to push you to do more. It’s a lovely combination, perhaps I should of brought wine in case you blow your hand off instead. You sure you got this?” Athena rolled her eyes, picking up the dragon blood next. She put the vial in her hand, considering if this counted as magic, before ignoring the thought and allowing it to disintegrate as well. Suddenly the air shifted around them and she grinned, clenching her hand into a fist as her eyes fell to the last ingredients. “All I need is half a chance.” Wyvern heart. “A second thought.” Spirit essence. “A second glance I’ll prove.” Ironbark.

“I got whatever it takes.” She whispered under her breath to a rhythm playing inside her head. Dorian arched a brow and cleared his throat, cupping his hand around his ear sarcastically.

“Pardon?”

Dragon bone.

A bright light erupted from her hand, beams of power shooting out towards the ceiling and
illuminating the room. The pressure in her palm was alleviated, a cracking sound like lightning
echoing through the cave and out the back of the mountain. Dorian erected a barrier to stand
behind casually, his hair whipping around with the force of the wind while he looked through the
light to find her.

When it had calmed down, Athena was crouched down on one knee, panting with a grin on her
face. In her left hand, she pinched something smaller than a marble between her index and thumb,
spinning it around in her grasp while she cracked a laugh. “It’s a piece of cake, Dorian.”

Chapter End Notes

Mini song reference at the end: Stand Out - A Goofy Movie.
Pampered

“Emperor Gaspard has been seen less and less lately in the public. Liquor hallway downstairs.”

Her fingers effortlessly glided over the piano, wordless music projected through the hall as she smiled in between notes. Leliana was standing near her, resting a list on the piano and checking phrases off of a list when she heard them through her lizards. Summoning the orb had helped immensely. It amplified her power as expected, but it had taken training with Dorian to harness and focus the energy in a way that she could communicate with her new spies. She noticed her energy level was higher and most of the uneasiness that came with the ball had melted away. The orb was still smaller than a pea, easily forgettable but wrapped up in a golden wire and worn as an earring in her left ear.

Dorian claimed he had sent away for it back home as some way to represent their relationship with one another. He had found a somewhat matching earring in his stock and began wearing it around with her as a cover. As long as she didn’t push too much of her magic into it, it wouldn’t crackle with her aura and show itself. Even when it did, Dorian had already told everyone they were fire enchanted since they both practiced in the same school of magic.

The future Magister had a future in politics with his silver tongue.

There was another ping on her radar and she pulled on her blessing from Inspiration to keep her fingers going through the music while she listened in. The rumor is if you put enough beautiful women near the Commander, he will tear open a rift in the Veil.

Athena couldn’t help but laugh, looking up to Leliana with a confident grin. “I am not repeating that. I don’t think I could.” The Spymaster giggled to herself and checked the final box from her list, nodding before whistling with two fingers in between her lips. All of her own people returned to the main hall within minutes, the lizards that were perched on their shoulders and the walls around them coming as well. She now wore two packs on her hips that the lizards would climb into where she hid snacks and had a warming rune for them to sleep in while she was working in her office.

“Well the tests are conclusive. This will be successful as a monitoring system during the Ball. I am quite impressed at how you were able to master such a thing in a short amount of time. The event is in two days; your timing is impeccable Madame Sorcière.” Leliana complimented, bowing her head with a proud smile. Athena rubbed the back of her head, itching a spot where a lizard had just run over with her fingernails, which were about to be sanded and painted due to Vivienne and Josephine’s beauty boot camp before the nobles arrived.
“It wasn’t for lack of trying, that is for sure. My eyes were about to cross from all of the speed-reading I did over those Circle books. I think if I read “Magic was meant to serve man” one more time I’m going to purge my breakfast on the floor.” Leliana’s lips twitched into a frown but she nodded, gripping her shoulder and squeezing.

“You have all of the information and resources you need. Syla has stepped up in her new role as your Lieutenant as well.” Athena winced at the title, nodding, and running her fingers over the keys.

“I would try not to label them as soldiers, but yes. She has a gift for information and a history of sneaking places unseen. I’m glad she has found her true place in the Inquisition.” Leliana hummed in agreement, gesturing for her people to return back to the raven’s nest where they had come from. The lizards all drifted from their shoulders and went into their hidden places in her bags, her clothes, or mixed within her hair.

“We have little time left. Valerie will be in your office downstairs for final fittings and alterations before you are taken to the beauty regimen. By the time you are recovered, the ball will be here.” The red-head clapped her hands together and mused as she left, mumbling something about new shoes to wear with her uniform as her body disappeared from the main hall. Athena let out a sigh, cracking her knuckles while standing from the piano bench. She pressed her hands against her lower back so she could bend back and pop her spine in a few satisfying cracks, groaning when it sent a shiver up her spine.

She began to walk towards her office when Varric whistled, waving at her with a quill. Athena couldn’t help but smile and wave back, shaking her head when he called out to her. “Don’t let them drown you with that perfume! It makes it hard to stand within twenty paces of you lot!”

She cupped a hand over her mouth and called back over her shoulder with a wink. “Maybe you could use some, Varric! The soot in that fireplace sticks to your clothes after a while.” He then fake-gasped and looked down at his clothes, shaking his head and waving her off as she disappeared down the staircase and into her office. There were a few people walking in and out of it, Syla managing the flow of her recruits.

“Remember your places! They will be arriving tomorrow night and then the celebration is the whole day after! Do not fear. We have everything in place! Oh! Athena!” The elf waved with a smile, gesturing her over to a map on the wall.

“We finally filled the gap between the kitchens and the main hall where the sound was getting muffled. Our people are getting prepared and armed with discreet weapons, just in case they are cornered or we can’t reach them in time.” Athena looked over the map that she now had memorized, her eyes bouncing between the different x’s that indicated where her people would be.
most of the night and then the circles that indicated the lizard’s placements on the wall.

“Who is setting up for the weapon distribution? It can’t be from the same place or else it will be obvious to any spy that the Orlesian’s have planted here. We cannot be too careful.” She felt two hands clap her on the back and pull her back into an odd embrace where he put his face next to hers.

“Come ooooon, Fen’Elgara. They found a barrel of daggers on the battlements so all of the soldiers needed them redistributed.” Loranil clapped her on the back and grinned proudly. “They were distributed to the people who needed them most!”

Athena’s eye twitched and she could feel the stress building up in the back of her neck. “Please tell me you gave a log of who you gave them to Cullen. Creators if I have him breathing down my neck about missing daggers in jaded former servant’s hands, I don’t know what I’m going to do. He’s high strung enough as it is about the whole ball. I’ve barely had a day where we don’t have to go over our strategy.”

Loranil put his hands up in surrender and closed his eyes with a smile, opening one sarcastically to see if the scene was safe. “I jest, Lady Athena. He has the log and a copy is placed in the top drawer of your desk.” He used one of his hands to point to the desk and then down, her gaze following the motion. An embarrassed blush came to her cheeks and she scoffed, turning towards him with a light punch on the arm.

“Smart ass. Ilrith! The nobles’ rooms were swept with our mage for anything?” The dark-haired rogue in the corner of the room nodded and pointed to the slender woman next to him with the shaved head and pale face.

“Lithari already swept them. They’re clear. She is going to check again tonight before they all arrive.” Athena nodded to their recruit. She was a deserter from a Dalish clan who had escaped before she received her vallaslin. She was underneath the Keeper and had observed many of their traditions, including the application of the blood writing. She decided the lifestyle did not agree with her and left under the guise of a storm one night and ran for the Inquisition.

“Thank you, Lithari.” Valerie walked into the room and instantly whistled, her commanding and sharp voice cutting through the room.

“Everyone out. She needs her fitting. You can come back in when we’re done.” Dorian followed at her heels as the elves left her room, most of them turning and waving or giving some form of farewell gesture. Lithari shut the door and reinforced the locking barrier before leaving for the
courtyard. The Tevinter nodded at her work, wanting to stop and assess the writing on the door before cursing under his breath.

“No time, Dorian. Athena! Disrobe. We need to get your final fitting in before you and I have a date with a firm sponge and some much needed steam. I’ve wanted to see this masterpiece since I sketched it!” He helped Valerie open a box lined with silk where all Athena saw was gold. The fabric flowed like water as the seamstress brought it out and held it so that it did not drag on the ground. She didn’t even have time to properly look at it before she was being slipped into it. Valerie pinched the fabric in different places where it was slightly too big, her tongue clicking to make small disapproving ‘clicking’ noises.

“Your body is still changing. You have been training recently.” She had different pins in her mouth and slid on in the place above the curve of her bottom and then on the sides. Athena couldn’t help but blush.

“I guess so. I have been too busy to really look in the mirror. I normally just slide out of the bath into my bed. Ouch! That was my skin!” Valerie winked before properly placing the pin.

“Just testing to see it was still you. Alright, spin for me. Good, good. Dorian, you really gave me a vision to work with. You’re right, her hair will need to be up.” Valerie pushed for Athena to bend down a little, which was easier thanks to the slit on the side of her dress that went up to her mid-thigh. The seamstress held her hair up and frowned, letting it all fall around her shoulders.

“She’ll need the wax and the – “ Dorian laughed, patting the woman on her back.

“I know. This is not my first party, my dear. I will get her taken care of. Alright, my heart! Out of it. Now we’re going upstairs. Let’s go!” Athena barely had time to get her shirt and pants on before he was rushing her out of the door, playfully smacking her on her ass as they went up the stairs. She turned around with a fake scowl but he blew a kiss at her and like children going to Christmas they ran up the stairs. In all reality, it was going to be torture. They were probably going to be waxed, scuffed, buffed, polished, and soaked, but it was two days off to prepare. It would give them time to relax.

They were using rooms in the balcony area of the garden to prepare. Dorian shuffled them in one room together where there were two women in masks waiting for them with familiar red jars of gel on their vanities and a tub filled to the brim with hot, steaming water. He instantly looked at it and smiled, nudging her in the ribs.

“That looks too hot for me, but she can take it, can’t you, flame dame?” He poked at her and
casually sat in his assigned vanity, leaning back into the chair as his stylist ran their fingers through his hair and assessed the damage. Without even arguing Athena stripped down to her smalls and sighed as the woman pushed the hair goop in her hands with an expectant nudge.

Within hours most of the Inner Party that was expected to put on a good show was sitting on the balcony in robes with cheese wheels over their eyes. Rathein had already been finished and was being briefed on the events to come by Bull and a few of Leliana’s head spies. Athena opted out from the cheese from that because with her sensitive nose she could pick up on it from across the room, so it gave her the opportunity to giggle at everyone involved, even Cullen who was refusing most of the treatments. “A trim and a shave is fine! This is ridiculous.” He sat up in his chair, obviously impatient and throwing the cheese wheels from his eyes.

Athena pointed her finger at them, catching them midair with her magic before shooting them back into his lap. He turned to her quickly, face initially snarling in frustration before he saw the playful expression on her face. He then tossed one in his hand, assessing its weight before throwing it over the recliners and hitting Josephine in the lap. He then quickly leaned back and put the other one over the eye facing the Ambassador so he would look innocent.

Josephine sat up slowly with the grace of a refined Antivan noble, eyes twitching as she removed her cheese wheels from her eyes. “Childish. Really. Commander, I can see your blush from here.” Athena smirked and mumbled under her breath:

“What’s the point? My hair is going to get ruined when I hunt tonight anyways?” This caught Josephine’s attention. The Antivan gasped and squeezed the cheese so hard in her palms the wax almost splintered. Dorian sighed and itched the edge of his freshly waxed mustache, twirling it to his fancy before looking in Athena’s direction with the cheese still on his eyes.

“Why did you have to say that.” Athena laughed, itching her hair at the nape of her neck.

“It’s true! I need to let the packs know what is going on so they don’t decide to hunt along the trading route. I do not imagine Gaspard’s army is going to be friendly to anything wolf-like after what I did in the Plains to his men.” Josephine sighed, flattening out the cheese before looking out to the horizon.

“Then do me this one favor and wait until tomorrow night. That way we can solidify the itinerary and I can sleep easy.” Athena nodded to this, laying back with her arms crossed over her chest. It
was then that her stylist tapped her on the shoulder and pointed behind her.

“Lady Athena we need your assistance – There is a –“ The woman winced as there was a shrill rejection from the room behind them.

“Is this necessary? That hurts! He- Fen’mae!” Athena’s eyes widened as she slowly looked towards Josephine for an explanation, the Ambassador sharing a sheepish shrug with Leliana.

“Well. . . everyone has heard you identify her as your daughter. . . The guests will be expecting to see her around at some point.” She knew that was rational, but the pained cries of her daughter couldn’t help but spur the protective instinct inside her gut. A spark flew from her earring to her temple, sending a pulse down her aura that made Dorian shiver.

“Amatus. . . “ She raised a hand to him, tapping his shoulder before walking inside.

“Don’t worry. I got this.” They were using the same room Athena had just been in, both of the stylists attempting to brush and wash Lev’adin’s hair. There was red gel on her legs and Athena could tell from the color that it had been on there as long as it needed to be. She took a deep breath in through her nose, snapping her fingers and pointing out of the door. “Out.”

The masked women both looked up with what she could assume were shocked faces. “But Lady Athena!”

“Out! I can finish this.” The women bowed their heads and quickly exited, leaving the door slightly open so the rest of the Inner Council could hear them outside. She pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed, grabbing two hot towels from a rune-coated basket before dropping to her daughter’s legs and wiping the gel from them. It was unnecessary because elves did not grow as much hair, if any, as humans in other places. Leafy’s fine hair was undetectable and now it was gone. She sighed and ran a clean towel over her daughter’s now smooth legs, patting her thighs while looking up to her.

Leafy’s eyes were coated with unshed tears, rage filling the rest of her expression as her hands were white knuckled into the chair below.

“They barely told me what was going on – I thought those shems were going to torture me, mae.” Athena stood so that Leafy could lean forward and wrap her arms around her waist, burying her face into her stomach to release the hot tears that were being held back only by her stubbornness.
“Fen’mae?”
“Hm?”

“So...” Athena did not pause in her movements but she felt a cold chill go down her back, tears coming to her eyes.

“Sometimes. It gets easier every day but sometimes there are bad days. What about you? Do you miss your parents? Your brother?” Athena quickly wiped her nose with the silk sleeve of her robe, looking up in the mirror to see her reaction.

“Like you said. Sometimes. You and Tobi are my family now.” She opened her eyes and ignored the mirror, looking straight up with a faint smile on her face. Athena stopped what she was doing, bending down and kissing her on top of the forehead, only now noticing that everyone outside had turned and watched the interaction through the door, which had swung open from the wind. It was as if there were looking at puppies. She kept them in her periphery while chuckling under her breath, pressing her forehead to Lev’adins.

“Yeah – Family.”
“Can we stay out all night? I don’t want to do this ball tomorrow. It sounds boring and I don’t know the dances that well!” Athena stood up and shook her head, purposely messing up her daughter’s hair with a grin.

“You’ll learn with practice. You can sit by me near the piano if you want or keep at your brother’s side. He will be wearing his best uniform and his hair got cut to look like a soldier’s! Krem said he wanted something like his haircut so we’ll have to see what he looks like when we get back.” She pulled Lev’adin in with one arm, keeping her in a side embrace as they trekked through the forest that was damp from a recent rain. Raindrops fell from the branches still, eradicating any scents of animals that were in the forest. It would make hunting more difficult for the wolves, but that was half of the fun.

“Should we go find Claw?” She asked, nudging both Kain and Leafy with a smile. Kain responded with a growl of yes while Leafy returned the smile with almost double the excitement, her hands twitching at her side in a movement to grab her bow. Athena used another ribbon from her pocket to tie her hair up so it wouldn’t get messed up in between shifts, taking in a deep breath before pushing forward into a shift. It came naturally to her, her white-furred form sliding into existence as they walked through the forest. The pack was close; she could feel it within her bones.

Leafy was humming a song, something that she had song before that sounded like a mixture of Sleeping Beauty and Prince of Egypt. There was a light skip to her step and when Athena looked over with happiness in her expression the young elf returned it, smiling before focusing on a spot between Athena’s eyes. Leafy leaned forward, poking her finger into the spot where her gaze rested with a furrowed brow. Athena felt the poke and then realized there was something hard there resting between her eyes.

*It’s that damned earring. It must have shifted with me.* Athena rolled her eyes and shook her head, nudging her nose into the girl’s backside to get her to meet up with the pack, who was in front of them. Claw threw his head back and howled in greeting, the rest of the pack joining him with great confidence. There were greetings thrown around and Athena realized she could hear them a lot clearer with the small red orb in the center of her forehead. They each had their own individual
voice, tone, and personality. She could hear the youth of the pups and how they were struggling to find their own words while the wiser old wolves came through even clearer.

Athena let out a whine of happiness, touching noses with Claw, who could sense the change in communication as well. *You sound louder somehow, Athena.*

She couldn’t help but scoff, raising her nose to the wind and taking in a deep breath. An air current went by at the same time and she was able to get the slight scent of something that made her turn her head in confusion. *A druffalo? This far north?* Athena took in another breath and was positive of her findings. *It’s alone.* Claw caught onto the scent as well, raising his head back and announcing their hunt to the wild. The forest was humming with their energy, Lev’adin even aware of the change as she pulled an arrow from her quiver and knocked it on her bow.

*Let’s go.* The pack took off together in a run, weaving and dodging trees as they made their way for the druffalo that was ahead of them. As they were running Athena couldn’t help but suddenly feel a gnawing feeling on her body. She shook her head in an attempt to get it off but it stuck, suddenly feeling like a pressure on the inside of her mind. It had been weeks since she felt it last, and it was when she was in the Plains by herself. Her eyes widened and she snapped her head to the side, looking at Kain. *There is a threat behind us. Keep Leafy with you and do not let her leave your sight. Claw. Please.*

The two wolves looked to one another and nodded, barking different orders as Lev’adin scouted ahead in the trees. Athena took the opportunity to shroud her presence with a barrier, fade-stepping in the opposite direction. The pressure grew as she ran up a hill that was overlooking the druffalo, it becoming nearly crippling when she reached the top.

Sure enough. The Dread Wolf sat there, looking over the edge of the cliff at the pack below. Athena instantly switched back into her two-legged form, pulling on the strength of her earring to erect a barrier between her and the wolf. “Why the fuck are you back?” She asked in an exasperated tone, acting as if the Elven God of Rebellion was an annoyance instead of a threat. She threw her hands in the air, turning her back to him for a moment. When she looked to him again he was simply looking at her with his head tilted to the side.

“That is the greeting I get to receive?”

Athena’s jaw slacked open in disgust, her right eye twitching in anger as her hands clenched into fists at her side. She refused to switch into Elven to appease him, keeping her Common fresh on the tip of her tongue. “Shit yeah. I have enough to deal with on my plate, let alone you stopping by for a surprise visit so close to home. Our last ones have been so lovely. I really have been looking forward to them again.” She snarled at him in frustration and sarcasm, leaning her body against a tree while looking down at the pack with him.
They had closed in on the druffalo and Leafy was taking her aim from the branches, nearly completely concealing her presence with her elven grace and her magic. The large black wolf next to her stilled, turning his head back down towards the scene below. “Even still. That is new.” The wolf didn’t even need to gesture towards her earring for her to know that he had noticed it.

Athena rolled her eyes while returning them to the hunt, keeping Leafy within her line of sight at all times. “My best friend got it for me. It was a matching pair, he has the other one. Together we’re a complete set.” The wolf let out a groan, rolling his eyes while raising his lips in somewhat of a snarl. Athena couldn’t help but poke, smirking with anger behind her motions while arching brow. “What? Are you jealous, Fen’Harel? Would you like a red marble to hang beneath your ear?”

The wolf let out an actual growl before ruffling his fur with a shudder. “She is impressive. Your daughter. She moves like she is one of them.” He gestured with his nose towards the scene below and she turned just in time to see Lev’adin jump from a branch and launch her arrow into the thick of the druffalo’s hide. She pushed with her magic to spring back up into a tree, using the branches to stay out of reach of the creature’s horns while allowing her pack mates to jump in and attack.

“Yes she is. A prime example of your people.” The God snapped his head towards the side, furrowing his brow with a small grown. Athena knew her attitude and anger towards him was stupid; he could end her within a second if she wished. But she knew if that was his intention he would have done it the first time they met in the same forest. He let her live and wanted to continue to see her, she was just trying to see why.

“She is not my people.” He emphasized, the growl trickling from his lips still. She shook her head and pointed down to her, keeping the other hand on her hip.

“She is the product of your actions then. Look at her! She does not let anybody decide what she wants to do. That girl down there is free, whether you wish to see it or not.” Athena bit the inside of her cheek, keeping him at her side, not wanting to face him head on. “Focus less on the Veil within the sky and instead look at the one over your eyes. This world is not doomed, it is not damned. It may be separated from the spiritual, yes, but it is not hopeless. The hope within this world exists in the people like her.” She retracted her hand and pointed again, allowing her hand to drop by her side as she let out a sigh. The Dread Wolf was unusually quiet to her prods tonight. It was unnerving. “Who are your people, Fen’Harel? You said you have heard my name on the lips of your people.”

The wolf shook its head, looking down at the ground in a solemn gesture. For a moment, she saw her lover’s face mirrored in that look, with how he was kneeling before her in the Fade, stated that he knew what it felt like to be a part of a change that was about to happen. “I. . . do not know. I
Athena clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth, arching a brow while moving her gaze from her daughter to him. The wolves were beginning to feast and Kain was keeping Leafy interested in eating instead of looking around for her. “The elvhen such as you, perhaps? The ones scattered to the winds of this world?” The wolf tilted its head in a shrug-type potion, shaking its fur before pacing. Athena couldn’t help but feel lost, like she was missing some part of a conversation they had had before. Normally he was the one with questions about her, but this time, it was like he just wanted to be there next to her. “Why... Why are you here tonight, Dread Wolf?”

The God scoffed, his maw twitching into a kind of smile while the red eyes on top of his stayed focused on her as he paced even though his main ones were on the ground in front of him. “I must admit, I am at a loss for an answer. It has been a long time since someone did not run in fear from me. Perhaps I am grateful just for the company of another.”

Athena put her hands up in surrender, putting her back against a tree with a blush of frustration on her cheeks. “Well – ah – don’t think too much of it. I am more curious as to why an Elven God would show interest in me at all.” She smirked and ran a hand through her hair. “Maybe you can sense my ‘unique’ spirit that my vhenan keeps talking about.”

That caught his attention. The Wolf visibly recoiled and took a step back, tilting his head to the side in confusion and a bit of agitation. “Your vhenan? He lets you roam these forests alone?”

She couldn’t help but laugh, covering her mouth to suppress the sound so Leafy wouldn’t know she was up there. “Yes – these forests are mine. You are in my territory, fen. He knows I can handle myself better than most. He trusts me, as I do him.”

The Dread Wolf suddenly puffed his chest, curling his lips back into an almost animated smile that sent a shiver down her spine. “And where is this vhenan of yours? Surely your mate would be by your side during a hunt under these moons?”

Athena twitched, clenching her hand into a fist at his side. “His location is no business of yours, harel. Did something happen to you? You are not yourself tonight.”

The smile fell from his face instantly, eyes cast down as the wolves were feasting on the raw meat of the Druffalo and Leafy was sharing her scraps with the pups that were little to fight for their own meals. “I have been roaming Thedas, seeing the effects of my mistake and how the People have fallen. They used to...” He sighed, digging his paws into the earth with a growl. “They used to reach so much higher. It pains me, Fen’Elgara.” For the first time, Athena felt sorry for him.
There was a somberness she could recognize and it frustrated her and made her sympathize for him at the same time. She relaxed her posture, shaking her head back and forth.

“Mistakes. . .the blow from a mistake lessens if you try to atone. Do not run away from it. It happened. Instead of looking back at what was, focus on what is happening now. Besides, from what I understand, the world wasn’t perfect back then either, correct? Or else you never would have had to raise the Veil in the first place.” She shrugged and dropped her hands to her thighs, tracing circled in the tops of her pants with a finger. Fen’Harel looked over to her and met her gaze, holding it for a moment before sighing.

“I suppose you are right. If I may intrude, what is bothering you? You seem. . . different as well tonight.” It felt weird for the Dread Wolf to ask how she was doing as if they were friends grabbing a coffee, but she looked around to check if they were still alone before shrugging.

“A little stressed, yeah. The Inquisition has a lot going on in the next few days and I’ve been thrown into the middle of it. I am not used to having this much. . .influence.” She flexed her fingers and stared at her palms, sighing and pressing her head back into the bark. Athena didn’t like it, but she was growing more comfortable around him since he wasn’t attacking her. There were also uncomfortable comparisons between this wolf and the man she had grown to love. It was an awkward situation to be in. “So I guess running into you on top of that, I’m off my game. Oh – it looks like they’re done.”

The wolves were beginning to whine and look for her, Kain being the most observant and linked one to her. *Hurry.* He whispered into her mind and she shuddered from his rushed message, glancing over to the wolf with an apologetic shrug. “Do not look back on your mistakes too much. If you continue to look back, you will miss what’s in front of you. Old wolves can learn new tricks.” She cracked a smirk before pushing from the ball of her foot, fade-stepping around the side of the cliff before coming up behind them. Leafy frowned and crossed her arms over her chest, moving her weight to one side.

“You missed the whole thing!” The girl threw a piece of raw meat at her in punishment but Athena caught it, instantly sizzling it with flame in her hand until it was cooked thoroughly. It was charred, but fresh, the juices from the druffalo putting a smile on her face.

Lev’adin scoffed and rolled her eyes, putting her bow and arrows away on her back and in the quiver. “There wasn’t much game anywhere else. The recent rain has them hiding.” She nodded and motioned back towards Skyhold, her arm open for Leafy to come into. Claw and Kain walked alongside them, knowing that Athena was about to address them.

“We’re going to have a lot of nobles coming up the mountain into the Keep. Kain, you’re going to have to stay in my quarters or in Cullen’s office. There are going to be workers in an office so it
might be a good idea to stay there just to give him peace of mind that nothing was touched since my room is warded *now.*” She said that playfully, pulling her daughter against her in a side hug. The girl blew her hair out of her face with a smile, letting out a sigh and relaxing her body into her mother’s.

“Can I hide in his office all day too? I’m not looking forward to tomorrow. We occasionally had gatherings with other clans but that was more ritual than this. Everything I’m hearing, I would rather be out here.” She pouted and stuck her bottom lip out, squeezing extra hard on Athena’s hip. “Do I have to go?”

Athena rolled her eyes and looked down to her daughter, raising a single brow while grinning. “If I have to go, you have to. Stick with your brother and the people you know. Commander Cullen will need saving, I’ll be at the piano, and Syla will be there as well. You have nothing to worry about. Come on. We both could use a soak and I need to reapply the hair oil that Vivienne gave us.”
The morning started off with a rush. Valerie and her assistants swarmed into the room like a plague, filling every corner of her area with mage light and different supplies to get them ready. Athena and Lev’adin were getting prepared in the main area of her bedroom and the basement below while they were using the loft for Tobi, who they referred to as strictly Tobias the entirety of the morning since he was now an official soldier for the Inquisition and the Chargers. Athena couldn’t remember the last time she had such a quick bath but it felt like there was somebody for every appendage scrubbing her with a stone or applying a lotion that smelled of a warm vanilla. The scent made her smile but not too much, because it would then ruin her make up lines. Lev’adin was sitting on the edge of the bath, perfectly manicured and dressed with basic make up.

Valerie ended up mimicking Athena’s color palette so that the family would match. Tobi’s suit was a deep navy with gold trim and a blood maroon sash. Even though Athena didn’t care, the attendants wouldn’t allow him downstairs while the ladies were doing their routines. In between sweeps of eyeshadow, she looked into the mirror and got a glimpse of Lev’adin, smiling at how lady-like she managed to look. They tamed her normally wild locks back into a braid that was relaxed and brought up into a bun. She wore a sheer gold top with a maroon cami-underneath while the sleeves remained see-through with a bit of a shimmer. They fashioned her in the same deep navy leggings with foot bandings that looked freshly dyed and washed.

On her second glance, it appeared that they had tamed the young huntress into wearing blush as well.

“Oh Leafy look at you. I think your clan would swoon seeing how grown up you look.” Athena chided, trying not to scream as the rune-heated iron pressed too close to her neck and burned her for a second. The elf stuck her tongue out and shut her eyes in a childish gesture, crossing her arms while itching at the small golden buds in her pierced ears.

“At least we don’t have to wear masks. . .those things look like they could suffocate me.” They both chuckled as Valerie did quick work to make voluminous curls with bounce around her shoulders and down to her shoulder blades, before pulling them up and off of her back into an updo that made her curls look like a bouquet of roses in the back and elongated the line of her neck. Using a delicate touch, she applied a thin line of black eye-liner with another layer of shimmery gold on top of it. Athena had to fight hard to keep her eyes from twitching or watering, her hands gripping onto the small golden buds in her pierced ears.

“Almost done, Madame Sorciere. What do you plan on saying to the Emperor? Surely you are looking forward to seeing him again.” Valerie teased, her accented voice sharpening her words as
she looked over with the finishing touches.

Athena rolled her eyes, looking up as she applied something akin to fake eye-lashes on top of her eyes. If she could have guessed, they were made of small feathers dipped in an ink. Still, they felt heavy and weirdly foreign on her face. “I hope to say something as few as possible to that man. I appreciate everything he did in the peace talks but the man and I rarely see eye to eye on things.” The seamstress nearly scoffed under her breath, using a wax warmed with her palms to keep the small hairs and details in place.

“Whatever your venture tonight, I wish you luck. You are done, my lady.” She then clapped Athena on the shoulders and helped her to stand. Thankfully with the slit up the side of her thigh the dress was not as constricting but it was still form-fitting. They abandoned the typical wyvern-bone dress and went with a softer yet firm material for her underclothes. It allowed her dress to be smooth and lineless, the gold material cascading like water down her body from the lace-stitched and decorated scooping neckline.

It was . . . dramatic and met every goal that she wanted. It looked similar to the fashion Solas had shown her in his dream. Even if it wasn’t identical, she wanted to give him a piece of home.

“Fen’mae.” Lev’adin spoke in awe, sliding off the edge of the bath to run her hands over the fabric. “You look beautiful!” A glowing smile broke over her face and Athena couldn’t help but echo it.

“Come on, let’s go get your brother and sneak to the office. You can feed the lizards before they go off into their places.” She said with a strangely excited tone, her hands grasping at her marble-sized orb that called to her from the vanity table. She looped it through her left ear lobe, rubbing her fingers over it for luck and a charge of energy. When her skin came into contact with it, either through the shared gold metal or her touch, she suddenly felt like the walls of her mind came crashing down. The chattering and voices of the three dozen lizards, the two packs, and the druffalo in Crestwood all came rushing in but she was able to take a deep breath and shut them out.

Leafy led the way up the stairs, grabbing her mother’s hand and nearly pulling her up the stone steps. Valerie was cleaning up behind them and getting her own gown ready, bidding them both farewell with a small wave before falling back into her stony silence. Tobi was waiting for them on the bed, his lips drawn into a fine, nervous line with his brow furrowed. Athena’s heels clicking against the stone alerted him of their arrival and he stood at attention, instantly breaking when he saw the both of them. “Ma’ – Leafy. . . You look – “ There was a soft blush on his cheeks as he looked to them in amazement.

Leafy shly walked up to him, punching him on the shoulder and dragging the top of her foot against the ground. “Don’t even say it. Come on, let’s go feed the lizards before all of the adults and nobles start showing up.”
They all nodded to one another in a silent agreement and left the room. Athena reached out to Kain and found that he was in the Commander’s office, helping him get ready by fetching different things from around the room like different armor pieces and items that had been delivered throughout the week. She couldn’t help but laugh, itching the side of her temple delicately with a nail that was polished blood red. They took a roundabout path to her office, through the kitchens on the side of the Keep.

They bee-lined it through the frenzied room, waving at the familiar faces and avoiding the chef before they arrived in her office, which was only slightly less peaceful. Syla was organizing everyone and showing them their assigned lizard, using her frighteningly precise memory and leadership skills to keep them in line. When Athena entered the room, everything paused and she thought she saw someone salute to her.

“Oh Gods no don’t do that – this is not a military assignment. I don’t need that kind of greeting. A ‘hey what’s your face’ will do just fine.” She said with a smile, tapping on Loranil’s shoulder and gesturing him over the table where Syla had the maps pulled up. Without missing a beat, the elf began, pointing to the different areas.

“The nobles are unloading their luggage as we speak and the they will begin announcing them in the ballroom in an hour. You are to be up at the front with the other members of the Inner Council until the bulk of the dignitaries are introduced. We will be at our posts well before that ends so you’ll have a good time to listen in since you’ll just be standing there and smiling.” Athena rolled her eyes, her gaze glancing over the very long list of people that were to be coming. However, on that list was King Alistair, so she suddenly had an odd excitement to talk with the man she knew from the first game.

“Alright. I can’t really leave this room the whole night, except for maybe small periods where I have to use the washroom’, so it will fall to me being on the dance floor or on the piano. There will be a constant stream of servants, many of who we have enlisted, correct?” Loranil confirmed her suspicions with a nod. He gestured for Illrith to come over to the table. The dark-haired elf cleared his throat and pointed his thumb over his shoulder at a group of people who were dressed to be serving that evening, including himself.

“Everyone is ready and at your disposal, Fen’Elgara.” Athena steeled herself instead of twitching, nodding while walking over to the cage that held the largest lizard. It filled her palm and it was the first one she had brought to Leliana. It knew her movements and knew how to hide when she moved, talked, and danced.

“In that case, let’s get started. There is a spare, lizard, correct?” She asked, looking over her shoulder at Syla. The woman quickly leafed through her scrolls, reading over the names before
nodding. Athena clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth and pointed to Leafy.

“She needs to have one. Kain was insistent on it – “ Illrith raised a brow.

“Kain?” Tobi laughed into his palm while Athena smiled.

“Don’t worry about it. Family guardian. Everyone!” The group turned to face her and suddenly she felt her cheeks get hot, her chest flushing with the sudden realization that she was actually leading this group of people.

“I am sorry that you are in this position to begin with. It is not fair that even still you must fight for your basic rights like the freedom to choose what to do with your life. I am confident with our planning, our practice, and with this astounding group of people that we will be successful tonight. If you hear anything, do not hesitate in coming to me. Fuck the Game. I am not risking a single wasted syllable if that means it will delay us from helping each other.” There were general sounds of amusement with Loranil grinning at her side.

She had not heard from Solas and Valerie made no mention of him being on the list of people they had to prepare, but unfortunately those thoughts would have to wait. They were hosting two countries in a holiday ball and there were other things on her mind besides where her lover was and who the black wolf of the forest was.

Athena stood up next to Cullen on the elevated area of the throne room. Rathein sat with a noble’s posture in the throne, greeting every visitor with a smile and at some points she would stand, walk over, and shake their hands or bow in greeting. Leliana and Josephine stood close to her so that they could whisper small anecdotes about the person being introduced. She felt like she was suddenly in the Devil Wears Prada movie and that gave her a small sense of pride. They were doing the lesser nobles first, allowing for there to be build up to the larger guests like the Marquise, the Emperor, or the King.

Since she did not know many of them, she allowed her mind to wonder into the thoughts of her spy army for the night. They weren’t very far into the introductions so there wasn’t much to report. One of the creatures close to the library thought they had heard some whispering from two unknown masked guests but after crawling closer they realized they were just having a small
romantic session. The lizard went into more detail but she groaned and dulled that voice within her head. Cullen glanced over at her with an arched brow, the change of expression actually softening from what he had before. “What?” He asked simply, a light tone of pink on his cheeks as he looked at her.

Athena smiled and crossed her arms behind her back in a move to copy the posture from her lover. “It’s like a bag of mad cats inside my mind right now. You would be reacting much more than me if you heard what was going on. They have no filter, I swear.”

The Commander chuckled under his breath, managing to look happy for the first time in the period of introductions. “I trust you on that. I can barely manage with how humans talk, let alone a small group of lizards, wolves, and whatever else you have up there.” He tapped against his temple before turning to his posture of crossed arms. She allowed her gaze to linger on him for a moment, taking in the detail of his black formal attire with a silver sash.

“Left the lion’s furs at home?” Her lips curled into a devilish smile and he scoffed under his breath.

“Remember how I said I pitied the person who angered both Leliana and Josephine?” Athena nodded, automatically knowing what had transpired between the other three members of the Inner Council. “They won. Oh - we’re starting to get higher up, I recognize this person. They had made visits to Kinloch when I was a Templar there since they owned part of the lands that the Circle stood on.” He nodded in recognition to the strong-faced man that was bowing before Rathein. His expression and posture marked him for a Ferelden and Athena cursed herself that she was beginning to tell the different.

“Well, you clean up nicely, Commander. Did you sharpen your sword?” She jested, eyes scanning over the crowd. There was a gap behind the last two nobles that were being introduced, which meant the ‘big’ people were coming up.

“I – ah – thank you. And.” His voice dropped low, a wicked smirk coming to his lips. “Yes I did.” Athena hid her laugh behind her hand, eyes crinkling in her smile. The lizard readjusted its sleeping position on top of her head, using the curls of her hair as a textured camouflage to hide in. They composed themselves before the gap, the entirety of the upper Inquisition taking in a deep breath before the last announcements, which meant the ball was officially going to begin.

“Briala, Marquise of the Dales, advisor to the Emperor – “ Athena smiled, meeting the elf woman’s eyes and bowing with the rest of the staff on the elevated platform. At this point Rathein was standing and bowing like the rest, abandoning her throne since she would soon be a mobile socializing force as the face of the Inquisition. She steeled herself for who came next, allowing a single shiver to run down her spine. She looked across the crowd one more time for her anchor,
slightly nodding at Bull, Dorian, and Vivienne who were standing amongst them, but there was no Solas.

Shit.

“Emperor of Orlais, Gaspard – “ Athena cut into the lizards within her head to keep herself distracted from his rambling list of titles. Things were beginning to get interesting, different shadowed figures moving in the halls of the Keep. But when there were secondary follow-ups from her own people they found nothing to worry about. She was thankful for their system, and especially thankful because it gave her a reason to tune out during half of the proceedings.

“Lady Inquisitor, it is an honor to see you again.” Gaspard bowed low before Rathein, coming up and glancing over towards Athena with a hard expression. She wanted to wink and wiggle her fingers back at him mockingly, but she held her composure. . . especially since Cullen took a slightly closer step towards her as a physical warning to not act out towards the Emperor.

“The honor is all ours. We are thankful that the mighty nations of Ferelden and Orlais would join us under our roof to celebrate Wintersend. We have made great strides against the self-proclaimed God, Corypheus, and we could have no done that without your assistance. Please, enjoy your evening.” Rathein announced with a smile, bowing again to end the conversation as the announcer cleared his throat in the back.

“Alistair Therin, Hero of the Fifth Blight, Grey Warden, King of Ferelden.” Athena couldn’t help her completely biased smile, Cullen nudging her in the side while arching a curious brow of his own. She tried not to obviously lean into him but her words were rapid and the lizard was humming at how she suddenly flushed.

“Perhaps he should have sharpened his sword as well, Lady Athena?” He asked with a sarcastic bitterness to his words, this draining the color from her chest as she subtly nudged him back in the ribs into his armor. King Alistair scanned the Inner Council, nodding his head to Cullen in recognition before doing a full bow to the Inquisitor. There were gryphon designs mixed into his light armor but the gold and red was blatantly Ferelden.

“I am well aware of the King and the Hero of Ferelden’s journey through the Fifth Blight. It was the first time I had exposure to your world. It is. . . interesting to see him like this to say the least. When I first was aware of him he was much younger than this.” Athena flicked her eyes over to the Commander and couldn’t help but smile. “You as well, Commander, but I think we have all grown for the better.” There was a soft blush on the warrior’s cheeks as he cleared his throat and began to look over at Rathein, who was doing her introductions. Already Gaspard began to move out of the immediate area where the Ferelden royal stood, getting closer to her in the process.
“Enjoy your Wintersend among friends, allies, and companions. The Inquisition welcomes you into its home! Ser, if you would please!” Rathein turned with a flourish, motioning to the orchestral maestro to begin. They were situated in the corner in between the throne room and Dagna’s dungeon, thankfully blocking the room off to curious visitors.

Athena had put a lizard in there just to be safe.

She scanned the crowd one more time and groaned softly when she found it Solas-less, turning to hide with Cullen in the crowd until she heard someone clearing their throat. With a stiff back, Emperor Gaspard bowed low to her and extended a hand. “If I may, could I have the first dance, Lady Sorciere?”

His mask was gold, bold, and shining the candlelight in her face. She curved her lips into a smile, placing her hand delicately in his with a small nod.

With the forced smile and perfect posture, her mask was on as well.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: From here on out things will get cheesy with song choices mixed with the drama of the ball!

You’ve been warned ;) thanks for your continued reading and support. It means the world to me.
Civility

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The dance between the two was surprisingly loose. She had expected them to be as stiff as statues but he appeared to keep a reasonable distance between their bodies, his hands remaining on her lower back and her arm in the proper dancing position. Athena was waiting for the shoe to drop but in between their polite words she listened in on her lizards and observed the room. Gaspard cleared his throat, looking her up and down in a way that made her stomach turn. At least she had some peace before he returned to his creeping ways. “You are looking exquisite tonight, Lady Athena. How have you been in the arms of the Inquisition?”

She turned her gaze back to him and smirked, raising up on the ball of her foot to turn underneath his arm and back into his grip. Compared to Halamshiral, she felt powerful here. This was her home. She had people on her side now. The Inquisition trusted her entirely now and they were a solid team that could conquer anything. It had taken a long time to understand how something like that was so powerful, but in the wake of thousands of people dying they were able to unite soldiers underneath their banner and fight for something good. Their actions inspired people who were content living in fear in their homes to go out, pick up a tool, and do something. It reminded her of what Wisdom had said to her. Do something with what you know, Athena.

“The Inquisition is flourishing with Orlais’s full support and we are closer than ever to ending the menace who stole our Divine from us.” She smiled with a mask that Vivienne could be proud of, feeling a sort of ping in the back of her head. Strange masked man speaking with a group of people in hushed voices. Syla says she recognizes him and you will too, Athena. Illrith spoke through the lizard and Athena immediately knew who the person would be. Baron du Ghalad. He was the man she intercepted from hitting Syla at the ball. The elf had told her later that he was frequently a guest of the Empress’s so that wasn’t the first time he had showed his power through physical aggression. Gaspard rolled his eyes, spinning them both around in the rhythm that was beginning to establish on the dance floor. Rathein was dancing with King Ferelden with Bull subtly watching in the wings by the fireplace.

It was a perfect place for a spy to be. He could see whoever was coming in and out of the hall and his height gave him the advantage of seeing over a crowd. They thought alike. It was also why her piano was the perfect place for her to keep an ear out for her spies. “You state you hate the Game like I do but those words sound like they came from the mouth of a player. You have changed. I suppose we all have had to compromise.” His lips twitched into a frown before they fell back into his passively blank face.

Athena shrugged, allowing her friendly mask to fall for a second as she met his gaze through his mask. “I suppose we have. A true huntress knows how to blend to analyze a situation. I am simply adjusting to the environment around me.” She rolled her neck and pushed forward to come to his side, stepping back and mirroring the effect on the other side. The basic dances were becoming
easier for her to remember. It was the ones with Dorian and the more foreign ones that made her pulse race and her hands sweat.

“Where is that elf this evening? Your paramour?” He asked with an almost sneer, his eyes glancing around the crowd. King Alistair had stepped to the side and waved for Bull to come over, the charismatic smile on his face when the Inquisitor grinned when she was in the arms of her lover. Athena matched the smile, shrugging and turning back to her dance partner.

“Inquisition business has called him away.” Gaspard huffed under his breath.

“He left you to the wolves, as it were.” There was a creepy smile on his face and she twitched in discomfort, tightening her grip on his arm.

“I think it speaks more that he was entrusted with duties instead of being left to play nice and be a pretty face for the Inquisition.” Gaspard stilled underneath her and she took the opportunity to break from him, bowing low enough to look up and flash him a wicked smirk. “Emperor Gaspard. Always a pleasure.” The masked man faded off into the crowd and she let out a breath, itching a part where a pin kept her hair in place. She felt an energetic clap on her back as Bull and Rathein bombarded her from behind.

“You’re getting better at this. Red is pleased.” Bull hummed, using his large hand to grip almost the entirety of his shoulder. When it came off he looked at his palm and saw that some of the glitter Valerie used to create a glow on her skin came off on his hand. Rathein smirked, touching her cheekbone and showing him that she had the same thing. The Inquisitor then turned Athena and brought her in a soft hug so that none of their make up or outfits would be messed up.

“Just try and relax tonight, Athena. This isn’t about politics. It’s Wintersend!” She shook her friend shoulders and then froze. “Oh wait – you didn’t have this in your world, right?” Athena nodded with a small shrug. “Well then just relax. It’s our night off.” She pushed off her shoulder and left to mingle in the crowd while Athena saw Illrith walk along the edge of the wall, using some of his rogue-ish abilities to blend easier. He was walking with a tray of wine glasses towards the piano and so she mimicked his movements, knowing this was a cue to follow and talk to him.

The dark-haired elf handed her a glass that had a peach in the bottom of it, bowing his head while taking a step close to her. “That man downstairs. He’s asking a lot of questions of the staff and trying to flirt his way into finding things out. He’s a poor player of the game but he’s dangerous. I’ve been able to pick up that he owns a great deal of land and sponsors over half of the chevaliers in Orlais.”
Athena bit her tongue. “So he has connections to Gaspard and the public-viewed crown. I see. Are the other ones behaving?” She took a sip of her glass, pressing her back against the piano and sighing at how it hummed underneath her magic. The earring hanging from her earlobe also vibrated, and she couldn’t help but roll her shoulders under the foreign sensation. Illrith nodded, turning to leave.

“Surprisingly yes. I think they recognize the new influence. This Baron is just stubborn and ill-willed.” She watched him leave through the door leading to the rotunda. She couldn’t help but look through the open door to see the office still empty, a sigh leaving her lips as Leliana came up to her side.

“Enjoying the party, Madame Sorcière?” The Spymaster was sipping on her own wine with an infectious amount of happiness and Athena remembered that this was her comfort zone. The lying, the faces, the music... it was the core foundation for a bard. She smiled and nodded, gesturing to the whole crowd.

“Absolutely. Look. We have two countries underneath one roof and there hasn’t been blood spilt to do it. What do you know of the Baron du Ghalad?” She asked, chuckling and leaning against her as if they were old friends catching up for a drink. Leliana mirrored the motion, clinking her glass against hers while raising the glass to her lips.

“He is a wealthy individual, but not without his own debts. He has no heir and his cousin the Marquise, has never been a fan of his. Like the opposite of Celene and Gaspard, the family has always gone in the Baron’s favor. She has openly voiced her support for the Inquisition and uses her wealth to help our soldiers.” The Spy then took a large swig of the wine, chewing on the cherry that was in the bottom of her glass. Athena put the pieces together, nodding with a sigh. She looked over the crowd again and saw that Leafy was with the Chargers and Tobi, thankfully with no glass of alcohol in her hand. The teenager looked somewhat uncomfortable, but safe with at least a member of her family there.

The music ended and the maestro of the orchestra tapped his baton against the metal music stand, the faint sound triggering her to sit down on the piano bench. Josephine was at the top of the pedestal near the throne, genuine excitement on her face as she made an announcement. “As promised, our own Lady Athena Wolfsbane will be playing us songs from her world throughout the night to match the mood of this blessed holiday. My Lady!” The Ambassador raised a drink and Athena returned her polite smile, cracking her knuckles and running the pads of her fingers over the keys.

The piano hummed to life, it pulling on her new power to create an ethereal glow of sparkle-like light within the air as she played notes. She noticed that Blackwall was on the wall to her left, arms crossed over his chest and generally hiding from the ball. There had been some animosity from the Orlesians towards him now that his crimes were out in the air, but the Inquisition had his support.
Rathein had been frustrated at first but they were all realizing that nobody was perfect. Each of them had their demons and skeletons in the closet so it was near impossible to point fingers at another person. It was what made them such a formidable group. They had all made enough mistakes to grow, learn, and change their ways. Athena began playing the notes to the music, clicking her tongue against the back of her teeth to get the soldiers attention. He instantly looked up, smirking and nodding to her as if it were a greeting.

She switched and extended the intro, keeping his gaze while slowly gesturing and looking over to Josephine. The Antivan was now just walking through the crowd, talking amongst the nobles, playing the ever-popular party hostess. Blackwall followed her gaze, brows raising when they found her target. He then cleared his throat, shaking his head and looking away. Athena couldn’t help but smile, whispering loud enough so that he could hear her. “I am literally holding this ball hostage with my music until you get off that wall.”

The future Warden shot her a playful glare before pulling at the bottom of his jet-black formal attire with silver trim to remove wrinkles. He then walked through the crowd towards Josephine and that was enough confidence to get her to transition to the beginning of the song.

“I walked across an empty land. I knew the pathway like the back of my hand. I felt the earth, beneath my feet. Sat by the river and it made me complete.”

A door opened to the side and she saw Lady Morrigan walk in wearing a dress similar to what she had worn at the Winter Palace. She couldn’t help but smile in greeting, nodding her head in rhythm and as a gesture of recognition as the other Witch walked around the piano with her hands skimming across the top of the instrument. Did she recognize that it was an ancient elven object? Surely Flemeth did not mention such trivial things like musical instruments in her teachings, but it left her curious nonetheless.

“Oh simple thing, where have you gone? I’m getting tired and I need something to rely on...”

Athena’s eyes looked at Morrigan’s hand and noticed a small twitch along the skin, a shift in the air scurrying along her arm. The lizard hidden within her hair readjusted and made a small thought of acknowledgement at its kin and her eyes went wide, gaze flicking back to the piano in an attempt to save face. Morrigan put her own creature in her hands and then led it to her shoulder, bobbing her head along with her arms crossed over her stomach. Athena quickly went through the lizards in her mind, checking in with everyone that was on a wall of a room and the ones that were on the shoulder of one of her people.

There was one missing.
“I came across a fallen tree, I felt the branches of it looking at me. Is this the place we used to love? Is this the place that I’m dreaming of?”

The image of Josephine and Blackwall dancing gave her a moment of reprieve but she soon was redirecting the lizards to adjust the new loss and try and find her friend. Images from the eyes of her spies flooded her brain and she pulled on the harnessed power of her orb temporarily to find him. He was on the ground in one of the basement rooms in the dungeon, near her office. There was blood but from the lizard’s standpoint on the wall there was the sound of breathing.

“Oh simple thing, where have you gone? I’m getting old and I need something to rely on.”

Athena took in a deep breath, quickening the tempo only slightly so it wouldn’t be an obvious jarring change but enough to buy her a few seconds.

“And if you have a minute why don’t we go? Talk about it somewhere only we know? This could be the end of everything, so why don’t we go. Somewhere only we know.”

She let out a sigh, finishing the song with a small flourish of quiet notes to give the dancers a cue to finish their routines.

“Somewhere only we know.”

With the resolution of the song she looked up to the maestro, smiling through the clapping before taking a small bow. Morrigan did an almost sarcastic slow golfer’s clap, rolling her gaze over to her like a lioness taking in her prey. She knew it wasn’t personal, that was just how the Witch was trained to be under Flemeth’s parentage. Athena placed her hand on the woman’s shoulder, the lizard instantly running over her arm to join its friend within the curls of her hair.

The Witch of the Wilds noticed Athena’s guarded expression and raised a prow, genuine concern flashing over her face. “Is something the matter, Lady Athena?”

She clenched her jaw and simply asked. “Where did you find my friend?”
Morrigan pointed over her shoulder towards the door she had come through. “I sensed a creature in distress and this one was in the middle of that large room down there by itself. I haven’t seen another of its kind so I assumed it was lost or separated. Unfortunately, I lack your gift of communicating with them so I simply brought it with me.”

Athena nodded, squeezing the other woman’s shoulder in a gentle gesture, softening her face. “Thank you for returning him to me. If you’re interested in a hunt...” She nodded her head towards the crowd with a wicked smirk on her lips. “I believe the King of Ferelden is somewhere in that crowd, no doubt surrounded by fans of the Hero of Ferelden.”

The mage of the wilds smiled, nodding and allowing her to leave with a wave of her hand. She looked over her shoulder to Dorian, who gave her a small wave before turning back to a conversation with Vivienne. They were both distracted enough for her to disappear down the door near the piano and quickly head to the dungeon. She knocked on her office door in a rhythm that indicated help and brought the mage elf Lithari with her. They both found Illrith and quickly shuffled him back to the office where there was a cot laid out.

He only had superficial wounds but one of them was slightly deep in a break of his armor behind the knee, leaving him cripple to walk until they tended to it. Athena assisted Illrith in healing the deeper parts, wrapping it and being delicate enough to literally not get blood or anything on her hands, dress, or hair. The rogue was muttering elvish curses under his breath, some of them so violent Athena couldn’t help but join in with him.

“The first one came in the ballroom. It was superficial enough that I barely even felt it but apparently, I left a trail for them to follow me and ambush me. Thankfully my partner stayed in hiding so they wouldn’t realize we were on to them. They were acting drunk, boasting about heading to the kitchens when I was in there restocking on my – Ah!” He smacked the hand of the bald-headed female, cursing again. “Damnit, Lithari! That hurts!”

“If you weren’t acting like a heavy-footed shem and got caught, you wouldn’t be hurt.” She tightened the bandage on his leg and allowed him to rest. Athena put her hand over his, using her free hand to pinch the bridge of her nose.

“We were too confident. We didn’t think anyone would actually be stupid enough to try and hurt one of our own within the homes of the Inquisition. Did you notice any sigils or house emblems on their wear?” He shook his head.

“No, but they were wearing a yellow mask with green trim. Rounded ears, not one of ours.” Athena let out an audible growl, hands flexing around the cot as she pushed herself to a standing position.
“Orlesian, or someone trying to act like it. Spread it around, high alert and do not get relaxed. As happy as this holiday was intended to be someone wanted to fuck it up. This will not stand.” She punched the stone wall next to her with a barrier around her fist, getting some delight that there was now a fist-shaped indent in the wall that had a sound barrier on it.

Illrith’s companion scurried out of her hair and down her dress, using the smooth gold fabric to slide to the ground and run over to him. The rogue laughed, scooping down from the cot to grab him and put him on his chest. Syla made herself seen from behind the desk, concern written in her features.

“I-Illrith, are you alright?” She bent down besides the bed, gingerly taking the tan-skinned elf’s hand into her own. He casually brought it to her lips and Athena felt a pang of loneliness before replacing that feeling with an unadulterated rage towards the stranger who had entered their home with malice in their heart. Even Gaspard was civil to her on the dance floor and they hated each other.

“I will be fine. You should know, the attacker came in asking about a ‘cute, red-haired elf- that worked here. They’re definitely looking for you, Syla.” Athena turned on her heel and sighed, taking a heated wet cloth from Illrith to clean her hands and under her polished nails.

“Stay in this office then. If we cannot sniff them out we might have to draw them out eventually.” Illrith rose to a sitting position, shrugging off his servant’s jacket for a new one from a rack on the side. “No, you need to heal.”

The elf scoffed and shrugged off her words and Syla’s touch. “No. I will be fine, Fen’Elgara. I saw the filth and can track them down again. Permission to use my own tactics?” Athena considered it for a moment but nodded, heading towards the door.

“Granted. Send a message when we have them so we can cut the head off of this waste of space.”

Chapter End Notes

Song:

Somewhere Only We Know - Lily Allen
Athena made it back up to the dance floor and sat on the bench of her piano, letting out a sigh while rubbing the back of her neck. Before she even had a moment to breathe normally there was an ungraceful thud against her piano from the side that faced the wall. She allowed a beat to pass before sliding to the edge of the bench to see who it was. Normally only people familiar with her were the ones who stayed near her piano. But this, they were a stranger.

At least from their perspective.

King Alistair Theirin.

She instantly grinned, leaning her arm against the arm of the piano while leaning her head down. “Hiding are we, Your Majesty?”

The warrior instantly scoffed, slowly rising up to look over the edge. “Of course not. Is that what this looks like? No I’m just – er – getting to know all of the main hall here. This corner seemed lonely and empty so I wanted to fix that.” There was a frustrated blush on his cheeks and she wasn’t sure how there weren’t a thousand-people looking at him, but there they were in their corner.

“And this wouldn’t have anything to do with the fact that Morrigan is looking for you?” The Grey Warden’s face almost went pale, a groan escaping his lips as he rolled his eyes.

“How did you – wait – no. You’re the Witch of the Inquisition, right?” His voice grew guarded, his strange posture leaning slightly away from her as she stood up and crossed her arms over her chest.

“You haven’t changed much, you dork. She thought inwardly to herself, shrugging and bowing her head in a sarcastic greeting. ”My name is Athena Wolfsbane – “ Damnit Dorian. “But yes. That is the title they have given me. Don’t worry. I won’t turn you into a frog or whatever it is they tell you I do.”

Alistair paused a beat before standing, instantly looking over his left shoulder towards the crowd. “The court loves to gossip, nowhere as much as the Orlesians, but I still hear weird things. The biggest one is that you know of Thedas and its history, in a way that not many people can.” Athena smiled, extending a hand while gesturing to the dance floor. Morrigan was making her way to the front by the throne room and due to her persistence with manners she wouldn’t interrupt them if
they were dancing.

“That is true, my King. If you would permit me to save you I can explain this on the dance floor? Do not worry – I am not poaching after your throne. I understand the Queen Rose Cousland is not here and away on Warden business. My own partner, Solas, is unfortunately not in attendance either.” He looked to her hand and then around with uneasiness in his gaze, nodding and placing his gloved hand in hers. She turned and led him to the dance floor, fighting the blush in her cheeks over the fact that she was about to dance with the Alistair from Origins.

He brought her into the pose for a Ferelden Waltz, which was more rigid in appearance but relaxed. “I’m sure you know, but I became a Warden before going into Templar training. We didn’t have much time to learn dancing so people get the basics!” He chuckled under his breath and began to look around less, looking her up and down. “Well when they said Witch, this is not what I imagined.”

A laugh bubbled from her throat, her head turning to the side to quell the sound within the crook of her arm. “I’m sorry. I left my low-cut dress and wolf furs at home next to my blood make up.”

He laughed as well, lifting her up in an odd sort of hop before bringing her back into their position that gave them space between them. “But you do know about this world right? My people weren’t wrong in telling me that?” They spun and Athena caught sight of Rathein and Dorian giving her a thumb’s up over the view of his shoulder. She rolled her eyes and nodded, taking in a deep breath to give him an abbreviated version.

“Yes. In my world, we could sort of watch Thedas in a way. I don’t know the connection yet but I have knowledge of things since Queen Rose’s trek through the Blight and some scattered details before that. I could divulge personal information to prove it to you, or just say that Sten likes cookies and the Queen gave Morrigan a mirror that she found.” Alistair’s face went into a sort of awe, brow arching but still a smile on his face.

“That is fascinating, and helpful! Do you have anything that could help the Great Kingdom of Ferelden?” He asked in a joking manner, puffing his chest and going through the steps seamlessly. Athena twisted her mouth to the side, using a dance opportunity to bring her a step closer to him and mutter under her breath.

“If you, your wife, or your comrades in arms are feeling the Calling – don’t follow just yet. Corypheus has the ability to craft it and use it against the Wardens.” He stammered, skipping a step but picking back up and turning.
“I – uh – thank you. We had received a letter about that from Leliana but by the Maker I didn’t think it to be true. It’s all crazy, isn’t it? We finally kill an archdemon and put Wardens back on the map, restore Amaranthine from the Howes, keep it standing after the strange talking darkspawn, and then this. Leliana already mentioned the Orlesians Wardens coming to Amaranthine and that makes me so nervous. Didn’t you just save them from their own problems? I’m sorry. You didn’t sign up for a rant about the Order when asking to dance with me. Even after all this time, this ‘royalty’ thing feels odd.” Athena chuckled and nodded, noticing that they had gone an entire dance and were about to go into a second. The King didn’t seem ready to go back into the fray yet so she kept moving, doing her best to actively ignore Illrith move through the crowd towards the rotunda.

“No, I didn’t sign up for it but I am fascinated by it. If it makes you feel any better, aren’t you half royalty? I’m sure that gives you a small break.” She jested with an obvious wink, feeling relieved when he laughed.

“Don’t let Teagan or Eamon here you say that. They may challenge you right here. But yes, it does make me feel better.” He huffed under his breath and curved his lips in a genuine smile. “You know, it’s odd, but it feels nice talking to a normal-seeming person. It doesn’t feel like you have an agenda with me or are trying to use me for some gain of your own. It’s relieving. Thank you, Lady Wolfsbane.” The compliment left her speechless for a second, eyes blinking before a blush crawled from her chest.

“A-thank you, your Highness. You are kind to say so. It may sound weird, but, your travels with the odd group you had were my first glimpse into the world. I want to protect those apart of that. What I know was like reading facts in a book, but meeting you all, it just is a different experience.” He smiled and nodded, opening his mouth to talk again when Athena felt a tap on her shoulder. The pair looked over her shoulder to see Cullen standing there was a small bow of greeting to the King.

“King Alistair, I was wondering if perhaps I could cut in?” Alistair’s gaze slowly went from the stern-faced Commander over to hers, arching a brow before jokingly bringing her in a step closer.

“Commander Cullen! I have acquired your Hand of the Inquisitor as a shield from the people of the court. Go find your own!” There was a beat of silence between them before they both started chuckling under their breaths. “I jest, Cullen. Here.” Alistair broke off and patted Cullen on the shoulders from behind, looking to her with a shrug. “We go back to Templar training – good man here, Lady Athena. If you ever need anything or wish to visit Denerim, Ferelden will host you with open arms!” He then waved off and immediately was found by the Witch of the Wilds, who was standing with crossed arms and a cat-like smirk.

“Morrigan!”
Athena laughed into her hand before Cullen stepped in, clearing his throat and taking a step back to bow before her with his hand extended to cue the opening of the next dance. She tucked a stray hair behind her ear, touching the side of her lizard companion before placing her hand within his. “Sword not sharp enough?”

He chuckled deeply in his throat, bringing her close enough for people to assume they were friendly and comfortable with one another. Athena wasn’t sure what box to put him in. It wasn’t a sibling thing like Dorian and it for damn sure wasn’t a lover thing like Solas. He was weirdly in the middle, but a respected confidant nonetheless that she felt comfortable around. Plus they shared Kain together as strange parents, so that was also a consideration. “You do know Wintersend is largely for marriage proposals? I think I’ve already received six through word of Josephine or Leliana and three more directly from the nobles or their fathers approaching me themselves.”

She rolled her eyes at him, realizing he was keeping the same Ferelden based danced the King was just doing before. It was easier to stay within step since it didn’t require as much active thought. She tapped into the companion on Illrith’s shoulder, seeing that he had dragged the unmasked man into a storage room off of the rotunda. He was bound and gagged with bruising on his face. Athena winced at the grotesque violence, Illrith’s words echoing within her head. Whenever you are ready, Athena.

“Are you alright, Athena?” Cullen asked, squeezing her hand to bring her back into it. She shut her eyes and sighed.

“I apologize, my mind is literally in a thousand places tonight. My little soldiers are already being put to use.” His eyes widened and she could feel his body stiffen as if he were about to act but she took a step closer, nearly pressing chest to chest against him while shaking her head subtly. “No need to look alarmed. I am taking care of it. As the Hand, there are things I do to make the Inquisitor’s job safer. This does not involve her at all, understand?” He nodded silently, spinning her outwards and bringing her back to the same distance. “And can’t you learn to just say no, Commander? You do it at the War Table enough, an Orlesian woman should be easy!”

He instantly blushed, looking down at his feet before she squeezed his hip and brought his gaze back to hers. She could tell he wanted to rub the back of his neck but they were in the middle of a dance. “Mia would murder me if I was engaged without her meeting the woman. With our parents being gone. . . “ Athena’s eyes widened, lips slightly parting.

He caught onto this, tilting his head to the side. “Did you not know? The Blight took them.” He said it so matter of factly it almost felt false. She shook her head, suddenly feeling a lump of guilt within her stomach. It was such a terrible world. She was cut off from her parents and he, Lev’adin, and Tobi had lost theirs through tragedy. It was one of the little moments that made her appreciate
her family within Skyhold that much more. He gave a smirk that felt solemn, shrugging before continuing. “It is strangely refreshing to know you do not know everything about me then.”

“I was just telling King Alistair – what I know are like facts in a book. Getting to know you all personally is what I enjoy most. For instance, I didn’t know you and he were in Templar training together. What did your parents do in Honnleath?” He chuckled and spun through the ever-revolving crowd with her, seeming almost lighter on his feet.

“He enlisted young, younger than me. But we were about the same age when I started. It made it easier to train having a companion of sorts. My father was a blacksmith and my mother assisted him in the forge. It’s where Mia gets her stubbornness from.” He rolled his eyes and she chuckled, glancing to the side to see Illrith casually standing by the door near the rotunda with Varric sipping on an ale. Of course, the spy would get along with another spy-master.

“What of you? What did your parents do?” Athena hummed and shrugged shivering as the lizard readjusted its position in her curls.

“My mother was a financial person, kind of like Josephine but not as big. My father did construction long enough until he could be a foreman type, overseeing the projects and making sure they ran smoothly. We had buildings that were the height of dragons if you stretched them from snout to tailtip.” Cullen’s eyes went wide and she glanced to the side to notice the dance ending, the maestro lifting his baton and scanning the crowd for her.

“That sounds impossible.” He remained within the dancing posture, eyes fixed onto hers or the features of her face as they spoke.

She gestured with a nod to the rest of the people, smiling as he stammered and broke off into a bow. “The stubborn thing about my world is that they thought nothing was impossible. We crafted metal carriers to fly hundreds of people in the sky going nearly as fast as a fade-step. But if you’ll excuse me, I have some business to attend to before my next song.” She raised a finger to the maestro and winked in gratitude, slipping out and to the side with Illrith who fell into a quiet step behind her.

The man he had captured was gangly, poor-fed, but surprisingly clean. Athena pegged him for a servant type in one of the classes low enough to be trapped in Orlais. Perhaps a Ferelden born or former slave from generations past. “He won’t speak yet, Fen’Elgara. He was the one who got me and was looking for Syla.”

The name of the elf perked up the man’s ears, a bruised glare looking up over the bandings that
were shoved in his mouth to silence him. She shifted her weight to the side and noticed they were the dressings they used to wrap over Illrith’s wound. “Oh that’s just cruel and wicked, friend.” She stated with a smirk, glancing over at the elf who shrugged. The man made a grumbling noise underneath all of the packing in his mouth and she lazily drew a silencing rune on the wall behind her and tapped it with her index finger to activate it.

She then pulled on the dry piece of bandage and removed it from his mouth, the amount of fabric making it look like a sick magician’s trick because it felt never ending. The man then gasped and spat blood from his lips, both Illrith and Athena casually stepping to the side to avoid it getting on their clothes. “That bitch! All we need is that stupid ra-“

Before the slur could leave his mouth, Athena backhanded him with a barrier-coated hand, feeling an odd pit in her stomach at the foreign sensation while knowing it was a necessary evil. The man’s lip began to bleed but her companion at her side nodded in agreement, an odd smile coming to his face. “Why Syla? What is so important about her to your master? Why is he risking being so sloppy to get to her?”

The man shook his head but Illrith placed his hand over his dagger as a warning, Athena raising her hand to halt him. “If he truly saw elves so low he wouldn’t care for one unless it had value to him. What could make . . . “ Her words trailed off, eyes widening and lips curling in disgust as her mind raced. Illrith followed the same train of thought, cursing under his breath and looking to the side of the room with hatred in his eyes.

“An heir.” The disgusting man said with a blood-stained smile. Athena couldn’t help it. Her hands were shaking so much she backhanded him again, magic heating her hand enough to where it left a burn across the man’s cheek. Her vision was white on the edges, breath coming in shaky pants.

“Illrith. Take him to the dungeons in one piece. Tell the admitting guard he attacked a member of the Inquisition and by order of the Hand will be sentenced to a trial at the next date.” The rogue nodded and picked up the bandage to begin stuffing his mouth again but the man bit at his hands, fighting against his restraints to scream.

“Why! Why, Bitch of the Inquisition, do you choose to associate yourself with those fucking knife ears? You’re turning your back on your kind!” Athena turned her body towards the door, taking in a deep breath to contain her rage before relaxing her clenched fists and putting a hand on the door knob.

“The foundation of this world was built on the bones of their people. The world has taken advantage of every tragedy they have managed to survive, and yet the people endure.” She looked over her shoulder and scoffed. “Frankly, they are better than you.” She moved out of the door and moved fluidly through a hallway, coming into the rotunda. Something made her pause and look...
around. There was something different in the room, a subtle change.

She cast her gaze over the desk and saw that the pile of letters normally left for him was smaller and a book was missing. Athena curled her lips in a snarl, pushing through the rotunda to come out by Varric who was sitting in his normal chair taking in the event. Bull was leaning over his chair and watching everything, the black of his formal attire still failing to make him look smaller. “Hey, Alpha. How’s it going?” He asked with a raise of his head, both men smiling at her like they knew a dirty secret.

Athena went to answer when Dorian showed up at her side, looking exasperated and flustered. “Well that was cl – oh hey, Mata’! The maestro was looking for you to do another song. Come on, play something for me.” He put his hand on her back and led her towards the piano. She could feel him turn around and look at the other men and she rolled her eyes.

“All this spy business has made you too suspicious. Might I say, I’ve received compliments on my earring! We made a good choice.” Athena looked him up and down, rolling her wrists while catching the gaze of the orchestra leader.

Perhaps I should have given you a friend of your own, you all are acting shadier than the guy I just slapped in the basement.” Dorian nudged her in the side, wiggling his eyebrows before glancing at her hands.

“I’m proud of you. Getting your hands dirty – it shows you’re going up in politics!” Athena attempted to bite at him when he touched her cheek lovingly, turning towards the piano and letting out a sigh.

If Wintersend was supposed to be happy, she wasn’t feeling any of the “holiday cheer”.
Athena swore she was going to kill Dorian. The disgusting man in the basement revealed that not only was Syla being targeted, she had been *raped* as a means to an end to produce an heir. The woman was downstairs organizing a spy organization potentially with child and she was upstairs playing the fucking piano. Dorian was going off about the ball and how Vivienne had seemed off since returning from Val Royeaux two nights before but she wasn’t actively listening to any of it. He noticed after a minute, looking down at her and relaxing his face in sympathy. “Hey, Athena, what’s wrong?”

She used her index finger to wipe under eye, sniffing back tears she didn’t know were there. “Why are people so shitty, Dorian? Why do people care so much about legacy, heirs, and possessions? Shit once you’re dead you’re dead. People are eventually forgotten and possessions turn to ash next to your fucking corpse.” Athena looked around the room and did a sweep of the crowd, noticing that the orphan jar was slowly filling up as the night went on. There was a lid on top of the suggestions jar with a small note that said *be back tomorrow!* in hurried writing she could only assume was Varric’s.

“Well you just insulted the entire Imperium in a single breath but thankfully I’m trying to change that.” He took in a deep breath and sighed, straightening his posture, and avoiding her glance. “But don’t ask me why people are terrible. I can only agree with you as the man who would rather spend the night dreaming with a spirit than dancing with half of the hungry-eyed power climbers here.” His face went blank and he cursed underneath his breath. “Kaffas- I sound like Solas now.”

Athena broke her sadness and smirked, placing her hand on his thigh. “Still, Dorian? I knew you two were flirting, but this has been, what, a month since Adamant? At least?” He shrugged and twitched his mustache, scratching the side of his temple while remaining speechless.

“Even with all of the people here, I doubt any of them would actually want to get to know me.” He gestured over the crowd with a disappointed stare. “I mean look at them. Maybe it isn’t them. Who knows, maybe I’m the odd one.” He lamented, eyes softening to a point where Athena knew he was being genuine. The maestro of the orchestra caught her attention with a flourish of his baton, giving her the cue to start. She looked over to Dorian and scrunched her mouth to the side in childish consideration, starting off a song she knew would hopefully cheer him up or piss him off it was so cheesy. There was an enraged pit in her gut that she had to quell while she wore the mask of the “Otherworlder Musician”. Still, duty called.

She started singing the opening notes in an almost whisper, her fingers effortlessly sliding over the keys as she pulled on Inspiration’s blessing harnessed within her orb to keep the magic going in her
fingertips enough to make the piano happy. The Tevinter perked up, looking over to her with an arched brow while remaining silent.

“*Oh, his eyes, his eyes, make the stars look like they’re not shining.*
His hair, his hair, falls perfectly without him trying.
He’s so beautiful. And I tell him everyday.”

Dorian rolled his eyes, beginning to cut her off but she shook her head, knowing her stubbornness would win over especially now that she had won the attention of the crowd.

“*Yeah, I know, I know, when I compliment him he won’t believe me.*
It’s so, it’s so sad to think that he doesn’t see what I see.
But everytime he asks me do I look okay, I say–“

He admitted defeat, holding his hands up in a surrender while breaking his sadness with a solemn smirk. She looked over to the side, seeing the boys raise a glance to her. Cullen was now hiding amongst a small group of his soldiers, Loranil with his own lizard standing at his side. When her eyes met the Commander’s, he smirked at her but she went back to the song and looked to the man at her side, her family, her rock, her equally as fucked up of a person.

“*When I see your face, there’s not a thing that I would change.*
‘Cause you’re amazing. Just the way you are. And when you smile – “

Athena took her hands off of the piano for a moment, allowing her magic to continue to pilot the instrument as she grabbed her friend’s hand and squeezed it. It brought a sincere smile from his face as his thumb traced over her knuckles, tears glistening over his gaze. She sighed in happiness, nodding while leaning over to kiss his bare shoulder from his Tevinter-styled outfit.

“*The whole world stops and stares for a while. ‘Cause man you’re amazing, just the way you are.*
Yeaaah!”

She left a painted-lip imprint on his shoulder, thankful that there was another pot with a brush down in her office to freshen up before Vivienne clocked her for looking sloppy. “*His lips, his lips I could kiss them all day if he let me.*” There was another pang of loneliness, nestling itself next to the discomfort that came from adjusting to her role for the night. They were buried underneath her agenda and the burden that she had to protect the people she put in harm’s way in the first place. Dorian had listened to her line, laughing and rubbing his forehead with one hand. She shrugged and continued on, slapping a fake smile to her face.
“His laugh, his laugh, he hates but I think its so sexy.” He winked at her and she returned it, sighing when he put his hand on her thigh and did well to not mess up Valerie’s good work. “He’s so beautiful, and I tell him everyday.”

Dorian ran a hand through his hair and she stood up, extending a hand to him and allowing her magic to take over completely on the piano. The magic around her earring crackled and he flicked his gaze to it. She shrugged, knowing that Solas wasn’t around, helping him to get up from the bench. The orchestra began to play soft background music since this was on the list of songs she had gone over with them in the meetings leading up to the ball. “Oh you know, you know, you know I’ll never ask you to change.”

They passed Vivienne who was watching the whole ball with a cool eye. Athena caught her gaze and looked her up and down, nodding her head in response to the perfectly fitted black and blue dress that she was wearing. Wait, black? Shit. Mourning. Dorian had mentioned Vivienne went to Val Royeaux, which meant she had taken the wyvern heart and still managed to come back and help plan the ball with Josephine. Athena sang the next lyric while holding the Iron Lady’s gaze, realization and sympathy leaking into her eyes. “If perfect’s what you’re searching for, then just stay the same.”

Dorian spun her eloquently and presented her down the main stretch of the ballroom, the dancers adjusting to them as if they didn’t exist. They didn’t blink at her singing while dancing, interacting with friends, and playing the piano, which made her think that their lifestyle and events were much crazier than this. Still, it made her feel at home to be able to cheesily express her love and adoration for Dorian in a song in public, so she continued. “So don’t even bother asking if you look okay, you’ll know I say-“

She motioned to him from top to bottom, biting her bottom lip in jest before winking when she caught his eye. He raised his arm vertically and she met it, placing her forearm against his as they walked in a circle to begin their dance. “When I see your face, there’s not a thing that I would change. ‘Cause you’re amazing. Just. The. Way. You. Are.”

Athena accented the words and squeezed his hand when he brought her in close like a lover would, holding her hand against his chest while smiling down at her. “And when you smile, the whole world stops and stares for a while. ‘Cause you’re amazing.”

Dorian rolled his eyes jokingly before finishing her lyric, nudging his nose against her forehead. “Just the way you are, Mata. Even though your songs are so sweet sometimes I feel like my teeth are going to fall out of my skull.”
Athena laughed, nodding to the people around her that were clapping at the resolution of her song. Without missing a beat, the orchestra picked up a new song and he was taking her through a Tevinter dance they had learned together. It required a lot of close-contact and footwork, reminding her somewhat of a rumba from the little she knew of it back at home. “And, if it makes you feel better, I literally had to go to another world to find the person I love. So, the location of your interest is a bit closer than that?”

The Tevinter man groaned, taking a wide step to the side and dipping her low to where her back was on top of his knee. He held her strong, meeting her eyes with a sarcastic grin. “Oh yes. Thank you. I feel so much better, Madam-I-Walked-Through-The-Fade.” They smiled at each other as he brought her back up and she kicked her foot up high, using the advantage of the slit on her thigh to do so and change positions. Just as they were about to move into the next set a smaller framed woman tapped on Dorian’s shoulders.

“Might I have the honor, Altus? It has been a while and I believe the Sorciere and I have some catching up to do.” Briala weaved herself into the dance floor, meeting Athena’s eyes with a smile. Dorian looked between the two women and nodded, spinning Athena a final time before bringing her into a hug.

“Someone is popular tonight. Be safe, ‘mata.” He said before kissing the top of her head, leaving her with the Marquise who began to lead the dance. Athena chuckled, shaking her head back and forth.

“Thank you, unfortunately I do not know how to lead half of the dances they have taught me.” Briala politely smiled, bringing them into a basic Orlesian waltz. Leliana had mentioned before that this was an easy dance for conversations since it was difficult for spies to listen on the dance floor.

“Do you know of the herb of thornbane?” The true Empress asked, meeting her gaze through the same mask she wore at Halamshiral. Athena tilted her head to the side in question, shaking her head. The elf made a hum of acknowledgement before continuing. “Most know it as an afternoon tea.” She then nodded with a slight blush on her cheeks, arching a brow in question.

“Yes – that is more familiar. But why – “ Athena asked, her back brushing against that of the noble that was passing them by. There was a disgusted sound from the Ferelden man but she ignored it, knowing that King Alistair was on her side now. Even thinking that made her chest feel warm but she felt it all snap away when there was a subtle change in her dance partner’s expression.

“A member of staff asked for it once from one of my people in an estate. A young woman, red hair, very intelligent. You know the one I speak of?” Shit. Again, she nodded, feeling somewhat helpless and stupid in the situation but grateful for her ally’s help. “One can get nausea when it is
used when... there is already something present. The master mistook these ailments as something else and got excited at his prospects.”

Her grip on the elf became tight, gaze looking past the ballroom to the white area of her mind where she could listen to her spies. There were more tipsy people stumbling around, but more concerningly there was an antsy noble with a black mask walking in the gardens and pacing. He did not fit the scene of the calm party-goers and his gait looked off, at least according to the spy she had in that area. “I have been told this person has been quite ill and matters of their estate are frequently being brought up.”

Athena clenched her jaw and had to avoid grinding her teeth. “He is getting nervous because his estate will pass to his cousin, who supports you and the Inquisition, and that will be one more resource that ‘the rightful Emperor of Orlais’ will not have, correct?” She asked with a sharp and annoyed tone, speaking low while bringing her gaze from over her shoulder directly to the small woman’s calculated eyes. She did not have the time to dance around the questions and make her words colorful and poetic.

Briala nodded, squeezing her back where her hand rested. “My hands have been tied in this situation, which makes me uncomfortable. I was limited but I at least switched out the majority of his staff with some of mine. The faces he cares not to notice will be the ones watching him on the ride home.” Athena made a small move of her head, indicating that she understood while listening to the familiar rhythm and knowing that the song was about to end. Briala broke the formal façade and smiled, gesturing her head over to the side where she noticed that Tobi and Lev’adin were dancing on the side, giggling with one another while trying to figure out the steps. “Your children are wonderful, Lady Athena. You must be proud.”

Athena looked over to them and sighed. When Tobi was confused by a step he would directly interject and ask Cullen next to him as a pass to get him out of conversations with the surrounding women. It was a breach in the chain of command but the warrior did not hesitate to drop what he was doing and walk them through it. That did not help the crowd of ever-growing sighing women, but it warmed her heart to see her children surviving in the harsh political environment. “You have no idea, Briala. They fill my soul.”

“And Solas?” The woman asked without hesitation, arching a brow underneath the mask with a scheming smile on her lips.

Athena responded without hesitation, matching the woman’s tone in kind. “My heart.” *Man staggering downstairs, pushing through servants with a drink in his hand.* The lizard on top of her head squirmed and made a small noise of distress, Briala looking up while Athena broke off from the dance. “Excuse me, Marquise. If you will forgive me, there is yet another piece I need to play.”
Athena weaved through the people, face blank with concentration as she moved to find the closest staircase. Leafy followed her trail, remaining silent as the two golden-clad girls walked down the hall and descended through a staircase. As they were coming down into the large open area that would soon be hosting the after-party, they heard a drunken cry. “Syla! Open the fucking door!”

“Leafy. This is dangerous. Go back to your brother.” The mage in training already had lightning sparking between her fingertips as they descended, shaking her head as the lizard on her head became visible, her barrier around it glowing a faint yellow. The pair ran and skidded to a halt in the middle of the room, witnessing the Baron pull out a jagged crystal and using it to blow through the barriers on her door. Athena immediately snarled in a scream, holding a hand out to her staff that came from the kitchens with daggers drawn.

The man stormed through and she heard Syla scream, Lithari’s spells bounding off him as if they were water. Athena and Leafy ran through the door and she pulled on her orb, power crackling around her earring as she summoned power within her palm. “Baron du Ghalad.”

“Get away from me, you fucking bitch. Do you know who I am? Who I know?!” He turned in a flurry, his outer clothes burnt away to show the magic-resistant leather chest piece he wore underneath it. Athena curled her lip in a snarl, taking a slow step forward, her heel clicking against the stone floors.

“A pathetic man at the end of his life grasping for something to cling to. You were messy, Baron. Frankly it was disappointing.” The man’s eyes were frenzied, yellow skin stretched out and hollowed around his gaze and cheeks. She had seen this kind of disease before from her experience as a healer. There was a click of recognition when she realized exactly how little of time he had left.

“That knife ear has what is rightfully mine.” He nearly spat his words like venom, keeping his eyes on her since she was the truest threat in that room, or so he thought.

Syla unsheathed her dagger silently, moving around the desk to within standing reach. Without warning the lithe elf lunged forward, burrowing the tip of her dagger into the man’s torso. The edge of the dagger protruded with a splash of blood from his right chest. Athena put her hand out in front of Leafy to guard her, pushing her back a step. Syla screamed as she pushed the man onto the ground, pulling her dagger out and throwing it to the side with a shaky hand.

The Baron was gasping for air, hatred filling his eyes as Syla couldn’t control the emotions in her
voice. “There is nothing that belongs to you in this room. You have no heir.” There was a shift in
the room and Athena was too slow to find the source, the sickly man using the enchantment of his
artifact to reach forward and pull Leafy into his grasp using a tendril of lightning that originated
from the object. The young girl cried out, pushing out with her lightning but he held the crystal to
her neck instantly.

Athena saw white as he dragged her back to the edge of the cliff, blood pouring down her
daughters back as it came from his fatal wound. “Y-y-you took my future! MY LEGACY.” He
coughed, blood sputtering into Leafy’s hair. “Consider this a trade!” He raised the crystal to
Leafy’s neck with a shaky hand but the wind from outside was already beginning to swirl around
them.

Lightning sparked from the room and in a fade-step Athena raced across the room and over the
desk in a blur, grabbing Leafy’s shirt and throwing her back. Syla and Lithari caught the girl as
Athena gripped the man’s throat with a clawed hand and raised him in the air over the cliff’s edge.
There was no anger on her face, no glances of sympathy.

Her heart was beating so hard within her chest she thought it was going to burst.

Her breathing was so measured that the air hurt when it came into her lungs.

Her hand was so firmly squeezed around his throat that she could feel the individual pieces of his
spine underneath it, and for that moment it felt so easy to crush. When her voice came it was
passive, as if she were calling out from a world far away. Emotion drained from her eyes and she
surged her magic into the hand that held onto it. With her thumb against the front of her throat, she
carved a flame glyph into his skin, using the other hand to plunge into his breast plate and rip it
from his chest.

“I am sorry, Syla. I do not mean to snatch your vengeance from you.”

Illrith and Loranil burst through the door behind her as well as half a dozen of their workers. She
could see the image before them through the eyes of their lizard companions. A golden-framed
woman nearly glowing with power, flame dripping from her claws onto the floor below as blood
dripped down her arm, her victim scrambling and clawing at her skin to try and escape.

Syla shook her head and made a sound of acceptance, eyes steeled to her former master as he hung
in the free air. The flame glyph began to burst, its power spreading like a slow flame to a cigarette
over his skin. The man screamed, the sound echoing from the cave and drowning within the sounds
of the howling wind.
“You spend your life hating on these people. You spend your life harming these people, for what? To make yourself feel superior? You have walked over the ashes of the people for years, but. . . “

Athena’s face contorted into something of purpose, an animalistic and feral expression coming into her face as she clenched her hand over his now burning throat. “Now they will walk over yours.” She reeled back and threw his body over the edge, flaring a last bit magic into the spell. The flames erupted and consumed his body, his screams quickly fading out as his body burnt to ash and spread through the winds at the bottom of the mountain.

There were a few breaths when all she heard was her own heartbeat. It sounded like a gunshot erupting within her brain. Her throat felt tight and there were tears unshed burning at the corner of her eyes, but she was distracted when there was the sound of movement behind her. Athena clenched her clawed hand into a fist, dismissing the shapeshifting magic to bring back her painted and carved nails. Loranil came to the front of the group next to Leafy, dagger drawn.

His steps sounded through the stone cave until he dropped to her on one knee, placing his right fist over his heart in a gesture that stole the words from her throat. Slowly everyone in the room repeated it, the last person being Leafy. There was a mixed expression on the face as her fear faded away.

The young woman clenched her fist, nodding in determination before falling down to one knee. She looked up to her mother with nothing but admiration and pride, her eyes reflecting back the thrill of the wild that Athena knew hers had. “Fen’Elgara.” The girl’s voice was strong and true, the rest of the people humming in agreement before Loranil repeated it.

“Fen’Elgara.”
Chapter End Notes

Song:

Bruno Mars - Just the Way You Are

Art commissioned by fleshwerks on Tumblr.
It took two different spells to get the blood out but Athena just let them do it as she sat on the plush chair behind her desk. Her eyes were into another world as she recounted over what just happened while idly stroking on the lizard that was now sleeping on her desk on top of a small warming rune. Lev’adin’s shirt had been ruined with blood but Valerie had created a spare in a stunning deep navy blue, the contrast bringing out the light of her hair and the glow of her skin. She appeared to be ten years older within those minutes of cleaning the blood from her hands and body, allowing Lithari to touch up her magic with basic lotions that would match the job Valerie did earlier.

They were all a strange working machine, but soon the office looked like nothing had happened. The breast plate with the rune and the artifact the Baron used was placed in a chest for Josephine and Leliana to investigate. Lorani was on his way to convene with the staff that was waiting near the Baron’s assigned room, and already the castle felt at ease. Athena, on the other hand, had a momentary feeling of claustrophobia.

Women like us.

It was a phrase Vivienne had mentioned to her before and she was starting to think it was a warning. There was a burden in protecting so many people, and for some reason this was the first time it weighed on her. The actions at Adamant, the fights against the red templars, those were all strangers without names, cogs to the machine of the Inquisition. These were her people. She knew them, or at least was beginning to. Their stories were starting to intertwine and she knew in that moment when Syla took back her freedom that she would do whatever she had to do give them that choice.

There wasn’t a regret in her mind over killing him. There was only slight regret for murdering her innocence and naivety on the stone floor of her office.

“Fen’Elgara, they are asking for you upstairs. The last few songs are playing and the hall is nearly bursting with visitors.” Lithari stated matter of fact, her lack of hair bringing attention to her sharp and androgynous features.

Athena nodded and met her gaze, standing in a smooth motion before gulping down the rest of the wine in her glass. Leafy followed on her tail, intertwining her fingers with hers as they slowly ascended the stairs they had previously rushed down. Illrith removed the door from its hinges and was speaking with one of Josephine’s people to put in an order for a new one, preferably something that could be worked in with metal for sturdier protection.
The rogue met her eyes and smirked, going back to his conversation as the pair of women left his sight. Athena waited a few steps before pausing, turning and squeezing her daughter’s hand. “Are. . . are you okay?”

The teen nodded with confidence, squeezing her hand back. “I am fine, Fen’Mae. Thank you – for that back there. I . . . can tell that wasn’t easy for you.” She spoke with wisdom beyond her years, the maturity putting a hollow pit in her stomach. She was supposed to enjoy her young years. Her and Tobi both. This world forced them to grow too fast.

“I would do it every day for the rest of my life if it meant you were safe, Lev’adin.” Tears formed over Leafy’s gaze but she wiped them on her sleeve, being careful to not ruin the soft make up that had been applied.

“I know. Let’s get back before Tobi gets himself into trouble.” They finished their ascension in silence and when she walked through the doors she realized exactly how much time had went by. There was a feeling of drunkenness in the room and she was sure every person at Skyhold was in attendance.

Well, all but one apparently.

Athena twitched her lips into a frown as Dorian glided over on the floor to her, grabbing her by the shoulders and arching a brow. He looked to them both, taking in their gazes before nodding. “Business is done then?” Leafy hummed in her answer, resting one fist on her hip while giving him a somewhat rude gesture in response. He laughed, fingers twitching with the urge to bring her into a hug.

“Well. Good. Perhaps you can help me, Amatus.” There was a cool breeze from the entrance of Skyhold since the sun was far gone from the sky. He wrapped her in his warm aura as a sort of mage-embrace, sitting her down at the piano and patting the instrument on top. “You and Vivienne seem down tonight. For your final song of the evening, I was wondering if I could put in a request even if the jar is empty.” He pointed a fist and thumb to the jar on his right. She couldn’t help but be annoyed by his positivity, especially after what she had just been through, but she resigned herself to a sigh and nodded.

“Anything for family. What are you in the mood for?” Dorian grinned, framing his body so that she could see Vivienne speaking to Orlesians with very toned-down movements and expressions.
“Something up-beat, that makes you want to dance no matter how miserable you are. I am going to drag her out on that dance floor even if it- well more accurately, she kills me.” The wheels were turning in her head and she couldn’t help but smirk, the severity of her expression melting away into a passive enjoyment of the ball and its surroundings.

“I think I have just the thing. I’m not sure if I have the energy though.” The mage leaned forward and touched her cheek gingerly, wiping away a tear she didn’t realize was there before tilting his head with a smile.

“Try. It will be good for you too, you sap. I’ll sit here until it feels right, so get warmed up.” The silence in the ballroom meant that the dancers were waiting for her to start so she cleared her throat, looking over to Lev’adin with a shrug. It would be difficult to translate the grooviness of this song into piano, but she figured she would try. The meetings she had with the orchestra gave them enough practice to pick up on her rhythms and melodies so that they could add in what they knew. It was the difference between her and the professionals. They were able to identify repetitive strings of notes since most of Earth’s music had a tendency to be redundant.

The opening notes were a combination of her finding the key and drumming her hand on the piano bench for affect. She led up to get the tempo going before running through the song in her head, a reluctant and fake smile coming to her lips as she began to sing. “Clock strikes upon the hour and the sun begins to fade. Still enough time to figure out how to chase my blues away.”

Athena stood from the bench and scooted it back with her thighs, using her body to sway with the forced beat in her head so she could easily replicate it with her fingers on the keys of the piano. Leafy bobbed her head along, tapping her fingers on the bench with a smile that mirrored her mother’s.

“I’ve done alright up to now, it’s the light of day that shows me how.

And when the night falls, loneliness calls.”

She widened her stance and cursed Dorian inwardly for him convincing her to play a song that would lift her spirits. She had danced with the false Emperor or Orlais, the King of Ferelden, the true Empress of Orlais, the Commander of the Inquisition, and her soul-mate of a brother, but not the one who brought true foundation and comfort into her life. There was a bitterness to her singing, eyes closed as she tried to push down the panging emptiness within her stomach since the night’s events were almost over.

“Oh – I wanna dance with somebody. I wanna feel the heat with somebody.

Yeah – I wanna dance with somebody, with somebody who loves me.”
As she repeated the chorus she began to include small dance moves in her playing, breaking into a full on grin at how much she missed dancing to this song with her sister as they drove in the car. It was a memory so far away now but even still she clung to it to drag her out of the hole that was her night. It helped when Lev’adin stood up and was bobbing to the song in her own cute way, raising herself up on the ball of her foot to spin gracefully.

“I’ve been in love and lost my senses spinning through the town. 
Sooner or later, the fever ends, and I wind up feeling down.”

Athena poured her soul into the song, glancing over to see Dorian trying to convince Vivienne to dance. She was adamantly refusing, but she noticed a few subtle shoulder twitches with the beat and finger taps against her wineglass.

“I need a man who’ll take a chance on a love that burns long enough to last. 
So when the night falls –” Vivienne met her gaze with the hardened one of a trained member of the Game, sending a chill down her spine but she held it with a nod. “My lonely heart calls.”

The mage turned her nose up, handing the glass off to someone walking by before gliding to the dance floor with Dorian on her arm. Rathein extended her arm from the dance floor and gave her a tipsy thumb up, Bull mimicking the gesture and making room as the Iron Lady and Dorian broke into a complicated and smooth-looking dance.

Athena continued to sing, realizing that almost everyone was on the ballroom except for her. Josephine was with Blackwall, Leliana had dragged King Alistair on the floor, and Briała had coerced Commander Cullen into conversing while doing some awkward mash up between the Orlesian and Ferelden steps. “Somebody who- Somebody who loves me.”

There was a snap against her skin, Dorian’s wrapping aura coming from her skin as if she just forcibly removed a sweater she had been wearing for hours. Suddenly she felt the chill of the outside and pushed down harder on the keys, pouring all of her energy into the song to hopefully energize the people on the dance floor. “I need a man to take a chance on a love that burns hot enough to last –“

The cold didn’t go away, it prickling against her skin like a gentle touch.

Her breath caught in her throat, her eyes wide as the next lyrics almost failed to fall from her lips. “So when the night falls.”
The door to the rotunda shut, an image like a dream walking out and adjusting his cuff-links. There were no more words within her throat, hands shaking as they left the piano and thankfully her magic continued to play it. Lev’adin pushed her on her side towards the fireplace, a shit-eating grin on her face.

Solas looked up from his wrist and they both had a moment of shared awe. He looked over her, face melting into one that made her knees weak as she did the same to him. He was wearing a suit, the same suit that she showed him in a dream once months ago. The slim-fitted navy blue jacket cut down to his waist and there were matching pants that went into dress shoes. It was odd seeing shoes on him, but the sight alone made tears come to her eyes.

He was within arm’s reach so she reached out and touched the black tie hanging from his neck, rubbing over her fingers over the fine silk while her other hand ran underneath the length of a black suspender that pressed against his chest. He framed her face with his gentle touch, fingers tracing down her jawline until his eyes started taking in the golden lace neckline. “Ma vhenan.” The title choked her throat with unshed tears, a smile splashing across her face as the urge to touch him caused her hands to shake. He continued, happiness flooding into his voice. “You look – like – ” He hesitated, hand cupping on the curve of her hip as his gaze fell from hers to the floor.

Athena answered for them both, stepping forward and cupping his face within her hands. “Home. You look like home, Solas.” Their shared contact broke all matters of decorum in the ball, him bringing her into a tight embrace against his body. Athena released a sob, putting a hand over her mouth to contain the sounds as he buried his face in her neck. The song continued behind her, her distantly realizing that the Nightingale herself had stepped in to finish the song.

Solas brushed his lips over her neck, sending a myriad of shivers down her spine. He trailed the gentle gestures up to her ear, whispering in a heated yet hushed voice. “Dance with me, ma’fen, before the music stops playing.”

She nodded into his shoulder, doing her best to not wipe make up all over the brilliant fabric of his suit. He took his hands into hers, kissing the knuckles before leading her out onto the dance floor. Dorian and Vivienne looked him up and down as he did so, the Iron Lady raising her brows and humming a sound of approval.

“A vast improvement, Solas.” That was all she said before falling victim to another swirl that Dorian led her into. The mage called out over his shoulder, winking at Athena when she scowled at him.

“Thought you would never show up, Solas. Traffic from Val Royeaux that awful?” Solas made a
small scoffing noise, the smile never leaving his face as he spun her into a hold that they had done once upon a dream. He had attempted to teach her elven ways of dancing, more things from his world. They were slow, gentle movements that allowed for the dance partners to fully take in one another’s touch, smell, and sound.

Elven balls lasted for days, weeks, sometimes so their movements were not rushed. There were dances that were solo, one partner trying to lure another out through powerful, seductive movements. The other would have hours to decide if it was what they wanted to do, and when they finally met... it was fireworks.

During their dance Solas and Athena never took their eyes off one another; they never broke contact. Even when there were parts in the dance where they were supposed to push back from one another, their fingertips remained laced and he brought her back to a pose where he could hold her close. The upbeat song had dissolved into an orchestral piece that she had played for the conductor and Varric, since he was still trying to find material to write in ‘their book’. It was a slow piece that her mind played through the piano, gently pulling on the magic that existed within her orb to help her do it.

It felt like the rest of the world had dissipated around them and they were the only two dancing. They had attempted to keep within the dance, but since they weren’t watching what they were doing she tripped over his foot and nearly face-planted into his chest. He chuckled into the top of her head, using a gentle touch to smooth over her hair. They smiled at one another, her favorite wrinkles appearing at the sides of his eyes when he did so. They both surrendered to a basic dance, him holding one of her hands against his chest while the other rested on her lower back. She hummed along softly to the song, pressing her ear to his chest to feel the rhythm of his heartbeat underneath her touch as they swayed.

Solas let out a soft sight, kissing the top of her head. “I am sorry my absence was longer than intended.”

She shook her head in protest, pulling his hand up to her lips so she could kiss his palm, leaving a red imprint of her lips on the inside. Her smile broadened when she felt him shudder at the lightest of touches, the tips of his ears flushing pink. “You are forgiven. Did you obtain the books you wanted?” She asked almost in a whisper, hooded eyes flicking from his hand to his gaze. He smiled, unable to keep himself from laughing with a small shake of his head.

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“Believe it or not, that was one of the things that kept me held up in Val Royeaux. I was not lying in that. But, the meeting with the seamstress took longer since they had not seen a design like the one I had sketched out from our night in the Fade.” He met her gaze at the mention of their dream, a dark hunger setting into his features, the sight of such drew a soft sigh from her lips. Her throat was dry, tight, and it was difficult to form words as she wetted her lips to try and answer him. The images of that dream flashed through her head. The way he gripped her thighs in desperation, the
predatory gaze when she danced on the dancefloor, the feeling of the bass within her body as she crushed her lips against his.

The sound of her own pulse drumming within her ears drowned out the noise of the ball, eyes slowly lifting from his hand to the features of his face. She could feel the flush of her attraction blooming on her chest so she cleared her throat and mustered a nervous smile. “Y-yeah, your artistry is better than mine. I had to show Dorian the dress I wanted in the Fade so he could draw it for me.”

Solas tilted his head slightly, subconsciously following the gentle sway of their dance even as people began to leave the dance floor. “You were able to bring him into a dream?”

She nodded, her own pride in her abilities allowing some of her flushing to dissipate. “Yes, I think it was my first time doing such a thing. I believe it created some positive results, however.” There was an obvious sweep from her lover’s gaze, it slowly moving over the details of the dress, over the curve of her breasts, and down the slit on her thigh as he twirled her under one hand to take in all of her features. Athena felt a knot begin to form within her belly, thighs tightening as she turned back into his grasp. There was the lightest brush of his nails against her back, bringing her in close with a sharp inhale through her nose. She shot him a warning glance, failing in her strength as his scent swirled around in her mind and she caught sight of the wolfish smirk he was giving her.

There was a gravity between them that left her helpless, lips slightly parted as she pushed her chest against him. The thrill of the hunt lifted the veil of the ball from her mind, her entire spirit captured by the God in front of her. The images of everyone around them melted away as he brushed his lips against her forehead, the heat of his breath lingering on her skin. He bent down to make a move to venture south when there was a sharp clap on her shoulder, the grip turning her away from him and bringing her back into the whole situation.

Dorian grinned at her with almost a cheeky smile, pointing over his shoulder towards the staircases by the piano. “Come on, you two. Sera says downstairs is ready.”

Solas let out a long groan of frustration, dragging his eyes from her face to him while making a gesture Athena couldn’t see. The haze of his touch was fading from her mind and she smiled, touching the pins in her hair to make sure everything was staying in place.

The Tevinter put his hands up in surrender, the smile never leaving his face. “Don’t get cheeky with me, Chuckles. Inquisitor’s orders.”

Chapter End Notes
Songs:

I Wanna Dance with Somebody - Whitney Houston
So Close - John McLaughlin (just the music of it, not the lyrics)

I believe there were requests for a showy, fashionable entrance at the right moment?

Great minds think alike because I've had this idea since I wrote the dream chapter months ago. :)

Duty, begrudgingly, came first.

Dorian had interrupted them and pulled them from the dance floor, Athena trying to stay within a pace of Solas at all times. His hand would occasionally brush hers or he would make a pass for their shoulders to touch, but it wasn’t enough. The rapid beating of her heart put a lump in her throat that was difficult to swallow, her mind frenzied and unfocused as Loranil and Illrith came out from the side.

“Everyone else was safe as planned, Lady Wolfsbane. There hasn’t been anything else of note and most of the guests are turning in for the evening or heading to the tavern.” Loranil stated in an official manner, his words clipped with one arm resting on his stomach while the other was folded over his lower back. Cullen was nearby so he was on his best behavior in front of his overall commanding officer. Athena had made a mention to the red-haired elf that they would discuss a potential transfer, but he was doing well as a lieutenant in the soldier’s force.

Illrith broke the soldier’s hardened posture and pulled him into a sideways embrace, pointing over his shoulder and out the main door. “And that is where we will be going!

Athena shrugged, crossing her arms over her chest and shifting her weight with an impatient posture. She then flicked her gaze around, waiting for a visiting Baroness to pass before she spoke low under her voice. “There... is something going on downstairs if you are interested. Sera is putting it together, so you know it will be fun.”

The two men looked at each other, both shrugging while raising their brows. “That girl does play a mean game of cards at the tavern.”

“We could stay for a little bit, Loranil.”

“The Inquisitor always brings the best booze.”
She chuckled and tucked a stray hair behind her ear underneath a pin, looking to them with a genuine smile. “No pressure. I figured we all could use the night off. If we need to, sneak some of the good stuff into my office and go at it.” She then winked and tossed an invisible pair of keys to Illrith for a gesture, who caught them knowingly with a grin.

“That we can do.” The dark-haired rogue paused, glancing over to the group of the Inner Council before looking to the staircase with a focused expression. Loranil followed his gaze, picking up on the silent communication between them. “It might be better if you return to the office first to clear things out, has Solas seen it yet?”

Athena’s jaw hung slightly open before her lips curled into a wolfish grin, her gaze lazily rolling from her soldiers over to her lover, who was standing and catching up with Cassandra and Dorian, who could not stop circling him to look at the details of his Earth-like outfit. “Are those shoes! Kaffas, Solas, mark me impressed.”

Cassandra had the blush of a romantic on her face, a hand playing with the braid that was fallen to the side of her head. “I am impressed as well. That was very – very endearing.”

Varric walked over with his fingers on the waist of his pants, wearing a shit-eating grin towards the Seeker. “What she means to say is Bull had to keep her from fainting from the pure romance of it all.”

The brunette went to scornfully smack the dwarf on the back of the head before Solas looked over to Athena and smirked, the corners of his lips pulling up in a flash of a dark expression that made her stomach turn. She heard someone clearing her throat next to her and she saw Illrith raise a brow, his body stiff in an official-looking posture that almost made her scoff. There was a playful expression in his eyes though, and she noted that Loranil was now absent from his side. “Lady Athena, that artifact is still waiting downstairs. Lithari cannot determine its origin.”

She blinked a few times, mind whirring when it dinged within her head like an oven timer going off. Solas closed the space between them, flicking his gaze between the two. “Artifact?” He asked, coolly looking to her with an arched brow. She nodded, gesturing towards the staircase near the piano that led near the door to her office.

“Uh – yes. We collected something off of a party guest tonight that allowed a non-mage to cast magic. I doubt he was a secret mage all along, so this artifact is something I needed to look into.” He assessed her features and then nodded, his expression fading into one of the curious scholar. He gestured in Illrith’s direction, since the rogue was already walking towards the stairwell. Athena fell into step behind her soldier, hands smoothing out the fabric of her dress as they walked. Just as
Illrith opened up the door he snapped his fingers and shook his head, sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck.

“I’ll meet you down there. I was supposed to grab Syla something from the table up here since she didn’t have a chance to leave the office tonight.” He then slipped off onto the side of the piano, leaving Athena to continue descending the stairs. Solas was directly behind her, a hand sliding along the wall for support as they went down together. The sound of their steps against the stone became suddenly very evident, their shared silence only increasing the echo of the movements. She paused, for a second, her hand twitching against the wall before looking over her shoulder. “Were... you here earlier? Your desk – I thought I saw – “

Solas chuckled low in his throat, descending a step so that he was directly behind her. He bent down and brushed his lips over the back of her neck, his hands tentatively gripping her waist. “I must confess, yes. Unfortunately, I had to manage the large shipment of books and then find my uniform amongst them. By the time I was ready, it seemed like you were already in the thick of the evening.” His words dragged along her skin, the depth of his voice elongating the syllables in hot breaths against her skin.

She groaned softly as he made light touches with his lips in between her ear and her shoulder, his lips lingering enough for her to feel the warmth of his body against her skin. She couldn’t help but shudder again him, nails scratching down the stone wall in an attempt to gather some sort of grasp on standing. “R-remember how I said – ah – that I felt like I was standing on the edge of something?” His hands gripped into her hips and pulled her back against him to where she could feel his arousal pressing through his pants into her back.

He stilled with his lips on her shoulder, nodding gently as his thumbs stroked small circles into the top of her hips, finding the small creases in her underclothes that she was wearing underneath with the lighter boned-corset. She clenched her jaw and closed her eyes, resting her forehead against her hand on the wall. “I would say I jumped, but my hand was forced and I fell. I fear I am past a point of no return, as it were.” She paused, glancing to the side to see Solas watching with a hunter’s gaze, lids hooded as he moved to where he was now a step down from her, his face opposite of hers with one hand on her hip. She could smell the mulled wine on his breath, the mixture of the woods, soot from a burnt torch, and the pages of old books clinging to his clothes.

Without even thinking she reached forward and ran her hand along the lapel, a somber smile coming to her lips. “I do not wish to be a player of the Game, Solas. I do want to be one of those people that unknowingly plays with the lives of others, thinking of them as pawns on a chess board as if they’re disposable. One of my own was put in harms way tonight, and Leafy – “ A flicker of rage flashed across her face, her features hardening and hand clenching against his suit. She opened her mouth to speak but felt a tug on her waist, Solas stepping up and putting his leg between hers, his free hand gently capturing her jaw so he could steal the words that wished to bubble up from her throat.
Even still her mind was racing, urging to spill words since she had not been able to talk to him in weeks. Her hands nearly shook against him, knees feeling weak as the heat of his body was so close to hers. He slowly took her bottom lip in between his, using every beat of her heart to silence her and steal her stress away. Her eyes fluttered shut, a sigh falling from her as he used a single nail to trace her jawline. At her next breath, he pulled back and nudged the tip of her nose with his, causing her to open her eyes and stare into the eyes of her lover. “Your concern keeps you from being one of them. Instead of being a player in the Game – “ He kissed her again, his restraint showing through when he nicked her bottom lip with his teeth, drawing a gasp from her that made his lips curl into a smirk. “You burn it down and dance in the flames, ma’fen.”

Athena felt a flush crawling into her chest, the heat spreading between her legs as he pushed her up against the wall in one rough motion, a hand moving to the wall to support himself as he moved to the same step as her, looking down at her with lust and pride within his gaze. “And I love to see you dance in those flames.” There was a single moment between them, when her eyes met his and she could feel his presence fanning the flames of her spirit, filling her belly with nothing but thirst for the taste of his lips. She used the lapel of his suit coat to pull him fully against her, using the moment of surprise to bring a leg up behind him and pin him against her.

He growled low in his throat, gripping both of her wrists and pinning them above her head against the cold stone. The presence of his magic whipped out from his hands, pressing her wrists to the stone even against her protests. He used his leg to continue to trap her against him, pushing his length against her heat while ravishing her skin, taking her bottom lip between his teeth and biting down enough to draw a moan from her. It had been too long, physically and in the fade. Her body called to his like kindling to a flame, her core burning and yearning for his touch. Every adjustment, slide of his mouth, and grind of his hips brought a noise of utter wanton from her lips. She found it difficult to breathe, throat hitched and dry with desire. Her mouth searched for his to search for the breath he had stolen from her, finding only moans and sighs against her skin instead as he pressed himself against her.

“Please, Solas –“ She pled against his skin, sighing as he kissed and nibbled at her neck and shoulders, wherever he could find that wasn’t covered by her gown. He glanced up at her from the crux of her breast and she gasped when she saw the fire within his mixture of greys and blues, the colors popping out against his darkened and hungry expression. She felt her heat grow slick with her arousal for him, her hips grinding up against him once more as a silent plea. He found her hardened nipple through her gown, nipping at light with his teeth while his nails scratched over her gown on her hip lines, the vibrations of his moans against her shaking her to her core.

He continued to torture her, pin her against the hard, stone wall with the unrelenting rhythm of his body. His length rubbed against her, pressing against the cluster of nerves that caused her legs to twitch and a weight to twist her belly. In the back of her mind she could distantly hear Illrith swaying people away from the door at the top of the staircase, the cheeky elf giving them more time, but she didn’t want more time. She wanted what she had been denied for weeks and needed some sort of release after the fucking night she had endured.
“Vhenan.” The title grabbed his attention, Solas pausing and rising up to meet her face, which was flushed with desire. She used her legs to pull him in closer, kissing her way from his lips up to his ear, straining against the magical restraints he had placed on her wrists. “Garas, aman’ na’mis.”

Fuck me. She begged, throat heavy with need, her breath coming in shallow pants against the firm wall of his chest. He looked to her, a wolfish confidence coming over his features as he pinned her with his hips so he could quickly shrug out of his jacket, loosening the belt so he could pull down his pants and smalls down enough for her to feel his bare length against her.

The shared contact made her moan, her painted lips leaving a trail over the line of his jaw. He guided his length to her entrance, her hips moving down against him in anticipation. She could tell how much she wanted this, her want slickening the inside of her thighs through the smalls that he had to push to the side. He let out a low growl in his throat, his grip turning into nails against her skin as he sheathed himself within her. Athena’s cries threatened to echo within the hall, her head buried within the crook of Solas’s neck. Every twitch of his arousal brought a whimper from her lips, nearly unintelligible pleas and proclamations of want flowing out as he began to thrust into her.

He pinned her against the wall with his deep movements, hands trailing over the curve of her breasts until his hands were linked with hers above her head. He rested his head on her shoulder and began to pound relentlessly into her body, every thrust striking her core with a wave of pleasure and pressure that made her toes curl behind him, her heels digging into the top of his backside to bring him in as deep as their bodies would allow. There was a desperation in their actions, weeks of unprofessed affection and stress communicating in their need for one another.

He gave her confidence, enforced her strength and allowed her to grow on her own. Athena smiled into his cheek, kissing and nibbling at whatever skin she could grasp in between sighs and cries of passion. Solas intertwined his fingers with hers, echoing a low and strangled moan into her neck. The sound caused her to clench tighter around him, her heat throbbing with the anguish of being near release. To be able to draw those sounds from him, to be able to command his body and be the source of his pleasure even as she was bound against the wall, it lit the flame within her core and caused her to build. Her breaths came in quick pants, her mind now speechless as it was bathed in the white light of near-climax. Desperate pleas flooded from her lips onto his jaw, neck, ear, mouth, anywhere she could pray for him to never stop.

His body responded in kind, each thrust becoming purposeful and deep, his mouth finding the crux in her neck that made her shudder when he flicked his tongue across it and brought the skin between his teeth. The small movements filled the cup of her pleasure, his hands squeezing hers against the wall, the feel of his breaths and moans against her neck, the satisfying sound of his body crashing into hers, and the drum of his heartbeat against her skin. They all caused her to overflow, a wordless cry ripped from her throat as she came. He dropped a hand from hers, lightly pressing it over her mouth to quiet the sound of her pleasure as she continued to the ride it with his thrusts.

She could not be contained, her mouth kissing the inside of his palm and licking long and tortuous
on the inside until she could pull a finger into her mouth. Her tongue played and payed special attention to every detail of his finger, teasing the tip and pulling him all the way into her mouth. He stilled for a moment, the pupil of his eyes blown completely wide in shock. She watched as the heat of their actions set into his features and he released her from her bonds with a flick of his wrists, allowing her to clutch onto his shoulders and respond as he dug his nails into her hips and thrust into her at an uncontrolled pace.

With every thrust she drew another word or plea from his lips, his words rolling in ancient elven along her skin as he brought himself closer. Soft moans left his lips and she kissed her way to his ear, murmuring in their shared language: *Come for me.* He cried out her name and sheathed himself completely, his length twitching as he spilled his seed into her. His hips thrust in shuddering movements, eyes closed and brow glistening from the work of their labors. Athena took long, deep breaths, clinging to him for support since it was now only the pressure of her between his legs keeping her up on the wall.

Solas waited a moment for them to regain their breaths before he withdrew himself, drawing another sigh from her before he helped her legs down to the ground. He steadied her since her knees wished to collapse, but he cupped her face with his hands and captured her lips in a final deep kiss, a silent statement of gratitude and greeting since their time long separated. Athena loved the feel of his lips on hers, swollen from her affection and slightly marred by the paint on her mouth. When they separated she dragged her thumb across the swell of his bottom lip, slightly biting on her own as she began to fill with need again.

He caught her thumb between his teeth, smirking at her reaction and never letting his gaze leave hers. The silence was thick between them and she chuckled, cupping his face with her hand and stroking his cheekbones with the pad of her thumb. “I missed you too, *vhenan.*”

Solas laughed, a sound bright and joyful as he pulled a kerchief from his suit pocket. “I believe it shows on both of us. Neither one of us survived unscathed, *ma’fen.*” He gestured to the love-marks on her neck and chest and she began to see the matching sets she left on him, the trail of her kisses brightly evident thanks to her lipstick. She laughed into her hand, glancing down at the stairs while twisting her mouth to the side.

“Come on, we can sneak into the office and fix ourselves up.”
Loranil guarded the door at the bottom of the stairs, shooting her a childish grin whenever they exited the room and nearly fade-stepped into her office to avoid being seen. Already Illrith had acquired a basic wooden door to replace the one that the Baron had shattered until they received something new. As Athena slammed it shut, she heard the red-haired warrior break and begin laughing into his hand. She rolled her eyes and chuckled herself, glancing sideways at the mirror and seeing how disheveled she looked. There were indeed marks of their shared passions on her neck, shoulder, and jawline. Her lipstick had smeared to mirror blood over her mouth and chin, and Solas didn’t come away unscathed either.

He stood by the door, rubbing a hand over his neck where she had managed to nibble on the supple flesh that rested there. His cool, steely gaze took in her new office, small hums of approval vibrating from his throat. His lips then curved into a smirk that threatened to light the flame between her legs again. She found a clean cloth and dipped it into water, heating the liquid with a spark of magic from the tip of her finger. It helped the lip paint wipe off easier, revealing the bruises underneath that made her blush. “This location is fitting for you.”

Athena hummed in agreement, turning her head to the side in the mirror and adjusting the pins in her hair to reset the style that Valerie had created earlier in the day. She then plucked the lip paintbrush from the makeup box and retraced the lines over her swollen lips, smiling as Solas watched her out of the corner of his eye. She finished her bottom lip with a long, dramatic drag of the paint brush before putting it back. He was now fully turned towards her, longing filling his gaze as he took her in.

“Allow me to heal those for you, ma’fen.”

He took stalking strikes over towards her, helping her turn towards him with a gentle touch on her shoulder. As she rewet the cloth to help clean him up, he gently ran his fingers over the spots on her skin. There were small presses of magical warmth on her body as he did it, the sensation drawing a strained sigh from her lips. His lips twitched into a smirk back into passive concentration, his expression playful as he healed her. “Tell me of your days since we have been apart. You said you leaped over the edge of something?” His voice was calm, neutral, even as his fingers delicately ran over her skin, so soft it caused her to shudder underneath his touch.

“I seem to have been promoted as an ‘official’ member of the Inner Council. I have my own office and staff. Tonight . . . they all knelt for me?” She spoke it out loud, questioning the memory and shaking her head and forth. He paused, gently grabbing her hand to stop her process of cleaning him up so that he could catch her gaze.

“You disapprove?”
She shrugged, gently wriggling from his grip to wipe the lipstick from his cheek and around his lips. He resisted, but his lips curved into a smile as he waited for her to answer his question. She tucked the cloth around her thumb and dragged it across his lips slowly, eyes mesmerized by their fullness and shape. “I am unaccustomed to people kneeling and calling me Fen’Elgara. It unnerves me. All of this time we have been fighting for a cause that had a common enemy. I fought alongside the Inquisitor’s chosen and the nameless army of the Inquisition. But now, now I have people who are willing to fight for me. They trust me, pledge themselves to me – “ She paused, stopping her movements along his collarbone underneath his now opened shirt.

He stilled and shuddered underneath her touch, the cloth inevitably growing cold as it rested on his skin.

“It is those who search for power who do not deserve it. The universe has decided to give it to those who are worthy, you and the Inquisitor. The world is lucky in these cases as you two have kind, caring hearts. The Inquisitor looks to rid the world of Corypheus and chaos, but you look beyond that.” He took the cloth from her hand and then brought it to her lips, placing a kiss on the inside of her palm while keeping his gaze on her. “Your unique origins allow you to have a broader scope. You have the ability to see the larger picture of events. It is what makes you wise.”

Athena couldn’t help but laugh, the weight of the conversation lifting as she did so. “Wise? Me? I think you must be mistaken. But I thank you for your compliments, vhenan. Here.” She positioned him in front of the mirror, standing at his side and pointing to the main areas where he would need to heal himself. “Your healing touch is better than mine, we will miss the after party if we do not hurry.”

She walked over to her desk and looked over reports from the evening that were beginning to gather in her ‘incoming’ basket on the upper right corner. There were varying scripts from her soldiers, but Syla’s was on top. It was a small half-page, with two very large words written out where they could be seen easily.

Thank you.

The letter made her smile, her hands gingerly picking it up so she could look at it. Solas was buttoning up his shirt, hands fussing with the tie around his neck. He glanced over to her, running his fingers underneath his ear to heal a spot she had left. “Anything else? Tobias and Lev’adin are fairing well?”

She put the letter down and sighed, looking over to the cages where there were empty lizard cages. Some of her people might have opted into taking care of them as pets, since some of the cages
were now missing from the wall. She made a mental note to capture new ones for Sera or order them from some odd animal vendor. “I had another visit from a stranger who is becoming all too familiar.” He pulled the bulk of the tie through the knot with adept precision, glancing over at her.

“Oh?”

Athena told herself that she was only hearing him be coy because of her foreknowledge of the subject, so she rolled her shoulders and poured herself a glass of wine. “Mm-hmm. I followed Lev’adin and the pack on a hunt and a certain wolf with black fur appeared.” He tilted his head towards her, actively listening with an intrigued expression around his eyes. She took a long drink and shrugged, swirling the white liquid around carefully to where it brushed up against the rim of the glass. “It was the strangest thing. The first time it happened, it was almost like an interrogation. This time. . .it was almost as if he just simply wished to talk.”

Solas let out a small huff of breath from his nose, tightening the tie and putting his jacket over the shirt. “And you are sure this is the same creature that you showed me from your memory?”

“I do not believe they are the same, but they look it, yes. The one I have met here has a presence that comes with it. At first, it was suffocating, but now I can handle it better.” He looked over to her and nodded, pride filling his features as he closed the distance between them.

“You are growing stronger with each passing day, vhenan. Can you not feel how the energy of the Veil swirls around you here? Skyhold is in an area where it is thin, but especially in here among a few other locations. It is why this office is fitting for you.” He tucked a curl she missed behind her ear, bending forward and kissing her gently on the forehead as to not mess up her freshly painted lips. She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath through her nose, focusing on the gentle hum of magic around them. The moment she became aware of it, it was suddenly obvious. There was a light tingling on her skin, it pressing around her like the comfort of a warm blanket, and she thought she could hear buzzing in the back of her mind.

It reminded her of a type of radio static, with voices coming in and out, but it was barely anything clear. When she tried to focus on the voices, she swore they sounded familiar but his touch against her cheek brought her back into the conversation. She nodded, smiling bashfully while gesturing towards the door. “Consider this one of those moments where I was too distracted by my duties to focus on what was around me. It must be amazing to be so sensitive to the Veil, Solas. I envy you in that respect.”

He chuckled and walked at her side as she moved towards the door. “You have just as much ability as I, if you simply shift your focus to notice the subtle differences in the weave of the Veil.” He opened the door for her, taking one last moment to look her up and down before flashing a genuine smile. “You look stunning, vhenan.”
Athena looked back up at him with a soft blush on her cheeks, pulling the door the rest of the way open with a small nod of acknowledgement. People were beginning to fill the room, thankfully all of them were familiar faces. There was a table near the center with chairs all around it, and each one was filled with a person playing cards. Maryden was playing her music, forgoing the singing so that she could watch the environment while gently strumming her strings. Sera had managed to set up a game of something that looked like darts and Varric was winning even without Bianca’s help. She couldn’t help but smile at the scene. Everyone was still dressed to the nines yet they had managed to create a bar right outside of her office.

There was a wave from the table, Rathein sitting in between Bull and King Alistair. The Ferelden waved as well, alcohol putting a blush on his cheeks. Solas came to her side and there was suddenly a shuffling underneath the table, Alistair looking down with a confused expression. “What’s gotten into you? Gah!” His chair was flipped backwards as a large force made its way around the table and towards them. There was barely a second for her to process the stampeding mabari that was coming around the table, eyes blazing with an instinct she recognized.

Protection.

She moved in front of Solas out of habit and took a step forward to catch the creature and wrap her arms around its shoulders. Even still it tried to push past her, barks ripping from its throat as it tried to lunge from her grip towards her lover, who stood with an arched brow and passive posture behind her. Alistair scrambled over the table, gripping onto the war-hound’s collar to pull it back. “I’m so sorry! He’s never done this before – I swear!”

Athena nodded and winced as the creature’s nails pressed against her skin through the fabric of her dress. “Mind if I try and speak to him, your Majesty? What’s his name?”

The Grey Warden managed a smile, pulling with all of his might to get the Mabari on the ground in front of her. “Barkspawn.”

She huffed a laugh, kneeling before the creature with an assessing gaze. It was as if the creature saw through her and was only focused on Solas. Even from the sounds of its barks, the animal was confused. She pulled on her connection to her shapeshifting magic, feeling the gentle pull from the orb dangling underneath her ear as she tapped the creature in between the eyes. It didn’t calm him, simply opened up the silent communication between their minds.

Barkspawn’s voice was a mixture between confusion and anger, his words clipped and jointed with his motions as he still attempted to wriggle free of his owner’s grasp towards the elf behind her. She looked over her shoulder at him, shrugging while turning back and shaking her head towards the dog.

No. He’s safe. He will not hurt your master, Barkspawn. I promise. The dog whined, conflicting with his instincts and what she was saying. He minimized his snarling to a low growl mixed with a whine, looking between her and the elf behind her.

You smell of wild...like Morrigan. I cannot help – but something tells me to be weary of him. He safe? He asked one more time, looking back to Athena with a soft whine of question. She nodded, reaching forward and patting his head and smiling at how he relaxed underneath her touch. The kitchen door burst open and she heard the pat pat pat of Kain’s nails against the floor, the wolf skiddling to a half at her side, panting with a curious gaze towards the Mabari.

She turned and kissed the wolf on the side of the face, smiling at the King’s confused expression. With a push from the ground, Athena stood up and smoothed out the fabric of her dress. “I speak dog. Makes things easy. He was just overprotective, that’s all. Barkspawn. Meet Kain.” She looked to the bulky creature in front of her and then gestured to Kain, who was standing between Athena and Solas in a protective stance of his own. The two canines gently moved forward and sniffed one another in greeting, her wolf’s tail hesitantly wagging behind him. “Go on, go play. Mom is going to do the same.”

The two companions ran off together, yelping back and forth different messages as Kain led them out through the kitchens. She looked down and thanked the seamstress that the mabari hadn’t ripped her dress, looking up Alistair with a helpless gaze. He held his hands up in surrender. “Hey – I told you he normally doesn’t act like that. Oh! You must be – “ He looked to Athena and then clicked his tongue against the back of his teeth. “Solas!” He extended a hand forward and Solas stepped forward to shake it. Athena noticed he didn’t bow his head at all to the King and she bit on the inside of her cheek to keep from saying something.

“Yes, and I assume you are King Alistair?” The two men shook hands and Alistair gestured back to the table.

“Fancy a game of Wicked Grace? Blackwall says you’re an excellent card player.” Solas then smirked with a mischievous twitch at the corner of his lips.

“It would be rude to refuse our visiting King. Lead the way.” Alistair turned on his heel and walked back towards the table, the elf touching Athena on the low of her back before following suit, his face falling to that of passive interest. The key to winning Wicked Grace was not showing your tells, and the man who could hide his divinity from the Inquisition was expert at that. She
smiled, leaning her back against the door to the office while taking in the sight of the party.

The main Inquisition group sat around the table playing cards with drinks in front of them. Her own people, Illirth, Loranil, and Syla, were standing around a tall table in the back with smiles on their faces. Her eyes began to scan the room for Dorian when he slid next to her and handed her a glass of white wine with a strawberry in the bottom of the glass and another sliced and placed on the rim. “I know you like the extra sugar, you child.” He teased, leaning his back against the door with her while sipping on his own brandy.

Oh look at how nice everyone looks!

Athena’s eyes widened, gaze flicking around the room before she turned around completely to see if there was anyone behind her. Dorian moved his drink away from her with a scoff, arching a brow and looking her up and down. “What’s gotten into you?”

“You didn’t hear that?”

Wait can she hear us now?

“What?” He asked again, taking a long sip of his drink before hissing from its strength. She itched the side of her head, her hand bumping against the orb and sparking with a jolt of energy. Suddenly something clicked her mind and she had a strange moment of clarity.

If you can hear us, think or say something back, Athena!

“Wait... Inspiration?” She asked out loud, voice full of disbelief as she turned her body towards Dorian to hide her befuddled expression. He nearly copied her gaze, a sound of effort coming from his lips as he attempted to not choke on his drink. He bargained for a cough into the curve of his sleeve, tears coming to his eyes.

“Hey, can’t hold your drink, Vint?” Bull called from the table, earning a rude gesture from Dorian before he turned his body to the side to partially cover his friend.

“Yes! Yes! It’s working!” The spirit managed to call out, the excitement of her voice filling Athena’s head. The woman shook her head back and forth, a shaky hand hovering over her mouth. “How can I be hearing you right now?”
Dorian let out a groan, resting his head against his hand while his other hand dropped down to his side, being careful not to drop the drink. The spirit made a noise of contemplation, before another voice chimed in. “As the strength of this object grows, so do you. The two of you are linked for now. You know the origins of the Keep you stay in, so the Veil is thin throughout. You have an increased connection through your orb, especially when you channel magic into it.” Harmony stated simply, the fact making her groan and roll her eyes.

She looked up to Dorian and sighed, taking a gulp of her wine to ease her nerves. “Apparently summoning our little friend – “ She then pointed to her ear with a sharp, sarcastic gesture. “Has increased my connection to the Fade. I can hear them in my head in places where the Veil is thin.”

The Tevinter mimicked her groan, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Of-course this couldn’t be easy. Can you get rid of it for tonight? Put it back in hiding?”

Athena shook her head, gesturing in a way to signify that she felt helpless. She slumped her body against the wall and touched her fingers to the orb, realizing that Solas had already seen it that evening. If it suddenly disappeared, it would look suspicious. “I don’t think I can without it looking strange. I’ll do it after the ball once I get back to my room and can investigate in the Fade.”

“Wait. . Is that Dorian?” Harmony asked softly, his voice breaking and becoming uncharacteristically soft. Inspiration chuckled and Athena swore that if she closed her eyes she could see them perfectly. They were standing in a green clearing, close to where Wisdom normally resided.

“Yes – that’s him, but can you two keep it down? I’m starting to look crazy talking to myself.” Dorian chuckled and nodded in confirmation, reaching forward and touching the earring that hung from her ear. The two spirits nodded and she felt a sort of fog fade from her mind, giving her some clarity in return, even though she had a feeling that with their curiosity they wouldn’t be able to be quiet for long.
Athena had appeared obviously shaken by the newfound connection to the Fade through her orb. She downed the entire glass of wine while throwing up every mental barrier she knew how to cast, like how she had in her training of fighting the Nightmare. It removed the static from her thoughts and gave her the freedom to try and actually relax. Dorian had his hands on her shoulders, looking over her face and doing a quick assessment without drawing too much attention. He licked the pad of thumb and was pretending like was fixing her makeup, ghosting his hand over her skin while whispering.

“How is that even possible? I mean, it’s practically unheard of, right?” He ran his hands over the top of her hair, making a nod that everything was in the right place. She shrugged in a defeated motion, glancing over to the table and smirking at how people were beginning to remove weapons and articles of clothing in a better game of cards. Josephine and Solas were the only two that were fully dressed, the Dread Wolf coolly sitting back in his chair with his cards folded down on the table. Rathein had shrugged off her jacket and was working on removing her dress boots to throw on the massive pile of clothes building in the center of the table.

“Yeah, add it to the list of things I’ve stumbled on in this journey we’re on. Harmony says hi by the way.” The mage instantly smirked even as she rolled her shoulders in discomfort. It was unnerving, having something within her grasp that could connect to the Fade. Her fingers drummed on her thigh as a transient song played through her mind, her thoughts always racing with some kind of background music to keep her focused. She subconsciously chewed on the skin on the inside of her cheek, letting out a deep sigh from her nose before itching the back of her neck. “I mean I guess it makes sense. It’s an object from the Fade. Kind of like how the fade-touched items we find have strange capabilities.” She then clicked her hands and pointed to him in the chest.

“I bet you that thing the Baron had was a fade-touched item too. That would make the most sense considering he was a non-magic user.” There was a slight blush on Dorian’s cheeks as he shrugged.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about there with barons and objects, but I’m always happy to be your soundboard. Leave your work for tomorrow, ‘mata. You need to relax. Go, mingle with your people and enjoy your victory tonight. We can speak of artifacts and things in the morning.” He bent down and kissed her on the cheek before waving off and walking over to the table, pulling up a seat next to Varric and gesturing for Josephine to deal him in. She let out a small sigh and walked over to the corner where her people were celebrating, nearly laughing when she saw Lev’adin resting with her head in Loranil’s lap on a couch in the back.
The red-haired warrior smirked, running his hand over her hair and down her back. “Poor girl is exhausted. She said the shems kept saying ‘oh you’re pretty for an elf.’” They both rolled their eyes and Athena couldn’t help but let out a small growl of protectiveness.

“I’m glad it is over. Is everyone okay?” The different elves looked to one another and nodded, Syla giving her a genuine smile as she sipped on some warmed wine.

“We’re all safe and sound, Athena. Here, do one of these with us.” Illrith sat a tray down on the table with six shots of something that she could smell without even having to lift it up. The rest of them flashed wicked smiles, lifting the drinks up in a kind of toast while looking to her expectantly. She hesitantly picked up the glass, looking inside of it to see that it was red.

Reminds me of college.

“I’m not even going to ask what this is, but hey, here’s to an amazing group of people! I’m lucky to call you my friends.” She tapped the glass to the table, as she was taught to before, and took the drink back in one shot. It burned down her throat, the fumes nearly making her choke but she managed and only had to clear her throat. Everyone else celebrated with small sounds of laughter or happiness, Illrith resting his arm around Syla and bringing her in for a sideways embrace. She felt the drink put a haze over her mind, but she relinquished control the people around her and made a call for a second round.

Wicked Grace was a game of bluffs, lying, and being damn good at it. Athena was not good at any of these things, since her major tell was the flush she got on her chest and face whenever she was embarrassed, proud, or any emotion that was anything but neutral. But since she had already had a few glasses of wine and whatever shots Illrith brought her, she was flushed anyways. So, she tried learning the game and managed to play low to the ground for the first few rounds, but she was now starting to sweat.

Shit what do these cards mean?

Solas sat across from her, still the master of his own expression, sliding a card forward and taking one from the table in front of him. He had removed his tie and placed it on the table in front of him as a bargaining chip, making small sounds of consideration as he assessed his cards. She looked down to her own deck, sitting up as much as she could in her chair to keep a good posture that hid her tipsy-status. Even still she did not allow herself to get fully drunk. She was too much of a talker.
Angel of truth, song of mercy, song of twilight, angel of charity, and knight of dawn. Hey two matches! Guess I have to donate something. She then cursed herself for not accessorizing more. She currently only wore the red earring harness containing her orb, the wolf ring Solas had given her before they had become romantically involved, her dress, her shoes, her corset, and her smalls. There wasn’t much to bet with. She bent down and plucked a golden and navy-blue shoe from her foot and threw them on the pile of different articles.

Leliana’s eyes instantly went to them, a soft smile on her lips as she removed her earrings and threw them into the bunch. Cullen made an uncomfortable sound, shrugging off his lion overcoat before throwing it on the table. Athena blinked at the furs, a competitive flame lighting within her belly. The game was a constant shuffling of cards, clothing, and expressions. There were those who hid their tells within loud conversation, like Varric and Bull. They were masters at the game and how to play other people, using their words like daggers to illicit reactions from others.

Bull was teasing the King about how he reacted when Morrigan found him, putting a rather deep blush on the Warden’s face. Cullen tried to cheer his comrade up, Athena quickly shuffling out cards. Yes, another song. Three of a kind and a pair. She took off her other shoe and added it to the pile, Cullen lifting up a card that made everyone groan.

“Alright, Angel of Death, put in your last bets.” Athena groaned, looking down at her hand and feeling confident about it. It was a solid hand, one that had one only rounds before when Bull laid it down with confidence, regaining his shoulder holster and his belt. Now was the time when people threw in final bets if they really felt like their hand was going to win, a sort of test to see who would fold or who would fight.

With alcohol fueling her confidence, she was not in the mood to fold. She ran her hands quietly up the slits on the side of her dress, linking her thumbs in the tops of her smalls while bending down and pulling them down to her knees. Once they were there she made a face of concentration, lifting her feet off the ground to finish pulling them off before she casually threw them on top of the pile. Solas’s eyes widened, the only break in his mask during the game. Bull cupped his hands around his mouth and let out a howl of approval, Rathein laughing into the crook of her arm.

“Yeah, Alpha! That’s how you get in the game.” He still folded his cards down, crossing his arms over his chest with a huff of enjoyment. Solas shrugged off his coat jacket, folding it and placing it next to his shoes on the table in a small, neat pile separate of the rest of them, like he knew he was going to win regardless.

Cullen glanced over, failing at hiding the blush that rushed up his neck. “Alright, those who are still in, show your hands.”
Josephine, Solas, Athena, and Cullen all turned their hands over. Josephine and Cullen cursed when looking at her hand, putting their cards down in defeat. Her proud gaze slowly turned towards her lovers, who had only a smug smirk on his lips. He had four serpents. Four of a kind beat her out. “Ah fuck.” She threw her hand on the table and leaned back in the chair, looking up towards the ceiling as Solas smoothly put his jacket back on, then his shoes, and then lazily hung his tie around his neck without making the knot. He was returning different items that he found no value in, including Athena’s shoes but not her smalls. Those he pocketed quickly when nobody but her was looking while he shot her a dark glance that made her breath hitch in her throat.

As his hands ran over the furs of Cullen’s overcoat, he lifted it up and then looked to her with an almost uncharacteristic smile. “Do you think Kain would enjoy sleeping on this?”

The Commander slapped his hand against his forehead, groaning while leaning on the table. Alistair patted him on the back in between fits of laughter, the entire table joining in. Athena grinned and opened her hand for Solas to throw the furs her way. He looked to them, shrugging before tossing them over the table into her hand. She didn’t hesitate to assess the object for its potential in regard to Kain’s sleeping. “He sleeps on all of the Commanders clothes anyway, I do not see how this would be different.” She then tossed it back to Solas who rolled it up and put it on the floor besides him, claiming his trophy for the evening, among other things like a pair of Leliana’s earrings and a single shoe.

That would drive her mad.

The table broke off into side conversations, some people lamenting their losses as the cards were re-shuffled. Rathein was talking about the different nobles that still tried to woo her and how their voices changed when Bull came into view at all. Tears of laughter lit up the Inquisitor’s blue eyes, pure joy radiating from her features. Then Iron Bull, Dorian, and Varric joined her in her laughter, and suddenly the table felt warm. Time slowed for a second as Athena glanced around her family, head turning slowly so that she could see her table getting along as well. There was a small twist in her gut, something akin to nerves, but it was more emotion.

They were all hers. In the strangest way, this was her family and this was her support system. These were the people she would bleed for and she knew it was mutual. Seeing Lev’adin resting peacefully in her clansman’s lap, seeing Cassandra manage to crack a smile at one of Varric’s jokes, seeing Alistair and Cullen talk about their training days, and watching Solas try to hide a smile as Blackwall called him a cheat at cards... she would do anything to keep the happiness in their eyes. She let out a sigh and relaxed her guard, smiling to herself and resting her hands in her lap.

The Inquisitor stood from her chair and walked over to her, hugging her from behind and planting a
maroon painted kiss on her cheek. Athena reached up behind her and pulled her close, breathing in the scent of her perfume and purring at their shared touch. “I think it is time for all of us to retire, but can you sing me something before bed? I don’t know if I tell you enough, but *I love it when you sing.* It’s just so pretty.” There was liquor within their fearless leader’s voice, but most of it was sloppy sincerity as she pressed her cold nose against the inside of her neck.

Alistair chuckled and shrugged, raising his mug of ale to his lips. “You know I was promised a song of the other-world and I missed my chance to listen due to politics of all things!”

Rathein broke into a laugh, leaning over Cullen to nudge the Warden in the shoulder. “Pity, right?”

Her mind began to run through different songs, a sort of bell going off when she thought of the perfect one. *Oh that is a good one! We’ve sung that one before, right?* Inspiration asked excitedly, a sort of groan coming from her lips that she turned into playful reluctance as to not draw suspicion.

*Harmony knows that one too! He’s such a secret romantic. You’ve rubbed off on him—*

There was a sound of effort and the sounds suddenly became muffled.

*Shut up or I’ll kick you from my training glen.*

“All right, just one. Varric, hold onto Cassandra, this one is so sappy she might swoon.” The Seeker blushed and smiled, tucking her braid behind her ear as her gaze fell into her lap. Athena walked over to the bench where Maryden had been sitting, putting a slight extra sway into her hips the table knew she had given up her smalls during her dramatic defeat.

*Ooh! I have an idea. Athena, pull on your blessing as you normally do.* Inspiration uttered feverishly, an odd warmth coming from her earring. Dorian cleared his throat and flicked his eyes to it, the effect obvious to him but there was nothing she could do about it.

“This is from one of the stories of my world, kind of the climax of a romance. I wasn’t sure it I was going to tell the story at the campfire so I’ll let you guys be the judge. It’s normally sung as a duet but I’m going to try my best to do both parts.” Her fingers found their place on the lute, the base of the instrument resting in her lap. The beginning notes started and she found a soft smile coming to her face, a wave of nostalgia rushing over her mind as she began to sing.

“All those days watching from the windows, all those years outside looking in.

*All that time never even knowing, just how blind I’ve been.*”
She felt a flicker of energy to her right and she blinked, shaking her head to rid herself of the illusion that was probably a product of her buzz fading off and her exhaustion. Athena looked up and immediately saw her family, who were all listening intently, some with eyes closed, others with their attention on her, but the one pair of eyes that grabbed her were those belonging to her lover. He nearly glowed with pride, arms resting in his lap as he leaned back on the chair to where his back was against the wall so he could see her properly.

“Now I’m here, blinking in the starlight. Now I’m here, suddenly I see..

Standing here, it’s all so clear. I’m where I’m meant to be.”

He smiled, and watching the curve of his lips and the brightening of his eyes put a flutter in her chest and a matching smile on her own lips. There was a small yawn from the back and she looked up just in time to see Lev’adin stretching and sitting up from Lorani’s lap. She rubbed her eyes and smirked, giving a tired wave to her from the back. She nodded her head up in return, shaking her head with a smile.

“And at last I see the light, and it’s like the fog has lifted.

And at last I see the light, and it’s like the sky is new.

And it’s warm and real and bright, and the world has somehow shifted.”

She swallowed down the lump of nerves that generally came with performing, flicking her gaze back up to her foundation to get another batch of courage. With him back after being gone for those weeks, she made a silent vow to herself. Slowly, she would open up her secrets to him. She was not the story she had seen played a thousand times over. They would not hide from each other. Piece by piece, she would try.

“All at once. .  everything looks different. Now that I see you.”

Okay, Athena, pull on your blessing and on our connection now!

The voice was crystal clear in her head and she followed her friend’s command, gently plucking the strings while charging magic through her notes like she normally did when she thought of Inspiration for performing and Harmony to channel her emotions into it. Except this time the flicker of energy to her right formed into something more, light appearing on a kind of stool like she was sitting on. Athena recognized the energy immediately and she failed in holding back a grin. “Just a trick from your friendly neighborhood Witch of the Inquisition, let’s see if this works
The light flickered in and out, the image a shadow of what it was in the Fade. Harmony looked down at his hands, moving his mouth to the side and looking to her, squinting his eyes to make sure that she could see him. *Come on, don’t make me look like a fool now.* She could feel the spirit scoff within the place he resided, he cleared his throat and groaned as Inspiration pushed him.

“All those days, chasing down a daydream. All those years, living in a blur – “

There was a turning of heads at the added voice, Dorian’s eyes instantly opening as he nearly fell from his chair since he was leaning back enough for the front legs to be off of the ground completely. Bull caught the chair without even flinching, slowly raising it back to normal posture as he kept his eyes on the wisp of a spirit next to her. Athena continued to play, a blush of anxiety on her cheeks since she was having to use the orb to amplify its connection to the Fade. The Tevinter put a hand over his mouth in a kind of awe, his gaze completely glued to the image of their mutual spirit companion.

“All that time, never truly seeing, things. . .the way they were.”

His voice was softer, but genuine, the embarrassment melting away since they technically couldn’t see him singing along in full form in the Fade. The spirit wasn’t as practiced, but he was familiar enough with the song to follow the notes and rhythm that she was playing on the lute.

“Now he’s here, shining in the starlight, no he’s here, suddenly I know. If he’s here, it’s crystal clear, I’m where I’m meant to go.”

They looked to one another and nodded, Athena taking in a quick breath before harmonizing with her friend, a sort of childish giddiness lighting up her face. “*And at last I see the light, and it’s like the fog has lifted.*”

Harmony let himself relax and shrug, his eyes slowly moving from her to Dorian in the crowd. “*And at last I see the light, and it’s like the sky is new.*”

He looked back to his temporary singing partner and rubbed the back of his neck, Athena looking down at the strings as they finished.
And it’s warm and real and bright, and the world has somehow shifted.

All at once, everything is different, now that I see you.”

Athena began to allow the music to fade, as well as the image of Harmony next to her since she could feel it pulling on her energy stores. “Now that I see you.” At the conclusion of the song Harmony’s image faded back into the Fade and she put the barriers back up to protect both herself and to keep anymore magic from being channeled into the orb, conscious or not. Cassandra let out a sigh, opening her eyes with a smile on her lips that Athena couldn’t help but echo.

She carefully slid from the stool and walked into Rathein’s arms since she was standing with them open. At impact they both groaned, the Inquisitor lifting her off of her feet with an extended sound of effort and exhaustion. “That was just what I expected. That voice was familiar...was that...”

Dorian came up behind them both. “One of the spirits that helped us in the Fade? Yes.”

Solas arrived at her side with Cullen’s overcoat draped over his arm, his hand touching her lower back. “It was a wisp that reflected a spirit of Harmony. It was a harmless projection. The veil of Skyhold it thin and Athena’s magic is naturally attuned to it due to her origins.” He leaned over and kissed her on top of the head, pulling her into his body.

Rathein nodded with a hum as Bull stood from the table. She straightened her posture and stretched to the sky, projecting her voice through the room. “Alright, everyone, back to business in the morning. Get some rest.” There were hums of agreement and refusal throughout the basement, Sera ignoring it as she slept underneath the table with a pillow from one of the couches upstairs. The group split their different waves, Lev’adin moving with the other elves to sleep in their quarters for the night. Solas and her greeted the midnight chill. The moment she shuddered he moved the overcoat to where he could slip off his jacket and put it over her shoulders.

“When did you learn that technique?” He asked softly, walking with an arm around her to keep the jacket around her shoulders, the soft sound of his shoes against the stone floor setting the pace. She huffed under her breath, reaching up to begin removing pins from her hair, the waves and curls falling to the middle of her back.

“What do you think I did in your absence? Laid around in bed and counted the seconds until your potential return?” He chuckled, the steam of his breaths visible in the chilly night air.

“No, I suppose not.” They walked in silence to her bedroom. When they entered he rested the overcoat over the chair in front of her vanity, earning a smirk from her.
“What? No dog bed?” He flashed her a wicked expression, unbuttoning his shirt as she shut the door.

“Do you think me so cruel?” She winked as an answer, kicking off her heels and walking over to him to assist him in taking off the other-worlder styled clothes.

“No.” She paused, resting her hand on his bare chest while looking up to his caring gaze. “Quite the opposite, in fact. Tomorrow, after a good night’s sleep with you in my arms again, I will tell you of my studies when you were gone.” His eyes swept over her features, taking note that there was obviously more to tell. He nodded slowly, closing the space between them to bring her into his arms in a warm, tight embrace.

“Alright. In the morning then.”

Chapter End Notes

Song:

I See the Light - Tangled

This is the last super fluffy chapter for a -while-. Thanks for the continued support, kudos, bookmarks, anything. Those all give me the motivation to keep writing super silly chapters like these, and of course the serious plot-driven stuff as well. Way more of the latter coming up, thanks, everyone!
It was easy to fall into the Fade, tangled within the warmth of Solas’s embrace. They had been eager to go to bed after the emotionally exhausting day they had endured. They helped one another in disrobing, a trail of clothes leading from the doorway, downstairs where she removed her make up, and back up to the bed. She hadn’t realized how cold the bed had been until he filled it with his warmth again, soothing the soreness of her heart from his absence as her mind drifted into dreams. With a flick of her hand she erected a barrier around herself and let out a sigh.

If she were to be honest, if she were to try and open up to him about what she knew, she would need guidance. From the knowledge she knew, those who opposed or failed the Dread Wolf had been killed, even those close to him. There was not an ounce of her that believed he would do such a thing now, and she was getting strong enough that she would not get down without a fight. There was something bugging her, something on the tip of her memories that caused her to have a mental itch. Seeing the primal instinct to go after Solas within the eyes of the Mabari, she felt like she had read something. She ran her hands through her hair and let out a groan of frustration, sitting back and collapsing onto a padded bench that materialized underneath her.

She rubbed her temples with both hands in small circles. The pressure felt nice, even in the dream, and it helped to alleviate her stress. The presence she had wanted showed up with an answer, like she always did.

“You know what the Dalish say to their dogs?” Wisdom asked, walking through the wall of her barrier with her hands clasped in front of her. Athena’s eyes widened, realization coming into her features as she met the spirit’s gaze and nodded, lips slightly parted in awe.

“Take the Dread Wolf by the ear if he comes. I thought that tale was familiar. Leafy recently brought me a book of Dalish tales that some First had written down to ‘freshen up on my history’. I think she also wanted to educate me on the Dread Wolf since our encounter with him.” She then sighed and huffed a scoff under her breath. “But I suspect by now you know I don’t exactly need a refresher on my history of Fen’Harel.” Athena looked up the spirit with cold determination on her face, rising from the bench to pace off some of her anxiety.

Wisdom nodded solemnly, hands twitching in front of her as she tilted her head to the side. “I had my suspicions, yes. This is why you have come to me for help tonight?”

She instantly threw her hands in the air in a gesture of defeat and frustration, rage getting the better of her for a moment. “What am I supposed to do, Wisdom?” A hollow laugh fell from her lips, one originating from her helplessness. “First off, I know his identity, which is not something that is going to be common knowledge for years. Second, I know the passcode to the eluvian network and have allied with Briala, and I know he has killed over this passcode before. Thirdly, I am now in
possession of something that will more than likely come to bite me in the ass but has also powered a crazy Tevinter magister.” She flicked her palm open and brought the orb into the Fade, it turning to its full size within its palm as it fed off the energy of the Fade. It came at her call, flaring to life and illuminating the area with a burst of light.

Looking at it put a pit in her stomach, however, its pulsing light and energy swirling around like all of the thoughts in her mind, so she closed her hand over it and dismissed it entirely.

“That is too much to manage at one time, Athena. Talk it out, what do you think is of priority right now? What would you relinquish to him and to others to lessen your burden?” She chewed on her bottom lip, turning on her heel to look at the spirit who was annoyingly calm in the conversation. In response, she shrugged, the fall of her shoulders bringing a look of despair over her face. The spirit smiled, walking over and grabbing Athena’s hands, forcing them to relax from the clenched position they were in.

“The Dread Wolf has walked alone for generations upon generations, Athena. He is in a battle with himself on a number of matters,” the spirit looked up knowingly but sternly, the lines of her face and the coolness of her expression shutting Athena up from asking any further questions on it. “Allow him to come to you.”

She couldn’t help herself, bravery and fear fueling her words as she snapped back. “In which way, fur or familiar?” The spirit let out a sigh and let go of her hands, raising them in a posture of surrender. Athena’s voice fell to a soft whisper and she knit her eyebrows before speaking again. “Do. . .do you know if it was him that brought me here? That’s something that is keeping me, well, back. How do I know the wolf that is coming to me in the Plains and the woods isn’t the same one that ripped me from my home?”

Wisdom hummed and rubbed her hands together, opening them and gesturing for Athena to place her palm on top of hers. She hesitated, hovering her hands for a moment before dropping them into the spirit’s. There was a surge of energy upon contact that sent a shiver down her spine. She allowed the spirit, her friend, into her memories. The feeling was almost like after drinking alcohol, a sort of haziness around her mind that made it difficult to see clearly.

The spirit tilted her head as she watched the different memories play out. She couldn’t feel where she was, but she had a suspicion that she was comparing the wolves from when she came versus when she was in the forest last. Athena couldn’t pin it herself, but they weren’t the same. There were moments when her anxiety was high, when there wasn’t a mission or a task to distract her, that she wanted to just walk up to her lover and shake him by the shoulders. Thankfully her fear kept her quiet and the impulse faded to an uncomfortable pit in her stomach that made her feel like she was about to vomit. Word vomit, more than likely, but still.
“It is hard to say, but from my own experiences I do not believe them to be the same, no. There are certain nuances, the power aura, and the voice. They do not match up.” Athena smiled but it instantly faltered and she retracted her hands so that she could wring them at waist level.

“I do not know if that makes me feel better or worse, Wisdom. Who brought me here? Who else would portray themselves as the Dread Wolf?” The spirit considered for a moment but then shook her head.

“That is a question for another time, let us focus on what we know. You have traversed the eluvians, what, once, my friend? It would be foolish to speak of a “secret” you barely have explored yourself. It would be not wise to do so. Become more familiar with it, so that when you broach the topic you will not be as afraid of it as I sense you are now.” She couldn’t help but fall back on the bench and let out a groan. Wisdom made everything seem so plain, so simply, so easy. Perhaps it was her job, discussing philosophy and the like, but it made Athena feel suddenly small.

“That leaves us with the orb, if we can even call it that yet.” She felt the knowing within her body, the part of her spirit that was crying out for a connection to the raw, untapped power that existed within the object. Those kinds of artifacts were normally only used for malice, to tear the world asunder and bathe it in chaotic flame. How did she manage to have something like that within her possession? Command had forged it from the remnants of what they used to bring Wisdom back into existence, was this object an extension of her?

“Objects like these were common in the times of Arlathan.” Athena nodded and ran her hands through her hair, her nails itching at the roots in frustration.

“I know – and typically each one was saved for a member of the Elven Pantheon. I’m fully of aware of the object Corypheus wields, which makes me so nervous about having this one. Why me? Perhaps this is something I can give to the Inquisitor – with her mark she may be able – “ Her words were frantic, clipped, fear leaking into her words as they fell from her lips. She clenched her eyes shut and prayed to be awoken by Solas shifting in his sleep or by Kain giving her kisses of good morning, but neither happened.

“The Inquisitor already has a mark from interacting with a foci. What do you think would happen if somebody other than you touched yours, Athena?” The spirit’s voice turned grave and the sound of it put a lump in the desert that was her throat. She nodded in understanding, scratching her nails along her scalp until she had a grip of hair within each hand.

“Fine.” The all-too familiar presence of a chill sent goosebumps over her skin. Her eyes widened and tears came to veil her gaze, silent streams running down her cheeks. Wisdom knelt down before her and placed her hands on her shoulders, leaning forward to press her forehead against Athena’s white-knuckled grip.
“In the past, people who had these objects and this potential for power were turned by greed and pride. Be better than them, Athena. You have the support and the resources to do so. You are not of this world. You set your own path. Do not shrink in fear from shadows of the past. They are only whispers now.” The spirit stood and turned to go, Athena instantly standing and reaching forward to pull her into a backwards hug. She rubbed her face into the back of her shirt, removing the tears from her cheeks while hiding her pained expression.

“Th-thank you. I truly do not know what I would do without you.” The spirit chuckled and turned, giving her the full embrace that she longed for while patting her head gently.

“And I know I would be gone from this place without you. Trust is not so easily given, but when it is, sometimes that can lessen the burden we carry. We are but a thought away if you require our help.” The spirit quickly faded into the energy of the dream plane and Athena rubbed her hands on her arms, summoning up the courage to let her barrier drop.

With a wipe of her eyes she did. Solas strolled in wearing the sleeveless green wrapped-appearing shirt he wore when he was painting. He looked to her and immediately noticed the red around her eyes from her tears. He stepped forward to read her features and she took a step back with her hands up, sniffling and smiling at him the best she could. “I- I’m sorry. I’m in one of those fits where if you touch me, I’ll shatter, and I’ll be unable to say what I need to say. It’s nothing bad – just – informative I guess?”

He arched a brow at her, looking her up and down before nodding and dropping his hands to his sides. “Alright. What is it you wished to tell me, vhenan?”

There was a flicker of inner appreciation for him still being compassionate when his demeanor had changed. He straightened his posture and clasped his hands behind his back, earning a sincere smirk on her lips. “It’s a lot, but I’m going to try to summarize. So - when Wisdom fell, I was upset. It was something I had seen happen before, and even when I tried to intervene it didn’t help. There was a spirit of Wisdom that was a great influence on you and on me.”

He hummed in agreement, expression fading to sadness for a moment when speaking of her murder. She took in a deep breath and continued. “So, me facing Command’s former touched in the Korcari Wilds was my payment for her helping me to bring our friend back. We did that in a strange ritual I had never seen before.”

Solas tilted his head to the side. “A ritual?”
She nodded and rubbed the back of her neck, sweat beading on her brow as she spoke. “Yeah, dozens of spirits came together and we all kind of formed our memories we had of Wisdom and combined them together. Command was leading the whole thing. They all combined in this large circular seed that we pushed into the ground for it to ‘grow’, in a sense.” As she was telling the story, it all sounded crazy, but thankfully he was one who understood the Fade and its different magic. Magic was slowly growing less foreign for her, but there was still the possibility of somebody pissing magic so a ritual like the one she had performed couldn’t have been that abnormal in his eyes.

“Why did you not seek me out? I have had countless encounters with my friend and could have helped.” She couldn’t help but smile, lifting her right hand and wiggling her fingers to draw attention to the wolf ring on her middle finger.

“You did, believe it or not. I did not want to get your hopes up if it wasn’t successful. I did not see Wisdom until Adamant, where she assisted in bolstering my strength to defeat the Fear demon that reigned over that area.” He smirked, relaxing in his posture. Seeing that allowed her to take a deep breath and slow her speech, slowly bringing in hand gestures as she talked and returning to her normal state.

“There was another thing I was able to channel my energy into. . .in order to do that. Command, and I suspect she wasn’t alone, brought me something that I have only now been able to summon in the waking world. It’s unique in a way, and I wasn’t exactly sure how it bring it up to you. But I’m at an impasse with it.” She paused a beat, looking up to him with nothing but trust in her eyes and hope in her soul. “Okay, er – don’t touch it.”

She took a step back from him and opened her right hand, sighing in anticipation before surging energy into the Veil to bring her artifact to life. It swirled at her touch, bathing him in a white light as her energy crackled around its surface in colors of red and silver. When the light faded he looked in her hand, his eyes immediately widening a snarl coming to his lips.

“What is – how did you manage to?” His hand hovered out and he snatched it back, turning away to pace while throwing his hand in the air. “Where did you find such a thing, Athena?”

She flexed her fingers around it, dropping her hand to her side and groaning. “I just told you – the spirits made it. This is the remnant of the seed used to recreate Wisdom. It’s an object of Fade origins, unlike anything I nor they have ever seen. However, it is not strong enough to be larger than a pea in the real world!” She gesticulated with the hand that the orb was in, acting like it weighed nothing.

He looked from it to her, his hands flexing at his sides before he took in a deep breath in through his nose and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he focused his attention on it and crossed his
arms over his chest. He spoke, his tone softer but still pointed. “Does anybody know of this? If this is what it appears to be, I cannot emphasize how dangerous this is to have around. Corypheus is using an object such as this to enhance his power – “

Athena put the object behind her back, using her free hand to touch on his chest and bring his attention down to her. She nodded with determination, rubbing her thumb over his sternum to calm her own breathing. “I am aware, vhenan. Dorian is the only one who knows about this. I did not know what to do with this, which is why I’m coming to you with it now. You are the one most well-versed in this subject, right?” He stiffened underneath her touch but relaxed after a moment, his hand resting over hers. For a second, she felt his heartbeat underneath her fingertips, but he laced his fingers through hers and dropped their hands down between them.

“I – yes. Normally foci are of elven origin, from their Gods.” She nodded along, making small hums mm-hm to show that she knew. He looked to her, narrowing his gaze before tilting his head as well. “So this, I think Command was trying to replicate those objects. Where did you have this?” She pointed to her ear and he clicked his tongue against the back of his teeth, a wolfish smirk curving her lips.

“Hiding in plain sight, ma’fen. Why is it so small? Typically artifacts of this size are like this.” He then pointed to the orb behind her back and she shrugged, taking a step back so she could put it between them.

“I have found that when it rests in the Fade it can feed off of magically-imbued objects. I do not know how they are connected, perhaps through my spirit?” He hummed and raised his shoulders in a small shrug before she continued. “But when I touch those objects with intent, it feeds this and allows its strength to grow. I gathered materials such as dragon fragments and fade-touched objects, and after that is when I was able to summon it.”

He rested his hand on his chin, thumb stroking over the curve of his lips as he groaned in thought. “Perhaps it needs to grow in strength on the physical side of the Veil in order to be at full strength? Even looking at it now, it pulls on the fabric of the Veil, much like you do when you cast. If it can traverse the barrier, go from one to the other, it needs to be equally as strong on both sides to be effective.” He put both hands up and looked between them as he spoke, thinking out loud in a way that made her heart warm.

“That’s the conclusion I came to as well. I do not wish to carry it around with me at all times; I know it is inherently linked to me in a way, but when I do not have it summoned I feel this kind of weight in my hand and my chest, like a need for magical release like when I’ve gone more than few days without casting a spell.” Solas looked to her and nodded, reaching forward and grabbing her free hand, his thumb stroking over its center as his eyes examined its features.
“I suspect you are feeling the imbalance of its strengths between the Fade and the physical. I have a suggestion, if you are open to it?” He looked up to her with a smile and she was helpless to do anything else but nod in return. “Keep it hidden within the Fade. You have allies here that can protect it and you were correct in your assumption that it is linked to you. As you grow as a mage in your abilities, keep seeking out those objects and channeling magic into it. When that weight disappears, you know it will be equal on both sides.” She brought her orb and looked into it, feeling how it thrummed within her palm and was in complete sync with her breaths and pulse.

With a flicker of power, she dismissed it, leaving her hand suddenly barren and warm. He instantly took it into his own and brought it to his lips, brushing his lips over the fading buzz of her aura as he smiled at her. She could feel the movement of his lips within her hand, the sensitive nerves sending a shudder throughout her body. “Thank you, Solas. I don’t know what I would have done without your help.”

He chuckled and stepped forward to close the distance between them, stroking the back of his knuckles along her cheek over the dried streams of her tears. “I am thankful that you place your trust in me, Athena. I now see why you were in distress before as you said. Stumbling upon the likeness of an ancient artifact is not an easy matter to shoulder on your own.”

Athena reached up and brushed her lips against his own, relishing in the small moan that she stole from his mouth. “Thankfully I no longer have to do it alone.”
The next morning, she happily woke up within the tangle of limbs that were her and her love, the scent of the morning dew swirling within her mind as she stirred. One of his hands cradled her face and she turned her cheek into it, nuzzling along the inside of his palm as the Fade cleared from her mind. He responded in kind, small sounds of effort trickling from his lips. He turned his face into the pillow and let out a groan, his body slouching with a sigh of defeat. Athena looked to him and smiled, pulling up the piece of the pillow that was covering his face.

“Not greeting the morning today, are we?” She began to sit up but he clutched the blanket and pulled it back up to his chin.

“Not this morning in particular.” He then shot one eye open at her with a playful smirk, his arm pulling against her abdomen to bring her back down to the bed. Solas took in a deep breath and nuzzled into her neck, earning another laugh from her. “I would much rather spend it here with you.”

Athena looked down and cupped his face in her hands, brushing her lips against his and relishing in the shared smile on both of their faces. “Unfortunately, it is back to our duties. I am to meet with the Inner Council and discuss the next plan or expedition.”

Solas met her gaze and then rolled his eyes, throwing back the blanket with a sarcastic flourish while rubbing his hands together. “Let us not wait then. How are you feeling? About what occurred in our dream last night?” He extended a hand to help her get out of bed and she scooted herself to the edge, walking over to look down at the now empty earring harness crafted from gold. There was still a small pull in her hand, a kind of ache in her body that needed to be fulfilled. He looked to her and made a hum of recognition. “Ah. I also do believe that is a matter of the mind.”

He moved his body in between her and the vanity’s, tucking her loose waves of hair behind her ear with a hopeful smile. “Do not let it weigh on your mind. It is safe, you are safe. The more energy you invest into it, the more you will feel its pull. Gather your power and you will become ready for it.” Athena sighed through her nose and nodded, kissing the curve of his neck before turning towards her wardrobe. She was exhausted from the ball the day before and settled for the basic clothing for the day. Her mind was racing about the potential options for where they could be going: Emprise du Lion, Emerald Graves, or the Western Approach again.

Solas reached over her, into his drawer, and pulled out a clean tunic with an emerald green wrapped tank top. He smirked when their eyes met, brushing his lips over her shoulder. They both quickly got dressed in silence and before she left she grabbed Cullen’s overcoat from their vanity, huffing under her breath while shrugging and gesturing it to him. He dismissed it with a gesture and a cocky smirk, pulling his tunic over his head and adjusting the wolf-bone to where it rested on
top in its usual place.

“It can be returned to the Commander. I enjoyed my trophy enough for the evening.” Athena couldn’t help but wink and blow a kiss towards him, feeling oddly domestic as she skipped down the stairs. The sounds of the morning drills echoed through the air, but there was a louder cheer to most of them. A crowd, in fact. She blinked, turning from her stairs to what appeared to be a duel between two soldiers. Kain was barking at the side of it, excitement, and fear in his voice. But she understood it well enough, and who was fighting.

Athena stepped up besides Josephine and Leliana, who were watching with silent gazes. Leliana had her hands clasped behind her back but Josephine had her arms openly crossed over her chest with her foot tapping in frustration. It was odd to see the Ambassador so frustrated, but she understood why. She looked over to see the King of Ferelden dueling with the Commander of the Inquisition forces. They were both stripped of their armor and wearing their tunics and beige pants. Their boots slid in the dry dirt as their swords collided, cocky grins plastered on both of their faces.

She decided to say it out loud. “If the King wins, it could undermine our forces. If we win, we showed up royalty and Fereldens hold a grudge.”

“Mmm-hm!” The two women to her left hummed in unison, the corner of Leliana’s lips twitching into a momentary smirk. Athena scanned the crowd and saw Rathein trying to look professional with passing Dalish a bet underneath their waist line, trying to keep it a secret from everyone. Bull had a hand on her shoulder and was watching the battle without any emotion on his face, his military eyes assessing every move, every guard, and every area of opportunity. Barkspawn sat next to Kain and he was doing the same thing as the mercenary captain, looking for any real danger towards his master.

“Want me to break this up?” She asked softly under her breath, a soft smile coming to her face as Cullen gained a temporary upper hand.

Josephine made an uneasy face before subtly nodding, her nails digging into her lower arms as they remained crossed. Athena looked to Kain and leveled her gaze on his, letting out a sigh with a small shrug. The wolf knew her well enough and whined, looking to Cullen and the King. Barkspawn picked up on it as well, sensing his friend’s uneasiness and joining in on the assessment. The two came up with a plan and jumped in at the same time. Barkspawn dodged Alistair’s downswing and jumped up on his shoulders, pushing him down to the ground and covering his face in sloppy affections.

Kain chose to just stand in front of the Commander, lips slightly pulled back in a snarl as he glared the Ferelden down. Athena puffed her chest with pride at how her companion didn’t have to act like a domesticated mutt. The two men balked at one another, Cullen rubbing the back of his neck.
“I almost had you – “

Josephine cleared her throat and looked to the two men, her scowl melting into her trademark polite smile. “War room in ten minutes, Commander. King Alistair, you are welcome to attend if you like.” She flicked her brown gaze up to Rathein, who was acting like a child caught speaking in the back of the class. “Inquisitor.”

The two women turned on their heels and headed inside. Athena pursed her lips together and whistled, tossing Cullen’s overcoat on him while waving over her shoulder. Kain came faithfully to her side and she heard some heavy steps catching up with her on her free side. “I was going to win that.”

She flicked her gaze over to Alistair and laughed, itching at the scars on her left arm from the bear attack. It still ached from time to time, but the skin around the area was beginning to fade to white instead of the healed pink and red. “I’m not so sure, your Grace. I think the Commander was about to get the upper hand on you. Perhaps sitting in the throne has made you rusty?”

“Athena!” Josephine scolded from over her shoulder. Alistair chuckled and dismissed her with a laugh and a wave, itching the side of his temple.

“Ambassador she is fine. It is simply playful. What is your itinerary today, Lady Wolfsbane?” She hummed and waved at Dorian as they passed through the doors of the great hall. He was speaking with Solas by the door of the rotunda, their voices low in a way that made her tilt her head in curiosity. The Tevinter waved her off so she shrugged and looked back to the Warden.

“Meetings, I assume, and then prepping for whatever have to do.” He plucked a piece of bread from a nearby table and took a large bite out of it. “Why?”

He smirked and chewed, putting the bread to one side of his mouth while wiping his hands together to free them of crumbs. “Well, ah – you see – Morrigan and I have a lunch appointment. I am – um – meeting her – well – “ A faint blush blossomed on his cheeks and she couldn’t help but laugh.

“Kieran. You’re meeting Kieran, her son. I’m aware of his origins, your Highness.” She stated boldly, plucking a fruit from an opposite table, reaching over Tobi’s shoulder to get it. She touched his cheek with the back of her hand and continued to walk, enjoying the sweet bite of her pear. “If you would like, I could invite my own children and we could provide a buffer? The children are
friends with Kieran and Lady Morrigan and I get along well.” He considered for a moment, moving the bread around in his mouth before swallowing with a nod.

“I think that will be better. I don’t need to interrupt your War Council meeting, let me go change into something presentable for the meal. Lady Athena.” He touched his fingers to his forehead and smirked, breaking off before walking through Josephine’s office and going towards his quarters. Josephine was waiting for her on the other side, curious smirk playing on her lips.

“You two get along quite well. Thank you for breaking up that duel. It could have been twisted for some use in the Game and that would have been unfortunate.” The Ambassador now had her clipboard, using it to gesture towards the War Room. Leliana was already laying out different scrolls at their typical standing points around the table, greeting her with a head nod when they entered. Athena picked up the papers and picked up a quill, tapping it on the tip of her tongue while reading through.

Leliana made a small sound to catch their attention. “We sent off a raven this morning, Lady Athena. It appears the Baron du Ghalad passed away in his sleep last night. His attendants notified mine this morning.” The Spy-Master slowly raised her gaze to meet hers and Athena had to swallow down a lump of nerves to keep from blushing.

“Oh that was the sick looking one, right?” Rathein asked upon entering the room, leaning her elbow on Athena’s shoulders. She stiffened, turning and kissing the Inquisitor on the cheek in greeting and as a pass to avoid her gaze.

Josephine made a sound to answer, bringing up her clipboard and looking under a few layers of scroll. “Yes, Inquisitor. He had no heir – “ Her eyes flicked to Athena’s and she cleared her throat before continuing. “And thus his estate goes to his cousin. That is who we sent the raven to, to notify her. His remains will be sent to her by the attendants that were brought along with him.”

Athena almost choked on the next bite of pear, coughing into her hand as Cullen walked into the room, fluffing his overcoat over the armor that he had to quickly don. He sympathetically patted her on the back as she coughed until the fruit cleared her throat. When she had a chance for air, she managed to look up to Leliana with blood-shot eyes. “R-remains?”

The Spymaster almost smiled. “The Inquisition took the liberty of cremating him so that transportation of his remains would be simpler. An urn with his family crest is being packed with the rest of his belongings.” She looked to her papers and leafed through, lifting them up to an angle where Rathein couldn’t see to point at a scroll with red ink on it. Athena arched a single brow, wiping her eyes with one hand while filing through her own papers.
There was one with matching ink, in the Spymaster’s and Josephine’s hand. “Welcome to the Inner Council.” The text then became Leliana’s alone, the text becoming smaller and slanted. “I would have said this was a test, but this fell into your lap. You handled yourself well. I understand he threatened to harm your daughter.” There was a break and a drop of ink on the paper. “For the future they can stand trial, but we all start somewhere.”

She could feel her heart in the tips of her fingers as she held the paper, eyes glossing over the words written there. Rathein tapped her on the shoulder, bringing her back into the conversation that Cullen and she were having. “Athena? Did you hear? We need to go to the Emerald Graves and get some letters to track down Samson. Cullen says we’re close, do you know anything of this? Is this a part of your other-wordly knowledge?”

Rathein wiggled her fingers towards her teasingly, bringing up a more detailed map of the Emerald Graves. Athena twisted her mouth to the side, picking up unmarked coin markers from the side of the table. She rubbed the cold metal between her fingers, allowing the sound of the metal on metal to calm her mind as she tried to remember the letter locations. “They will be general areas, but there are Red Templar camps here – here – and here. I’m sorry, did we discuss Fairbanks already?”

Cullen scoffed lightly under his breath in annoyance, scratching the back of his neck. “Yes – Lady Athena. We are meeting with him. I hope to get the letters back as soon as possible, so perhaps we could send an extra man or two to split the forces? The Inquisitor could work with Fairbanks and you could take one or two more to retrieve the letters?” He asked to the group. Rathein nodded with a smile, nudging Athena in the ribs.

“What did I tell you? Twice as fast when you come along. Alright, we’ll leave for the Emerald Graves in the morning. Commander, we are sending Bull and the Chargers down the mountain since the snow is melting to gather remains and do a sweep of Haven.” Athena couldn’t help but clear her throat after the Inquisitor elbowed her in the ribs. She focused her gaze on the war table in front of them, looking up to Cullen with an arched brow.

“All of the Chargers?”

The Commander looked up and noticed the change in her tone, a half smile coming to his face. “Yes, I am sending some of my own with them since they are covering such a large area. It will be a great training exercise.” There must have been a subconscious worry on her face because he chuckled. “He won’t be alone, Athena.”

She looked to him and nodded, a blush of embarrassment blooming across her cheeks and chest. “I suppose I will prepare them for our departure in the morning. Commander – “ She looked up to him and then picked up a marker and set it north, in the general area where she remembered the Shrine of Dumat being. “Sent some preliminary scouts around here. Observe, do not engage.” He
went to ask more questions and she just raised her hand and turned to leave the room, running the extended hand then through her hair while she let out a sigh.

Rathein shrugged and followed her, grabbing Athena by the hips and stopping her tracks. “Hey, why the sudden change?” She turned with a chuckle, nibbling on her bottom lip and rubbing her palms on the tops of her thighs, trying to get some of the sweat of them.

“All – my –“

The brown-haired mage squeezed her hands where they were on Athena’s hips, bringing her attention back. “Ward?”

“‘No. Adopted son. I kind of took him in on the path from Haven to Skyhold and have helped him since, and then Leafy. He’s just kind of grown up and matured – and now he’s a Charger – and I know he’s been training and has been trained by the two best warriors in Skyhold – “ Athena spoke rapidly under her breath, the words scrambled as she gestured in front of her for emphasis.

Cullen sounded from the War Room. “Thank you!”

“Not now! It’s just terrifying. He was the scared child by the campfire in the mountains, but now he’s old enough to brandish a sword and go on missions. I just don’t know how to let him be a man but not panic and suffocate him. It’s – It’s a lot.” She finished sheepishly, shrugging and putting her back against the wall with a flop of her hands onto her friend’s shoulders. Rathein couldn’t help but smile, pulling her into a firm hug.

“He’s going to do great, Athena. Spend the day with him and Leafy that way you won’t feel bad when we leave tomorrow and split our ways. I felt the same way when my brother started his training and started going away from home.” She could feel her friend smile against her shoulder and she sighed, relaxing into the embrace while nuzzling her face into her neck.

“If you say so.”
Leafy and Tobias had managed to clear the chess table and throw a blanket over it to create a make-shift table under the gazebo for their lunch. Athena was in the kitchen and was stealing things for their lunch with Syla assisting. The red-haired elf was able to weave through the constant stream of workers, her thoughts trickling from her lips as she worked.

“Leafy likes these fruits with this cheese, Tobias likes bread and has started to like ale, you like this sweet wine, Morrigan eats like, Kieran is picky – oh!” Her right-hand woman turned to her with a tilted expression. “What does King Alistair like?”

Athena couldn’t help but grin. “Cheese. He likes cheese. It probably wouldn’t hurt to throw in some of the leftover meat from last night. Here, I can get that. Hey, Tyth!” She waved at one of the other workers in the kitchen, a blonde-haired male elf that smirked and side-stepped for her to go into the ice box to fill her arms with finger foods. She returned and finished filling the large basket, groaning when she picked it up with two hands and slid it over her shoulder.

Syla smiled and helped her get it into a better position for carrying, walking with her up the stairs and towards the door outside. “How is everyone today? How are you today, my friend?” Athena paused with her hand on the door knob that led to the gardens, meeting her friend’s gentle gaze. The elf shrugged and grinned, putting her hand over hers and opening the door.

“Feeling like I can breathe better. That man . . . “ Her face fell for a second but it was only a drop of sadness within the never ending optimism that existed within the elf. “Was a monster for the time I knew him, but he will never be in another thought of mine. There are better things to look for. I have things to look forward to and people who care for me, so I am doing wonderfully, Athena.”

In a moment of embarrassment, she lost her words, eyes dropping to their shared contact over the doorknob. Instead of fumbling over her words, she shrugged with the basket on her shoulders and smiled. Her friend laughed and opened the door, lifting the bottom of the heavy load until Athena was out of sight. She looked to the gazebo and smiled, seeing Tobias and Alistair having a small duel with their swords. Leafy was watching them with Kain at her feet, her foot and his tail swaying in unison as they watched the two fighting.

“I believe this is the second time today I’m going to have to interrupt your duel, your Majesty.” Alistair turned to the side and put his hand out on Tobi’s head, laughing as the boy dropped his sword and groaned in defeat.
“I thought that was you this morning. Barkspawn knows better than to jump in the middle of stuff like that. You must be quite convincing if it made him willing to do that. Here, Tobias, another!” He then pushed from the teenager and started the duel over, Athena side-stepping their sword slices to swing and put the basket on the table. Leafy raised a brow in interest, her head turning towards the left side of it where her favorite treats were located.

“Is that a Brecilian Apple I smell?” The elf leaned forward and attempted to dig through the basket but she slapped her hand.

“Yes, but, - wait you can smell it? There is so much cheese in here that fruit is hard to pick out.” Athena snatched the apple and held it out of her daughter’s reach, waiting until they faces were a breath apart before kissing her on the forehead and relishing in how embarrassed she got.

“Fen’Maeee – “ the teenager wined, wiping her brow with her sleeve while grabbing the apple from her hand. There was a pressure of a new energy on her left and Athena couldn’t help but smirk.

“She doesn’t mind it actually, I do not know why she is lying.” Leafy’s cheeks flushed a bright pink as she took the largest bite of apple that she could to keep her mouth full. Athena chuckled and turned to Cole, giving him a polite wink while flicking the tip of his hat.

“Because she is growing up and embarrassed by affections from her adopted mother. Meet with me after this, Cole, our visitor is already a little jumpy about this meal and I would hate to frighten him off.” The spirit looked into the basket and made a sound of acknowledgement, his fingers sifting through the food before he landed over the cheese that she had picked out for Alistair.

“I was looking for this – oh – you knew. This is his favorite.” He blinked and then looked up to her and she looked back with a caring gaze. Most people in Skyhold were creeped out by him, the thinning of his skin and the way it clung to his bones as if it were wet tissue about to rip. She saw him growing stronger every day, more independent, more human. His heart was full of nothing but want to help others, and that was something that made him better than half of the people in the Inquisition. “He likes that you told him, trusted him. It makes him happy. But he’s frightened for you. Too much, too much corruption, too many bad songs that can come from something like that.” He paused and nodded in affirmation. “Be careful.”

The spirit then made her forget how he disappeared from their conversation and she rubbed her eyes to rid herself of the strange sensation left behind. Leafy continued to chew on her apple, itching the side of her head where one of her braids was freshly pinned. “I like him. He’s nice. Sometimes I’ll see him sneaking the other kids treats in the middle of the night or turning their pillow to the cold side.”
“He has brought me books from the tall parts I can’t reach in the library.” A cold voice came from the side, the sound of swords clashing against each other ceasing in the air of the garden. Kieran tilted his head as he spoke, looking to Leafy and then down at the chair. She immediately scooted over so that he could slide in and be in the middle of the table, barely paying him a second glance while her curious eyes turned to the now very uncomfortable shem in the garden.

“Morrigan – uh – good afternoon.” Alistair stammered out, standing straight up while sheathing his sword, his hand resting on it in a posture that she recognized from Cullen. Perhaps it was a nervous Templar habit. Athena smiled and stepped out from the table, bowing her head with a polite smile to the Witch of the Wilds.

She instantly smirked, her eyes rolling to her former travel partner. “Couldn’t face me yourself, could you? You should be weary. The Witch of the Inquisition may not choose your side if we are to come to verbal blows. Her and I are kindred spirits.” Morrigan took a playful step towards Athena, her gaze of a huntress never leaving her prey.

Alistair wasn’t focused on her, he was more focused on Kieran, beads of sweat appearing on his brow. “Is this - ?”

Tobias noticed the tension and scooted behind Athena to sit by Kieran, the boys smiling to one another as they pilfered through the snack basket that she had brought. The children were now in the perfect viewing position to see the exchange between the adults. Even Kieran had a look of mischief about him and suddenly she could see the resemblance between him and his mother. Morrigan hummed, arching a brow while gesturing to her son.

“Yes, this is Kieran. He is my son. Say hello to the Grey Warden, son.” The dark-haired boy looked up and murmured a flat-toned greeting. Alistair smirked and rubbed the back of his neck, looking to Athena with a shrug.

“Well this is, nice? How have you been since, well, you know.” He let out an exasperated sigh and she could feel the nerves coming off of him like the shakiness of a deer in the sights of a wolf. She chuckled under her breath, digging out his cheese and bread while sliding it the edge of the table closest to him. There was a pressure against the back of her legs and she suddenly saw a brown wooden chair behind the backs of her legs. Its placer, however, was absent.

Cole.
She looked to the children and gestured for them to sit closer to one another so Morrigan and Alistair could sit at the edges of the table with her on the outside. They obeyed silently, switching snacks as Tobi leaned over to grab a small bushel of grapes for them all to eat like conversational popcorn. “Since the Archdemon, yes. I have been fine. Motherhood is a great gift that I do not wish to spoil.” She flicked her gaze to her son, allowing the typical hardened expression that came from being around Alistair to melt into something kinder. Athena did the same, nibbling on a strawberry while pouring her and Morrigan a glass of wine.

Alistair did not hesitate from peeling the wax off of the cheese and devouring his first piece of bread, anxiety setting into his features and making his movements jerky. She got the feeling that her lunch partner was going to take advantage of this, so she shot the Witch a warning glance while slowly drinking her wine. Morrigan clicked her tongue against the back of her throat, muttering something under her breath in elven about ‘playing nice’ before continuing. “I see you have prospered as well. How does being the King of Ferelden suit a Hero of the Fifth Blight, husband and battle partner to the Hero of Ferelden?”

There was a beat of silence. “How. . .is she?”

The King finally looked up and swallowed his food, reaching with a wink to steal Athena’s glass to wet his lips. She allowed it, crossing one leg to sit back in the chair. “She is fine – I mean, great. I haven’t seen her in we – er – months. Grey Warden business normally keeps her as busy as politics keeps me. She is happy though. We enjoyed the peace while it lasted anyhow. Leliana tells me we might have some new Wardens coming into Amarathine soon.” He glanced over to Athena who immediately smiled, stealing her glass back to top it off and put it equidistant between them.

“Yes, that was my idea. That way they can help bolster the Ferelden numbers and potentially be under a leader who, well, made the right sacrifices for her people. What Clarel did was selfish and arrogant. The Hero of Ferelden is made of better stuff than that.” Morrigan and Alistair nodded in agreement, a sneer of disappointment curling his lips.

“Yes. That matter with the Orlesian Wardens is. . .hard to hear. I don’t know how they turned to blood magic of all things.” As the words left his throat she could feel Morrigan smile, her gaze rolling from the top of the gazebo over to her son. Alistair caught on and scoffed, throwing his hands into the air with a blush on his cheeks. “That is different and you know it.”

Leafy, ever the observant one, looked up with an arched brow. “What is different?”

Athena playfully hardened her gaze at her and lifted a finger to her lips to silence her, turning to face the Warden with a nod. “I agree. The circumstances of the Fifth Blight were a threat to the whole world and the decision was made with trust on all sides.” She looked to both Morrigan and Alistair, uncrossing her legs so that she could barely touch his boot with hers to give him some sort
of physical touch. She had learned on Earth that touch was one of her “love languages.” She was a puppy in desperate need of affection half of the time, which is what made Bull so annoying when he pulled her aside for a hug shortly after Haven. She wasn’t sure if he was the same way, but she glad when he visibly relaxed and pushed his toe back at her, his arms crossing over his chest.

“You’re – right.” He then pointed his thumb to Athena while looking to Morrigan. “She would like her. Don’t you think?”

Morrigan met Athena’s eyes, smirking with a small nod. “Strong women often can sense a kinship in one another. Women of burden are drawn to one another. Perhaps one day when your lovely Queen returns she could meet her?”

She couldn’t help but smile as she ate her fruit and bread. “I would like to see Denerim at one point. What I have seen is old by now. I want to see what it looks like thriving – “

Alistair chuckled and lifted her wine to his lips. “Not so Blight-y you mean. It would be nice! Bring the wolf. That will really make Eamon shake to see him running around the palace. Him and Barkspawn can go off on adventures, talk about their favorite trees to mark, dig up random bones throughout the city – “ He leaned back and looked wistfully off into the distance, sipping on the wine with a smirk playing on his lips. Morrigan even smirked, relaxing in posture while nibbling on the snacks that Syla had picked out for her.

A laugh from the back of the table brought her gaze to Tobi, Leafy, and Kieran. The three children – no – young adults apparently, were joking and tearing a loaf of bread in three ways, each grabbing a piece and jerking at the same time. Kieran, sitting in the middle, managed with the largest piece. The normally flat-expressioned child broke into a grin and took the largest bite he could of the freshly baked bread. From where she was sitting, Athena could smell different nuts and banana in the mixture. Tobi and Leafy looked at their smaller pieces and shrugged, toasting with the pieces before snacking on their own.

If Tobi was leaving for his first mission the next day, she wanted to do something special. That night was potentially their last night together as a family, before real world events tore them apart or they were sent to the other side of the country in the name of the Inquisition.

She would have to make it special. But how? Her mind was racing with ideas when the Witch of the Wilds nudged her leg with her foot, bringing her back into the conversation. “Your mind is wandering, Lady Wolfsbane. Could the King of Ferelden really be that boring?” She teased, her lips curved in a semi-permanent catlike smirk. Athena rubbed the back of her neck, flicking her gaze between the two with a shrug.

“Just thinking ahead, I guess. He’s leaving off on a mission with the Charger tomorrow – “ She
gestured to Tobi who puffed his chest with pride and patted the hilt of his sword. “I’m leaving with the Inquisitor and our crew for the Emerald Graves and then the Emprise du Lion – “ Alistair’s eyes went wide and she stopped her rambling with a blush, tucking a stray hair behind her ear.

“Wow, you really do know things, don’t you?” His expression was pure amazement, a small huff of laughter puffing his chest as he reached forward to drink more of their now shared glass. “Exactly how much did you see of our travels in the Blight?”

She smiled, “I would say everything, but that wasn’t true. Main events, interactions at camp, different discussions and battle scenes.” The King wiggled his eyebrows and nudged her under the table with his foot.

“Everything?” Athena couldn’t help but grin, a blush flowering on her chest and cheeks.

“Do you really want me to answer that, Your Highness?” She then did an exaggerated eye roll to Morrigan and then to Kieran, who was in the middle of a discussion about magic with Leafy as she summoned lightning between her palms, in a much more controlled manner than she had previously done. Alistair nearly choked on the wine, coughing into his palm while shaking his head and narrowing his gaze at her.

“Actually. No. No I do not. Thank you, very much, your Witch-y-ness.” He flicked both hands in her direction with an uneasy but jesting smile, leaning back in his chair while looping his foot around her calf to keep himself balanced. She tensed to make sure he didn’t fall, chuckling as it took a couple attempts until he found himself comfortable in a relaxed position.

The three fell into pleasant conversation for the next hour or so, the wine settling into their words and relaxing all of them to the point where she heard Morrigan actually laugh at something Alistair had said. The two women shared many friendly glances, Athena finally feeling like she was breaking through the icy wall that the Witch tended to keep erected. Women of the Wild they were, there was an air of mystery that surrounded Mythal’s daughter that was suffocating. She had a large potential in her future, depending on the path that was to be taken... and she felt somewhat responsible.

Still, all of the decisions in the world were not hers to make and it was something she had to constantly repeat to herself. She was an advisor, she was not the end decider on these factors. It was difficult, but Athena was trying to reframe her mind so that every small decision wasn’t her fault. Ever since Redcliffe, that was the majority of her stressor was trying to think about every possibility that could happen. Events at the war table, missions in the field, they all weighed on her mind. With a sigh of contentment, she looked at her lunch dates with a smile, sipping on her wine while the time clicked by.
I'm really really proud of this chapter. I've been going through a bit of a writing rut the past 2-3 months, and writing this one made me really happy. Hope it shows.

Athena cleaned up the lunch from Alistair and Morrigan. Alistair took Tobias back into the training ground for more dueling practice and Leafy had pulled Morrigan aside for some magical advice. She tried not to mind it, lips twitching in annoyance as she lugged the basket full of fruit parts and empty glasses down to the kitchen. Things were already winding down so it was only her and a few other workers in there, some of who she recognized, the others were new faces to replace the ones she took for her own group.

She kept to herself, cleaning up and putting things away where they needed to go. She then gathered ingredients from the shelves and the ice box: flour, lard, cocoa beans, sugar, and eggs. It was another family recipe, and a labor of love. Since she didn’t have a hand mixer she would be whisking the egg-whites by hand. Unfortunately, she didn’t know a spell to quick the process and part of her wanted to put every ounce of love in that she could.

The crust was easy enough to make. She mixed the dry ingredients and cut the lard in and had it set aside in the pan she found on the counter, which she had cleaned herself to save the others time and to give herself a clean workspace. It was the chocolate filling that requires a careful eye. It had to boil for an extended period of time, the wooden spoon scraping the bottom of the pot with every stir to ensure that it didn’t burn or stick. She slowly added in butter and sugar, humming a soft song to herself as she did it. It felt like she was in her own little world as she cooked. Different people came in and out and she saw the familiar faces of her troupe flow through, all waving at her and accepting her head nod with a hum as a returned greeting.

They were all getting to know her and how she acted when she was focused on an individual task. With each bubble of the filling, a burst of chocolate sweetness filled the kitchen. Her mouth nearly filled with saliva in anticipation of the taste. This was something that her family cooked during hard times. There was always chocolate, always something good to make a ray of sunshine during the bad. Her adopted children growing up wasn’t necessarily bad, it just was something she didn’t know how to process. Even in this world, she wasn’t old enough to be their parents by her terms. She would have been in high school pregnant with them, and that thought unnerved her.

Yet here they were, growing before her eyes and going off on their own adventures.
Tobias was walking on his path to become the prince he dreamed of from her stories. After the initial story with a daring prince he was never without his wooden sword, which had turned to steel in the past few months. When they met he was showing up with bruises on his arms or scratches on his face from where Krem had pushed him a little too hard that day or from where Rocky had grappled him to the ground. He was one of them. He was a Charger. She had overheard him singing their cheer from the training grounds one day, all of their arms linked as they broke off for the night.

He had joy on his face, and she couldn’t take that away from him.

Leafy was moving from her room with the other children to the quarters closer to where the elves stayed. She bounced between crashing with Loranil and now with Syla. She didn’t require much to sleep, maybe a thick blanket or a wall to sleep on. The nights where she woke her up in the middle of the night to cuddle were few and far between. Solas never seemed to mind. He would scoot to the edge of his side and give the two their space, sometimes sleeping back to back with her just to keep contact during their rest. Leafy had been able to isolate the smell of a single apple out of a basket full of cheeses and various freshly baked breads.

Athena had noticed that after she started shifting or dabbling in shapeshifting magic...her senses had become more heightened. There had always been a fierceness to her daughter that she could not deny, a natural sense for rebellion against the beliefs that had been forced upon her.

She would have to see how it progressed.

She placed a barrier over her hands so she could move the now thickened and ready filling off of the heat and into the already made pie crust to bake in the oven. With a deep sigh, her eyes rolled over to the large bowl of egg whites and sugar that would need beating. The sun coming in through the window showed that it was just about to be dinner time, so she needed to hurry so she wouldn’t disturb the people coming in to work and serve food. She moved with a quickened pace to clean up her mess so that she could simply focus on the remaining bowl, but of course she left the pot and spoon with the filling last so she could snack on some herself.

It felt like it had been at least twenty minutes of non-stop whisking. Her arm was beginning to grow sore but the smell of chocolate in the oven was enough to fuel her efforts. The door leading to the outside opened and she was too focused on her task to noticed Solas come up behind her and lean against the same counter, eyes taking in the scene. She blew a strand of hair out of her face and looked to him, instantly smiling as he looked into the bowl.

“I smelled whatever you are making outside. Is this another creation from your home?” He asked with a smirk on his lips, his not-so-secret love for sweets suddenly becoming blaringly obvious. She jerked her head towards the pot and the spoon, winking at him playfully.
“If you’re nice to me, I’ll let you lick the spoon. Actually, go ahead, tell me if it’s good or not. It’s hard for certain ingredients to transfer over so I’m doing my best.” He walked over to the pot and picked up the spoon, turning it over in his grip before tapping his index finger on the edge before putting it in his mouth. He immediately hummed and smiled, going back for another finger-full.

“This is spectacular. What is the occasion?” He looked up with a new light in his eyes. She shrugged, switching hands to keep the rhythm going in her mixing.

“Since we are leaving for the Emerald Graves tomorrow and Tobias is leaving for his first mission with the Chargers and Leafy went through that shit with the Baron, I’m kind of treating tonight as our last night together as a family. They’re about to grow up and I wanted to give them something nice before they do it. My family made this during hard times, but I feel like it could be used now.” She did a few rapid turns of her hand with a concentrated face. “And this won’t fucking whip.”

Solas chuckled, putting the spoon up to his mouth to lick off a stubborn part of the chocolate filling, which of course caught her attention. When he noticed her watching he grew smug, his lips curling into a smile as he tossed the now licked-clean spoon into the sink. “Focus on your task, vhenan, or it may never be finished.”

“Ass.” She accused with a clipped tone, eyes lighting up as the mixture in her bowl began to thicken. “Oh! A little more!” She switched back to her right hand – her dominant hand – and leaned against the counter next to him, simply enjoying being near him. The door opened again and Tobi burst through with a grin on his face.

“Ma’! The Chargers invited me to the tavern tonight for drinks before we go out tomorrow! I know we were going to have dinner so I wanted to ask you first!” There was such confidence and joy within his face it stole her breath away, his hand running through his messy but short brown hair. Athena blinked once, letting out a sigh before nodding, not letting the disappointment show within her face.

“Of course. Be careful.” She passed the mixture off to Solas so she could hug Tobi as he stepped forward with his arms open, suddenly realizing how much taller he had gotten. She squeezed him tight and took in a deep breath before putting him at arm’s length. “If Bull offers you anything, say no. The stuff he drinks will put ‘chest on your chest’ and leave you hurting before you leave tomorrow. Alright?”

The boy nodded with a smile, dashing back out with a wave. “Smells great, Ma! Save me some! Love ya!” He was then gone in a flash, Solas silently handing her back the bowl with a shrug.
“Ah. Youth. I remember being so excited and confident about any opportunity to be in battle.” She simply shrugged and nodded, keeping the pace with her whisk since it was finally getting to the consistency she liked. Once it got to almost a firm peak she had Solas help her bring the pan out of the oven so that she could scoop out the meringue and put it on top of the pie. The sugary scent was almost like marshmallow, filling her senses with nothing but nostalgia as she put the pie back in the oven to finish.

Solas showed her a book he was reading on early Tevinter magic, pointing out the similarities in the language to ancient elven as Leafy came through the door with Loranil and Syla at her back. The young girl had her blonde hair down, the straight locks cutting off just below her shoulders. “Fen’Mae!” The warrior and her second in command waited by the door expectantly as the girl came up and immediately hugged her. Athena raised a brow in curiosity and suspicion, kissing the girl’s head before she stepped back.

“Hello, da’fen.” Solas greeted with a smile, Leafy returning the greeting with a grin.

“Hello, hahren!” The girl squared her gaze back on her mother. “The group invited me to join them in a meet up in the forest tonight. I was going to show them the pack! Can I take Kain?” Athena clenched her jaw, thinking to how Claw and the others might respond. They were open minded if shown respect, so she relaxed slightly and nodded.

“Sure, he trusts you. Just be wary. They know us. You bring them a bunch of strangers, even though they are not strangers to us, could be an invasion in their home. You know them and their ways, just be respectful.” The girl nodded and looked to the oven, her eyes lighting up in happiness.

“That looks amazing. Can I have a slice in the morning before Tobi leaves?” Loranil chuckled, patting his hand on his sword on his hip.

“She’ll be safe with us, Fen’Elgara. No worries here, right Syla?” He nudged the red-haired elf next to him who could only smile sweetly in return.

“Absolutely. One of the moons is full tonight and we wanted to celebrate the frost melting out in the woods. Would you like to join us?” Athena shook her head and patted Leafy on the shoulders, gently pushing her towards them.

“No, you guys can show her a good time without me. Little Leafy needs to grow.” She winked as
her child blushed, biting back the tears in her eyes as they all left through the same door they came through, leaving her and Solas alone in the kitchen now. He waited a second, swallowing the small bit of meringue that was in his mouth before speaking.

“Are you all right?” Athena wiped her eyes, chuckling under her breath with a smile.

“I guess they are growing up. I guess I shouldn’t complain; they couldn’t stay at home and be safe and young forever.” Solas pulled her back towards him into a backwards embrace, his arms resting at her lower belly to keep her back against his chest.

“Their love and adoration for you is blatantly apparent. You have done well with the little time you have had with them.” He pressed his lips against her hair and she finally relaxed back into his grip, an eye flicking over to the flame-lit oven to check on the meringue.

“Thank you, it’s selfish of me, but now we only have to save them a slice instead of letting them demolish the pie.”

They were able to have a nice, quiet night to themselves on the rooftop of her tower that extended deep into the middle of the night. He brought basic spell books to help expand her knowledge and they went through casting different glyphs and how to alter them. She was still shit at casting frost, her natural flame magic overtaking any chance she had at even summoning a snowflake. He tried not to laugh at her when her hands would just be coated in water instantly, but once her pants were soaked with multiple failed attempts at ice magic they both were caught in a fit of laughter. The sounds faded into a comfortable silence with her cuddled up against his side with her head in his lap. He stroked her hair gently as they watched the full moon rise high into the sky.

Athena made a soft hum of contentment, nuzzling her cheek against his thigh as his touch on her head sent a shiver down her spine. “Have you ever been to the Emerald Graves before, Solas?”

He took in a deep breath and shook his head, relaxing a bit in his posture to lean back on his hands. “Not in a very long time. With all of its beauty, it still holds such melancholy. What do you know of the place, Athena?” He didn’t even look down to her, his gaze now transfixed on the moon even as his features saddened. She frowned, moving his hand from her hair to the center of her chest where she could hold it and kiss the inside of his palm.
“I know it was the battle grounds of the Exalted March against the Dales. That there used to be a group of elves called Emerald Knights that roamed through it with wolves as their companions. I think there’s a story that each tree within the area is a marker for each elf that died within the Exalted March?” Her tone grew sorrowful as Solas’s jaw clenched, his hand flexing against the center of her chest.

“And how lush a forest it is – “ A sound from down below in her room cut him off and then both crawled to look over the edge. The door was flung open and it smelled like two distilleries were staggering up the stairs to the loft, drawing a groan and half a laugh from her lips.

“Seems like they had a good time. I guess I should go down there.” Solas nodded and tucked the book under his arm, looking to her with a curious expression.

“Do you require help in getting them to bed?” She twisted her mouth to the side and then hummed in answer, slipping over the side, and smoothly descending into the open loft window. He balanced things within his grip and used one hand and the strength of his feet to swing in as well, still much more graceful than her even though he was carrying their blanket, a book, and the rest of the pie. Tobias and Lev’adin were shushing one another, their words slurred and eyes glossed as they haphazardly threw down a blanket and their usual pillows that were now stored in a chest that was pushed up against the wall.

“SHhhhhh – Shhhh Leafy you gotta be’ – you gotta be’ quiet or else – “ The young elf girl then violently turned him around and pushed him towards Athena, his face lighting up in pure shock and awe. “Ma! Fucking. . . Ma.” He slapped his hand over his mouth and backpedaled as Solas looked him up and down with a smirk, putting down the pie on the window sill behind him. “You s-saved us some! Oh see, Leafy! They remembered.” He slapped his sister on the shoulder, which made her only growl under her throat.

The poor girl’s eyes were red and her lips were dry, which led Athena to believe she had already gotten sick before coming home. Tobi made a grab for the pie when Solas put two fingers on his forehead and pushed him back, clicking his tongue against the back of his teeth. “Not yet. Go downstairs with your sister and wash up. Do not come back up until you’ve both had a glass of water.”

Tobi instantly frowned, his shoulders slumping dramatically. “But Solas.” Solas shook his head and pointed down the stairs.

“Go, da’len. You’ll thank me later.” Leafy groaned and grabbed her brother’s hand, dragging him down the stairs behind her reluctantly. Athena could smell the ale and liquor on both of them and it made her senses reel, lips twisting into a grimace. She then couldn’t help but feel a warmth within her chest watching Solas help her parent in a way, the playful wickedness on his face showing he
was enjoying it just as much as she.

“Thank you, vhenan. You didn’t have to do that.” He shrugged and brought her into a sideways embrace, kissing the top of her head with a smile on his lips.

“No, I did not, but I had the desire to. This phase of life is not easy, for them or you.” She laughed and made the bed for them as the children washed up. She padded the floor with two blankets and arranged the pillows with the harder one for Tobi and the softer one for Leafy. The teenagers bounded back up the stairs, Leafy in the back rubbing her head and itching at her temple. Tobi nearly fell forward but Athena caught him, helping him take off his overshirt and the loose pieces of armor left on him. Solas did the same with Leafy, catching her gaze and speaking low in elvhen to one another. Leafy mumbled about how Illrith snuck a bottle of liquor from the basements and they drank it while the wolves hunted then they shared the products of the hunt together.

“Ma! The Chargers got me with this game, two truths and a lie. It’s terrible. I’m such a terrible liar. They caught me every time.” He sighed and she helped get them both onto the bed, bringing the remainder of the pie with two forks and placing it between them. There were no words as they scarfed it down, only the sounds of forks against the metal tray and sounds of appreciation filling the night air. Athena closed the window to a crack and leaned her back against the wall next to Solas, leaning her head against her shoulder and smiling at how the two were now using the wettened tips of their fingers to pick the scraps off of the bottom of the plate.

“Like animals.” He muttered under his breath almost in disbelief, head tilted to the side as Tobi stuck a fork covered in chocolate in his mouth and brought it out squeaky clean.

“I remember being that age. My friends and I would go out and I was able to eat an entire pizza to myself with room to spare.” Solas arched a brow and looked down to her.

“Pizza?”

“I’ll try and make it sometime. Okay, you two. Time for bed. We all have to be up in a few hours – ah you’re late.” Kain bounded up the stairs with a whiny growl as he flopped between the two children. His tail lazily wagged as they turned to cuddle him, Tobi keeping one eye open to look up at his foster parents.

“Sing something for us, Ma’. Please.”
Leafy groaned into Kain’s fur and nodded, “It helps us sleep.” Solas nudged her towards them with a smile. As she had done many times before in their orphanage beds, she kneeled down and tucked the hair out of their faces, trying to keep the tears out of her eyes and voice. Their eyes were closed expectantly waiting for a song but she could tell they were still awake as their hands searched for the perfect position until they found one another’s and lightly clasped them together.

“Without you. The ground thaws. The rain falls. The grass grows.
Without you. The seeds root. The flowers bloom. The children play.”

Leafy managed a smile and squeezed Tobi’s hand within her own, the young man fighting off sleep with a slight smirk on his lips. Kain was fast asleep within their embrace, his feet twitching in time with his breaths.

“The stars gleam. The poets dream. The eagles fly.
Without you. The earth turns. The sun burns. But I die. . .without you.”

The last words were sung in a soft whisper. She was being careful not to wake them as they both took in unison sighs that signaled their deep slumber. As a parting gift, she bent over and kissed all three of them on the head before walking downstairs with Solas. He teasingly helped her get undressed, just as he had done for Leafy moments before. She let him, raising her arms, and laughing as he just threw her shirt in the corner.

“Come now, vhenan. You need rest just as much as they do.” She rolled her eyes and slid into bed, leaning up on one arm to watch him undress on his side of the bed. The moonlight from the small opening in her door and the candlelight allowed her to see the lines of his back and arms, a wicked smile coming to her face as he slid under the blankets beside her. He wrapped his arms around her and nuzzled into her hair, lightly kissing down to her lips where she deepened it just long enough to feel that pull within her lower belly.

He kissed the tip of her nose before shaking his head, tracing the line of her face with the back of his knuckles. “Ar lath ma, vhenan.” He spoke with such sincerity tears almost came to her gaze again. She returned the words with another kiss, speaking her reply against his mouth.

“Ar lath ma, Fen’Pae.” She teased, snuggling into his chest as it vibrated with his laughter. They both fell into a quick sleep, hers comfortable and warm since she was full of nothing but love in her heart.

Love for Solas.
Love for her children.

Love for her family.

Chapter End Notes

Snippet of Song:

Without You - RENT
Send Off

They were awoken with the sound of hurried steps downstairs followed by retching into a chamber pot. Athena opened one eye and immediately smiled, knowing from the pitch of the sounds that it was Tobi who was hurting. Solas’s arm twitched around her belly but she sat up anyways, reaching and picking up Solas’s tunic from the floor to slide it over her form. He rubbed his eye with his palm while sitting up, looking over with a smirk of his own. “I thought he would not have lasted as long. It was almost time for us to be waking.”

Athena scratched the side of her head and nodded, moving downstairs while lighting her candles with a flick of her hand and pulse of magic. The boy was rubbing his head and groaning, dry heaving into the pot again as she opened a chest and rifled through it until she found two slender vials full of a purple potion. Once Tobi was in a break between heaves she used the vial to tap him on the back of the head. “It helps, trust me. What did you in last night?”

He attempted to flick the cork from the top but his grip was too weak, his finger slipping off until she took it from him, removed the cork, and put it back in his hand. He mumbled some thanks in gratitude before downing the potion in one go, laying back flat with his head against the cold, stone ground. “They put chest on my chest, Ma’. That felt awful. I should have listened.”

She nodded with a smug hum, grabbing a dry cloth from her cabinet to wet it. She then used the cool cloth to wipe off his face with a smile. “That you should have. But, every man needs to learn his own way. Think you have the strength to get back upstairs? The Iron Bull won’t tolerate tardiness, even if he was the reason for making you feel so shitty.” She nudged her foot underneath his body until he sat up, swatting her foot away before wiping the rag over his face and through his hair.

“I’m already feeling a little better.” He smiled in a way that made him look like the young boy on the mountain again, her heart melting when he kicked up from the ground and then ran upstairs. “Morning, Solas!” The elf was standing in the room with his pants on and emerald green undershirt on, waving to the boy as he passed.

Athena grabbed a tie from her desk and pulled her hair up from her neck, looking up the remainder of the stairs. “Kain! Is Leafy up yet?” The wolf let out a series of growls and barks and she could hear chastising the girl for sleeping in so late. Leafy let out a whine, a thud sounding on the ground from where she assumed the girl was reaching to hit the wolf for waking her.

“Da’len. We are leaving soon.” Solas calmly called up in their shared language, looking to Athena for his shirt but she refused to get it. She was in her wardrobe rolling up two different pairs of clothes while undoing the clasps on her light armor to wear it during travel. He cleared his throat and made a motion for his shirt but she shook her head.
“No way. This one is mine. You need to go pack anyways, vhenan.” She winked at him and pulled the edges of his tunic down to prove a point. He looked her up and down, shaking his head while pulling her close in such a quick movement she yelped, smiling as he bent down and pressed his lips against hers. There were two sounds of joking disgust from the stairs and he pulled back and flicked his gaze over to them.

“I will see you by the horses soon. Good to see you’re both up.” He waved and shut the door behind him, leaving the three of them to scramble. Tobi was going through their shared chest in the loft, screaming out to Leafy who was downstairs washing her face.

“Have you seen my boots?”

Leafy called back out, “I don’t think you came home with them last night! You were in your socks when I found you!”

Athena looked to Kain and gestured her head towards the door as she tied one of her spellbooks to the side of her backpack. Go find his boots please. He probably left them in the tavern. The wolf let out a whine before bursting down the stairs. She switched out Solas’s tunic for something basic, making sure to still roll it up and shove it in the bottom of her bag to sleep in when they were in the Emerald Graves. She patted the top of her backpack once it was completely full, looking over as Leafy came up the stairs fresh-faced with her hair braided back in two braids. She slapped her cheeks and looked at the purple vial sitting on the edge of her bed.

“Is that for me?” Athena nodded and wrapped her magic around it to levitate it to her daughter, smiling as Lev’adin was able to pop the cork off with her thumb and down the contents.

“How was the group last night?”

The girl hummed and finished the potion, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand while putting the vial back down on the bed. “Good. The wolves liked them. Claw hung around me most of the night and they slowly got used to the others. Since its getting warmer we were able to have a better hunt. The wolves want me to sleep with them sometime, like you did.” Athena blinked once and looked to her slowly.

“You can understand them?” The girl laughed and shook her head.
“Not like you. I’m just getting to know them. Their little sounds and movements they make. I’ve been with them long enough now, I can piece some things together.” She walked over and brought the girl into a hug, smiling into her hair as she wrapped her arms around her as well.

“I’m proud of you. You’ve grown. How has training been?” The girl smiled and pushed back, quickly summoning a barrier and sliding her magic along her own. It was chaotic but more controlled now, the small sparks causing the hair on her arms and neck to rise. Her invisible flames shot out and pushed against the opposing aura like a magical handshake of sorts. She crossed her arms over her chest and pushed her weight onto one hip, raising a single brow as there was a miniature battle of wills between the two. It didn’t last long, Leafy raised her hands and allowed the heat to surround her in an ethereal embrace.

Tobi finally came downstairs looking put together, minus his boots. Athena looked at them and reached out to Kain mentally who simply replied: *Krem has them.*

“Sorry, bud. Your Lieutenant has your boots and probably a good teasing. You ready to receive it?” The boy mockingly saluted while slinging his bag over his shoulder.

“You have an extra pair of clothes?” She asked, looking down at him while rubbing dirt off from his temples.

“Yes, Ma’.”

“You have your sword?” The boy patted on his hip.

“Yes, Ma’.”

“Do you have your – “ The boy stepped forward and brought her into a hug, effectively silencing her while putting an embarrassed blush on her cheeks.

“I’ll be fine, Ma’. It’s just a mission down the mountain in Haven. They say it’s nothing and we shouldn’t expect much.” She kissed him on top of the head while patting his back.

“So, they say, come on now, let’s go down to them.” The trio closed the door behind them and went down the stairs to the expecting group of travelers. Rathein waved at her the moment she heard the door shut, bringing a smile to Athena’s lips as her eyes took in the entire scene. The
Chargers were all massed around one horse, whispering in a circle until they heard Lev’adin and Tobi talking as they descended the steps. The group then nearly turned in unison, letting out different cheers and hoots.

Tobi almost turned around, his cheeks red as a tomato but Athena gripped his shoulders and turned him around, leveling Krem within her gaze. He put his hands up in surrender, dropping Tobi’s boots to the ground with a sheepish smile on his face. “H-hey, Athena! Good morning!” He said with a coy tone, holding his posture even as she almost came nose to nose with him.

She called out over her shoulder, “Tobi, what did I warn you about last night?”

The boy swallowed a lump of nerves even as he was being nearly tackled by the rest of the Chargers, mainly Rocky and Skinner. “Getting chest on my chest.”

Krem broke into a grin with a snort of laughter, covering his mouth with his gloved hand while he shrugged. “Couldn’t help it. If he didn’t he think he was a Charger before then, he sure as hell is one now.” She took a step back and watched at how Tobi nearly glowed with pride, his face breaking into laughter as he wrestled with Rocky, trying to use his height to his advantage but the dwarf was surprisingly smooth, grappling him into a choke-hold within seconds.

“Well. I can’t be there so . . . we’ll do a trade.” She walked over to Prince and took some of her stuff from his back before moving her things to the wild horse that they had assigned Tobi. It was younger, its coat speckled bits of gold and blonde. It looked to her in challenge, stamping its hooves into the dirt while making noises of distress. She walked in front of it and crossed her arms, looking the creature up and down with a smile. “Oh you and I are going to have fun, I can tell.”

Krem came to her side and huffed a chuckle. “Yeah, we couldn’t find any other horses for him. You’re trading?”

She looked over her shoulder towards Prince, who flicked his tail once in approval. “A Prince for a Prince. He’s good and behaves well, good for any of the Chargers really. If I say so.” She winked to him and patted his shoulder while slipping her back from her back. The short-haired warrior tilted his head as she approached the horse, taking a tentative step back.

“Uh – what are you doing?” He held his arm out as she got close to the temperamental steed.

With a burst of magic, she put her foot in the stirrup of the saddle and swung her leg over,
wrapping the rope of the reign around her hand tightly while looking to him with a hesitant smile. “Bonding – woah!” The horse immediately took off, breaking from the formation to break into a fight. It released a roar of refusal, bucking its legs backwards and in the air. She clenched her thighs around the saddle, trying to lean forward and put a hand through its mane to connect with it.

The young thing was feisty, that was for sure. Any attempt at communicating was met with a shake of its head and another attempt to toss her off. Thankfully she wasn’t as green of a rider as she used to be. She kept her balance through the next thrash and took in a deep breath of the crisp, mountain air, focusing her efforts in a single pulse of magic that pierced through the young stubbornness of the horse’s mind. *Tight. Too tight.*

Athena looked behind her at the rear strap, noticing that there was almost an indent in where it was sitting. No wonder the horse was testy. She pulled back over the clasp and released the belt, the horse immediately calming with pants of breath. Athena leaned forward and put her head on the horse’s back, rubbing her hand along the side of its neck. “Woo – boy. Who tied your saddle?” The creature nodded its head towards Bull, which only made her snicker.

“Bull! What did he do to you to tie him so tight?” She slid off the saddle and rubbed her hand down his nose, now that he was calmed down. He nibbled at her fingers but it was playful, sarcastic almost. The Qunari shrugged and leaned against his own horse.

“He was acting up.” She rolled her eyes and immediately bit her tongue, wanting to make a joke about tight tie-ups but she wasn’t in the mood to embarrass the Inquisitor that morning. She moved her stuff from Prince to the new horse with only a huff of frustration, taking any opportunity to touch or pat the new horse. During her last transfer, she stood in front of Prince and pressed her forehead to the bridge of his nose.

“Take care of him, okay?” She whispered, the horse nudging against her face while dragging his hoof through the dirt. She looked over to Tobi and gestured him over. He was able to escape the group of mercenaries, who were now boarding their own horses and corraling Cullen’s soldiers that were being sent with them. He looked up to the larger horse and instantly beamed.

“I get to take Prince! Really?” She nodded with a hum, patting on the horse’s back with confidence.

“Absolutely. He will take great care of you. Before you go to bed, make sure you brush him and itch this spot – “ She reached up behind right ear and scratched until the horse’s head relaxed, small grunts of contentment groaning from his throat. “Here. Now, is it going to embarrass you if I hug you good-bye?” He looked over his shoulder at the rest of the men and saw Bull hugging Rathein farewell.
“No, you’re good.” He then opened his arms and allowed her to bend down and wrap her arms around him, taking in a deep breath before sighing into his neck.

“Be careful okay?” The boy – no – man nodded into her neck and barely had time to breathe before Leafy nearly tackled him from behind. She embraced him tightly, not saying a word even as he wrapped his arms around her and squeezed as if she were going to disappear into thin air. Tobi looked up to Athena with tears in his eyes, a soft smile on his face that made her heart melt.

“Love you, both of you.”

Lev’adin playfully punched him on the shoulder before rubbing her eyes, Athena fighting the tears in hers. She gripped him by the shoulders and squeezed them with a nod.

“We love you too. Now, go on, go ride with your friends.” They both stepped back as he kicked up onto Prince’s back and took the reins. He took in a deep breath and let it out in a sigh, looking over as Bull rode his stallion to the front and blew the horn.

“Charrrgers. Move out!” The Qunari led the group and they watched the herd of horses and mercenaries move with their different cries of joy. Skinner quickly caught up with Tobi’s horse and rode with him side by side. There were also a group of men running on foot, some of them Athena recognized but couldn’t identify since they were running past. She shook her head and moved to her new horse, readjusting the strap, and tying it looser than before, making sure he was okay with it before she slid up onto his saddle. Leafy looked up at her and patted the new horse on his flank, whispering small elvish greetings under her breath.

“You be careful too, okay, Fen’Mae? I heard there are red templars where you’re going.” Athena let out a chuckle, shaking her head back and forth.

“And giants. I haven’t seen one before so I’m kind of terrified.” Leafy’s eyes grew large with a mixture of fear and interest, earning a wink from her mother. “Want me to bring you a tooth? Or a trophy of sorts?” Leafy began to nod when someone interrupted them from the side.

“Ever the huntress. We have not even seen one of the creatures yet and you are claiming your prize.” Solas commented, moving his horse forward with a squeeze of his thighs. She looked him up and down, making a sound of approval at the wolf-fur sash he wore across his armor.

“I can’t help it. I’m excited to see this new place! It beats the Western Approach anyways.” They
both looked up as Rathein stuck two fingers in her mouth and whistled to gather the attention of the group going with them. Athena quickly glanced and saw an empty horse, which usually meant Cole was coming, Blackwall, Cassandra, and Varric. The Inquisitor smiled at them all and then nudged her horse forward, which immediately broke for a running pace.

Before she lost the chance to breathe, let alone talk, Athena looked to Leafy and winked. “Hold the fort for me, da’fen.”
“And what a lush forest it is.”

Solas stated through clenched teeth on the edge of their camp. Athena looked up from her tent, furrowing her brows as he looked over all the forest in front of them. The branches created an endless canopy over their heads, allowing only small rays of light to penetrate through and illuminate their path below. From this point, they would be splitting up and going on foot. They had met Fairbanks already, the Robin Hood of Thedas, except the Earth myth wasn’t a secret noble in disguise. She held a map within her lap with the circled areas of where the red templars guarding their smuggler letters were.

“I’m sorry, Solas.” She said softly as she stood from her position. He shook his head and let out a sigh, his hand clenching around the shaft of his staff, which was almost pulsing with his energy.

“’Tis the bittersweet reminder of what my people had. They were able to build a life here.” He blinked and looked over to her, his expression vacant of all emotion but sorrow. “It must have been something to see.”

She went to reach for him, guarded as he was, but the Inquisitor called her over towards the table set up with an even larger map. “Run me through this one more time, Athena. I feel like I could get lost within this place.”

Athena rolled her eyes and pushed the sleeves of her armor up. It was a mage robe that looked more like a blazer with an extra-long coat-tail that nearly scraped the ground. But it allowed her to wear pants so she didn’t complain. “You will take your group here then report back to Fairbanks once all is in order. I will be taking Blackwall and Cole here, here, and here. We’ll probably make camp up north near the river and then meet you guys back tomorrow. Send some men to be ready to meet us with a raven so I can send the letters we find to Cullen with some notes attached.” She paused and rubbed the back of her neck, tilting it to one side until she felt a satisfying pop. “Be careful. There are red templars all over the area, and giants in particular in this area.” She made a large circle with her finger, remembering how she had died multiple times in the games.

“Too bad Bull isn’t here. He would go crazy over a hunt like that.” There was a laugh from the side as Varric loaded up Bianca with a new bolt.
“Oh good, gives me some time to try out her new upgrades. I wonder if it can pierce giant’s skull. . .

“Cassandra rolled her eyes and made a noise of disgust, sheathing her sword while looking to the Inquisitor. Blackwall and Cole were waiting on the other side of camp, the warrior looking to her for when they were going to leave. She nodded to him and put a finger up, gesturing that they would be leaving in a minute or so. Rathein patted her on the back with a confident smile before turning back to her work. Athena walked by Solas’s side, not wanting to intrude on his silent mourning but also not wanting to just leave without saying anything.

“Please be safe. As beautiful as this place is, many dangers hide within the forest.” He nodded and touched her wrist as she turned to leave, bringing her attention back to him for a second.

“You as well, vhenan.” That was all she needed. She readjusted her pack on her back and walked in between Blackwall and Cole, the two men silently following her as she walked down the path towards the general direction of the first campsite. Besides his unusually pleasant company, there was a second reason she had brought the spirit of Compassion. He was sensitive to the song of red lyrium and would be able to point them in the right direction.

“Alright, my friend. There should only be a couple of them by themselves, not near any of the large crystal near the estate, alright?” She looked over her shoulder towards the boy who simply nodded in return.

“Okay.” The boy blinked and then looked over to Blackwall, his eyes falling to the large blade on his back. “Your knife is big.”

The soldier bit his tongue with a chuckle, shaking his head while itching his chin underneath the beard. “It’s a sword, Cole.”

Cole brought out his daggers and then looked back to the sword. “It’s bigger than mine.”

Blackwall frowned even as Athena was laughing to herself, thankful for some comedic reprieve during the eerily mournful walk through the Emerald Groves. “And now you’ve made it awkward.”

Athena held a hand out after a few minutes of walking, stopping them in their path. There was an odd vibration in her ears, something she had heard before when she was close to the tainted crystals that twisted men’s souls. Almost like a dog she closed her eyes and tilted her head to the side, trying to pinpoint where it was coming from. “Oh. You can hear it too. It’s getting louder now.” Cole pointed straight forward. “Up there.”
Then the boy went into stealth mode and Blackwall drew his sword. “How many can we be expecting?”

She swallowed down a lump of nerves and rolled her shoulders. “Hopefully no more than three, but prepare for the worst and hope for the best.”

“Aaaah!” There was a blood-gargled cry from ahead of them and they both ran ahead. Cole had sunk his daggers into one of the normal-looking templars, free of any ‘crystal gardens in his skull’. That left them with one that had spikes for arms and the other that was half the size of a behemoth. Athena decided to take on the one with the spiked arms, stepping to the side to avoid a lunge while summoning a wall of flame to keep it and its partner separated.

It turned and fired three small daggers of red lyrium toward her and she broke into a fade-step to dodge them, having to suck in her stomach to avoid one grazing her skin. She then used the slowed time to punch forward, a stream of flame knocking the templar in the face. It knocked him off balance, which Cole used to his advantage.

The assassin drew his blades and ran them across the back of the templar’s legs, essentially leaving him crippled and in a perfect position for Athena to summon a burst of flame underneath him and end his life. It was strange. It was something she had grown used to over her time in the Inquisition. The templars blood pooled underneath him, even though his body was now a mixture of red lyrium and flesh. There was the smell of burnt hair and bone, which always made her lips curl in disgust. Then there was the sound, the wordless cry of anguish as the monstrosity in front of her fell to its demise.

It only made it somewhat easier that they were monsters, but as Solas liked to say under his breath: they had families once. They were people once that made terrible choices. Even though Cullen had fond memories of the Templar Commander Samson, he was the one who put the templars to this. He used the fear and distrust of the Chantry to turn them towards Corypheus and poison their bodies with the blight-infected lyrium. There was another burst of blood when Blackwall finished ramming his sword through the trunk of the larger and more infected Templar. Her and Cole stepped back when the crystal shards burst on the ground, both of them frowning at the sight.

She turned to the table and found the letters amongst a table, next to scattered gold coins and a healing potion. She handed the healing potion to Blackwall and swirled her hand, using a gust of magic to collect the red lyrium shards and the bodies of the templars into a pile. When it felt like they clicked together, she clenched her hand into a fist to set them aflame.
“Maker I can never get used to these things. To think they did it willingly, like the Wardens and their blood magic.” Blackwall commented with anger trickling into his voice. Athena clenched her jaw and moved away from the camp, looking for anything else they could take with them.

“Fear does odd things to people, makes them desperate. I guess we can all understand that, but we’re better, I guess.” She tried not to look over her shoulder at the pile of burning corpses but the song of the lyrium was now screaming in her ear and she wanted to get away from it, even if it meant walking into another camp of the same creatures. Every time they passed a tree, or a marker that had been wiped clean by time, a small part of her happiness faded. This area was once so lush with life, there was evidence of that in the ruins that were scattered throughout.

Nature had survived in this area against all odds, against all war that was brought there by people who felt superior based on faith alone. It had been done many times throughout her history on her world, but it had been so long ago because the world had grown. Even when it did happen the world could look at it and step in. Here? They had just recently considered an Exalted March on Kirkwall or on the dwarves in Orzammar for their murder of the local Chantry brother.

“Faith wavering, angry, how can they do it? Not like her. She glows, shines, through the darkness, a beacon of faith, their combined faith.” Cole muttered off in his trance-like way, earning a hum of recognition from her as she walked.

“Yes, let’s be thankful our Inquisitor is one of the faithful instead of me. I would be a poor example for Thedas.”

Eliminating the two other camps had only put a sour taste in her mouth and blood all over her clothes. There had been a point where one of the templars had her backed up against a wall and she was getting ready to breathe fire on it, but Blackwall stabbed it through the chest and nearly showered her in blood. She thankfully was able to close her mouth, the former healthcare worker in her demanded it, but it didn’t save her skin or the rest of her clothes. It also added some intimidation factor for their next battle when she stomped into the camp wearing the blood of their kin.

They had eaten with pleasant conversation but Cole noticed that her words were clipped and borderline angry. She picked her rabbit leg clean before throwing the bones into the fire, scratching some of the blood from her chin and neck. “You don’t like killing?” The boy asked innocently, managing to draw a laugh from her throat.
“No, darling. I do not.” He tilted his head and itched the back of his neck with the blunt side of a dagger.

“Or this place?” She shook her head and looked up. There was a moment where she was stunned silent by the beauty of it all. The moonlight peeked through the gaps in the curtain of branches and leaves, leaving them a sight that was nothing but nature for days. The ambient sounds of nature surrounded them and it made her feel like she was actually camping, but underneath it all there was a layer of sadness, a layer of mourning. It was as if every time she passed a tree, there was a fallen elvhen reaching out for her or crying out for help.

It made her realize how much she had ignored the small details previously. Every marker, every time she thrust an Inquisition marker into the ground, those were famous grave sites or battles. They were constantly questing in a place whose history was written in blood and bones, and the area in the Emerald Graves was thick with grief. “For once... I would like to go to a place that does not have a history of genocide or sadness. But I feel like that is too much to ask, even in my world.” She took a long gulp of water from her flask before shaking her head. “Maybe I just didn’t pay attention before, or maybe it had been so long since my country had seen war we didn’t care, but it weighs on a person.”

Blackwall grunted in agreement as his hands worked away at whittling a small chunk of branch he had found on the ground. “It weighs on a person, it weighs on the world. Even though it has been a decade since the last Blight, half of Ferelden is still scarred. You saw Crestwood, how people had to survive that.” He took a large chunk out of the wood and watched the piece fall to the ground. “Thedas does not have an easy history, m’lady.”

Athena nodded, shaking her water and finding that it was empty. She pushed up from her sitting place and stretched to the sky. “I’m going to go clean this blood from me. Feel free to go to bed before I get back. I’ll send the raven to Cullen when I return with our letters.” Cole remained in the same place but Blackwall at least nodded when she left with her dirtied clothes on and Solas’s tunic that she had packed in her hand, putting down his wood work so that he could polish and clean his sword before they rested. She waved at the Inquisition soldiers guarding camp and moved past them, following the not so distant sounds of a running river. The wind bit at her skin but all she wanted to do was strip down and scrub herself clean from the battles earlier.

She found a quiet place where the water was waist deep. She removed her boots and sent out pulses of magic when her bare feet touched the sand, looking for any visiting rogues or creatures. She was alone, except for the local wildlife of rabbits and wolves. They left her alone though, keeping to the edge of her periphery in curiosity alone. Athena removed her clothing and brought it into the water, using a smooth stone to scrub the blood out of it and off of her skin. She ran the stone over her skin and then followed with her free hand, moving until her skin felt smooth and free of the blood of other men.
Still in her bandings and smalls alone, she looked around at the halo of blood that drifted away in the water. It was unnerving, seeing and smelling that much blood. It hadn’t been that long since Adamant, but again there was a thrill of battle that kept her distracted. She was fighting demons, unearthly creatures where she felt no guilt in banishing them back to their home. She fought an undead dragon and lured it away from her allies. There was something sickening about taking the life from another human, or at least someone that used to be human. Even murdering the Baron left her feeling odd, and he had threatened to hurt her daughter. How many more would die at her hands? In the name of something better?

She began singing softly to distract her mind from the guilt that was trying to encroach over it, her hand using the stone to scrub away at her arms and torso. The song wasn’t as relaxing as she wanted, the words emphasized by the motions of her hand. Still, there was a flicker at the edge of her vision, a new yet familiar wolf. A dark, broken, and hollow laughter trickled from her lips and it only added to the uneasiness that existed there.

She ignored him, running her hands through her hair and using her nails to scratch and clean her scalp. The Dread Wolf silently paced at the river bank, his many gazes focused on her. There wasn’t anything sexual or predatory, but in a strange sense she could feel that her love was in a similar mood. There was an air of uneasiness about him, of mourning and sadness that she recognized from when he left them in Exalted Plains after Wisdom’s death.

“If I give my heart to you, I must be sure from the very start, that you would love me more than her.”

Her voice was still soft, as if she were singing for herself, eyes now closed as the water dripped down her skin and into the bloodied river below.

“If I trust in you, oh please –“ Her eyes fluttered opened and found the wolf on the other side of the river, visually acknowledging him and giving him that satisfaction for the first time. “Don’t run and hide. If I love you too, oh please, don’t hurt my Pride like her.”

Athena blinked and looked to the edge of the river, gasping when she saw a shadowed figured, tall, with his face cloaked underneath a wolf hood with six, glowing red eyes, hands at his side defeated. The next blink the figure was gone and the wolf was on the other side of the river, now by her things. She had no breath, it was stolen from her and her eyes were wide. She remained in the safety of the water with her thoughts and suspicions about what she had just seen.

Let the Dread Wolf come to you.
Wisdom’s advice rang in her head like a bell but she was frozen in place, hands by her side in a passive posture. The Dread Wolf looked around and made a sound of contemplating, it high pitched and close to a whine. “It has been many years since I have been here. These forests. . .have changed.”

She took a step towards the river bank, using a tie around her wrist to pull her hair up. “I can only imagine. What was it like before?”

The wolf scoffed with a bitter tone, looking her directly in the face. “You are a Dreamer, are you not? View the demise of my people for yourself.” The look on her face must have been obvious because he let out a growl and shook his head, digging into the soil with his claws before sitting down. “Apologies – “

Athena cut him off by walking closer towards him, easing over to her clothes. She used a spell she had seen Solas use before, swirling her magic around her body and her clothes to dry them. “No need to apologize.” She found the clean, dry, and warm tunic that she had left on the branch and slipped it over her bandings, feeling a small bit of happiness when the wolf looked over at her and stilled. She could see his six eyes widen and then look to the side, and she felt that if he were in elf form he would have been blushing.

Still, she sat down at the base of the tree and put her back against it, crossing one leg over the other while resting her hands in her lap. She closed her eyes and could almost feel him getting agitated or uncomfortable with their silence. She heard his maw open as if he were going to speak and she raised a hand to stop him. “We do not have to talk, Fen’Harel. I came out here to clear my head, as I’m sure you did as well.”

She opened her honey-colored eyes to look at him with a passive yet kind expression on her face. The wolf nodded and stood, walking over towards her until his face was within inches of hers. She took in a deep breath and relaxed, relying on the trust she had for her love and their mutual friend, Wisdom. The Dread Wolf took in a deep breath and pressed his nose to her forehead, whispering in a voice that was almost familiar. “Allow me to show you the visions just out of your reach then.”

Chapter End Notes

Small snippet of song:

If I Fell- Across the Universe
The Fade felt different when she slept in the Emerald Groves.

Without even trying, she could feel some of the memories from the area seeping through the cracks into her own dream. Wisps of former residents ran in front of her vision and crashed into a thousand glittering bits once they hit her barrier. She didn't hesitate to let it fall, eyes wide in wonder as she walked from the comfort of her own area to what was in front of her. It was as if there was just another layer added onto the waking world she had just escaped from.

Instead of marked rock-covered graves, there were spiraling staircases surrounding the thick trunks of the trees, seeming to climb into the clouds themselves. Delicately perched on top of the strong branches were houses and spires of crystal and glass. The moonlight reflected beautifully through them all, reflecting different colors like stained glass upon the ground and other trees surrounding them. Athena swirled on the pad of her foot to try and take it all in, a childlike smile on her face the entire time. The ghosts of the elvhen people...they all looked so happy, so safe, so carefree.

In the center of the forest dwelling was a familiar arched structure, one that different wisps of memories ran in and out of as if it were the front door to a house. There were so many recognizable details within the scene that it left her completely breathless.

"Ah. I see you found it on your own."

She had completely missed his presence next to her, the large image of a wolf appearing like smoke. She felt the usual pressure in the air that came with the Dread Wolf, like a change in gravity that existed around him. The former scientist in her wanted to delve into more to discover its source, but she suspected it came as a consequence of living in between worlds as frequented as he did. Which presence was the true presence of Solas? She knew Solas had come before the Dread Wolf, and Solas was a master of the school of frost magic. One of them had to be a guise of sorts.

"It was hard to ignore. The moment I opened my eyes in the Fade I could see the memories running around me. I've never felt such a pull to a time in the area I was sleeping in. What makes the veil so thin here?" The wolf huffed underneath his breath, looking as a child ran in front of them. He looked over to her and she felt slightly unnerved as all six eyes blinked at different times before focusing on her face.

"The natural power that flows in the earth pulls on the memories of the thousands of lives that were lost here. Before their fall, the world was enriched with such magic that their lives were stretched
on for eons and eons. Artifacts the kind that this world has only seen in fragments or ash nearly littered the ground. Elves that were raised to godhood were able to traverse the earth using powerful artifacts. It...was a complicated time.” She noticed that he slightly clenched his jaw and she clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth, leaving the safety of his side to walk underneath the trees and towards the eluvian in the center of the elven village they were in.

“So, what was the major downfall of the Dales? Humanity or hubris?” She went into the comment wishing to be bitter, but her anger was fading as she witnessed the beauty of what once was. Even in the memory, there was an undeniable power that buzzed through the Fade. The ground held some bioluminescent magic that caused her footprints to glow as she walked forward. It left a trail of glowing steps behind her and they faded every three or four steps. She reached out towards it and smiled, a somewhat nostalgic smile coming to her face. It reminded her of something, a memory of a beach in California that was buried in the place where she held all of her earthly-thoughts. When the waves crashed on this particular beach, even in the dead of night, they illuminated and glowed an ethereal blue. It was a local breed of algae, but she found the sight to be a miracle of nature at the time.

“A mixture of both. The fall of the elvhen people was occurring long before the Veil was erected. The infighting between my brethren was – “ The wolf paused and tilted his head, jaw still clenched with a low growl in the back of his throat. “Bloody and unnecessary. I intervened when the best of them was slain.” Athena couldn’t help but lightly scoff underneath her breath, feeling the look he gave her before she saw it for herself. He nudged his nose forward, silently asking her to elaborate. She was getting to know this part of Solas well enough that he was agitated, the pressure of his aura twitching and pushing out from him like a changing weather current.

“Forgive my brash opinion, but if she was truly the best out of all of you, it is no wonder that your people fell. I do not hold Mythal the Vengeful in as high regard as you do, Wolf.” There was a hum or snarl of disapproval next to her and she felt a swell of pride in her chest from it. But then it abruptly ended and she saw the large and wicked curve of the wolf’s maw.

“What exactly do you know of Mythal to disapprove of her so besides the legends of the All-Mother?” Athena couldn’t help it, especially in his realm of the Fade, but the blood drained from her face and she found her body stiffening in defense. She groaned and rolled her neck to look away from him, frustration rooting in every feature as she bit her tongue to keep from cursing out the wolf. It broke the somber scene around them, but the Dread Wolf began to chuckle under his breath, shaking his large head back and forth. “The rumors are true then. You have a knowledge of this world: past, present, and future. Tell me, Sorciere. What do you see in my future?”

She rolled her eyes and looked to him with an arched brow, annoyance plain and obvious on her face. “And what makes you think I know anything of your future, Wolf? Regardless of what I’m sure you might think, the world and its realms does not revolve around you.” She managed to step forward and flick him on the tip of the nose as if he were a disobeying domestic mutt. He paused, looking at the tip of his nose before pulling his lips back into a semi-snarl. She smirked at her accomplishment in wounding his pride, crossing her arms over her chest as he paced in smooth
motions in front of her.

“Your refusal answers plainly for you. How far into the future do you happen to know?” She raised her hand to flick him again but he stepped back and growled again, the vibrations of the sound pulling back his lip further to reveal the blood-stained canines that appeared sharpened to a point. Athena huffed a breath and relaxed her hands to her sides, throwing one into the air as a flurry of curse words left her lips.

“Fucking bloody shit. I’m a terrible liar. This isn’t fair, Harel.” She nibbled on the inside of her cheek and shrugged in defeat, itching the back of her neck while answering just loud enough for him to hear her. “A few years give or take.” He blinked and calmed only slightly, accusation still burning in all six of his eyes. She swallowed the large lump of anxiety forming in her throat, suddenly feeling like an intruder in part of his world. Still, she clenched her jaw and threw her hands into the air, walking towards him with such determination that he began to walk backwards.

“What do you want from me, fen? Do you want me to tell you of the potential raw, burning chaos the future might hold? You follow me across these blight-forsaken lands and try and pin me in a corner with your questions? I’ve gone through fucking enough without you – “ She reached forward and flicked his nose again, using the relief it brought her to keep the tears from her eyes. “Questioning my every move and what I know. Shouldn’t you be – I don’t know – reuniting with your beloved Vengeance to recreate the elven empire that is barely scrambling to survive around you?” Athena stopped in her tracks, the momentary flash of pain on his face ripping her from her annoyance-filled tirade. The wolf’s face fell from one of a hunter to that of the wounded prey, eyes softening and maw closing.

She reached out and cursed again, her entire posture sagging as her words caught up with her fucking words of rage. Shit shit shit. Athena groaned and turned on her heel to turn her back to him, instantly running one hand through her hair while the other slid down her face. “I – I’m sorry. I – fuck. My anger gets the best of me sometimes and I lose my words. Don’t – “ She went to turn again but instead felt a hand on her shoulder. It kept her from turning around and she was now too frozen to do so. Her pulse instantly quickened and put a pit in her stomach. Her jaw fell slightly open as there was a sigh behind her, fingers flexing into the touch on her shoulder.

The voice was still the gravely mixture of the Dread Wolf that she had grown familiar with, but there was a baseline of familiarity and tenderness that made her heart swell. “Do not apologize for honesty, Athena. It is too rare in this world. Sleep now, and think nothing of it.”

There was a wave of magic over mind and her dreams went black.
“Athena. Why did you sleep outside? It is cold.” A soft voice woke her up from her sleep. Its owner was lightly shaking her shoulder, the brim of his large hat brushing against her forehead. She groaned and opened her eyes up at Cole. Her hand ran alongside her left thigh, noticing that it was warm from her hip all the way down to her calf. If she had to have guessed, it felt like Kain had slept next to her like he normally did, but he was back at Skyhold.

She gasped softly and looked around, patting her legs to see that there was even a blanket over her legs now. Athena was still wearing Solas’s tunic, but it was obvious she hadn’t been alone. “Cole, dear, did you see a large black wolf run away from here?”

The boy hummed and shook his head, pointing back at the camp. “There was a pack near your camp. The Inquisitor and her group woke up early to come meet you. You have some letters waiting for you. Do you think the ravens like berries? I wanted to pick something for them but...” He frowned slightly. “I don’t know what they like.”

Athena blinked before chuckling into her hand. She stood up and grabbed her now-dry pants from the branch and slid them on. Cole didn’t watch. He absentmindedly looked around and saw a bush filled with something that looked like blueberries. He pointed over to it and tilted his head. “What do you think of those?”

She switched from Solas’s tunic into her own tank top and jacket, pulling her scarf over her head while using her other hand to pull her hair from her neck and into a pony-tail. “Those should work. They don’t smell bad. Let’s pick some and take them back for breakfast. Come on!” The boy smiled and followed her to the bush. They quickly picked the berries and filled their hands until they couldn’t carry anymore before walking back to camp. When they arrived Rathein looked up from a letter to the berries, instantly smirking and blowing a piece of hair from her face.

“Who are those for?” Cole blinked and gestured his hands and head towards the cages.

“The ravens. Would you like some? Oh wait – you like the red kinds, especially when dipped in – “ Athena nudged him in the ribs and shook her head quickly. Blackwall managed a chuckle as the Inquisitor sighed and sagged her shoulders.

“You think I would be used to that by now. I like this kind too, Cole. Here, split them up between the ravens and this bowl.” She walked over and took the berries from Athena’s hands to let Cole go feed the ravens. When the boy left their side, the Inquisitor handed over letters that hadn’t been opened while popping a berry into her mouth.
“One looks to be from Cullen. I’ll let him you give him the update. You had success in getting the smuggler letters?” Athena nodded and rummaged through her backpack until she found them. Her eyes flicked to the side to acknowledge Solas entering the camp. He looked to her with a nod of his head and then moved on to assist Cole in feeding the ravens.

“Yeah – I was going to send them back with my reply to Cullen. Were you able to do what you needed to? How’s Fairbanks?” The Inquisitor hummed in satisfaction at the taste of the berry and ran her hand through her hair.

“Thankful. They’re moving to set up in that fort we emptied out. This place is beautiful. . . I’m going to be sad to leave it for the Emprise du Lion. Scout Harding is saying everything is frozen out there.” She pouted and crossed her arms. “I really do not like the cold, Athena. Dorian and I get along in that. It’s dreadful and I would rather be bundled up at home with some of that hot chocolate stuff Bull makes.”

Athena’s jaw couldn’t help but drop in amazement. “The Iron Bull likes hot chocolate? That used to be my favorite drink but I didn’t even think they had it here! That’s. . . “ She laughed and clutched the letters in her hand. She then let out a groan at a reminder of her duty and walked to one of the tables set up to draft a letter back to the Commander. The quill made small scratching sounds into the paper as she feverishly tried to scribe a letter without acknowledging the somewhat solemn look Solas was carrying that morning. As she wrote her own missive, she quickly read Cullen’s letter to her.

Athena,

I followed your tip about sending scouts to the north. There was this “Shrine of Dumat” that they were able to find that is swarming with Templars. My initial instinct is to send troops to storm the place but you specifically advised not to. Why?

Cullen

She clenched her jaw and licked the end of the quill before dipping it into the pot of ink.

Cullen,

If you storm it, they will set it ablaze. That is the future I am aware of and I am trying to think of a way to avoid it. Within the Keep is someone you are familiar with: A Tranquil named Maddox. I do not wish any harm to come to him, so we need to be delicate in our approach. I’m sending along the smuggler letters we found in the Emerald Graves and we are leaving soon for the Emprise du Lion. Samson has Red Lyrium mines there and the Inquisitor plans to cut off his supply at the source. If I recall correctly, there are letters there I can find from Samson’s hand that will help in your investigation.
She folded up the letters as tightly as she could into a roll to attach to a raven and send off. Cole had one picked out for her and gave it an extra berry before she tied the letters to its ankle and sent it off to Skyhold. Everyone was already packing up their tent and thankfully she had already packed up since she never set up her tent. As she watched the raven fly off into the sky she felt a hand tentatively brush against hers. “Cole tells me you fell asleep outside last night?” There was an edge of curiosity in his voice but she could not deny that there was still sadness from the night before.

She felt the shadow of his hand on her shoulder, the first time the Dread Wolf had not been a wolf in front of her. She didn’t see him, he kept her back to him, but the voice and the touch was his. She linked her fingers in with his and gave him a small flash of a smile. “I got tired after bathing and the ground was surprisingly comfortable. I was unharmed, vhenan, do not worry yourself.” She raised his hand to her lips and brushed a kiss over it, grateful when he let out a smile and let some of the sorrow melt away.

“I am glad for that.” He opened his mouth to speak again but Rathein cut them off with her signature two-fingered whistle that pierced even the loudest of battlefields.

“Bundle up, everyone. We’re headed back on the road towards the Emprise du Lion and the reports I’m getting are not good. According to Athena, we’re going to have to basically fight every inch through that place and they aren’t going let it be easy for us. Anything else to add?” The short-haired mage looked over with an expectant glance, making Athena instantly clear her throat and shrug.

“The Red Templars have conquered the entire area. We will have to take the place back piece by piece until we get to the mines and Suledin’s Keep. When we’re done the people of Sarnia will hopefully be free and the Inquisition will have claimed another Keep for our temporary use. Any questions?”

Cole made a small sound of thought, tilting his head before slowly raising his hand like a timid child in school. She chuckled and pointed to him with a nod of her head.

“Who is Imshael?”
She bit the inside of her cheek and let out a scoff of a laugh, rubbing the back of her neck as a blush of uncertainty blossomed up her neck and her cheeks. “You’ll see, I guess. He can be unpredictable.”
The demon clenched his jaw in agitation and crossed his arms over his chest. The group was exhausted. Just as she had remembered, they had plowed through every small campsite full of Red Templars and eradicated them. The singing of the red lyrium gave the mages headaches and made Cole disappear for the majority of the battles due to his sensitive nature around the stuff. The demon’s relaxed manner and introduction made Cassandra curse and call out to her Maker. Athena had to keep from rolling her eyes at the introduction; it felt so melodramatic but she was in a bind.

Imshael was one of the original demons, something old, powerful, and unique. He had been trapped by the Dalish clan for Fade knows how long. He had given Briala control over the eluvians, and that story being in writing had given Athena access to them as well.

Rathein groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose. “I am too tired to deal with demons right now and we are not in the best company for negotiating. Hand – please – “The Inquisitor looked over to her and gestured with a stiff flick of her hand towards the demon.

Athena didn’t want to react poorly in front of Imshael or Rathein so she took in a deep breath through her nose and left Solas’s side. The elf was already nearly staring daggers into the demon so she knew she was walking on eggshells. “Wait wait wait, these are your friends? They look so violent. That one in particular.” The demon gestured towards Cassandra who was practically foaming at the mouth with her hand on her sword. Athena put her hands up and forced a smile.

“So, this is the demon who is rumored to have helped humanity create blood magic. You think you would have something better to do than work for someone else. Crystal gardens and such.” Imshael responded with a mock gasp of shock and Cassandra interrupted with a snarl.

“You’re joking with it? It should be ended, Athena. If it is what you say it is, it is an enemy of the Maker and the Inquisition.” The Seeker moved to unsheathe her sword and it was actually Solas who put his hand out to stop her.

“It would be unwise to attack such a spirit without speaking with it first. The older ones are not as brash acting as the younger demons.” There was a bitterness in his voice but she appreciated it nonetheless. Imshael puffed his chest and let his arms relax down at his side, turning his gaze fully to Athena.
“Now why would the Inquisitor pass this discussion to you? What do you know? Oh – wait – I’ve heard of you! Turner of demons, knower of the future, all those things, yes?” He gesticated into the air to add to his sarcastic tone, Athena’s lip twitching in annoyance but she nodded.

“You are correct, Imshael. I repeat my question, why would you work for someone else? Surely you have better things to do after being locked up in a Dalish clan for years on end.” The demon’s smile turned Cheshire in nature as he rubbed his hands together.

“So, you know past as well! How interesting! One wonders how much you know of that encounter with the former Empress and her friends through the – “ Athena clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth and hardened her stare.

“The only thing you should want to know from my knowledge is how you could potentially get out of here alive. Now – “ The demon stepped forward but she didn’t move as she raised a single finger in front of him with a teasing smile on her lips. “I have a choice for you, Imshael.”

The demon frowned. “That’s my line. Very well. What are your choices?”

Athena looked over her shoulder towards Rathein and Solas. The Inquisitor gave her a flippant and uncaring gesture while Solas raised his brows in curiosity. “We could continue how this should go, you offer us choices and we refuse until it ends in a battle where you end up dead.”

Imshael scoffed. “Very unlikely.”

“Oh? Shall I tell you how it shall go forward? Which forms you will take the words that you scream in desperation as we tear down every defense? Fear. Rage. Pride.” As she named off the different steps he would take his expression grew irritated. He clenched his jaw tight and formed fists at his side, his energy snapping out like a whip.

“And my other options? It’s normally polite to give three.”

She shrugged. “But we are exhausted from your creations so forgive me if my manners have run low. The other option is you leave Michel de Chevin alone. You abandon your red lyrium garden and you do not interfere with anything related to the Inquisition. That is just in exchange for your life. For letting you go unharmed from this place, you owe me a favor.”
Cassandra and Blackwall both balked at her back but she raised a hand to quiet them. The demon was considering his options before rolling his eyes and letting out a melodramatic groan. “You really don’t leave me many choices, Witch. A favor? That is a vague request.”

“Better than power, riches, or virgins. Vagueness grants possibilities, don’t you think?” He paused and chuckled under his breath, shrugging, and putting his hands behind his head so he could stretch taller and breathe in the frigid air.

“Fine. The deal is done. Normally I am the one with the power in these situations, so how do you plan to hold me to my end of the bargain? How do you know I won’t fly away and not follow the rules?” He winked and shifted his weight onto one hip in a move that was made just to test her patience. Athena let a protective growl trickle in the back of her throat. She stepped forward until she was a pace in front of him, her own arms crossed over chest.

“If you step out of line, I will personally go on a hunt for you through every forest, every land, every magical door you think you can hide behind.” She dropped her voice down to a threatening whisper, her own aura slapping back out against his so quickly there was a visible spark in the air beside them. He put his hands up in surrender and grinned like a madman, putting his back to the wall.

“Understood, Fen’Elgara. Until next time.” He saluted with two fingers from his head and then shifted into a raven and took off over them with rhythmic beats of his wings. Cassandra was quick to let out a noise of disapproval, gripping Athena’s shoulder with her gauntlet-covered hand to turn her around. The Seeker’s face was furious, her gaze sharpened to a point to where she felt like there was a sword at her throat.

“You just let a powerful demon escape? What do you think you were doing, Athena?” Athena didn’t move and simply looked at the hand on her shoulder, gently pushing it off with her fingertips.

“Look, Seeker, that demon deals in deals and I made a better one. He wants to live and is out of our hair. If it was such an issue, the Inquisitor would have intervened, right?” She looked over to Rathein who let out a sigh and nodded, itching her head with the end of her spirit sword hilt.

“Right. She made a point for him to stay out of all Inquisition matters, so that gives us and everyone we’re in contact with some breathing room for a while. Plus, he won’t grow anymore red lyrium so that cuts off Samson’s supply even more than the mines we have already shut down. My decision stands, Cassandra. Let’s go claim this Keep and get some rest. My body feels like it is about to crumble into ruins like the rest of this place.” Rathein adjusted the gloves on her hands and walked out of the courtyard towards the bulk of the Keep without looking back over her shoulder.
Cassandra nodded at the order and patted her hand on her hilt as she walked by, a constant reminder of the Seeker’s disapproval. Athena clenched her jaw and let out a sigh through her nose. She allowed her back to thud against the statue behind her so she could catch her breath before continuing onto the Keep.

The night air was frigid but it cleared her mind as she looked over the battlements towards the Judicael’s Crossing that already had an Inquisition marker aiming towards the sky, a gesture that they would repair the elvhen ruins that led to the three dragon keeps. The creatures were flying in the sky as she watched, their cries towards one another echoing in the air. Even with her shapeshifter magic, the tongue of the dragons was difficult to translate. She tilted her head in confusion at their roars, letting out a sigh of defeat before rubbing her neck. There was something that felt off, like she was either forgetting something to come or that something was happening out in the world. She didn’t know how else to describe it except for instinct. In her world, they said that healthcare workers had a knack for trusting their gut and had a sense about things. Maybe she hadn’t lost hers.

“Was there a specific reason why you decided to gamble with the demon Imshael today?” Solas’s voice was more curious than angry. He walked to her side and leaned onto the battlements, resting on his forearms while looking over at her. She shook her head and huffed a laugh, puffs of steam floating in the air when she looked back up towards the dragons.

“I guess Lady Morrigan and I have something in common: an appreciation for the old magic. It just seems wasteful to end the life of something that has been around for so long, regardless of its moral orientation. I’m sure he’ll show up again at some point and then we’ll have to kill him, but this was a personal curiosity I had.”

He smirked and adjusted his position to where his right side was nearly flesh with her left. It gave her a small amount of warmth that she was thankful for. She found herself resting her head on his shoulder and letting out a sigh, nuzzling her cheek into fabric on his shoulder. He turned and kissed her on top of the head, “Are you feeling well, vhenan? You weren’t hurt during the battles today, were you?”

She made a small shake of her head. “Nah, just tired is all and have a weird pit in my stomach. I would chock it up to exhaustion, but, I don’t know. I can’t shake it or go to sleep. I figured listening to the dragons would be calming.”
He could only nod, his gaze turning towards the shadows of the creatures in the night sky. They sat for a moment in the silence before he wrapped an arm around her and brought her closer. She relished and inhaled the scent of the woods on him. It was now becoming the scent of home and she felt that small knot in her belly dissipate. Whatever the worry was about, it could wait until later.

The Keep was buzzing with the sound of Inquisition soldiers clearing out all of the rooms and the skeletons in the closet, literal skeletons in some rooms. Cole was directing them to places to clear out the red lyrium and Cassandra led the scouting teams that were sent out first just in case they came into contact with anymore of Samson’s men or the defeated mining team. Blackwall was assisting Varric in cleaning out a few rooms for them to sleep in that night. Solas hummed low in his throat as a dragon flew directly overhead, tilting his head slightly towards hers while keeping his gaze on the night sky.

“Tell me, Madam Sorciere, what do we have to look forward to on this travel?” He teased her gently with a playful smirk on his lips. She shrugged and slouched over until her forehead touched the cool stone of the battlement walls.

“Hopefully Cullen got the letters I sent off a few days ago before we took the Keep. I’m expecting him to want to go to a Shrine of Dumat in the North to confront Samson. From there we rally our troops and go into the thick of the forests to an ancient elven temple.” Her voice was tired, drained of all energy and flat as she spoke into the stone, her words barely mumbling loud enough to be audible.

He loosened his arm and moved to where he was on his side looking directly at her. “You must be tired, I think that is the loosest your tongue has been regarding the future of the Inquisition.” He paused for a beat and Athena let out a groan through her clenched jaw. She pushed herself off from the battlements and slightly over the edge, focusing on something other than him so she wouldn’t feel pulled to mince her words.

“I’m tired of knowing things. I’m tired of people looking to me for answers instead of just living their lives. I’m tired of feeling guilt over things that I could have changed even though I had no hand in them. I’m tired of people and creatures of power toying around with me. I’m tired of feeling like I’m full of secrets that I can tell nobody about.” She ran a hand through her hair and stretched up, hands clawing for the sky before she let out another sigh and dropped her hands to her sides. “I just want a time where I have no idea what is going on so I can be just as clueless as everyone else.”

He reached forward and tucked a stray hair behind her ear. “I am hesitant to say that you can trust me with these burdens, but I know it is difficult when you know so much.”
The light touch instantly made her soften, her body betraying her mind and leaning into his touch until he was cupping her face. She shrugged, turning to kiss him on the inside of his palm. “They are not my secrets to tell. It’s like Cole and what he can see except I have a filter. I thought it would get easier as more time passed, but it hasn’t, especially as of late. . .” She looked up to him with a saddened smile. “I appreciate the gesture, however, *ma’lath.*”

Solas’s hand twitched on her cheek, thumb hesitantly stroking her cheekbones. His brow was furrowed in thought, and she felt like he wanted to press on it more but the gnawing sensation came back into the pit of her belly. It was like there was something grating in the air, something pressing on her mind and she couldn’t find the source. He looked to the side before bringing his gaze back to hers. “I am sorry that you must carry these burdens, *vhenan.* Your spirit, it is one of the most unique and strongest things I have ever seen. To go through so much and still be willing to help others with what you know.” He paused and nodded in what seemed to be an agreement with himself. “It is clear to see how you inspire people.”

“Sweet talker.” She winked at him, looking to his hand when it dropped from her face to his side. He was deep in thought and she felt out with her aura to find that his was skin tight, barrier thick to keep her out.

“I do not say these things only to flatter you, Athena. I – “ He looked up to her and then shook her head, the Inquisitor walking up on their side with a look of frustration on her face.

“Alright, you two, we’re packing it in for the night. The red lyrium in the area is making me feel awfully sick and I want to get out of here as soon as possible. Tomorrow we go back to the village and then meet with Scout Harding to plan our trip home.” Athena blinked and then pointed to her stomach.

“I’m glad to see I’m not alone. Is it making you just feel nervous?” Rathein nodded and rubbed her stomach, her expression obviously uncomfortable.

“It’s the worst. I can’t imagine how Samson thought he was doing the right thing by these people or the Templars. This stuff is poison.” Her face then shed all discomfort and turned into confidence, bringing her hand up to her chest and clenching it into a fist. “I can’t wait until we catch the bastard.”

Athena couldn’t help but smirk at her friend’s boost of energy. “I’m right there with you, friend.” The Herald turned on her heel and headed towards the rooms Blackwall and Varric had managed to clear out. Athena could see the men toasting their mugs of ale, the exhaustion clear on their faces even from where they stood.
“I’m sorry, Solas, were you about to say something?” She asked with a mixture of hope and fear in her heart.

He shook his head and sighed, standing next to her and linking his hand with hers. “Another time, perhaps.”

They walked in silence towards the rooms and went their own room where a bed had been made up for them. She immediately kicked her boots off and crawled into bed, ignoring the fact that she was still dressed or that her bindings were pressing into her ribcage. Now that she recognized the red lyrium, there was a sickly grating on her mind that was the cursed lyrium’s “song.”

Solas was on the same train of thought as her, only taking off his tunic and resting it on the edge of the bed before climbing into bed next to her. She was planning on having a fade-less sleep that night. She would be no volunteer for whatever dreams or memories lingered in that place. It wasn’t her favorite before she entered Thedas and it certainly wasn’t her favorite now. She knit her brow and groaned as a small headache formed in between her eyes, increasing in intensity as the sound grew in her ears.

It was then washed away by a cool surge of energy through the room, Solas’s magic replacing the odd feeling with an overwhelming sense of relief. She gasped and opened her eyes, turning to him to see him laying on his back and casting wards in the air with the tip of his index finger. He drew the runes in the air and pressed them on his barrier, each one clicking into place until she was able to breathe and have a clear mind again.

He hummed in satisfaction at his work, looking down at her with a soft and understanding smile. She couldn’t help but return it, reaching up and pressing her lips against his in a gesture of gratitude. “You saved my night, Solas.”

He brought her back down to the bed, wrapping his arms around in her a protective and gentle manner. “I am glad I was able to give you some reprieve in all of this. If there is ever anything I can do to help you.” He looked down and nudged the tip of his nose against her hair so she would look up at him. “Please tell me, vhenan.”

She thought for a second for nodding, bringing her body close to his until she could feel the jaw-bone necklace pressing against her skin. “I’ll try.”
“The Commander says he’s on the way.”

Scout Harding handed a letter over to Athena that had already been opened and read, her jaw slightly opening in shock.

“Wait, personally?”

The dwarf nodded with a lopsided smirk. “Yeah, it says here he was leaving the night he wrote this to go to the Shrine in the north we have been scouting. He figures if you and the Inquisitor go with him, we might be able to avoid some unnecessary casualties. It’s all in the scroll, here.” The scout handed it off to a silence-stricken Athena as she shook her head before unrolling the paper in her hands.

Athena,

I agree with your –

“It would be a waste to read it when I can brief you on it right here.” The Commander trotted up from the other side of the camp with such determination it caught her off guard. She looked down from the scroll and then up to him, making a flippant gesture of disbelief.

“Fuck – Did you learn to fly? How did you get here so fast?” He dismounted smoothly by throwing his leg over the saddle and sliding down from the top of his horse. His hair was wind-blown and she realized he probably rode straight for a day or two to make up time. There was no other way he could have gotten there so fast. Stubborn man.

He reached out and grabbed her forearm in a strong greeting, letting out a sigh of exhaustion and amusement. “No, you are still the only one I know with that particular talent. Inquisitor!”

Rathein hooted from the other side of the camp with her hands cupped around her mouth. They were all tired, but unfortunately Athena knew that the time for rest was too far off. Solas looked up from the potions table, clearing the steam rising from his new batch of elfroot potions to rise a brow at the whole situation. The Inquisitor ran a hand through her hair before pulling the Commander into a sibling-like hug with a firm pat on the back. “Did you come alone?”
He looked over to his horse and gave a small shrug. “Yes, to save time. My scouts have disappeared from the edge of the Shrine they were watching and I’m concerned that could have tipped them off to us watching them. I only wanted them to monitor Samson’s activities. I do not know how they could have been captured. Or worse. . . “He rubbed the back of his neck with a curse before Athena dropped her water flagon and pushed him on the chest lightly.

“They what now?” She looked to Rathein and shook her head. “We have to leave. Now. Before they become a part of Samson’s fucking crystal garden or whatever it is he does.” She went over to the log by the campfire and threw her jacket up and slipped her arms through the sleeves. Solas packed two potions of elfroot and lyrium and handed them to her, working wordlessly to help her pack up. Cullen nodded in agreement and then paused, turning on his heel to the Inquisitor with a letter in his hand.

“Inquisitor, why don’t you go back to Skyhold? Athena and I can go to the Shrine of Dumat with Cassandra and surprise them with a smaller force. They may not recognize her” He pointed his thumb in Athena’s direction, who was listening but still working around the camp to pack up.

Cassandra instantly patted her thighs and stood up from the log she was sitting on, giving Cullen a determined nod. “We should leave immediately. I do not wish for our soldiers to be harmed. How far is the ride?”

He glanced at the map spread out in front of the Inquisitor. “A few days, if we ride hard.”

Athena cursed. “That’s not enough time. . . “ She paused and looked at Solas who was instantly on her train of thought and shrugged.

“It could take a day off, but you will need a full night’s rest to recover. Many would not be able to, but – “ He buried his hand into his pack and pulled out a particularly potent lyrium potion, handing it to her with a nod of confidence. “You can do it.”

Cassandra and Cullen shared a similar glance of concern before Athena looked to the map. “We have a camp close to where the Scouts are. I think I can get us there. . . but we will definitely need to allow me to rest. I don’t know how conscious I will be. We’ll use the horses we have there to get home and the Inquisitor can take our mounts back with her to Skyhold. Sound good, Herald?” She flicked her honeyed gaze back up to the short-haired mage who only hummed in answer.

“That can work. By the time you get back Bull and the others should return from their mission, if
they were successful. This will work out. Good luck – and bring our boys home.” The Inquisitor patted her hand on the table and waved them off. Athena gave Solas a brief farewell in a lingering gaze, her hand slowly leaving the safety of his before she took Cullen and Cassandra towards the outskirts of the camp and towards the road.

The Seeker cleared her throat and rested her hand on the hilt of her sword, a gesture that her and the Commander shared when they were nervous. Athena pulled off her gloves from her hands and stuffed them into her pack on her side. “What is our mode of transport if we are not taking mounts?”

“Fade-step. A creative one that I’ve only done with my daughter and wolf before, but I am confident I can at least take a day off of our travels. Just do not interrupt me and try to stay still, okay? It is jarring at first, but the feeling will pass. Here. Straighten your posture.” The two warriors shared another look of concern before nodding and fortifying their stances. Athena moved her foot on the ground in an arch, reaching down with her hands before clenching her fist and moving her hands in strong, firm movements.

Two large circles of rock lifted the warriors off of the ground and levitated them at her side. Sweat began to bead on her brow but she held them there until she could adjust to the weight load. Cullen cursed under his breath but Cassandra remained silent and trustful, her hardened gaze keeping on Athena. With a quick glance, she could tell the look was one of concern for her, not the magic being cast. They bobbed with her breaths off the ground, her own barrier keeping them safe on the levitating discs she had created. It was something she remembered seeing from a cartoon she used to watch, and thankfully it worked.

If not, she would have looked foolish.

“Okay, take a deep breath in and hold it for the first few seconds. That is when it is the most difficult to adjust. Ready?” They both nodded and Cullen managed to crack his serious expression and smirk... which was immediately wiped from his face when she broke into a fade-step with their platforms tethered to her body by her barrier. It acted like rope and kept them within step with her, her barrier acting as a pad between them and the ground. Her goal was for the ride to be smoother than on the back of a horse, but she heard the Commander curse when she had to jump over a log or broken cart.

It took a few hours of silent travel before the two began to converse with each other. They mostly spoke of missions and the different factions within the soldiers. She knew they were close friends, but perhaps it took an ale or two to get them speaking of personal matters. Athena remained silent as she moved, her boots colliding into the earth. The trees and scenery flashed by in blurs on the side of her face and she only had to stop twice before they reached the camp.
She released them from their discs and fell to her knees, her breath coming in hard, ragged pants that left her vision blurry. Sweat had soaked her hair and stuck her clothes to her skin and she was almost positive that she would never be naked again due to the fusion of cloth and flesh. Cullen immediately fell to a crouch beside her, putting his shoulder underneath her arm and standing up with her on his side. The Inquisition scouts remaining at the camp opened a large tent for them to walk into. She turned her head into the fur on his overcoat and used the pleasant scent of armor polish and the wood from his desk to calm her mind.

It was just one of the scents of home, of Skyhold, something that grounded her and brought her back to life. She had no words to thank him when he placed her on the bed as Cassandra worked in removing Athena’s jacket and long-sleeved top that she was wearing over a thin tank top that was nearly sheer. Cullen didn’t look away as they tended to her. He propped her up with pillows as Cassandra fetched water and one of the potions Solas gave her from her jacket.

The titan’s blood tasted unusually bitter on her tongue, mana exhaustion wiping her mind clean of all thought as she focused on slowing her breaths. Cassandra began to speak in a low tone. “I would say that was foolish but it was incredibly useful in getting us here sooner than planned. Hopefully our scouts will not be harmed when we find them tomorrow.” Athena was now in her smalls and the tank top, covered with a thin sheet to bring her body temperature down. Cullen wet a rag and gently pressed it to her face. She could see a light blush on his cheeks from where she fought to keep her eyes open, but she could only pat his thigh in a silent gratitude.

“That is if she can recover overnight. Is there nothing else besides rest and . . .” He paused and looked to the empty vial resting between her legs with a desperate hunger in his eyes. Cassandra had her back turned and was gathering soup from the kettle over the fire. When the brunette turned back she followed the Commander’s gaze and immediately tensed. Athena wet her lips with some water before shaking her head.

“If. . .if it would make you uncomfortable I can just rest, Cullen.” Athena winced when Cassandra adjusted a pillow and smirked when she received an apologetic look. “Really – sleep will be fine.” She croaked in a whisper, her voice ragged and dry from the day’s long journey. He clenched his jaw and shook his head, gripping the vial and tossing it into a waste basket in the corner.

“No.” He swallowed hard and she patted his thigh again, letting out a sigh and relaxing into the pillows behind her. “I am alright.” He let out a soft sigh and rubbed the back of his neck. “It means something that you would even be willing to, however.”

Cassandra smiled and relaxed in her chair, crossing one leg over the other while crossing her arms over her stomach. “How have the headaches been, Cullen?” Her voice had softened from the tone of duty into something familiar, kinder. Athena and she would try and catch time between missions and talk over the latest chapter of Swords and Shields. The Seeker always had a blush on her cheeks when she talked about it, but the romantic in her couldn’t stop going over the details and
nuances of Varric’s writing.

It was adorable.

“They are getting better. Some days are worse than others, but it’s the nightmares and lack of sleep that get me the most.” Athena groaned as her right calf muscle spasmed and grew hard, furrowing her brow and bringing a hiss from her throat.

“I could help with that.” The left calf mimicked its twin and grew tight until her back was arching off of the bed so she could grip her legs and try to massage them. “Not tonight – I’m far too tired. You know I can walk through dreams and memories like Solas, right?”

He made an uncomfortable shrug and sat back in his chair, actively avoiding looking at the flash of bare thigh that was right in front of him without a blush on his face. He is getting better. “I didn’t realize it was to his level of practice.”

Cassandra chimed in as well. “You were not there in the Fade, Cullen, but she had . . . friends. Spirit friends in the Fade. One in particular helped her whenever she came from her home and protected her until she was able to come to us. A demon protected her.” She shook her head and looked down to the ground. “Many things recently have made me question the Chantry teachings. Demons are supposed to be the epitome the evil thoughts of man. You somehow befriended not just one, but two demons, and changed their will?” She smiled, something distant yet happy. “I would have called it impossible if I had not seen it myself.”

Cullen finally relaxed and loosened the belt that held his sword until the tip of the sheath was dragging against the ground. “I was aware of your encounter in the Fade. There are many things I would have called impossible: a hole opening in the sky, the fall of the Templar order, not one but two people falling from the Fade.” He chuckled in a defeated yet entertained tone. “The world does not allow us to be bored.”

Athena managed a genuine smile as she rubbed her calves. Cassandra found another lyrium potion in her pack and gave the small vial to her. She rolled her eyes, already dreading the taste before knocking it back and throwing the cork back on. “I know you two had to work really hard today – “ She joked with a wink towards Cullen. “But I am exhausted. Wake me when the sun rises and we can go get our boys back.”

She pulled the sheet up to her chest and readjusted the pillows for a comfortable position. Unfortunately, the sheet was not enough because soon the exhaustion set in on top of the cold and she began to shiver. “Jesus fucking Christ.” She muttered in between teeth chattering, her knuckles
turning white as she pulled it over her shoulders and nestled it under her neck. The curse was an old habit to break, something trained into her for over two decades. The front of the large tent was closed and only let air in when Cassandra or another soldier were bringing in their cots and bedrolls to sleep on. Cullen remained in the chair and was reading reports and writing responses back, the scratching of his quill against paper a constant white noise to drown out some of the ambient chaos.

In the midst of her fight to sleep, a subconscious whine left her lips as she turned towards one side and brought her knees to her chest in an attempt to fight the cold. Cassandra did her a favor by removing her sweat-soaked clothes and armor, but the resulting cold from being exposed was almost worse. It was worse than the presence of Solas’s aura. That at least came with a friendly smirk and a warm bed to share, this cold was biting and unforgiving. It went down to her bones and mixed with the icy swirl of the lyrium within her stomach and veins. They were able to get a far distance in a long day’s run but it left her barren of energy.

The scratching of the quill stopped and she heard movement in the chair beside her. She groaned once more and compressed her body again only to feel the warm presence of fur drape over her. Instantly she opened her eyes and relaxed her legs so they weren’t so pressed against her chest. Cullen readjusted in his seat with a pleased smirk on his face. His gaze met hers and he only nodded. Before she lost herself to sleep he cleared his throat and raised a brow. “Jesus Christ? It sounded like a curse but nothing I’ve heard before. From what they tell me you’re usually fond of damning the elven gods when you’re angered.”

Athena chuckled and readjusted to the warmth, the smile of a content cat curling her lips. “Consider it my world’s version of the Maker. I’ll tell you my world’s faiths another day, but the habit is still hard to break, especially when I’m tired.” He made a small noise of realization, smiling while scratching the back of his neck. He moved to get up from the chair when she reached out and touched the front of his knee to bring his attention and gaze back down. “Thank you, Cullen. This helps.”

He could only smirk as he walked out of the tent to help Cassandra gather their things for the night. The moment the flap of the tent shut all her muscles relaxed and she was lost within the warmth that he had given her. There was an odd sense of home within the scents of his furs, and she was positive it was because she could smell Kain’s presence in there. The wolf had a knack for sleeping on the Commander’s clothes when he left them out, and the overcoat was apparently no exception.

With an entertained smirk, Athena let out a sigh and lost herself within the darkness of her exhaustion.
“What is that fire?” Cassandra cried out as they approached the gates of the Shrine. Fresh explosions broke out on the stairs on the sides of the courtyard. Cullen and Cassandra both raised their shields but Athena moved forward with a flick of her wrist. A dome-shaped barrier expanded out from her skin and materialized in the air. There were two red templars on her side that raised their swords to the sky in a gesture of battle. She pulled her lips back into a snarl and growled low in her throat.

“They still expected us. We need to hurry – plow through and don’t look back.” Cullen unsheathed his sword and pushed a soldier back with his shield and drove the tip of the blade through the opening at the corrupted templar’s neck.

“Maker, tell me Samson hasn’t fled this place.” Athena made a face and nodded.

“I’m sorry, Commander, but there are still others to be saved here. Cassandra! Watch your back!” The Seeker turned to faced a Red Templar Horror that was shrieking into the air and preparing to fire some of the crystal daggers from its body. Athena pushed from the ground and fade-stepped to the creature’s side. Her hands moved to summon a stream of flames and she did not stop until the thing was lifeless at her feet. There was no time to stop and be patient with the creatures or to see who could be saved. They had precious time because even with their shortcut the day before Samson was ready.

He knew his former brother in arms well enough to know that he would come run to save the scouts.

The combination of Seeker and Commander worked flawlessly on the battlefield. They were able to watch each other’s weak spots and intervene when necessary. In a sense, Cassandra was the perfect friend for Cullen to have. She didn’t require lyrium for her abilities and her personality was as sharp as her sword. Their loyalty ran bone deep and she knew that they had seen each other’s demons at once point or another. But they were too much alike. Seeing them in battle, knowing them as she did, it made sense why they were never romantic in that moment. They were a perfect pair of siblings in a way.

Cullen always spoke of his sister’s strength and tolerance for his behaviors, and Cassandra had exactly that. It was moving in a way, but Athena quickly lost the taste of friendliness on her mind when they moved their way up to the Behemoth that mounted the top of the stairs. It slammed its foot down into the ground, splintering the stone beneath its weight, and roared in such a dissonant tone Athena felt her mind go white. The corrupted substance’s song was screaming into their minds and she let out a scream to drown the sound out, pushing forward with a fade-step to knock her entire body into the behemoth’s.
It was caught off guard, falling prone as she pushed forward. It scrambled and clawed at her legs but she pushed her hands together and then palms down, casting multiple different flaming runes upon its skin to eat away at it magically while Cullen and Cassandra took advantage of its weakened position. The creature raised its large maul of an arm, pulling it to the side to gain momentum to knock Athena off. She looked to it and snarled in a challenge, posture ready to spring off. Cullen slammed his foot down on the arm and drove his sword through the upper arm to remove the threatening part.

The screams of the behemoth gave them all pause.

The Commander looked into the next room and cursed as more flames began to climb towards the ceiling. “Samson had this place ransacked so we couldn’t. Quick – Athena – go find Maddox. Cassandra and I will meet you there.”

The Seeker let out a wordless battle cry as she shoved her blade hilt-deep into the skull of the creature below them. She looked to Athena and nodded, withdrawing the blade and flicking it to the side to remove the red lyrium blood from its edges. “We’ll be fine.”

She didn’t wait another moment. Her body shifted into flame and she flew across the opening of the next room through a group of templars until she arrived on the other side of the door. She shifted back and released her flames, smirking at the sight of the trail of pure fire she left behind her. The door shut with a loud bang that echoed through the hall. Things were stiller in here. Samson’s destruction hadn’t quite reached them but the room appeared to be on fire from the inordinate amounts of red lyrium growing on the walls.

Athena put her hand palm-up above her head and cast a barrier to minimalize the effects of the stuff on her mind. Maddox was standing at a potions table, turning around with a small vial in his hand. He tilted his head towards her and blinked once, eyes looking to her hand that was holding the barrier up. “You are not the Inquisitor.”

The vial was pitch black and she recognized it immediately. She took a step forward, tentatively reaching forward with her free hand. “No, I am not. But you are Maddox, correct?”

The Tranquil nodded. “Indeed. If you are not the Inquisitor, who are –“ He knit his brows in thought and then made a hum of realization. “Forgive me. You must be the Hand of the Inquisitor then.” He made a motion to raise the vial to his lips and she fade-stepped forward until her hand was on it as well.
“Please don’t, Maddox. We don’t want to hurt you.” She softened her expression but kept a firm grip on his arm.

“I know. But, I cannot allow for you to ask me questions of this place. It would be a waste considering we burned the fortress with the intention of hiding the answers.” His voice was hollow and far off, which only added to the creepiness of the whole room.

“But – I can’t just let you die, Maddox. It would be another unnecessary death in the chaos of Corypheus’s plans. Surely you can see that.” The former mage shook his head and then looked over at the door when Cullen and Cassandra broke through. The Commander’s eyes widened and he sheathed his sword immediately.

“Knight-Commander Cullen. Seeker Cassandra.” Athena clenched her jaw and tightened the grip on his arm. Cullen came over to their side as Cassandra kept guard and began assessing the perimeter of the room.

“Maddox, why are you still here? What is that in your hand?” He nodded his head towards the vial and Athena opened her mouth first to answer.

“Blightcap essence. He intends to drink it to end his life.” Cullen shook his head and stood at her side in front of the Tranquil with nothing but calm on his face.

“You do not need to do that, Maddox. You can come back to the Inquisition, we can help you.” The Tranquil made a small sound in his throat that was unsettling. He shook his head before tightening his grip on the vial.

“Would you welcome an enemy into your ranks? The Tranquil are not forced to do anything. We have wills of our own. Samson saved me before he needed me. I wanted to help him. It would not be logical for the Inquisition to open their home to an enemy that aided in the efforts of the downfall of Haven.” Cassandra stopped in her tracks and cursed under her breath.

“He. . . is right, Cullen. He would have to be tried and even though the Inquisitor is merciful, I do not see her letting this go.” The Seeker looked up with eyes full of regret, hands clenched into fists at her sides.

Cullen pressed on. “But surely – “
Athena tightened her grip on Maddox’s arm before releasing it, immediately turning heel to punch her fist into the red lyrium on the wall. “She’s right. Fuck – she’s right.” He was an enemy, truly an enemy. He was not forced to do anything: craft Samson’s armor, assist with the red lyrium mining, creating enchantments for their army, none of it. They were all things he chose to do after having his very emotion forcefully ripped from his body. Athena felt a pang of pity for him, eyes clenched in frustration before she let out a sigh. “We can give him this, Cullen. A last act of free-will.”

Before Cullen could even reply the Tranquil upended the contents of the vial into his mouth. The Commander reached out to the vial as it shattered against the stone ground, his features contorting into confusion and hurt. Maddox exhaled through his nose and slid his back against the front of the desk, sitting down with a blank expression on his face. Athena wasn’t sure if blightcap essence hurt, but she didn’t want to stick around to see if it did. There were some muffled sounds beyond the screaming song of the red lyrium and she pulsed her aura out to search the room and see what it was.

Behind one of the crystals was a cage, containing two people inside of it.

“Atten, stay with him.” She touched the Commander’s shoulders before running to the other side of the room, looking at the crystal up and down. “Cassandra, we need to destroy this. Our men are on the other side.”

There weren’t any questions or probes for more information. The brunette walked over with sword in hand and began hacking at the wall standing between them and the scouts. The crystal was newly grown so it didn’t take much, especially when Athena threw some barrier-coated punches into the mix to help. The men were on the floor in the fetal position, hands clamped over their ears. When the song dissipated from the crystal’s destruction, one of them looked up with a panicked gaze. “S-s-s-seeker Cassandra?”

Athena gripped the lock in her hand and put enough fire into it until it melted around her fingers. Cassandra flung the doors open and two men crawled out. One of them was Elvish and his face looked slightly familiar but she couldn’t pull a name to her lips. “Let’s get you guys out of here, come on.” The elf could walk on his own but Cassandra put her shoulder underneath the human’s arm to help him get out of the room.

“We’ll meet you back at camp,” Cassandra said to Cullen as he watched Maddox’s final breath leave his body. The Commander pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a controlled sigh, turning and looking over his shoulder towards them.

“Maybe Maddox missed something? There has to be something – “ Athena pointed in the direction of the desk with the notes, the lyrium vials, and the forging tools.
“They’re over there. Come on, let’s get our men out of here.” Cullen made a motion to move but then paused, turning and looking at Maddox.

“We should give him a proper burial. Samson did his best for Maddox, and we can do no less. Hold on.” He bent down and gently propped the fallen Tranquil over his shoulder before standing, gripping with both hands while only showing a small amount of strain on his face. He caught up with Cassandra and left Athena to gather the things among the fire. As she was leaving different weakened beams of wood fell from the ceiling behind her. The smoke was getting thick within the fortress so she hurried outside to help them get back to camp.

It had been a few days back to Skyhold before they felt truly relaxed. The red lyrium left her with a sensation on her skin akin to what she imagined being near a ghost felt like. Her skin was constantly tingling and it left her nervous. The more injured scout was in a potion-induced sleep most of the way home while the other kept to himself, glancing at Athena every now and then as they rode back. They all sat around the campfire as Cullen went through the letters, finally coming across the one Samson had specifically written for him.

“What does he expect me to get out of this? It doesn’t make sense.” He threw the letter down in his lap and let out a groan of frustration.

Cassandra reached over and took the letter, quickly scanning it before shaking her head. “The red lyrium has obviously made him go mad. Vessel? This letter is confusing.” She looked up over to Athena with an arched brow. “Can you make any logic of this?”

Athena was sipping on her soup in silence, focusing on clearing her thoughts and dipping into the Fade to check in with her pack and Kain back at Skyhold. Harmony was nowhere to be found, again, but Inspiration enjoyed when she could blip into the Fade, even for a moment. “The Vessel part I can. It’s another thing they are underestimating, but, we’ll come up to it soon. He would essentially be tying himself to another false-God.” She said with a string of bitterness in her tone, glancing up from her soup before swallowing down the rest of it with a gulp. The warmth took away from of the spring-night cold. The heat spread from her stomach and sent a shiver over her skin until goosebumps formed.

Cullen let out a sigh and put all of the tools away, rubbing the back of his neck with a quick shake of his head. “I cannot imagine how hard it is for you to know all of this while seeing everything happen. Is it difficult for you?”
Athena couldn’t help but let out a clap of laughter, stifling the sound with the back of her hand. Cassandra gave her an incredulous look but she shrugged and sat up. “Sorry, you’re essentially naming my largest struggle through all of this. It’s extremely hard. Imagine if you knew of Kinloch or Cassandra if you knew of Kirkwall and still had to watch it all happen.” She swallowed hard and itched the back of her neck, releasing the tie that held up her hair and running her hands through the greasy roots. “Dorian and Rathein told us how dangerous time magic could be, so I’m extremely hesitant and terrified to make any drastic changes. But . . . I try. Half of the time it is not my battle to choose, but I intervene when I could not live with the alternative.” She glanced up to Cullen with a loaded glance and he immediately caught it, nodding solemnly while crossing his arms over his head.

“We are all thankful, Athena. Everyone in the Inquisition has their burden to bear but unfortunately you and the Inquisitor’s are quite large.” Cassandra said with a smirk on her lips.

Athena couldn’t help but shrug again. “Necessary evils, unfortunately. My burden has lightened with time. The more good outcomes I see, even the minor ones, the easier it is to sleep at night. I –

“There was a soft whine from the side of the campfire. The elvish scout was in the midst of a nightmare, which he had every night since they rescued him. She had briefly looked into his dreams and saw nothing but Red Templar Horrors and the song from the blighted crystals. There wasn’t a demon for her to defeat or something to cast out.

It was just his trauma, and it would hopefully fade with time.

The scout gripped the blanket covered over him and she let out a sigh, resting the bowl next to her on the ground. “We all have our burdens. It’s important to remember why, Seeker.” She shrugged her jacket off and lay it on the log next to the fire. Cullen arched a brow and made a hum of question as to what she was doing. She removed her boots and put them next to her jacket, ignoring him before she shifted into her wolf form smoothly.

“Maker – I’ll never get used to that.” Cassandra stated with a small flinch of surprise. Cullen smiled.

“It terrified me the first time, but considering we share a wolf as a companion I’ve kind of gotten used to it. There are now stranger things in the world than a shapeshifter.” Cassandra scoffed with a smile.

“Unfortunately,” The Seeker mumbled. Athena trotted over to the scout and nudged his face with her wet nose, whining softly until he relaxed and allowed her to curl up above his head. Her large form provided heat and he opened his eyes for a second, blinking and looking up towards her. He
didn’t twitch back from her, especially when she expanded her warming aura to keep them warm with a barrier wrapped around their bodies. He adjusted his head until it was resting near her belly and his hands stroked the fur along her flank.

“Mas serannas, Fen’Elgara.” He said in what she assumed he thought was whispering but was loud enough for Cassandra to perk up and look over. Athena let out a sound of gratitude and nuzzled her head on the other side of the Scout’s, resting her eyes and enjoying being in her furred form near the campfire. She could see why Kain slept near the fireplace in Cullen’s office most nights. It was very comfortable.

“Fen’Elgara? What does that mean?” The smile didn’t leave Cullen’s lips as he took a sip of ale from his flagon, wiping the foam from his mouth with the back of his gloved hand.

“I had no clue until I finally asked Loranil. It apparently means Sun Wolf. They gave her that nickname after she pulled that stunt with Gaspard’s men in the Exalted Plains.” He leaned over and spoke in a mock loud whisper. “She *hates* it.”

Athena lifted her maw and let out a growl of warning, thinking to herself: *It’s grown on me, Lion.* Cullen put his hands up in surrender, grinning like a brother who was caught messing in his sister’s room. “My mistake, Sorciere.” She rolled her eyes and went back to rest, smirking as she fell asleep to the sound of her friends’ laughter.
The Little Prince +

Chapter Notes

A year.

It's been a year since I've started writing this fic. So much has happened in my life: marriage, grad school, taking a break from said grad school, starting a traveling job where I'm long distance from my husband.

But this has remained steady through it all as my therapy and my escape. I cannot write how thankful I am for the continuous love and support I still receive from you guys. Really, it has brought me out of some dark days and I know it will continue to do so in the future. This is my first fic I have ever written, and we still have a ways to go.

Thanks for the journey so far, enjoy the ride to come. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rest of the ride to Skyhold was uneventful. They rode at a quickened pace and Athena practiced on how to manipulate the fade-step to be an area of effect spell rather than just her. By the time they were able to ride back home, she was able to slightly speed up the caravan. She released them from the spell when the castle was in sight. The large blaring of a horn echoed across the bridge and down the part of the mountain where they were at. Athena immediately grinned.

“The Chargers must be back!” She nearly shouted, hands wringing over the reins on her horse in preparation to speed up. As she finished her words, a raven came through the trees and nearly landed in Cullen’s lap. Its wings beat rapidly and he was fighting to get it to keep still long enough for him to get the letter from its ankle and send it back to Leliana. He made a sound of consideration before unrolling it, clicking his tongue against the back of his teeth.

“It’s from the Iron Bull. They were successful in their mission but – “ He squinted and she saw a flash of something go over his face. The joy rushed from her face and she stopped her horse until he was along side of her.

“What is it, Cullen?” He wet his lips and then shook his head, turning towards her with a smirk.

“Nothing, the ink just smudged and I thought it said something else. Let’s meet them back.” She let out a sigh and nodded, pressing forward on her horse to push to a full sprint since they were on a developed road. Since it was young and restless, it moved without hesitation. Cullen had to fight to keep up with her as they bounded and swerved in between the merchants and recruits that were trailing in on the road. They heard them coming and side-stepped to give them space as they bounded up the mountain and near the bridge.
When she turned to the flat of the bridge she noticed there was already a bit of a crowd in the courtyard. Something gave her pause, her horse feeling it as well and slowing down to a trot. There were sounds behind her past the tree line, ruffling in the bushes until Claw came out and let out a soft whine. There were no words in the message, but something about his tone put a rock in her stomach.

“Come on, boy!” She pressed the horse forward and out of the Commander’s sight, mud kicking up behind them as they left the road and sped across the stone-paved bridge. The mumbling of the crowd grew louder and she could see Bull’s horns above all of them, directing different people away to make space. Krem was next to him doing the same. He was facing her and shouting something unintelligible, but the thundering of her hooves was beginning to grow in volume.

The lieutenant looked over with rage on his face, but then his gaze met hers from a distant.

His expression fell and a curse fell from his lips.

“Chief!” He grabbed Iron Bull by the arm and forcefully turned him towards her direction. Before she reached the end of the bridge the jumped from the back of her horse and began to run. Instinct told her something was wrong.

Cullen not finishing the letter, the random crowd at the beginning of the courtyard, Claw’s whining, and Krem’s face. Something was wrong and nobody was telling her. Some of the people saw her coming and made space but she still clawed her way through them. When she felt like she reached cold air and an opening Dorian stepped in front of her and grabbed her shoulders.

“Welcome back, love.” His voice was forcibly kind, eyes screaming something that he was verbally trying to hide. She pushed against him but his arms held her in place, his fingers digging into her shoulders as he moved to keep her gaze on him.

“Dorian, what’s going on?” She pushed again but he won. She looked around him and saw Solas across from Stitches, their hands moving feverishly to help someone but they wouldn’t let her see. “Dorian!” She pled, looking to each of the Chargers that were forming the circle to keep the pedestrians and nosy onlookers at bay.

Krem was standing next to Bull. Grim was strong in his posture next to Rocky. Dalish and Skinner were actively avoiding her gaze.
Someone was missing.

“Amatus, trust me. Please stay here.” Her best friend and brother in arms begged but tears now stung at her eyes and she pushed him to the side and nearly fell to her knees at what she saw. Stitches and Solas’s hands were covered in blood above the abdomen of a wounded soldier. She could smell the infected wound from where she stood, something familiar that she recognized from the hospital setting. At that point. . .it had to be in their blood as well, and there was enough of it on the discarded gauze and the healers’ hands that she could tell they had been actively bleeding for a while.

Her eyes slowly traveled up and saw how blood-soaked their clothes were, how ragged their breaths were, and the smile of relief on their ashen lips.

“Ma’.”

Tobi’s pale, sunken face lit up with joy when he saw her. He lifted a shaky hand towards her and she was helpless to his call. She fell to her knees at his side, Stitches and Solas solemnly standing from their spots. She wasn’t stupid or blind. This was a fatal wound. The stench of elfroot was strong on his breath and yet the wound bled. There were dark bags underneath his hopeful eyes and she could barely bring herself to meet his gaze.

“H-h-hello, my Prince.” She raised his hands to her lips, clutching it firmly before putting it on her chest. She forced a smile even though her body was beginning to shake and grow cold, realization setting in as Cullen pushed through the crowd and cursed. She didn’t look to him. She didn’t have time to look to him. “What happened down there?” Her voice grew hard but her eyes never left his face. “I thought it was a routine mission?”

Krem put his hand on her shoulder and shook his head. “It was, but there were a shit ton of Red Templars still keeping the place after Haven. We thought we had beaten them all.” The warrior smiled a broken smile, gripping her shoulder with half of a laugh. “This bastard took down five of them himself.” The Chargers all nodded with tears in their eyes, Rocky giving the boy a thumbs up. Tobi tried weakly to return it, but he began to cough and turn towards Athena. Krem continued. “One of the sharp monsters appeared and a soldier ran. . .Tobi followed and – “ The lieutenant choked on his words, letting her mind fill in the rest. With every cough, more blood blossomed on his stomach, trickling down his side to soak her pants.

Even the blood felt cold.
She quickly moved to support him on her lap, cradling his head in her arms and stroking the lines of his face with her other. He was so pale, teeth chattering as he smiled. “I-i-it’s okay, Ma. I saved people.” His eyes teared up and as he fought for the words. “I did what I wanted to, like in your stories.” Athena completely broke, tears streaming down her face as she pulled him to her chest.

“Shhh. I know you did, my love. You’ve always been strong and oh so brave.” Tobi laughed, the sound fading and weak. She relaxed him in her grip so she could look at his perfect eyes, stroking the bloodied hair out of his face.

He gripped on her hand, lips fading in color, but he managed to sputter. “Ma’, c-c-can you sing that one? The last one? For me?” His eyes were glistening with tears now and she pulled his hand to her mouth, kissing it with half of a sob in her throat.

“Of course, darling. Anything for you.” She looked up to the sky and prayed for the strength to do it, for him, but another sound pierced through the crowd and shattered her heart. But, she tried, something soft and under her breath as her gaze was fixed on Tobi’s.

“Without you, the breeze warms, the girl smiles, the cloud moves.”

“No!” Leafy tore through the crowd and pushed through Dalish and Skinner, pain written across her face. She looked to Bull with a snarl on her lips, pushing from the ground and jumping at his face with hands extended like claws. There was a blur of cold behind them and Solas moved his body in between the two of them. She broke into sobs the moment they made contact, curling up and pounding her fists against his chest. “What happened? What happened!”

“Ir abelas, da’len.” She could hear him whisper into her hair, falling to the ground with her across from Athena. She couldn’t look up to see them, her hand still clutching Tobi’s against his chest.

“Without you, the tides change, the boys run, the oceans crash.”

Tobi smiled, his eyes fluttering in an attempt to close. She shook him gently, bending down and pressing her lips to his forehead. “Come on, stay with me, my darling.” He sputtered and coughed again, nodding against her before turning to his sister.

“L-Leafy.” He managed to whisper. The girl immediately turned from Solas’s chest, eyes wild with rage and heart break. She scrambled to his side, lifting his other hand into her lap and patting his body until her eyes found the wound.
“Damnit Tobi, you’re supposed to be smart, not brave!” She screamed at him, voice strained with grief. He laughed softly, a flash of pain going over his face.

“Couldn’t help it.” She cursed a thousand Dalish curses under her breath before looking up at Athena. They both nodded and took a deep breath in, Leafy swallowing down a mouthful of tears and emotion.

“K-Keep going, Fen’mae. We’re all here.” Leafy wrung her hands around her brother’s and kept it in her lap, stroking her thumbs over the top of his hands as his breaths became even more strangled. Athena’s words wavered but she pressed on, stroking Tobi’s face as he struggled to keep consciousness.

“The crowds roar, the days soar, the babies cry, without you.”

He knit his brow and forced his eyes open, tears silently streaming down his cheeks. “Love you both.” He whispered, his breath hitching in his throat. He closed his eyes and pulled for breath, the muscles below his ribs pulling in enough to where she could see them working through his shirt.

“Shhhhhh. The moon glows.” She was now just speaking whispers into his hair, unable to sing for him as he suffered in trying to take his final breath. Leafy was now sobbing at his side, murmuring I love yous into his hair to make sure those were the last words that he heard from her. “The river flows. But I die without you.” Tobi began to shake and then took in a large final breath, Athena holding him close to her chest and breaking with a sob. “I love you.”

He then relaxed in her grip, the beautiful sea of blues in his eyes fluttering shut for the final time. Leafy let out a wordless cry of rage, balling his bloodied clothes in her fists as she rested her head against his shoulder, ragged sobs shaking her body. Athena felt hot tears streaming down her cheeks as she held him, his skin growing cold underneath her as the Chargers all grieved in their own way. She finally closed her eyes and took in a deep, shaky breath, focusing all her energy into keeping her face still.

Athena looked up to Bull with a cold expression, anger finally setting in on her features. Bull was able to read her mind. “Yeah. We have him. We brought him back to be tried for desertion.” Krem left his leader’s side to grab a man who was bound in chains. He was forced to his knees a few paces away from them. He avoided looking at Tobi, shame and anger written plainly on his face. Shaggy red hair fell in front of his face and Athena felt the bile rising in her throat at the look of him.

She knew him already to be cowardly, hiding behind alcohol to throw disgusting words her way.
“Arthur fucking Greystone.”

The man looked up at her and fought against Krem’s hand, Athena only staring him down as if she was going to be his last vision on this world. There was a howl from the forest and she knew that they could feel her grief, they could feel the swirl of her magic inside of her belly drawing them to her. They were all connected, and that connection was strengthened when one of them was hurting or in danger. She blinked and tore her gaze away from the coward that was responsible for ending her son’s life. She rested Tobi back down on the bedroll and pillow he was on, brushing the hair out of his face with a soft yet broken smile when she looked at him.

He was still so handsome.

Leafy had dropped his hand and was now staring directly at the man, her gaze a thousand yards off and blank. Iron Bull made a low groan in his throat, grabbing Arthur’s shoulder and picking him up from the ground with barely any effort. There was a mumbling and clearing in the crowd, Rathein finally showing up and laying eyes on the whole scene.

“Oh sweet Andraste.” Her voice fell to a whisper and Bull undid Arthur’s shackles, pushing him towards the bridge and one of the horses that were abandoned whenever Athena and Cullen rushed in.

“Run, coward.” The Qunari commanded with a tone as dark as his gaze, the whole Charger clan turning with malice in their expressions. The man took off without another word, scrambling from the ground and towards the steadiest horse. There was a crack of the reigns and the man was taking off across the bridge. The crowd still left a clearing, Athena watching his every move and every hoof beat as he took off.

“He needed a trial.” Cullen growled in his throat, gripping the hilt of his sword out of habit as he glanced towards the Bull. The mercenary leader huffed under his breath, taking the Inquisitor’s silence as approval before jerking his thumb down towards Athena and Leafy.

“Yeah, sure, but are you going to stand in their way?” He spoke low enough for all of them to hear and another howl broke out from the forest.

*He’s running through the trees.*

Athena stood from her spot and looked to Krem with a question in her eyes. The warrior nodded
and positioned himself near Tobi, banging his fist against his chest. “I’ll watch him now, Athena. He’ll be safe here.” He almost choked on the words but managed to get them out.

“Athena, please –” Cullen said in almost a forced tone, glancing around at the crowd that could only watch in horror. For as gossipy as the nobles and the visitors were, they at least knew when to be silent. The loss of a child was nothing civil, nothing to spread rumors about. It was a tragedy, plain and simple.

She could barely hear him over the roar of the hunt in her veins. The beat of drums echoed in her mind and her heart, a shared rage that spread through all of the pack. It burned like hot fire. No. Athena tilted his head slightly in confusion. It felt like electricity dancing along her skin, lighting up every nerve within her body with the urge to sprint forward and sink her teeth into the man that was running like prey. Those weren’t her instinctual thoughts; she had outgrown them months after she learned how to hunt and control the urges that came with shapeshifting magic.

There was a pulse of feral magic from her left that tore her attention from the bridge to the girl next to her. Lev’adin was nearly vibrating with anger, hot blades of tears carving paths in her cheeks as her hands clenched into fists so hard there was blood seeping from her palms and dripping on the floor. Solas looked from the girl to Athena, catching her gaze for the first time. She didn’t need to him to explain it, she knew what was going on and realized what was about to happen.

Leafy glanced over her shoulder one more time at Tobi before letting out a cry of anguish, pushing forward on her heels into a fade-step that cracked like thunder as she ran across the bridge. Rathein’s gaze widened, the taste of magic hot on their tongues. “Athena. . . she’s going to tear him apart. Rough him up, sure, but –”

Athena clenched her jaw and ripped her jacket from her body, throwing it down on the ground to her side as her aura manifested into heat rising from her skin like ethereal flame. “Damnit I know!” She hesitated, tempted to glance at her friends for guidance, but she shut her eyes to them.

This was a family matter.

Her body betrayed her mind and burst forward in a path to follow Leafy’s, using the current of the Wild to guide her steps. It wasn’t her grief that was influencing the path. It wasn’t her anger that was bringing a snarl to their teeth and a growl to their lips. She had slowly been learning how to calm the storm that was her rage but. . .

Leafy’s had just been unleashed upon the world.
Chapter End Notes

Art of Tobi the Charger by the amazing destinyapostasy on tumblr. Please check them out. I'm obsessed.

Song: Without You - RENT. Again.
Be Better

Her feet beat like drums against the ground. At one point her boots had abandoned her body. They were unable to keep up with her stride as she swerved through the trees and followed her daughter in a magical spurt of energy. The branches whipped against her face, some of the thorns and twigs scratching abrasions onto the skin of her bare arms. It felt like there was a wild frenzy within her head, different emotions and words spreading across the veil of their mind like lightning bolts. Their intensity hurt and when she wasn’t getting hit in the face with leave she was wincing from the grief.

“Leafy!”

She cried out, suddenly breaking through into a clearing with her heart pounding and breaths scraping against the confines of her ribcage. Arthur was on his hands and knees, crawling away from something with blood seeping from his leg already. They looked like bite marks, and she shook her head while reaching out to her alpha.

Claw?

There was a push back. No. She could feel them circling the clearing with hesitation in their actions. They were angry, hurt, like she was but there was something more intense bouncing around within their pack. It moved like a blur of golden and brown fur before jumping into the area. Her fangs were bared and blood dripped from her fangs onto the ground below.

Each step forward was deliberate and the wolf dragged her claws through the ground, shaking her head and snarling at the man who was now scrambling backwards on his hands and knees before his body hit a tree. He cried out, looking up at the one-sided prison that the tree became before his gaze snapped to Athena.

“P-p-p-lease. Not like this.” There was pure fear in the man’s eyes and it forced his heart to beat so loudly she could hear it from where she stood without needing the help of her heightened senses from shapeshifting. Tears streamed down his cheeks and he winced in pain as his leg dragged against the ground.

The wolf snarled and lunged forward until there was barely five paces between them. Arthur cried out and shielded his face with his hands, looking to Athena one more time with a pleading gaze. “I’m so sorry!”
Yet again her body betrayed her, acting so fast her mind barely had time to process thoughts. Her hands were on Leafy’s furred chest, pushing her back clear across the open area. Her body twisted in the air yet she landed on all fours, snarling and looking to her mother in shock. Athena felt the same way, looking down at her hands as if they were soaked in warm blood.

Why.

The thought snapped across their minds like a whip, causing her to visibly recoil. She took a step back but still stayed in front of the soldier, who had gone silent in shock. His eyes were blown wide and she could hear the frantic pitter patter of his heartbeat within the shackles of his chest. He was such an easy prey; he didn’t even fully realize his situation. Leafy’s emotions were stirring within all of the Haven Pack. They weren’t easily swayed, but the girl was family. They wanted to protect her and her loved ones.

Tobi –

Athena could barely even think of him, flashes of his pale, still face going across her mind.

“He killed him, Fen’Mae.” She could hear her daughter whispering in the form of a whine, the snarl still continuing but it was low. Small whimpers penetrated the rage and she got a taste of her grief. It was bitter on her tongue and they renewed the tears that had dried on her cheeks.

“I know, sweetheart.” She said out loud, partially for herself and partially so Arthur could hear her trying.

“He doesn’t deserve it. He’s weak. He’s a coward!” The blonde wolf lunged forward again, her small frame encroaching upon her space.

“I know he is, Leafy. But – “ Athena opened her mouth to speak and the wolf growled again.

“But nothing. Why won’t you let me avenge him? He didn’t – “ The wolf succumbed to a long whine, her head shaking to rid herself of the presumably weak emotions. “He didn’t deserve to go like that.”

She gently knelt to be at eye level with her daughter, cupping the wolf’s head in one hand before smiling. “He was better than most. He did not deserve that, but, if we kill him. If we do what every
instinct in our body is **screaming** for us to do. . . “ She let out a sigh. “Then we betray what he died for.”

Leafy tilted her head within her hand, tears streaming down her fur even as she closed her eyes. Athena pressed on, leaning forward to put Leafy’s head against hers. “He died saving this man and we cannot undo that. Our Prince would want us to be merciful.”

The wolf nearly collapsed into her arms, soft whines and cries falling from her mouth like the tears from her eyes. Athena stroked her fur and shushed her quietly in an attempt to still her own tears. They sat like that for a moment until the man stirred behind them. She could hear Arthur beginning to slide away with his wounded leg dragging blood across the surface of the grass. Without another thought Claw and the others cornered the man, snarling and growling at him until he passed out from fear alone.

His will was weak, so it did not take much to do it.

Athena waited until Leafy’s sobs had decreased to quiet whines, her hands never stopping from stroking her fur and whispering calming words into her head. The rest of the wolves began gathering as many branches as they could to create a funeral pyre so that they could at least spread his ashes somewhere. They had all seen too many undead to leave a scrap of a chance of him being corrupted. Leafy nodded and nuzzled her face alongside Athena’s shirt, drying her tears and clearing her vision so she could look over at the man fainted on the ground and give him a final growl.

“I’ll bring him back. If you can help them here, I’ll bring Tobi here.” She could barely recognize her voice. It was becoming detached, focused on task to task to get her through the next 24 hours. Leafy nodded and trotted off next to Kain to bring a larger log into the area. As Athena wrapped her barrier around Arthur to levitate him, she saw a flash of magic bring Leafy back into her normal form. The walk home was a slow one. Each step was deliberate, heavy as she realized she would have to look at Tobi again. He had looked so pale, so young as the color faded from his eyes.

The sob that racked her caused her to drop Greystone and he roused with a groan before she subdued him with a wave of magic she had seen Solas use so frequently.

When she reached the courtyard, her face was dry. Her expression had hardened into one of determination. With so many in the courtyard still, they couldn’t see her as weak. Even as her body wished to just break down into a pile of tears and sobs, she was the Hand of the Inquisitor. Corypheus was at large somewhere in the elven wilds and they would soon be going to the Temple of Mythal to confront him. Athena felt like she didn’t have time to grieve the way she would have back home. This was still a time of war, and she had to focus on the task at hand. When she reached the courtyard, she saw that the Chargers’ gazes were still misty and if she broke it would
only drag them all down.

She levitated the coward over to Cullen’s feet and unceremoniously dropped him, adding a monotoned statement as she walked by. “He needs a healer for that bite on his leg.”

Stitches had a basin of water and was finishing cleaning Tobi up when she dropped to her knees next to him. Her eyes burned with the urge to make fresh tears, but she pushed it down and brushed the hair out of his face. They had changed his shirt and wrapped fresh bandages around the wound. There was barely any sign that he had bled to death other than the pallor on his skin. Still, he looked happy. Even in death there was a peaceful smile on his face.

Athena extended a hand and wrapped her magic around him gently, levitating him off of the ground so that she could bring him to the pyre. The Chargers silently followed her across the bridge. There were others in the back that she could see out of the corner of her eye. Morrigan and Kieran had managed to find their way to the courtyard and the young boy was looking more solemn that he normally did. It took every amount of focus in her body to not break down and weep. She was sure they were expecting it. It was the logical reaction, right?

Even still, she was hesitant to be a sobbing mess in front of the entirety of the Inquisition so she pressed forward to the clearing in the woods. Instead she squelched the urge and brought forth a blank expression. Leafy had shifted back and was standing in front of the pyre. Her clothes were torn and dirty, blood streaking down her chin and the top of her chest. She looked to Athena and clenched her jaw, her hands immediately turning to fists at her side as she fought her own tears. The girl was rare to show her emotions openly, especially the negative ones. Whenever she was upset she would typically retreat to the rooftop or the woods to gather her senses.

Now they were both showing expressions of stone. Leafy came over and held her hand tightly at her side, quietly sniffing to hold back tears. Athena levitated Tobi’s body and laid it peacefully on the top of the rocks and wood. There was a moment of stillness where even the wind refused to blow over them. She gripped her daughter’s hand and took in a deep breath, closing her eyes and shaking her head as tears threatened to flow. “If. . .If anyone. . . ”

There was a large hand on her shoulder and she looked up to see Bull shaking his head once. “Nah. Not yet, not here. We’re good.”

She was nearly overwhelmed with a wave of gratitude. Where could she have even started? He was a quiet boy when she had first met him on the trek between Haven and Skyhold. He was the shining face in the group of children listening to her first story of the bear attack. He had always loved the action tales, getting so wrapped up in them that he always sat on the edge of his seat. Bull made a small hum of acceptance before moving back with the boys. She noticed he was already carrying a thin vase that they could use as an urn. She didn’t know where he would have wanted to
be scattered. Haven maybe? He was too young to even think of such things and she didn’t know where his parents had come from. He had made a comment that they were farmers before the Blight started, but he was too young to remember much then.

The decision would have to be theirs. Her free hand trembled as she raised it to start the fire, the mana nearly burning at her fingertips from her mind’s hesitation. It sparked at her palm and she urged it forward, but a cold hand on her wrist stopped her.

Solas stepped in at her side and shook his head. He took the burden of lighting the pyre, igniting it with a flick of his hand towards the logs and twigs. They instantly lit into flames of brilliant blue and red. They danced in the wind current and shrouded his image from her gaze. There was a hitch in her breath when she could no longer see his face. That had been the last time. The pale skin, the light smile, that was all she had left in the depths of the flames.

The elf at her side swirled a barrier around him and angled it towards the sky the moment the smell had begun to hit. It was something she was used to; it oddly reminded her of cauterization from the surgeries she had watched. But this was far different. Leafy’s hand gripped tighter around hers at the brief glimpse of the scent, her eyes watering up and looking to her mother. There was a question in her eyes, is this normal? She responded with a simple nod. The Dalish normally buried their dead and planted a tree for each life lost.

The sounds of sniffling and tears faded as the group silently watched him burn into a pile of ash. She didn’t know how long it took but it felt like days. However, the sun was beginning to set when all that was left on the ground was a pile of smoldering embers. Leafy let out a deep sigh. Her eyes were red and tired. There were dried streams of tears on her face and the color was gone from her cheeks. She let go of Athena’s hand and wiped her eyes, looking up to the sky for some kind of divine guidance before nodding. “I’m. . . going to go to Loranil for a while. Okay, Fen’mae?” The elf’s voice was quiet but determined, tired eyes looking up to her.

Athena couldn’t help but nod, bending down to pull her into a tight hug. “Okay. Do whatever you need to, darling.”

The elf looked to Solas and the Chargers, letting out a breath through her nose before jogging out of the woods towards Skyhold. Claw and the others dispersed back into the woods, silently sending their condolences in the form of soft presses onto her mind. Kain remained at Athena’s side. His side never stopped touching hers and he let out a soft whine when Tobi’s ashes no longer held an ember. Bull knelt down and let out a groan, shaking his head back and forth while scooping the ashes into the urn. “Sorry, bud.”

Everything suddenly began to feel cold. It started at her feet and soon she didn’t even realize that her hands had begun to shake at her sides. She was focused on watching Bull scoop up Tobi’s
ashes into the urn that she didn’t feel Kain nipping at her hand. There were murmured noises around her but she couldn’t quite make them out. She knit her brow, thinking that they were mumbling. She turned towards the nearest source of sound and it was Solas, but even his visage didn’t look right. He gently touched her face and looked into her eyes, shaking his head and making more sounds towards Bull that were garbled.

The Qunari looked her up and down and she was finally able to understand something but it came in fragments. “Is she - ? - looks like shit.”

Solas clenched his jaw and nodded, keeping one hand hovering near her as he positioned himself to catch her. “She   - - - shock. We need - - her back to - quarters.”

Krem took the urn from Bull’s hands solemnly, wiping some of the excess off of the top before shoving the cork in tight enough. Athena had a thousand words she wanted to say to them, but her body was not responding. Instead she looked between the men with a confused expression, hands grasping at the cloth on her sides. Even though she was nearly clawing through the fabric, she could feel nothing. The Qunari took a step forward when the numbness reached her legs and her knees began to buckle. “She isn’t going to make it that far.”

Solas smoothly dipped down and supported her behind her knees and upper back, cradling her against his chest. He nodded and then gestured towards Skyhold. “I can make it undetected.”

Already the heavy pull of his fade-magic weighed on her mind. She fought it. Small sounds of struggle escaped her lips and she moved within his grasp.

“I’ll tell them she went on a hunt. That’s something she would probably want to do if she were better.”

*I can fucking hear you!* She shouted inside of her head, letting out a groan of frustration into the comfort of the furred wolf sash Solas wore that day. Another cool wave of magic enveloped them both and she felt them go into the in between space between the veil and the physical. It was like an extended fade-step, and she realized it was probably how the trickster moved around with such stealth.

“Vhenan, do not struggle. You are safe.”

Safety wasn’t the issue. With the numbness came a wave of physical pain. Nausea bit at her tongue as bitterness washed over her taste buds. It tasted of bile and blood. Athena groaned and gripped the furs tightly in her white-knuckled grip at the same moment that Solas propelled forward into a graceful run. It felt like they were running on air, not a person or a creature noticing them as they
weaved through the crowd and up the staircase to her room.

The only thing that would have given them away was the slamming of her door as he shut it with his foot before laying her down on the bed. The smell of home struck her in the face, an even more terrifying one reaching her nostrils. He had been there before he left for his mission. His scent was still in the blankets in the loft and there were remnants on his bed where he sat for Leafy and Athena to get ready that morning. Tears burned hot in her eyes so she slammed them shut, wetting her lips to attempt to reach out to her love.

“Please, Solas. Please. I can’t feel this anymore.” She swallowed down a lump of emotions, a wordless cry ripping from her throat as the events of the day began to break down the façade of stone that she had erected. “It’s too much.”

Solas shed his furs and his tunic, sliding next to her in bed with a solemn nod. He put two fingers to his forehead before pressing them to hers, tracing her face with the backs of those fingers. Sleep came quickly then, his words the last thing she heard before falling into the darkness. “If that is what you wish, vhenan.”
The Fade was a reluctant friend that night.

At first she was alone in the expanse of dreams. The air was eerily still around her and the taste was sour on her tongue. Athena stepped forward hesitantly within the confines of her barriers and wards that were only reinforced by Solas’s presence at her side in the physical world. He hadn’t arrived in the Fade yet and she was sure he was either tending to her body on the other side or was dealing with the after effects of her shock. Even in the Fade she did not want to think of it.

She had helped at least a dozen people in her world cross to the other side. This was something different entirely. There was no suffering to end, no pain to take away. The only thing that was taken was the color from his cheeks and the breath from his lungs. Athena took in a deep breath and let out a strangled cry, hot tears falling like plasma down her cheeks into luminescent pools on the floor. The dream plane was supposed to be a safe place for her to explore her emotions and the memories of others, but even as someone who came from a world without magic she knew extreme emotions attracted the wrong kind of attention.

She was trying to fight harder than in the physical world to keep it together, but the memories played on repeat so fast in her mind and projected into the fog around her it was hard to keep them out. She replayed their last night together tending to his young drunkenness and the next day when he joined the Chargers in a playful embrace. She saw the adventurous gaze in his eyes when she first told her story with the bear. She saw the love in his eyes the first time he called her Ma’. In the midst of all of that pain, a familiar hollowness and ache appeared in her lower belly.

Her hand clawed at it as she felt to her knees in a sob. The control of her mind was lost and she was victim to the emotions that were finally laid bare. The cries, curses to whatever god would hear them, and shaking continued until a sharp sound pierced the barrier. A wave of chilling cold came with it, bringing her attention towards its source.

At first it looked like a dementor, but when she squinted her vision focused on Despair.

The sound came from its claw dragging down the edge of the barrier, its contorted and haunting face barely shrouded underneath the dozens of floating black veils around its face. Its face was blank of all emotions but in its eyes… was a hunger that she hadn’t seen even in the fiercest of hunters. It leaned forward and took in a deep breath through the two holes that formed as a nose above its rows and rows of teeth, letting out a sigh that’s sound left her breathless. It was a dysphonic cacophony of sounds, high pitched noises like nails on a chalkboard twirling together to send shivers down her spine and goosebumps over her flesh.
“Your grief calls to me, Athena. I think . . . I can even taste it from here.”

Athena was silent in her secured area even though her hands gripped the earth below in preparation to scramble away. The demon let out a sigh before taking in a deep breath, creating a whirlwind that barely passed through the barrier and reached her. She gasped, hands clenching into the earth as her eyes blew wide. Its influence made her feel frozen, hollow of emotion, and alone. Oh, so utterly alone. Fresh cold tears fell down her face and she didn’t notice how her body began to tremble.

The demon licked over its rows of broken teeth and nodded. “You carry so much. Won’t you let me take it from you? You will feel better. I promise. It doesn’t hurt at all.”

There was a flicker of a moment where that sounded good. Who wouldn’t want to be rid of all of their pain and grief? But demons such as Despair were born from such things so she clenched her jaw and shook her head, jerking and crying out when she felt a touch on her shoulders. Inspiration and Harmony knelt behind her, the horned spirit having a defensive and look of rage on his face. He gripped her shoulders tightly and protectively pulled her towards him while Inspiration rubbed her other shoulder gently.

“She does not need you, filth. Begone from this place. It is protected.” There were heavy footsteps behind her in the barrier. Athena was slow to turn around; she felt like she was moving in a vat of thick jello that hindered her movements, but when she turned she saw Dorian nearly stumbling into view.

“Kaffas, Athena is that a – “ He glanced again at the Despair demon and summoned his staff, twirling it in one hand before angling at his side. “What is that thing doing here? Where is Solas?”

Almost as if on cue, an intense gravity filled the confines of the barrier. The magic was so thick it nearly constricted her breathing, but she found a strange comfort in the familiar magic. Dorian, however, was not so accustomed to the presence and cursed again under his breath, nudging Harmony with the end of his staff. “What is this place? I’m not quite sure I like it.”

A cloud of smoke appeared on the other side of the barrier, near the demon. It towered to what looked like the top of the Fade and from its depths came a large, black paw. It dropped down and sent a shock through the earth, Athena almost smirking in the arms of her friends. The creature moved forward from the smoke under the visage of a towering wolf, mana dropping like acid from his maw as he growled and pressed forward on the demon.

Leave.
The command of his power was simple yet overpowering. It flowed through the Fade like a tsunami of magic, sending another wave of shivers down her spine. The demon turned in its layers of rags and hissed, readying its claws for the hopeless battle that would surely happen if it remained. It clicked its sharp-pointed tongue against the back of its teeth, shaking its head while putting its hands down. It then spoke openly as its image disappeared from the Fade, the lingering sense of sadness remaining. “There will be a day when you are vulnerable, when you are weak, when you are alone. On that day, I will be there, and you will call to me.”

When Despair was gone, the Dread Wolf slowly turned its gigantic head towards her, all six eyes lit flame with magic. Athena nodded towards it, a ghost of a smile still on her lips. Dorian bent down at her side, staff still at the ready. “That doesn’t make me feel safe but you look content.”

She huffed under her breath, leaning so that her side pressed up against her friends. “Let’s just say its not my first encounter with it.”

The Tevinter shook his head and finally relaxed, sitting next to her and allowing her to rest her head on his shoulder. He put his staff across their two laps and shrugged slightly, intertwining his fingers with hers when she searched for his hand. “This isn’t so bad I guess, this whole Dreaming thing.”

Athena nuzzled against his shoulder and looked slightly past it to the two spirits that were speaking softly behind them. “Harmony brought you?”

“Yes. He said you were in danger, so of course I came running. You have had a terrible string of luck, my dear. I’m so sorry about your loss. He . . . was a cute lad.” He tightened his grip on her hand and she took in a weak breath, eyes glistening over with tears.

“That he was. I – I’m sorry, my friend. I can’t do this yet.” He nodded against her head, resting against her one more time she pulled on the tether that connected her to her body. He turned and pressed his lips against her hair while letting out a sigh.

“See you when you wake then, love.”

The room was full of frigid cold air when she woke. Her first instinct was to pull her knees against her chest and let out a groan of discomfort. Athena rubbed her face against the pillow with a child-like whine, realizing there was another body pressed in front of her that was also now rousing. Leafy was facing her, knees now in the same position to gather warmth, teeth lightly chattering.
The young girl frowned and mumbled various curses in Elvish before fully opening her eyes.

They looked at each other in silence before Athena gently smiled. “How did you sleep, Leafy?”

The young girl shrugged and relaxed, raising up and looking over her back and huffing out a breath when Solas wasn’t there. She then flopped back onto the pillow and rolled onto her back, resting the back of her arm against her forehead. “Not well. Everything was freezing cold in my dream, like it is now, but that huge black wolf was there again.” Athena blinked and nodded to show she was listening, curling her toes in hidden gesture of anxiety as she listened. “I tried to fire an arrow to get him to go away but he just stayed out of reach. He was huge though, but I don’t know why he was there.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, he was in mine too.” Athena leaned up and supported her head with one hand to face her daughter, reaching forward with the free hand to brush the dirty blonde hair from her face. The huntress’s eyes widened and she turned on her side to get a better look at her mother’s face.

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, he was in mine too.” Athena leaned up and supported her head with one hand to face her daughter, reaching forward with the free hand to brush the dirty blonde hair from her face. The huntress’s eyes widened and she turned on her side to get a better look at her mother’s face.

“No. But he scared a – “ She paused, looking up to the girl with uncertainty in her eyes. “He scared a despair demon off. It was trying to get me to let it in but then the wolf and my spirit friends showed up. I...I think he brought them to me. I had walled myself off to give myself a second to just...” She looked up to see that Leafy was listening intently without any tears or signs of sadness on her face. They both shared a look of blank focus, as if they were waiting for the other one to break down or start the conversation that was typical to have. “To just grieve. I went into shock after the funeral yesterday and Solas had to sedate me with his magic.”

Leafy’s brow furrowed and she reached forward and grabbed her mother’s hand. “I’m sorry, Fen’Mae. I...I should have invited you to plant the tree with me and the others. I couldn’t see him like that and... wasn’t thinking.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath in, squeezing her hand for confidence. “The Dalish are more comfortable with death than most. We’ve been hunted our entire lives by the shem and when they don’t catch us, living on the mercy of the wild does. I... I wasn’t ready for him to go like that.” There weren’t tears in her eyes but her words began to get softer. She was fighting it and Athena pushed down the urge to reach across the bed and bring them into her arms, but there was a silent agreement between them to simply talk.

Athena’s throat felt tight with emotion when she nodded, bringing her hand up to her mouth so she could kiss her knuckles. “I wasn’t either. He didn’t deserve to, my leaf. He seemed... happy though?” There was a strangled question in her tone and she bit on her tongue to fight back to the tears. Leafy nodded solemnly, scooching closer so that she could press her forehead against hers.
and breathe together. There were small sounds of sniffling as they fought back and forth to keep their emotions in check.

After a few minutes, they took a deep breath in unison and sighed. Leafy started, suddenly sounding years wiser. “He wouldn’t want us to be like this, Fen’Mae. We have to get up, we have to keep going – “ There was a pause, a moment of uncertainty. “R-right?”

Athena instantly nodded and brought them both into a sitting position, allowing a shiver that normally started off her crying to run down her spine before she opened her eyes and hummed. “Right.” Leafy’s eyes lit up, a sincere smile curving her lips as she quickly got to her knees and nearly knocked Athena over in a hug.

“Love you, Fen’Mae.” She wrapped her arms around her daughter, breathing in the scent of elfroot and the woods before kissing her cheek and pressing her forehead against hers again.

“Love you too, darling – “ Her words were almost cut off by the door opening, Solas coming in with a basket of food underneath his arm. His expression went from tentative to relieved when he saw them sitting up together. Leafy rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hand before looking into the basket. He set it down on the end of the bed with Kain at his side, tail wagging in happiness that they were both awake.

“Even he knew to give you two some rest. How did you both sleep?” He semi-crawled onto the bed to kiss Athena on the forehead, running the back of his knuckles in a frame around her face to bring her gaze to his. She couldn’t hide the sadness in her eyes, the urge to cry buried so deep within her pit that it hurt, but she nodded to the silent question asking if she was alright. He could only nod gently before looking to Leafy, who was already nibbling on an apple.

“Alright. You’re a Dreamer, right, hahren?” She looked up to him as her hands nervously played with the apple’s stem.

“Yes, as is your mother, what makes you ask, dahlen?” He crossed one leg over the other as he sat on the edge of the bed. Athena scooted to the edge so she could kiss Kain on the head and look down at her clothes. Solas had apparently changed her out of her bloodied adventuring clothes, bless him. She quickly grabbed clothes from her closet and threw them on as Leafy chose her words carefully.

“Why... why would the – “ She opened her mouth to continue before closing her mouth, gaze hardening as she shook her head. “Never mind. It isn’t important.” The young elf held the apple in her mouth so she could throw her jacket on over the clothes she fell asleep in. She bent down and
adjusted her foot wrappings before heading towards the door. Kain let out a whine but she waved to the wolf to calm him, popping the apple out of her mouth with her tongue and catching it with her free hand. “I’m going to train with Lathari today. Fiona and Morrigan have been busy so she’s been teaching me things.”

Athena nodded, smirking at the thought of the bald headed former First Dalish mage teaching her daughter. It seemed appropriate, the two clan castaways working within her little family of misplaced people who found their purpose again. “Alright. Come see me if you need me.” Leafy smirked and left without another word, the slam of the door echoing through the empty tower.

Solas paused and leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “I do not believe she is a girl anymore, vhenan. This has changed her, stolen her youth.”

She huffed a breath and grabbed a braided ribbon from her wardrobe to pull her hair up into a tight bun. “Unfortunately, I agree. I don’t know what to feel but guilty that she is handling this better than I am.” As she talked she realized her hands began to shake and her voice was quivering with the tension of unshed tears. His face softened into one of concern. He smoothly stood from his position and faced her, but she side-stepped with her hands up.

“If you touch me... I’ll crumble. I can’t do that, not now. There is too much.” Her voice betrayed her words and nearly broke, her mouth and lips dry as she closed her eyes to regain her focus. The cold bit at her skin again and she looked up towards the loft where she could feel the breeze coming in through the open window. Even though Wintersend was past, it felt like even Nature was mourning the loss of spring, the loss of youth that had happened. She silently moved up to the loft and closed the window, glancing at the mural. It only gave her a flicker of the happiness it normally provided. It was enough to give her resolve until she turned around and looked at the mess of blankets and pillows that were left.

At the top of the makeshift bed that Tobi and Leafy had left... was a wooden sword. It was resting on top of their shared chest and she could feel her eyes go wide. There were memories going through her mind, ones that could only bring her pain and sorrow. Tobi practicing with Leafy when he first got the sword, wielding it like the strong warrior he wanted to be. There was such a youthful glow of pride in his eyes when he carried it around. Even when he fell asleep at her piano with it on his waist, he looked strong.

Solas climbed the stairs and followed her gaze, a sigh falling from his lips. He did as she asked and did not move to touch her, but the restraint in his movements was obvious. Athena noted a small amount of hurt in the corners of his expression that only she learned how to read but she knew the only way to take it away was for her to fix it. As the flood of emotions threatened to tear down her walls, she rested a hand over her lower belly and swallowed down a lump of stone. “Solas... how do you endure?”
The words were fast, panicked. She wanted to get them out and get her answer before she broke. Solas reached out to soothe her and then stopped, taking a step closer until he was within a pace of her. Athena fought with all of her might not to lose herself within him. She knew that if she asked, he would stay with her. He would do whatever her grief commanded. He would wrestle in the sheets within her until she they fucked together, fought together, cried together. The look in his eyes showed that he would be willing to do anything to take the pain away, but she just wanted it **gone and buried** so she could focus on the Arbor Wilds to come.

He settled for cupping her face, his thumb stroking over her cheek to catch the one tear that had gotten away. “If this is what you desire, *ma’fen* – “ Athena nodded curtly in his touch, which drew a sigh from his lips. He dropped his hand and his expression hardened into the one he wore as the fade-advisor of the Inquisition. “Fill your day with things to further our cause. Train, mobilize your people, do something to keep your mind occupied. Then when you dream, do the same. You must be in absolute control of your thoughts and emotions.”

She paused, giving herself one moment of reprieve. She stepped forward into his unsuspecting reach, wrapping her arms around him and clenching the fabric of his tunic with white-knuckled fists. She buried her face within the crook of his neck. She took slow deep breaths, allowing his scent to wash over her and bring some peace to the hurricane that was her mind. He stilled, as if they were embracing for the first time in the dam in Crestwood, but quickly melted and put his hands on her back. He spoke an I love you into her hair, whispering promises in Elvish about how the pain would pass and how strong she had been.

She used his words, his presence, his strength to hide her own brokenness. It took a minute, but she pulled back and looked at him with a hardened expression, one full of focus and determination to be stronger. . . for Tobi. He recognized it and nodded, following her down the stairs and outside where their duties were still waiting for them.
“Are you sure about this, Lady Wolfsbane? I feel this might be... inappropriate.” Josephine walked around the subject with her polite tone and words. She stood behind her desk with a small batch of letters held against her chest protectively.

Athena stood on the other side pleading, her voice plain and simple with a slight bit of agitation. “Yes, Lady Montilyet. I am looking for things to fill my day today, and answering letters addressed to me that you have been answering for me for months will help. Please, you have so much to do yourself, allow me to take this off of your plate. It is what you gave me an office for, correct?”

The Ambassador sighed, handing over the letters before nervously curling a strand of hair around her finger. In a rare moment the Antivan woman’s hair was down, the soft waves cascading down and behind her shoulders. She bit her lip in thought before breaking into her trademark smile. “You could play music? If that would be a distraction we have some visiting nobles that would love to—"%

Panic gripped her heart and she raised a hand to stop her. “No. I... can’t. Please inform the interested parties that I will be unable to perform for... the indefinite future.” Tobi always loved my songs and stories. The thought choked her up but she buried it down with everything else. Josephine read her expression and softened hers, nodding in understanding before sitting down at her desk.

“I will pass it along. Thank you, Lady Wolfsbane. I’m sure the ones who have written to you will look forward to reading your words in your hand. Please let me know if there is anything else I can do.” Athena nodded and turned on her heel, pausing before getting to the steps that would lead out of her entertaining space and to the door.

“Is... the group still meeting in a few days after the sun sets? To study “Orlesian Festivals?” She turned with hope in her eyes, longing to return to a routine of normalcy, even if that normalcy was a smut reading circle with Cassandra, Leliana, Rathein, Josephine, and sometimes Dorian.

“Of course. We’ll expect you there!” The Ambassador perked up and waved her out as she left her office and moved into the throne room. There were shocked looks of nobles as she walked by. Their masks hid the majority of them but the looks of pity were plain as the sun was bright. She walked with a purpose until she reached the door near her office. A glittering gold object caught her attention so she paused with her hand on the door, looking over at the piano.

It wasn’t a gold object, but a large jar full to the brim with gold and silver coins. The requests jar had been removed with no note of explanation but the donations jar for the orphans remained...
and was now bursting at the top. Its presence pulled her like a gravity and suddenly she found herself standing in front of it with her hands idly running over the side of the glass. Where had the coin come from? Before they had only come in small bits of donation whenever she played something or told a story. There was never a donation of this magnitude. She shook her head in confusion and took a step back from it, looking around for anyone who would answer for its existence. There was a scooting of a chair and she heard Varric’s heavy booted footsteps. He huffed a not so happy laugh and patted her lower back.

“Well, would you look at that. I guess those Orlesians aren’t as bitter and cold as I thought.” He was smiling but when she looked down she could see an edge of sadness in his eyes.

“Wh-what do you mean? Do you know who did this?” He nodded and let his smile fall. He sighed and moved his hand so he could gesture outside towards the courtyard.

“There. . . were a lot of people out there yesterday, Walker. We know what happened, and man I’m sorry. It’s shit and we all know it. How’re you holding up?” Her silence answered him plainly. He hummed and reached forward to take the jar into his hands. “Well. . . I did make a promise. And the Merchant’s Guild will double this, for whatever you want to use it for.” He tapped the jar and smiled at her shocked expression. Her jaw quivered but she pressed the letters in her hand to her chest before turning to him.

“Varric.”

He waved her off. “You can thank me later. You know where you can find me if you need a drink or a game of Wicked Grace.” His eyes glistened with the hidden wisdom that came with the story teller. “We’ve all lost someone before, and it isn’t smart to go through it alone.” He patted the back of her leg before turning back and disappeared through the rotunda towards his room. She let out a sigh and rubbed her hand over the piano.

A small pang of pain struck in her gut when its magic brushed against the palm of her hand. “I’m sorry, my friend. Not for a while, okay? I don’t have the strength right now. Get some rest.” The elven artifact vibrated and fell to stillness, which almost felt worse to her. Athena finally pushed on the door and quickly made her way down the stairs to her office. Dorian was talking with Sera in the basement. She had a jar of honey in her hands with a wicked grin on her face and he was shaking his head with a chuckle at something she had said. They waved to her and beckoned her over but she shrugged apologetically and wiggled the letters in the air.

Sera blew a strawberry in her direction but Dorian nodded in knowing, winking towards her with a known promise that he was there. Athena pushed through her office and sat in the chair. The wind coming in from the cave was welcoming and the sound of dew dripping from the stone calmed her mind. She found a quill and the inkpot and went to work.
The letters were full of marriage proposals, questions about her world, and requests for different stories. The writers were different nobles and dignitaries whose position she could barely pronounce but she summoned up her will and answered at least two dozen of them over the course of a day. At the bottom of the pile was a letter from Briala, but she put that in bottom of her top drawer for later. The sun was setting behind her when she heard a group of people talking in on the other side. She arched a brow and looked up like a librarian scolding a loud teen, tilting her head in confusion when nearly half of the Chargers and the Inner Party walked in with different cups and drinks in their hands.

Dorian came in and she could smell her favorite wine in his hands. Varric had a deck of cards. Rathein had a chair in her hands and a grin on her face while Bull lugged in a cask with Krem and Rocky. Morrigan even walked through but she ignored the impromptu campfire circle and went straight to the opening that looked over the cliff. They were all setting up shop in her office and she could only look at them in silence and confusion. They sat down in a circle and began to deal up cards when Athena cleared her throat and looked at them all.

“Uh. Hey Guys. What’s going on?” Varric looked to Bull and shrugged, Rathein turning around on her stool while shuffling cards in your hands.

“I know what you’re doing. I do it all of the time, but we know you. Putting your nose into books and ignoring it isn’t going to help you. Want to know what helps me?” The Inquisitor had a hopeful smile on her face and Athena could only push back from her desk and standing, shaking her head hesitant with her hands up in defense.

“Rathein. . . “ Bull cursed and stood up from his chair. He walked over to her until he was towering over her. He tilted his head to the side and called over his shoulder.

“Boss, okay if I get this?” She heard a defeated sigh behind the giant that was in front of her.

“Sure, go on ahead.” Bull intertwined his fingers and expanded them out until the knuckles that he had cracked. Without a warning, he stepped forward and picked Athena up in a hug tight enough for her not to escape. She expected laughter but the room was silent as she froze in his touch. She kept her arms at her sides and her body rigid. She used her core muscles to arch back and look him square in the face, not even bothered that their gazes were maybe only a foot apart.

“What the hell are you doing?” Her voice was cold and dry but inside she was panicking. The natural reflex of the body was to relax during a hug. It was healthy and she remembered it was beneficial to get a ten second hug a day. Her and her former roommate would jokingly just hold each other in the kitchen to fulfill that requirement or she would torment her coworkers with it.
Something with endorphins and hormones, but at that moment she was pissed. Bull rolled his eye and looked back to her with defiance in his face.

“Look. You can’t just ignore this. We’re not going to let you. The boss tries to do the same shit and it’s part of why our thing works out so well.” Rathein didn’t even budge when he briefly brought up their sex life, but it made sense to Athena, even if she didn’t want to admit it. “Speaking as the Inquisitor’s front-line man, I know you. If you’re not focused your magic gets haywire and it’s plain to tell you’re not in the game. You weren’t born a warrior, you had to be made one.” He readjusted his grip but still held her as if she were no larger than a bag of flour. “Still, you’re strong as hell and we need you for what’s to come. You just need to get it out and keep going.”

“Bull – Don’t Ben Hasserath me.” Athena cut in with a nudge against his stomach with her knee. “I can’t talk about it. If I do...” She felt the tears prickle behind her eyes and she looked to the sky for divine guidance to not cry. “I don’t know if I’ll stop thinking about it.”

Dorian called out from the sides. “Unresolved emotions make great demon food, Amatus! We learned this last night.”

Athena scowled and glared at him over Bull’s shoulder, witnessing the Inquisitor’s shocked and concerned expression. “She was visited by a demon in the Fade?” Dorian nodded and sipped on his wine with a strange confidence. Rathein shook her head, looking to Krem with a shrug. Bull shook her gently and pulled her attention back to him.

“See? Holding this all in, it isn’t good for you. I know it feels soon, it’s barely been a day, but it will help you. We wouldn’t be doing this if we didn’t think it would.” Athena bit her lip and looked down, pushing her forehead against his chest so they couldn’t see her expression. Even still she did not sob, she did not cry, she held it all in and prayed for them to disappear. Bull finally cursed, squeezing her tighter before bringing his voice lower.

“If won’t do it for yourself, do it for my boys. They feel like shit and need someone to talk to. Krem especially. We need to put him to rest, Alpha.” The softness of his voice struck her and it brought a cry from her throat. She freed her hands and slammed a fist against his chest, struggling as the tears began to flow down her cheeks and onto his skin.

“Fuck you, Bull.” He smiled and relaxed his hold on her, bringing her into a proper hug instead of a restrain.

“I know.” The others around the campfire returned to their conversation and she could hear the relief in their voices at her slight change. He let her do a few small yet restrained sobs before
putting her on the ground. He put a hand on her back and led her to the group. They talked for what felt like a few hours over cards and drinks. Krem and Rocky would go back and forth telling training stories about Tobi and how he refused to give into losing a spar his first day of drills. Grim almost broke his arm scrapping but the boy still managed to get up with his eyes bleeding and lip busted.

They said Dalish and Stitches always healed him up before he came home though, since they had seen how Athena nearly pommeled Bull for training him in the first place. There were stories that made her laugh and she told some of her own, about how he was so innocent and quiet when they first met. How he came into his own when he joined the Chargers. There was a moment of pleased silence that was interrupted by the door opening. Solas opened the door with Cullen at his back. Seeing the pair together instantly slapped a confused expression on her face, brows raised and mouth slightly open.

Morrigan’s hum of curiosity from the book shelves behind them further proved how strange it was. Solas looked to her and gave a half shrug. “The Commander was looking for you.”

Cullen looked to Solas and nodded, walking in with an official and stiff posture. She raised from her chair and looked to him, then to the scroll in his hand. “Hey, Cullen, what do you need?” She watched his expression go from the Commander to her friend that grew nervous in uncomfortable situations.

“Normally these are sent by raven. I have never had to hand deliver one. But I wanted to – and they said it would be alright.” He lifted a scroll and her eyes fell to it, an aching in her heart knowing what it was. She was silent but he continued. “They are. . . customary when a soldier is lost.”

She silently took the scroll and broke the wax seal of the Inquisition on it before unrolling it. Cullen cleared his throat and prepared to leave but she grabbed him by the wrist, her eyes completely glued to the scroll.

*To the family of Tobias Stanguard.*

*Young Tobi was a soldier of the Inquisition, a new recruit under the ranks of the mercenary band called the Bull’s Chargers. He was a promising recruit, showing endless enthusiasm and a thirst for the knowledge of battle. He trained for countless days and was able to best some of our more weathered soldiers. He had his adopted mother’s ferocity during battle; this much was obvious.*

At this point she began to silently cry, her hands still as she read the letter but there was a soft smirk on her face.
He was sent out on a patrol mission with a group of my soldiers and the Chargers. It was to be a routine sweep of Haven, but the Red Templars interfered. The company leader, the Iron Bull, reports that young Tobias took down at least eight of the soldiers by himself while helping others. During the exit of Haven, a red templar monstrosity appeared from the woods and attacked one of the soldiers. That soldier turned to run with the intention of desertion, but Tobi followed suit. He battled the creature one on one and took a fatal hit the stomach. He ended the creature’s life and saved the life of his brother in arms, but his own life was ended as a result.

I write this letter with my deepest condolences. He was a great soldier and had a promising future ahead of him. I regret to inform you of his passing. He was too young. He simply was too young and I am sorry for your loss.

Cullen Rutherford, Commander of the Inquisition’s Forces

He was too. Young.

It was the best apology for something that wasn’t his fault to begin with. She put a hand to her mouth as she finished reading the letter, nearly dropping it as the tears flowed freely down her cheeks. The ache that she had been burying all day blossomed and she handed the scroll off to Solas who walked over to her side. Cullen paused, looking uncomfortable but stoic as the light of the fireplace danced across his features. There was true remorse in the gold of his eyes and she sighed.

She wanted to be angry at them. She wanted to punch and fight Bull and Cullen until they paid for putting her son into the fray. He was too young. She had told them. She had yelled at them and fought with them about how he wasn’t old enough to go into it. But it was his highest wish, to be a warrior, to be a Prince that could help others. If this had happened when she had first fell to Thedas, her rage would be unstoppable. It was what initially moved her magic and helped her fight. The rage within her burned, as she heard countless people say, and allowed her to be strong.

But, she had grown, and she had been forced to grow wiser. This was nobody’s fault, and if it was anyone’s the blame belonged to Corypheus. She knew he would pay eventually, but now the burning lust for revenge danced hot in her belly. Still, she looked to Cullen and nodded. He repeated the gesture and moved to leave but she moved forward and quickly embraced him.

“Thank you, Cullen. You didn’t have to do that.” She stepped back and wiped her eyes as he made a hum of question.
“I wanted to. I’m glad it helped.” He looked to the others and then rubbed the back of his neck. “I must return to my office; I have things to prepare and we have reports that Corypheus’s forces are moving in the Arbor Wilds. I think they’re looking for something but we can’t determine – “He began to ramble and she chuckled under her breath, hugging her arms to herself. Bull whistled to interrupt his talking, waving over to an open chair.

“Shut up, Cullen and have a drink.” Cullen flushed and nodded at the command. He took a seat between Krem and Bull and hesitated to drink from the cask that they had open. The group fell back into conversation and Athena took the opportunity to turn to Solas.

“Did you...?” She asked with a genuine smile on her lips. He shrugged with a smirk, the first she had seen on him since her arrival home. It put a warmth in her chest, especially as he lightly touched her hip before speaking.

“I may be one to cope and endure in solitude, but you are not the same. It is not in your nature to be alone; you thrive when surrounded by your friends. It is one of the reasons the creature you chose as your first was so fitting for your personality, your spirit.” He looked to them and nodded. “You needed them. But you also needed time. They are much more impatient than I.”

Dorian chuckled during his eavesdropping. “Of course, we are. Come on, darling, your wine is getting warm. I put this in the ice box this morning.” Athena beamed and turned to Solas, touching his chest lightly while dropping her voice to a lower volume.

“Gods, what did I do to deserve you?” He was stunned, eyes wide and lips slightly parted as she turned and sat next to Dorian. The wine tasted refreshing on her lips and it was easier, smoother, to fall back into conversation about their fallen son. Even Rathein had a few stories about when he tried to ride her horse when they were scouting from Haven to Skyhold. He had touched a lot of people, and hearing each story made it easier to breathe. She could still see Solas over his shoulder.

He touched his fingers on his chest where her hand has been, fingers drumming as his mind went deep into thought. He then smiled, looking up to meet her gaze while standing behind them in the circle. She knew there was still a long way to go, but for the first time that day, everything felt right.
“As I was saying last night, Inquisitor, there is some concerning news coming out of the Arbor Wilds.” Cullen looked at his scrolls and then over the war table at the Inquisitor.

Leliana hummed and swerved on her side of the table with her hands clasped behind her back. “My scouts report that he is hunting down ancient elven ruins and temples. He is looking for something and hasn’t found it yet.”

Rathein pinched the bridge of her nose and groaned while looking at the map. She was working off a hangover but Athena wasn’t going to say anything. She had managed to get freshly bathed and into a somewhat official looking outfit, even though Solas was reluctant to let her leave the bed. She stood more on the side of Josephine now since she was an official member of the Inner Council. She had wolf markers all over the map, and more recently there were wolves in the Emerald Graves that had recognized her through the various howls of the wild. When she tapped into the pack it was difficult to tell all of them apart but it was an invaluable resource to have.

“Do we know what he is looking for?” Rathein asked. Cullen smirked.

“We do not know, but we have him on the run. We’ve cut off his red lyrium supplies, Dagna has given us a way to destroy Samson’s armor, and we denied him his demon army through the Wardens. He’s desperate, Inquisitor. If we can predict where he is going we can strike him down right then and there.” He wasn’t looking at her but she could feel the subconscious pressure of knowing the location of the Temple of Mythal. In the Fade the night before she had been scouring her memories but a general area on the map that she could mark.

Almost as if on cue, Rathein turned towards her with a shrug. Leliana cleared her throat and stepped forward with a few markers of her own and a larger one that had the Inquisition’s sword on it. “We have narrowed him down to these woods. Red Templars have been tearing up the forest and setting fires large enough for my scouts to even see in the Emerald Graves. He isn’t trying to hide; he is just trying to get what he wants.”

Cullen made a noise of confidence. “We need to strike him down. Send all of our forces and I think we’ll have a shot. If he has the army that the scouts are reporting, we’re going to need more than just the Inquisitor’s party.”

Josephine looked to Rathein and raised her quill in waiting. “Shall I write to our allies? Marquise Briala has promised us aid whenever we desire it.”
Rathein finally opened her eyes and surveyed the map. She could tell that her friend was weighing their options and their resources, blue eyes flicking back and forth to different places scattered across Orlais and Ferelden. “I can feel that we are close. I do not even feel like I need to ask my Hand about it. I agree with you, Cullen. Prepare the troops, prepare the siege equipment, soon we march. We’ll take everybody except the non-vital personnel and leave within the next week. Can we be prepared to do that?”

She looked to her advisors. Cullen looked down at the map and then nodded. “It will be tight, but yes, if we start working now.”

“I – I do not know if the raven can be sent in time, Inquisitor.” Josephine added in with a nervous tone. Athena raised her hand and shook her head.

“Let me worry about contacting the Marquise. I need to write back to her anyways.” She raised a letter in her hand that had been handed to her earlier. There weren’t any words in the letter; it was a map. It did not match anything on her maps of Orlais or Ferelden, so there was only one other place that the elf would want to meet her.

“I can assist you in determining what it is that Corypheus seeks.” The doors shut slammed behind Morrigan as she strolled into the War Table with a cat-like swerve in her hips. Leliana instantly glowered at the Witch but Athena couldn’t help but smile. It was perfect timing.

Rathein turned around with a smile of welcome without a trace of the hangover in her features. “Welcome, Lady Morrigan. Please, enlighten us. I know that Tevinter lords tend to heavily borrow — “

“Steal.” Athena cut in.

The Inquisitor’s smile fell to a blank expression. She clenched her jaw and nodded before continuing. “Steal from the elves, but I haven’t read of anything that would be powerful enough for him to use.” Morrigan clicked her tongue against her teeth before angling her body back outside of the war room.

“Perhaps it would be easier if I just showed you.” The Witch left without another word and Rathein dismissed her council members with a gesture, save for Athena. She jerked her head over in a beckoning gesture and Athena was helpless to follow. She stuffed the letter in the back pocket of her pants before walking at her friend’s side. Typically, she would have linked arms with her or
wrapped her arm around her hips, but this was growing to be a serious matter so she let it slide. They wove through the hallways and out towards the garden into the room that Morrigan kept the eluvian in.

It had been cleaned and the excess furniture had been put away. Now it was on proper full display. Morrigan walked up to it and flicked her hand it. They both sensed the magic that traveled into the mirror and activated it. The opaque surface lit up in a brilliant array of deep blues and brought a smile to their faces.

“This is an eluvian. An elven artifact, from a time long before the Empire was lost to human greed.” Rathein nodded and reached forward, tingling her fingers against the surface before looking back to Athena.

“This is what you showed me in the Fade, correct? Except that one was broken.” Athena confirmed her thought with a hum, crossing her arms over her chest while trying to appear as neutral as possible. She then looked to Morrigan with a shrug.

“We encountered one of these in the Fade. Solas determined that the one there was broken and could not be used, but it is marvelous to see one activated in person.” The lights flickered like a breath and Rathein gasped slightly.

“It is beautiful.” Morrigan smiled, her golden eyes nearly glowing in the presence of the artifact.

“I repaired the one before you at a great cost. It has a cousin in the Arbor Wilds. That is what Corypheus seeks. There are tales of an elven temple in the wilds, untouched. When I came across it, it was heavily protected so I turned elsewhere to find my prize.” The Witch of the Wilds turned her gaze back to the eluvian with a frown. “If he turned southward into the Wilds, he could succeed where I failed. The eluvian would be his, as would what lies beyond it.”

Rathein arched a brow. “Where does this one lead?”

Morrigan smiled and walked through, turning to look over her shoulder. “Allow me to show you.” The mage walked forward without any hesitation and Athena gestured forward with a smile.

“It’s safe, come on, Herald.” She teased jokingly with the title, bringing her friend along with a gentle grab of her hand. Rathein squeezed it in a gesture of nerves as they passed through. She immediately frowned, releasing her hand and walking to Morrigan’s side.
“This is what I call... the Crossroads.” Morrigan gestured out to all the ocean of elven artifacts.

The Inquisitor commented softly. “It looks so... barren.”

Athena could not help but shake her head in silent disagreement. To her, it was beautiful. What she knew to be the hollowed-out trees and dreary world from the game was a lush environment where the light tingled on her skin and the air felt clear. Instead of broken stone paths and toppled over trees there were pristine cobbled walkways leading to each eluvian. There was still the evidence of age: vines growing up the sides of the artifacts and cracks in the marbled benches that scattered the area, but the Crossroads felt very much alive.

In the midst of her excitement she heard Morrigan explaining the area to the Inquisitor in muffled sounds but she was too distracted. It still didn’t make sense. She was not supposed to be able to see this. It was supposed to be a gray, dead, and barren land that looked full of melancholy. This view... was only reserved for those worthy. She shook her head in disbelief, feeling the weight of the map that sat in her back pocket. Rathein tapped on her shoulder and gestured back towards through the eluvian.

She shook her head and raised a single hand in refusal. Athena looked to Morrigan with an arched brow. “May... may I explore for a while? This place seems fascinating to me and I would love to learn something to tell my agents. Leafy likes hearing about ancient elven culture and Syla has only begun to learn the histories of her people from her Dalish friends.” She lied, looking wistfully out towards the garden of portals.

Morrigan hummed and crossed her arms over her chest. “A curious mind such as myself. Be wary, this place weighs on your mind if you remain for too long. It took me a long time to adjust and grow strong enough to last hours within this place. There are also creatures that have rested here undisturbed for eons.”

She opened her right hand and summoned a staff of flame, hardening it into solid mana and spinning it within her hand. “I will try not to be long. Thank you for the warning, Lady Morrigan.”

The Witch nodded and disappeared back through her portal to Skyhold. Athena waited a few second, probing her magic out to see if she would return before walking out along the path. She took out the map and looked ahead, following the basic steps that included turning right at a tree and continuing over a fallen marble pillar. After almost an hour of traveling, she came across a group of elven soldiers surrounding tables.
On top of them were different maps of Thedas and the Crossroads, and lucky enough at the center of them all was Briala. The elf looked up at the sound of boots, smiling and nodding before gesturing her over. “Madame Sorciere, it is an honor.”

Athena dismissed her staff and bowed her head in respect, joining her at the tables with a smile. “The feeling is mutual, Empress. To what do I owe the pleasure of this summoning? It is by the luck of Fate I needed to speak to you as well.”

The red-haired elf smirked and gestured over to maps and a set of small scrolls no bigger than the palm of her hand. “You asked how you could help and I have been collecting things for you to investigate in the Inquisition. Most of them are past the borders of Ferelden so my people can only get there through the gift of the Crossroads. But even with the passcode, we cannot access everything within here. It can be like a labyrinth. Some walls are closed off with magic my mages have never seen before.”

She shook her head and handed over the small set of scrolls. “But I digress. These are for you. The People of Ferelden are suffering and have been since the Blight, even with the promise of improvements from the Hero of Ferelden and her King. The royalty may be keen to improving the lives of my People, but their Arls and Teryns may not agree.” Athena nodded with a light frown, stuffing her jacket and back pockets full of the scrolls. “What was it you desired of me?”

Athena pressed her lips into a thin line and move the maps until she pulled up one of Orlais. “Unfortunately, I do not come with good news. Corpyheus has moved into these woods – “ She moved paper weights to the corner of the maps and pointed out their plan with her index finger. “And is ransacking ancient elven temples. We think he is targeting an eluvian in this – “ She moved a large marker to the Temple of Mythal location. “Area. You know how terrible it would be if he gets access to this place, so we plan to move almost all of our troops to shut him down. We were hoping to count on your forces to meet us there and charge through the woods.”

Briala didn’t need much time to think. She immediately nodded and looked to her right-hand woman. “You know what to do. Gather our own and have them use the gates to scout the area.” She adjusted the mask on her face and let out a groan of discomfort. “So this is it? The fight against the Blighted Magister?” She nodded in confidence, strength emanating from her features as she turned and extended a hand to shake. “If the Herald calls, we will answer. I will return to Val Royeaux and inform Gaspard that we need to move the chevaliers. They will be our strength and I will be your eyes.”

Athena gripped her hand and shook it, a smile curling her lips. “Letters may be too slow and you have the upper hand of knowing the Crossroads much better than I do – “ Briala smirked and turned towards the table, handing her a small scroll with the seal of Orlais on it.
“Allow me to remedy that. These are only the known and explored eluvians, but you may use them for your purposes. I hear from your Spymaster that you have a successful experiment with lizards, was it? Shall we use something similar as we make our way across the wilds?”

She rubbed the back of her neck and looked into the sky deep in thought. She had been not using the orb due to its drain on her. Solas had been helping her with exercises to minimize the pull she felt and she had been steadily absorbing ingredients during their travels ever since. Even now she felt the slight tug in the center of her hand but as her lover said, that part was more than likely a mental symptom of the bond to her artifact. “Wolves. Communicate with the wolves. If there any you find, say the passcode for the eluvian to them and they will know you are an ally of mine.”

Briala smiled, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. “That gift... could be very useful in the days to come if we survive all of this. Give it a thought?”

She shrugged and began to walk away, packing the map of the Crossroads into the last free space of the inside of her jacket. “I... will. Forgive me, there are many preparations to do since we leave in a week’s time. Expect a letter from our Inner Council members with a more detailed information.”

Briala stepped back to go into a deep bow, waving Athena off as she jogged back through the path she had taken earlier. There was a tension in the air now as her agents moved about. Even still, she had this pressing feeling that someone or something was watching her. It gave her a sense of paranoia that triggered her urge to glance over her shoulder once or twice but there was always nothing there. Even still, she fade-stepped the rest of the way to the eluvian that led to Skyhold.

She burst through the window with a pant, catching her breath before leaning against the wall next to it. Almost immediately the door opened and Morrigan strolled through, a dark curiosity in her piercing gaze. “And what did you learn during your travel today, Lady Athena?”

Athena instantly let out a sigh, wiping her brow with the back of her hand. “That place gives me a massive headache and looks all the same. Even still, I didn’t realize how fast it was going to be.”

The Witch chuckled and threw her hands towards the eluvian, shutting it down until the magic was only a dim vibration against the glass. “You are correct. It appears we have many preparations to do. I will be going with your group to the attack. It has been many years since I have been in a battle such as the one we face.” There was a cheeky smile on her face as she continued. “I do hope I have not lost my touch.”
She couldn’t help but fully laugh, shaking her head back and forth. “You? A Hero of the Blight lose her touch? Don’t be absurd, Morrigan. You’ll do fine. If you want, we can both turn into giant spiders and scare the shit out of some Wardens and Templars.”

It was the Witch’s turn to smile. “’Tis a curious idea, but I think we will be pressed for time.” She then paused and looked to the ground. “Your daughter has approached me, Lev’adin. She asked. . . if I would run with her in the wilds tonight under the craning moons. It has been a long time since I have been able to do so, but I wanted to bring the girl comfort.” There was a heavy beat of silence. “Only if you allow it. I do not wish to intrude.”

Athena felt a stab of jealousy in her stomach. It twisted like a hot knife but she forced herself to shrug and shake her head. “That. . . is fine. Whatever she needs to recover.” She ran a hand through her sweated hair, avoiding the Witch’s gaze. “If you’re with her, the pack will like you.” She walked past her ally towards the door, hand resting on the handle before she shut it. “Enjoy the moonlight. It is a spring’s evening and the animals are sure to be returning to the woods.”
In the days to follow, Athena barely saw any of the other members of the Inquisition.

They were all in a frenzy preparing for the trek to the wilds. She had been sending some of her agents out on field mission to get more information on the letters that Briala had given her. Loranil was coming with them to the Arbor Wilds, since he was still a lieutenant under Cullen’s command. Illrith was to investigate the disappearance of some elves from the Brecilian Forest Dalish clans. Nethris, a new recruit from a Dalish clan on the outskirts of the desert, wished to check in on the alienage in Denerim.

Bull was prepping the Chargers on staying behind to protect Skyhold and its surrounding areas.

Sera was sending messages to the Jenny’s to keep them updated while making good target practice out of clumsily made up dummies that looked like Corypheus.

Dorian and Vivienne were preparing the necessary things to bring on the journey with the them.

Everyone had something to do and it kept her busy from before dawn to after dusk most nights. The night before they traveled was the first night that they were all in the same room together. Rathein had been working with Dagna to craft them all newly enchanted armor for the battle to come. From the looks on her faces, they were all exhausted. They helped each other into the new armor and transferred over and additions to their weapons that they needed.

By the time Athena got there they were almost done. Each of them were in their armor and talking over the plans for the morning. She walked up to an armor stand that was left for her, her eyes traveling over the fabric. Rathein walked up behind her and rested her head on her shoulder, bringing her arms around her waist to bring her into a backwards hug. “What do you think? We tried to keep it light weight because of the way you cast and just in case you need to shift.”

Even as tired as she was, she could only smile. The boots were slightly armored and extended past the thighs to come up to sharp edges at her hips. The scales of the armor were maroon and black, but they looked lightweight. In the light, it looked like drops of blood coming from the legs. Underneath the armor was a black, tight, and light fabric that was enchanted to protect her in the gaps of the armor. There was a sash of white wolf fur that went from the tops of her hips to the middle of her belly. It wrapped with strings on her back. The short coat matched the boots, the elbows having a point on the edges.
“It looks perfect. I . . . didn’t even think of my armor with all of the running around I’ve been doing.” Rathein patted her on the shoulders and pushed her forward.

“Well then, come on, let me see how it looks on you.” Athena didn’t even care who was around. She stripped down to smalls and bandings and quickly got into the underclothes of the armor. Dorian made a single cat-call in her direction, winking in the reflection of her mirror before returning to his conversation with Vivienne. She winked back, realizing that Solas was behind her on her right. He was fully dressed as well.

The armor was strikingly different than things he had worn in the past. There was a large wolf sash coming across the front but there was an obvious change from “unwashed hobo apostate” to what was in front of her. It put a lump in her throat to see it. It had all come too quickly. There was always the thought of what immediately followed the Temple of Mythal, but she couldn’t think of it. There was even a chance it wouldn’t happen to her, but she couldn’t let the thought enter her mind. There was too much at stake to let a single possibility like that enter her mind. He adjusted the glove on his hand before catching her gaze in the mirror, smirking at the sight of her in her underclothes and the tall boots that brought an accentuation to the angle of her hip.

“Oh stop showing off, here, let me help you.” Her friend joked, aiding her by sliding the jacket over her arms. The emblem of the Inquisition was on her right upper arm in a matching maroon color. On her left, there was the portrait of a wolf in the same shade. She raised a brow at the fact that it did not have extra eyes like the tattoo Dorian had put on her back during the ball. “My addition. It seems fitting, right? As my Hand, I wanted you to have something that sets you apart. You know, besides the whole setting yourself on fire and turning into a wolf thing.”

Rathein smiled and quickly braided her hair, wrapping it up in a tight bun. Athena looked at the stranger looking back at her; there was a solider in the mirror. There was someone that had been shaped by time and war. The angles of her face were sharper and even the honey color of her eyes seemed more striking. She ran her hands over her cheekbones and then down to her neckline. It took a second to fully recognize herself, but at the end her throat was dry from nervous. “Fuck, I barely recognize myself. Do you remember how I looked when I first fell?”

The Inquisitor paused, nodding solemnly before gesturing down to her own body. “You’re not alone. My figure hasn’t exactly stayed the same since the Breach either. We fight, we travel, we carry around what seems to be half of our body weight in armor, I forget to eat meals sometimes I’m so stressed – “ She sighed and scratched at the shaved side of her head. “You are definitely not alone there. I don’t think the me before the Breach would recognize me now.” She walked up besides her in her full armor and linked arms with Athena.

They stared at their reflections for a moment, both swallowing a lump of nerves in anxiety. “So, we leave tomorrow?”
Rathein shook her head and squeezed her arm closer to her chest. “Would you have a night with me tonight? Just you and I? I’ll leave Bull to the Chargers and you leave Solas to do whatever he wants to do tonight.”

She was helpless to refuse her friend, her sister in arms. “O-of course. After this I’ll meet you in your room with a bottle of wine and some fruit, okay?” She almost thought she saw Rathein blink away some tears before she nodded, letting Athena’s arm go before turning back to her own armor stand to disrobe. Solas waited until she was alone and looking at the different features before coming over and making a sound of approval.

“Good evening, Fen’Elgara.” He teased, quickly earning a smack against his chest with the back of her hand. She narrowed her gaze at him before looking back to the mirror, running her hand down her braid. He then paused and looked her up and down, noticing that something was off in her expression. “Is everything alright? You look troubled.”

There was a shift in movement beside her and Cole’s monotoned but intrigued voice followed. “She is afraid, afraid for . . . ” The boy paused and tilted his head. “Crestwood? But we’ve already been there.”

Solas put his hand on the boy’s shoulder and shook his head once. Athena could only clench her jaw and let out a controlled sigh through her nose. Well he isn’t wrong. “The Inquisitor and I are just realizing how much things have changed; firstly how different we look. I had a moment where I barely recognized the person in the mirror. Never in all of my days did I think I would be. . . ” She gestured to the reflection in the mirror, finally turning to look him in the face. “Well, you know. All of this. It’s unbelievable.”

It was difficult to explain. There was so much to be nervous for in the coming days, but it felt like everyday she walked into her office she had a new recruit that had stumbled in. They had heard of something she had done or heard that she wanted to help the People and signed themselves up. Syla and the others had been wonderful spreaders of their cause, but unfortunately that also came in the same hand as talking Athena up to a point that made her borderline uncomfortable.

“The Inquisition has come far since its birth. It has grown to be a formidable force, but unfortunately so has our foe.” He always started off in such an official and plain tone it was jarring. She visibly twitched and frowned at the edges of her lips, looking down at the gauntlets that came out like claws past her fingernails. He then placed a single hand on her shoulder, “But you are ready for this, Athena. I have no doubt in how you or the Inquisitor will help to lead us forward. What would help you in preparing before we leave tomorrow? A hunt? A quiet night on the tower?” He asked in earnest and she gave him a sheepish shrug in return.
“The Herald of Andraste has specifically requested me for her company tonight. But – “ She stepped forward and placed a hand on his chest, stepping up on her toes to brush her lips over the dip of his chin and then the tip of his nose. “I am all yours afterwards, for whatever you need.”

A dark and hungry look flashed over his gaze, the hand on her shoulder tightening before he relaxed himself and nodded. “Ma nuvenin, ma’fen.” There was a brief smile before he looked to Cole and gestured back over to their armor stands. “Come, Cole, let us return to Varric’s fire. He said he had a story for you.” As the pair turned Solas gave her a final lingering look over his shoulder. She thought she saw the slightest hint of pink at the tips of his ears. That sight alone was enough to melt away her worry and make her smile.

Rathein and Athena had what she would have called a typical Earth night. They had initially started by doing a quick briefing of what to expect in the mission to come, like they had every mission since Halamshiral. They ate desserts and drank two glasses of wine before delving into the dark and personal things they wouldn’t dare talk about on the open road, unless Cole intrusively revealed them of course. The Inquisitor was drinking her wine quickly and had begun teasing the various members of the party that she was close to. “How has this changed you? Your spirit?” She mocked in a serious tone, her brows furrowed with no trace of a smile on her lips.

Athena couldn’t help but laugh, leaning back on the headboard while supporting her belly with her hand. They had both been laughing themselves to tears. It felt nice, like they were cheating their way into getting in a good cry. “So he asked you that too, huh?"

The Herald blew a long string of hair out of her face and nodded, rubbing her brow with the back of her hand before taking another sip of wine. There was then a moment of silence before Athena rested her arms on the tops of her knees and leaned forward. “Well, do you think it has? How do you think you’ve changed with this?"

The brunette’s eyes widened, her free hand absentmindedly running through the long part of her hair down the middle. She shook her head and let out a sigh, quickly plucking a piece of strawberry in her mouth before shrugging. “My faith has been shaken, if not removed entirely. Athena, before all of this, you know how strong of an Andrastrian I was? I went to the Chantry multiple times a week with my parents and strongly believed in the Circle’s teachings.” She chuckled bitterly and shook her head again while looking off to the side and not meeting her gaze.

“Even when they called me the Herald, it was odd at first but I didn’t turn it away. I didn’t believe she had chosen me personally, but I also didn’t think I was just some accident. Then with you coming through the Breach, Corypheus, the Wardens, I don’t know what to believe in anymore.
Bad things just happen to good people sometimes and I have a hard time believing that there is a Maker or his Bride watching it all happen.” Rathein abandoned her empty wine glass on the bed and gripped the bottle from the ice bucket, bringing it directly to her lips and drinking a gulp full. Athena reached forward and took it from her grip, eyes softening immediately.

“Rathein...”

The mage raised her hand to stop her, bringing her tearful blue gaze to Athena’s. “You know why Bull and I work so well?”

She could only shrug to show she was listening, tearing down all of her walls to let her friend in. “He takes it all away sometimes. I know people joke, make up rumors, and the disgusting things they say. But when we’re in here, by ourselves, all he cares about is taking that weight off of my shoulders. We don’t even talk sometime.” She scoffed lightly under her breath. “He’s just there and it’s serious but not heavy. There’s just an open honesty that I haven’t had before. I just – “ She slumped in her posture, running both hands through her hair before sitting up with a flush of frustration on her cheeks.

Athena reached forward and gripped her hand, smiling with a nod. “You don’t have to explain it to me. You’re freer around him and obviously happy. I’m glad he can take some of this bullshit away from you, even if its for a little while.”

The Herald nodded with a smile, gripping her hands back in return with a playfully strong squeeze. “Well – enough about me, what about you? Does Solas at least do that for you?”

She took in a deep breath, gripping the wine bottle and putting it to her lips. The hearty flavor washed over her tongue and gave her enough courage to wet her lips and answer. “My situation, my knowing things... makes it really difficult to open up about everything. I feel that every time I intervene or try to help, the universe fucks with me in some way. There’s just this weight I can’t shake.” She pulled her knees to her chest with a sigh, resting her cheeks on top of her knees and settling in like a nervous child.

“What do you mean? What’s been changed?” Rathein asked softly.

She balked, looking down at the bed with a shrug. “Roderick was supposed to die at the camp after Haven. But I saved him... only for him to end up dying when we reached Skyhold. I fought the dragon and saved Clarel for us to still end up in the Fade. I hinted to Bull to save the Chargers instead of keeping the alliance... and we still lost a Charger.” Her voice was choked with emotion, tears glossing over eyes. Rathein made a move to reach forward but Athena wiped her eye and
shook her head.

“No – it’s fine, it’s fine. I just feel trapped by what I know sometimes. I didn’t ask to be taken here, I didn’t ask to end up where I’m at, but I am prisoner to fate apparently.” She then paused and thought back to the original question, a soft smile coming to her face. There was a flutter in the middle of her chest at the thought of her lover. Her free hand absentmindedly spun the wolf ring he gave her around her finger in a fit of nerves. She bit her bottom lip and sighed. “But – I get this weird feeling that Solas understands, like he knows the weight I carry. There’s this. . . I don’t know, gravity I feel towards him.”

She finally broke into a smile. “You know, what I knew of him, he only liked elves and was very private and closed off. But I was wrong. He doesn’t care about the shape of my ears and can be so tender with me. He . . . disproves so many things of what I thought I knew about this place.”

Rathein smiled cheekily, wiggling her brows at her. “So? What do you think happens with you two after all of this? Have you guys said the ‘m’ word yet?”

Athena tilted her head and arched a brow. “What?”

“Marriage, Athena. Have you guys talked about marriage?” There was a suddenly girly excitement in the typically boyish woman, eyes lighting up like when Cassandra talked about poems.


Rathein began to laugh into her hand, the other one gently gripping her dragon tooth necklace. “It’s okay, we haven’t either. I don’t really see him being the marrying type either. But – we have these. And that works for me.”

She scratched the back of her neck and fought the flush that was creeping up into her cheeks. “We’ve talked about kids before, but the topic of marriage has never come up. Weird how that happens, right? I don’t know if I can seriously think about it knowing that we leave for the Arbor Wilds in the morning.”

The short-haired woman looked over her shoulder at the moon and then at the candle. She then rolled her eyes with a groan. “Is that the time already? Shit we should probably get some sleep.” Rathein closed her eyes and then opened them, quickly grabbing a knife from the tray and running
“Rathein – what the shit!” Athena grabbed a cloth napkin and attempted to hold it over the wound but the Inquisitor held it up defiantly, blood dripping down her finger and arm. She handed the knife out to Athena with the other hand, raising both brows in question.

“Do this with me. It’s not evil or anything, but – “ She looked to the small wound and wiggled her thumb. “I was never that close with my siblings, and you are the closest thing I’ve had to family while being here. I want something stronger than tragedy and battles holding us together.” Athena wet her lips and gripped the knife tentatively while running her thumb lightly over the serrations. She had a sister back on Earth, but it had honestly been months since she had thought about her and this felt more real than anything she had before.

They were close, or as close as two people could be in long distance, but Rathein was right. There was something different about meeting and bonding with someone the way the two of them had. They were both outcasts from the Fade at the start and had risen through the ranks to become the leaders of an Inquisition. With a solemn nod, she quickly jerked the knife across her thumb and then pressed the bloody part to match her family’s.

They linked hands and pressed their thumbs together, tears forming in their eyes as they looked at the bond and then smiled. Rathein blushed at the sentimentality of the whole thing, itching the back of her neck while saying simply. “Well. No matter what happens, we’re blood now. You’re my sister, Athena, and I wouldn’t want anyone else at my back going to this Temple tomorrow.”

Athena blinked away tears and brought her into a tight hug, nodding into her shoulder with a laugh. “Sisters, I like the sound of that. I love you, Rathein.”

The Inquisitor nodded and rested her head on her shoulder, wiping her eyes on her shirt with a small hum of happiness. “Love you back, Athena.”
They had stayed up talking much later than anticipated. Athena estimated that they would only have a few hours at most before they set off as she was leaving the Inquisitor’s quarters. The Herald had fallen asleep with her head in Athena’s lap and it was a fun silent struggle trying to get out from underneath her without waking her up.

There were already people in the courtyard preparing the horses and getting ready to leave. Anxious soldiers filled the bridge and she thought she saw Cullen on the battlements outside of his office. She decided to leave him be. Heavy feet dragged her up the stairs to her room and when she entered she wasn’t surprised to see that Solas had fallen asleep. There was a bottle of wine on top of her vanity with some of the ice melted in the bucket it rested in. The sheet was covering his hips and below. He had fallen asleep on his back with a book on his chest, a hand resting on his forehead as he took in deep and steady breaths that filled the room with nothing but serene peace.

She shut the door as silently as she could, quickly disrobing then and there down to her smalls and bandings. She abandoned the pile of clothes behind the door and crawled onto the bed and straddled his hips. She gently took the book from his chest, glancing at the complicated Tevinter title with a quick roll of her eyes. He stirred, brow furrowing and hand twitching. He took in a deep breath as she bent forward, trailing soft and gently kisses to his ear so she could whisper. “Sh, you do not need to wake. I was just trying to get the book from your chest.”

He let out a groan and opened one eye at her, lips instantly curling into a smirk. “I apologize; I did not realize I had fallen asleep.”

She shook her head and kissed the top of his forehead, cupping his face in her hands while breathing in his scent of books, the furs from his armor, and light hint of mint from the drink he had before bed. “It is not your fault. Rathein and I were just catching up.” He nodded against her and shifted to where he could sit up partially, running a hand down her bare back before resting on the outside of her thigh.

“How fares our Inquisitor?” He clenched his jaw and suppressed a yawn while gripping the bare flesh of her leg.
Athena shrugged and ran her hands gently over his features: stroking her thumbs over his cheekbones, the tips of his ears, and behind his neck. He reacted in kind, hissing between his teeth and arching his back slightly against her at the touch to his ears. “As expected. I had just been talking about you.”

He took his hands from her skin and began to unbraid her hair, letting it fall loose around her shoulders in a wave of unbrushed curls from being up for so long. Even still, he took in all of her with a heated gaze and cupped her face gently, brushing his thumb over the swell of her bottom lip while fully sitting up to her. “Oh? What about? Anything that should be of concern to me?” His voice finally woke up and grew hoarse, hungered as he closed the distance between them.

She put a hand on his chest, stopping him as they were mere inches apart, his chest rising and falling with breaths of anticipation. There was an undeniable pull between their lips and it almost pained her to not let him crash into her and steal the thoughts from her brain. Gods knew she needed it. “I was just talking about how much I love you, Solas, and how about I would not have been able to bear this without you.” He paused, looking up to slowly meet her gaze. Even in the darkness she could see how his pupils had blown, but there was a mild shock in his face every time she said those three magic words. She knew she probably reacted the same way. Even though it had been many months, years almost, it didn’t feel quite real when he stated his love for her.

It was a never a possibility in her mind, but even then, with his hips pressing up against hers and her body fitting perfectly against his, she felt absolutely floored that he still chose her. He leaned up and closed the gap between them, lightly brushing his lips against hers before trailing them over her cheeks. Each touch of his lips was light enough to add on top of one another until a shiver shot down her spine and goosebumps traveled over her skin. He smiled at the response and he lightly gripped the top of her hips and brought her down against him. “I feel I am not worthy of such high praise, ma’fen.” There was a teasing growl to his tone as he nipped his teeth against the nape of her neck, but she knew him better.

There was a possibility that he actually meant it, and the very thought of that stole the breath from her lungs. She trailed her hands over his skin until she cupped his face, bringing his hungry gaze towards hers until she could gently stroke her thumbs over his cheekbones and shake her head softly. “‘Ma’sal’shiral’ . . . ‘Love of my life.’ She whispered against his forehead, her tone full of nothing but love and longing for him.

He let out a strangled sigh, his hands moving to hip hers with a solemn nod. “Vhenan’an’ara.” My heart’s desire. There was a pause where they relished in one another’s love and heavy gazes before he ran a hand through her hair and pulled her into him gently. It started with a simple brush of lips, an invitation, a question of permission, before she ran her nails lightly over his head and over his ears. He sighed softly against her mouth and she used the motion to her advantage. She claimed his mouth for her own, taking the sighs he released, and the words her murmured against her lips. He opened himself to her instantly, her tongue dancing along his as their dance with each other became more hurried.
There was a unison realization that they did not have much time, but she wanted to stretch every second with him in their home, their bed, surrounded by nothing but love and comfort. The road ahead was treacherous. The Temple of Mythal was a sort of catalyst for the end of Corypheus and she knew that there wouldn't be much time. Plus, with the more frequent visits from him in the form of the Dread Wolf... everything felt uncertain. There had been a small period, just a blip since her fall, that had solidified her grounding and made her feel as if the floor wasn't about to fall out.

Thinking ahead, it caved in and collapsed around her.

Tears formed in her eyes as she kissed across his cheekbone and to the edge of his ear. Her lips replaced her hand and she gently traced her tongue from the edge to the lobe, gently taking it into her mouth to scrape her teeth along the delicate skin. He leaned his head forward into his neck, groaning deeply as his hands gripped her hips. He whispered her name against her skin, moving the strap of her bandings down so he could kiss along her neckline. She rested her head against his shoulder as he brought a small piece of skin at the nape of her neck into his mouth, suckling and nibbling on it until she squirmed within his grasp.

“Vhenan... we leave for the road today.” She murmured her complaint in between sounds of pleasure. She gripped the cloth at the top of his bottoms and panted as he found the right spot that made her quake underneath his touch.

He chuckled deep in his throat, the tone dark enough to flood her body with warmth. “I believe I have seen scarves within your wardrobe, ma'fen.” Just to prove his point, he playfully bit down on the same spot, ripping a conflicting groan and whine from her lips. He moved his hips up against her and there was no denying his want for her, nor hers for him. There was a weight that existed within her body, a pressure building that would only be fulfilled by him and his touch alone. There was a flash of wickedness in her gaze as she turned and captured his lips, leaving an ache on her neck that would obviously end up in a bruise.

She playfully took his lower lip between her teeth to coax a growl from him. He countered by gripping her hips and flipping until he was under her and she could feel the strain against his breeches between her legs. Athena rolled her hips against that pressure, reaching up to pull Solas back down against her lips. The taste of him on her tongue brought her mind a sense of clarity. It brought her from the haze of duty, the thing she was using as a distraction. He knew she needed touch, he knew she needed comfort, but she was too stubborn. She tried to move on by herself, in preparation for the unknown.

But he knew the whole time how wrong she was. He tried to act like he endured alone as well. But there were little things that gave him away. He would reach for her in the middle of the night, or
lightly press a part of his body against her if they were sleeping back to back. Even if they were just working on separate things in the same room he would look up from his book. She guessed it was to confirm if she was still there or not, but she cherished the precious moments like that. He moaned against her mouth, running his hands through her hair so he could get a fist full and bring her closer. She smiled underneath the kiss and relished underneath his touch, warmth filling every fiber of her being –


They both stopped and Solas had the forefront to groan loudly in frustration, keeping her mouth on his as he took claim of her sounds and grinded up against her sex. It made her smile, knowing how fruitless his attempt was but she allowed herself a moment longer to enjoy his touch, his hands moving down her back to fully grip her ass to rise up to another grind.

“Athena – You’re needed in the preparations.”

Cullen’s voice cut through Solas’s moan and it was actually the elf whose eyes opened in a blaze of anger. He made a move to push her off and answer the door but she quickly scrambled up and wrapped the sheet around her body. Her lover put his hands over his eyes and let out a heavy sigh. She threw the door open without any pretense and realized that the sun was beginning to rise on the other side of the battlements. The Commander didn’t even flinch, crossing his arms and looking her up and down.

“Well rested, I assume?” Athena could only level her gaze and glare at him, tapping her finger against the door frame without saying a word. He then raised a brow with a smirk. “Regardless, the Inquisitor has requested you down at the gates. She wants your help in preparing and says, and I quote, ‘Get her ass down here so I’m not alone.’ “She rolled her eyes and pressed her back against the door frame, rubbing her eyes while holding up the sheet with the other hand. “Also we have a new recruit down there who is rather excited to see you.”

That got her attention. She scratched the roots of her obviously messy hair and looked the Commander square in the eye. “What? Who?”

He only chuckled and shrugged, moving his body while holding onto her gaze as if he were speaking of lectures. “You will see.” He raised his voice as he went down the stairs and out of their sight. “Report down here soon, the both of you.”

Solas fade-stepped from the bed and nearly slammed the door, his dislike for the morning obvious on his face. He clenched his jaw and sighed, looking over to her with a veil of hunger over his eyes.
She smiled and touched his cheek, leaning up on the balls of her feet to give him a soft kiss to steal his anger away. “Duty calls, I suppose.”

He could only nod and press his forehead to hers, taking in a deep breath through his nose before relaxing and turning his head slightly. “The Inquisition never sleeps, and apparently neither do those that lead it. Let us not keep our fearless leader waiting.” He captured her lips one more time, a slow and intimate gesture that made her heart stop and her hand curl around the wolf amulet he wore. He lingered on her skin, almost as if he was saying good-bye. Her eyes remained closed even as he pulled away. There was another chuckle in his throat as he turned away and threw his emerald sleeveless undershirt on.

“What was that for?” She asked breathily, eyes fluttering open to admire his form. He kicked her forehead on the way out of the door.

“Hopefully a promise of something we can finish later. It is a long road between here and the Arbor Wilds, after all.” She barely saw the wink he gave her as he left towards his own quarters to grab the things required. She pressed her back against the door and let out a groan of pure sexual frustration, but, the mention of a new recruit made her more curious and put a fire in her steps. She quickly threw her hair up into a tight bun and slipped into her traveling clothes, bounding down the steps with her pack over her shoulder.

Even in the short amount of time that she was with Solas, the number of soldiers and people prepared for travel nearly tripled. The courtyard and training areas were filled to the brim and she was looking over a sea of people from the steps outside of her room. Her jaw slacked open in shock, a wave of realization hitting her. This was actual fucking war. The videos from her home of the troops getting in formation, the people appearing like ants on a mountain, the siege equipment. . . this was it. Adamant did not require as many forces as this, but the Inquisition was planning to end the fight right then and there.

She swallowed down what felt like a stone’s worth of nerves in her throat, hands wringing at the edge of her jacket before a small sound of excitement distracted her from the bottom. Leafy was playing with Kain. . . who was dressed in light armor with different runes on the edges of it. She waved a bone around and got him to run around Cullen and nearly trip him as he was divvying off different soldiers to different battalions. She looked between the two and it suddenly clicked, a protective growl trickling in her throat as she bent down and vaulted off the side of the stairway to land in front of Cullen with a flustered look on her face.

“New recruit my ass, Cullen.” The Commander had to keep from grinning at her morning demeanor, gesturing over his shoulder.

“Good morning to you, Lady Wolfsbane. I see you have met our newest recruit? The armor you had
made for him fits perfectly. I can tell he’s very excited to help.” There was a smug smirk on his face that she wanted to throw something non-lethal at, but her frustration melted away when Dorian walked over to her side and clapped her on the shoulder.

“Well, ‘mata, this was my idea.” Athena’s eyes widened as she turned to her friend with a confused expression. He smiled and winked towards her with a charismatic flair. “I figured since we don’t have our, well, little ‘boost’ anymore, having him around would be good for you to communicate with your little spies.” He took a step back from Kain when he tried to sniff the Tevinter’s hand, pressing his body closer to Athena’s until she laughed with a smile on her face.

“I get it, I get it, thank you.” She leaned up and kissed her friend on the cheek before bending down and showering her new armored companion in affections. Can you hear them now? She asked him silently, ignoring Cullen as he pressed a now suddenly forgetful Dorian on what their little boost was. Kain nodded and pressed his head against hers, tail slowly wagging behind them.

Red Templars moving through the forests, burning everything along the way. There may be more in the forest that can help us. The black furred companion let out a soft whine of excitement before bounding in a circle around the whole group, nearly knocking Dorian over in the process. She tapped her finger against her chin. “More help? I wonder who he means. Hey, Cullen, we haven’t heard of any rogue squadrons or mercenaries from Fairbanks people in the woods, right?”

The Commander had Kain by the collar with one hand while directing a group of soldiers with the other. “None that I am aware of, why? What did he say?”

It was strange hearing the former Templar be so accepting of her communication with the wolf, but it made her smile. “Something odd, but I guess we’ll have to find out what it means.”
She thought traveling on the road had been hard before. That was nothing compared to traveling with the entirety of the Inquisition while keeping in contact with her own people.

The travel along the road started out light-hearted like any other adventure, but with every report that came in or with every order that went out, everyone was starting to realize how heavy the situation was. Athena and Rathein most of all. The further they got into the woods, the more messages they received. Kain started to get anxious when they passed through the Emerald Graves, speaking more about their potential helpers and how Briala’s people were moving through the eluvians that were scattered through the ancient elvhen ruins.

Rathein grew sick of the waiting, that much was obvious. She finally let out a groan and ran both hands through her hair until she was looking straight up through the canopy of trees. “I need a distraction. This march is driving me crazy. Everything looks the same!”

Cole was sitting behind Athena on her horse, arms wrapped loosely around her waist. He made a humming sound when Varric cleared his throat from behind the group. “I think I have told you guys the tales of Kirkwall six times now. You got anything up there, Walker?”

She froze and Cole tightened his grip on his waist out of response, shaking his head and answering for her. “No. Not yet.”

Athena couldn’t help but lean back into him and rest her head on his shoulder in gratitude, shrugging while allowing her hands to fall from Prince’s reigns to the side. “Sorry to disappoint.” There was a change in the group, a sudden realization from all of them that even made Morrigan look over her shoulder from her horse ahead of the group. Rathein made a noise to distract them all, pressing her leg into her Hand’s with a Cheshire smile.

“Okay then, did you have any weird rituals in your world?” She wiggled her eyebrows and Athena didn’t quite catch on.

“I told you we didn’t have magic – what are you talking about?” Cole’s head perked up as he read the Inquisitor’s thoughts and she beat him to explaining. Athena fumbled with her water flagon to take a deep drink of the fresh spring water they had found earlier in the day.
“I mean like marriage, Athena. What did you guys do for wedding ceremonies? Was it the same as ours?”

**Marriage.**

Athena almost instantly choked on the water, thankfully keeping it in her mouth but her eyes watered and she began to cough once it went down. She shot a blood-shot glare over to the Inquisitor who was sporting a charismatic and innocent smile. Bull and Dorian were chuckling themselves and there was an amused smirk on Solas’s face as he read a book from his horse. Cole pressed into her back shyly to poke her for an answer. The boy’s curiosity was never fed enough.

“I – uh – okay.” She looked around and noticed that other people were actively listening so she sighed and surrendered to the fact that this was her “story” she was going to tell. “Well normally first the one proposing would ask the person receiving’s parents for permission. My own father was kind of a stickler about that. My sister and I were constantly told of how he prepared to tell my grandmother. I personally thought that tradition implied that the parents had some sort of ownership over me, but I make my own decisions so it was more honorary that required.” She then shrugged and smirked when Dorian tried to stifle a laugh at her stubbornness.

“The more faithful people would have it under these huge cathedrals or church’s in front of their friends and families. Other people who weren’t so faithful or religious used places that were of sentiment to them. My sister would have liked the forest. She was a hippie that way. I’m sure its similar here? People use the Chantry, correct?” Rathein nodded and smiled, glancing over her shoulder to Bull in the formation.

“Yeah – but I think we’re holding off on the marriage front.” Bull made a scoff of a laugh and brought his horse closer to her side.

“Not our thing. What about you, Dorian?” The Tevinter opened his mouth to talk when Cullen cut in with his usual grumble.

“Are we really talking about this? Now?” Dorian shoed the Commander away with a gesture before shrugging.

“When the right person comes along, maybe it’s something I would think about. But in Tevinter its of course overly done and the entire room is filled with awkward expectations that will never be reached by the bride or the groom. The whole crowd is already picking apart their traits to
determine what the offspring will be like. It’s an old formality, unfortunately, like many things in my homeland.” Solas made a sound of condensation and the Tevinter balked, looking over his shoulder at the elf.

He then paused and gave Athena a mischievous smirk, which only made the color drain from her face. “Alright, Solas, since you obviously have an opinion, what marriage customs do your people follow?”

It felt like all attention and pressure turned to him so she did herself a favor and looked forward to the path ahead, gripping the reigns while silently cursing the Inquisitor for remembering their drunken conversation about marriage. It was a silly thing to be talking about on the war path, but that must have meant they were all getting nervous and wanted some sort of a happy distraction. Talk of weddings and marriage was an easy thing to lift spirits, because it meant there was hope. It meant there was a future.

“The customs have changed over the years, but the one of which I am the most familiar are rather intimate proceedings.” He paused and placed a leaf on the page that he was reading so he could look up at Dorian. Athena could feel his gaze flick up to her so she swallowed a flittered bunch of anxiety before looking back over to him. “The location differs on the couple getting married, but the customs were not the same from ceremony to ceremony. The ceremony represented a lifelong commitment, so vows were said as well as a hand-tying. As the couple spoke their vows, they would either wrap a ribbon around each other’s clasped hands or a representative they chose would. In the days of Arlathan, a High Priest of their chosen God would officiate or be a witness of their love. The ribbon was a symbol of their eternal tie to one another, body and soul, and typically the item was a cherished thing for the rest of their lives.”

The group was silent, Rathein letting out the most feminine sounding sigh Athena had ever heard. “That... is so beautiful sounding.”

Solas smiled and shrugged lightly. “Alas, the ceremony has faded with time. I do not even believe the Dalish practice something with a shred of likeness to it.”

Cole hugged her and she realized the smile she had on her face. She didn’t know when she did it, but he rarely spoke so freely, so hearing him speak of something so permanent, something so romantic. It made her heart flutter and her breath feel light within her chest. “It sounds nice.” The spirit boy murmured into her back and she reached behind her back to touch his cheek lightly with a smirk.

Yeah it does. She thought to herself. With their relationship, a large public show wouldn’t feel right. The base of their love had been confiding and finding solace within one another out of the eye of the Inquisition.
“Hopefully we’re able to get any chance of things like that after Corypheus.” Cullen dryly said from the front of the group. An apple core soared down the middle of the group and pegged him in the back of the head. He cursed and turned around to see Sera throwing her hands in the air. 

“Oi! Don’t ruin the mood. Don’tcha see yo’self getting all dolled up and going down the aisle?” The man almost paled but he blinked once and hardened his jaw. 

“It’s nearly impossible to imagine with the current state of things.” Athena rolled her eyes and audibly scoffed, changing her tone to something of playful mocking. 

“The Inquisition must not falter. Even though we have cut off the red lyrium supply, destroyed the demon army, and pinpointed their army, there is no hope yet for the future.” She straightened her posture as she imitated him and stiffly wagged her finger at him. The group laughed and he fought a blush, his face as straight as stone but his eyes crinkling with a fought smile. 

Kain began to whine beneath them, the clink of his armor sounding in time with Prince’s light gallop. He did a circle in between the horse’s legs before barking up to her in a shrill tone. They’re here. 

“What? Who is here?” She asked out loud, getting ready to move from her horse in preparation for battle.

Help. Help is near. The black wolf answered plainly. He turned on his paw with a sharp gesture and began to run into the forest. She cursed and swung her leg over the side, looking to Cullen with a pause. “How far to the forward camp?” 

He shook his head but it was Leliana who answered. “Not far. Hour or so at most. We will be hitting the troops and front lines in the afternoon tomorrow. Can you meet us at the camp tonight?” There was no worry of safety in the Spymaster’s eyes. Athena answered with a quick nod and took off into the forest in a fade-step to keep on her companion’s heels. He weaved through the trees aimlessly, leading her far from the beaten path and into the thickest part of the woods. Light barely penetrated the canopy of green, making it more difficult to pursue him.

But she followed until the breath grew hot in her lungs and her hands began to shake, bursting into a large clearing where Kain sat patiently looking out into the trees. This was the most urgently he had passed on a message. There were troop updates from Briala’s people and the wolves. They were all moving in towards Corypheus’s army and she kept having to reinforce the animals to not
engage with the red lyrium. Even if she knew what it was, it didn’t mean she had a cure for it. It was best to avoid it altogether.

She slowly walked up behind him and looked around the spot, running her hand through the fur on top of his head. “Where are they?”

He gestured his nose ahead and let out a small growl in the back of his throat. There. They’re coming for us.

“Who is it coming?” The wolf was silent but there was movement in the trees. Immediately from the sound of it she could tell they were large, very large. Trees cracked underneath their weight and she fought to jerk back when they came into the sunset’s view. A group of great bears, the largest she had ever seen, broke through the wall of trees and came forward in a strong formation. In their center, a beast the likes she had never seen.

“Old Scarred Paw.” She whispered in respect, surrendering to the urge to drop to a knee out of respect. There was a buzz of magic in the air so thick it raised the hairs on the back of her neck. She opened her mind and tapped into her shapeshifting abilities, eyes partially aglow as she listened for them.

Poison in our homes. Red in color, sets fires. The old bear spoke in a poetic rhythm. A low grumble echoed from his jowls and she nodded in response.

“Yes, a common enemy to us all.” He shook his large head and stepped forward. She did the same, coming to where he looked down at her.

The wolves speak of battle. Why. She had to resist bending backwards to look at him but she steeled herself and ground her heels into the earth.

“It is your home as well as ours. This thing is a threat to the world. If we cannot stop him here, his army must not be allowed to live. The red, the crystals of fire you see?” The bear nodded gently and the others behind him made sounds of discomfort.

It screams. Unnatural.

“Yes. That must be burned. There are others in his ranks. Soft-fleshed, like me, they can be
targeted. They bring demons in from the other side. If their heart stops, so does the connection to the other plane.” She poked her belly to prove a point of human fragility. Old Scarred Paw made a noise that resembled laughter.

\[ \text{You are not fragile; the wolves do not lie. We will help you.} \]

He paused and tilted his head to the side. \[ \text{Do you seek the glass that lies in the forest?} \]

It was her turn to tilt her head in confusion. “Glass of the forest?” The bear looked to its comrades and gestured for her to follow him. She looked down to Kain and shrugged, moving through the woods behind the behemoths of the forest. They took her into the depths to where it was so dark she only knew where they were by their scent and the sound of their breath. When Old Scarred Paw moved to the side, she saw exactly what he meant.

An eluvian.

Her eyes lit up in delight as she ran her hand over its surface. It was completely intact and it appeared to be untouched for quite some time. “Have. . .you seen anyone come through this?”

A cub came between her legs and yawned. \[ \text{Not in a long time.} \]

She nodded and looked behind her to Kain. “Stay and guard this, okay? I’ll be right back.” The wolf let out a soft whine as she whispered the passcode and stepped through the elvhen gateway. The alluring colors drew her in and the air felt thick with magic. This area of the Crossroads had not been used in such a long time. Had Briala’s people even found it? The path was full of gnarled branches and trees that threatened to reach the tips of the skies.

There was a strange pull within her gut. She would have called it instinct if she knew better, but she decided to follow it through the winding woods and past the dozens of collected mirrors. Some of them were beaten and broken by time, but there were a few where she could see more forest on the other side of them. It wasn’t a far walk, but it was clear where the arches of the trees led to.

There was a single eluvian, grand in nature surrounded by trees with blooming flowers in the branches. The reds and whites drew her in before she was standing in front of it, peering into the other side of it. She gasped and stepped forward, running her fingers along the mirror to activate it. What was on the other side slapped her speechless. Her face grew pale and her lips dry.

On the other side of the mirror. . . was the Well of Sorrows.
Her activating the eluvian sent a shimmer of power through the shrine with the well in front of her. She dared not cross over into it. It felt wrong since she had not done the rites to obtain passage. Even standing on the side, it was a remarkable sight that she did not feel worthy to see. There was movement in the Temple of Mythal, a shifting of air that appeared like glass.

Athena instantly withdrew her hand and had to fight to keep her expression blank when the Well’s protector appeared. A Sentinel glad in golden armor with eyes as piercing as blades walked to the eluvian and crossed his arms. He did not pass through; they could see each other plainly. A slim braid of silver hair hung over his shoulders as he assessed her with a hardened gaze. His lips pulled back in a disapproving snarl when she raised her hands in surrender.

“Abelas.” She called out softly, relaxing when he was surprised by her knowledge of his name.

“How do you know of me, shemlen?” His tone was no nicer than his expression. He began to slow pace in front of the mirror like a panther, his gaze never leaving hers as she stood on the other side of the mirror.

“It is difficult to explain – but I have knowledge of this world and its future. Please – “ She was cut off by a disgusted scoff from the other side.

“Do not insult my people by using your tongue to speak its language, no matter what your spirit appears to hold.” Athena clenched her jaw and finally gave up on the passive ally act.

“Fine. There is a threat coming to the Temple and I happened to stumble across this eluvian. I figured while I’m here I could warn you.” The Sentinel paused, stroking his chin with his hand while gesturing with the other hand for her to continue. She nodded in silent gratitude. “The Threat is an ancient Tevinter magister by the name of Corypheus. He uses corrupted lyrium to fuel his army of monstrosities. He plans to come and use the Well for his own gains.”

Abelas did not hesitate to respond. “And what of your gains, shem? What evidence do you have for me to believe you? The Sentinels only wake when a threat comes to the Temple. . . “He shot her a dark smirk. “Yet I was not wakened when you touched the sanctum. It reacted as if you were – “ He stopped his words and then shook his head, the smirk of mischief never leaving his face.

She shifted uncomfortably and gave him a heavy stare. “Are you a Dreamer? Like many of your people, Elvhen?”
He nodded silently and she clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth. "If you wish to see the truth, seek out a spirit of Inspiration in the Fade. She is my companion and I give her permission to go through my memories. She will have what you seek. The Inquisition is bringing troops to help. Please – don’t engage. “ She looked to the side to catch her breath before coming back to meet his gaze. “I would hate for any Sentinel to die unnecessarily. But if you attack us, we can not sit by and idly die to save you. This creature coming for you. He cannot die. He will not stop.”

Abelas looked her up and down once more and she felt every bit of his gaze. It passed through her like a current of magic and she forbade the shiver that threatened to show her as vulnerable. “Very well. I will do as you say. But this does not mean we will not bleed to protect our Temple or that I fully trust your words. We are bound: battle through battle and throughout time.” He steeled his gaze and looked at the glass of the eluvian. “Return to your world. Where you linger does not do well for your kind.” He then tapped against the glass and deactivated it, leaving her the ability to finally let out a sigh and run a hand through her hair.

It was an unexpected interaction. . . but hopefully his pride would not blind him. She offered help and if they were not as violent as she remembered perhaps more of them could survive. Athena nodded with a boost of confidence and lightly jogged out to the entrance and deactivated the window with a knock of her knuckles against the surface. Even in the thickness of the forest, she could tell that it was night time. She pulled on the connection to Kain and he was nearby in the forest with the bears.

*Return to camp. Tell them I’m coming home.*

The wolf bounded off without hesitation and she took in a deep breath of the clean forest air. It was a gorgeous night. . .and she would take her time going back to camp on the eve battle.

Chapter End Notes

I am at a loss. We've reached over 2000 kudos and I don't know what to say besides Thank you, thank you, thank you. I wouldn't be writing this without your constant feedback and it's really made my life and writing better. Here's to more stories and creative progression!
The forest was nearly pitch black, but she made her way through slowly following Kain’s scent and using the resources the woods provided. He had made a curious journey to camp. His trail went up to different trees and she could tell he was trying to mark nearly half of the trees as his in the Emerald Groves. Athena reached up to the sky and let out a sigh. There was a smile on her face and she couldn’t quite figure out why. It might have been because of the fireflies that flittered in front of her gaze and danced to the silent beat of nature. Or the song that the cicadas and other insects sang in the bark and branches of the trees.

It was all just serene.

She anticipated being to the camp within the hour and she found her steps growing slower. It was always hard to sleep the night before a battle. Cullen and his soldiers would be scurrying about trying to make last minute preparations. The speed of Josephine’s quill would be on its highest speed possible... and more than likely the Inquisitor would be having private time with her lover to destress. None of those things were very silent.

She rubbed the bridge of her nose and groaned at the thought, stopping when she heard the breaking of a branch on her right. With a pulse of magic, she found nothing. But yet it again the sound repeated on her left – and the air grew thick.

There was a momentary flick of panic within her gut and her heart, but once she took in a deep breath and realized who it was, she couldn’t help but smile. “Good evening, Fen.”

A rumbling chuckle echoed from the woods as if it were all around her, but she found comfort in the sound instead of fear. She dropped her hands to her sides and opened her palms out as a gesture of welcome. “You know me so well now?” He asked with teasing in the many voices that came with his presence.

“I know you think you’re a great hunter but give yourself away. Is it on purpose, I wonder?” She asked out loud, eyes bright as the fireflies lit up the area between the trees that she was in. A breeze brushed up against the back of her neck and she turned around to be greeted by two glowing eyes in the woods. She couldn’t make out the body but soon the two eyes became six red ones that were walking towards her in wolf form. The creature shook his head and laughed again, shrugging politely before coming within hand’s reach of her.

Without even thinking of it, she ran her hand through the top of his fur with a smile. He paused, as he normally did underneath her touch before relaxing. He rumbled and groaned as she used the
nails in her petting, walking past and continuing to scratch until she grabbed his ear playfully and walked with amazement for their surroundings. Like when they were alone together, he shuddered at the touch on his ear and she saw the fur on his body rise before he regained control. “What brings you to the woods this evening, Athena?” He asked with mild curiosity in his voice.

“Making the final preparations for tomorrow’s march on a fallen Temple. It is a Temple of Mythal that has been untouched for years, and we hope to keep Corypheus from contaminating it with his presence.” The wolf tilted his head to the side with a hum of curiosity.

“What does he hope to find in such a place?” She turned on her heel to face him, a mix of anticipation for the battle and happiness in the forest bringing a confident smile to her face.

“He hopes to find the power of a God. But. Thankfully we won’t be the only ones fighting back. There will be elvhen at our sides.” All six eyes widened in shock and she could only cross her arms over her chest at his response.

“Elvhen?” He clarified.

“Yes, Fen. Elvhen such as you.” She stated plainly, cheekily pressing the quote she knew Abelas would speak to him. It felt fitting and tongue-in-cheek. Fen’Harel had to hide his slight gasp, clenching his fangs together while casting his gaze to the ground.

“That is. . . unexpected news. What do you know of the ones that reside there?” There wasn’t a hint of mischief in his voice, it was genuine curiosity. Did he not know of the Sentinels? Or did he not know that they still lived after so long?

“I know that they are going to protect their home, and are duty-bound to do so. It’s my own personal goal to prevent their deaths as much as possible. Time and humanity’s mistakes have undone them enough. They cannot help being called to fight, so I will use the woods to try and fight alongside them. Granted… if they don’t kill me first.” She rubbed the back of her neck in sudden nervousness for the plan tomorrow. She had the wolves, the bears, and if she needed to: the insects like from Adamant. The very thought sent a disgusted shudder down her spine as the Dread Wolf took a step forward, a weird hesitation in his movements and expression.

“You would fight alongside these warriors? You have not even met them yet.” She shrugged and nodded to him, holding his gaze until a blush crawled up her neck. He chuckled low in his throat and took a step back. The air began to swirl around them, and she could feel the presence of magic on her skin. It sent the small hairs on her arms and the back of her neck on edge. Out of response, warmth flooded through her belly and between her legs, but she kept her face as blank as possible.
“Do you trust me, Lady Athena?”

Well that’s a loaded question.

She relaxed her arms at her side and took in a deep breath through her nose, letting out the pent-up sigh with another nod. “I suppose I do, even though that is against logic and my instincts. Why do you ask, Dread Wolf?”

The lines of his form began to shift and waver within the magic, the redness of his eyes melting to black as he smiled. “Close your eyes.” He asked and, so she obeyed.

Immediately she felt pressure over her brow as a veil of unknown material wrapped around her eyes. She opened her eyes and saw nothing but darkness. Panic gripped her throat and she took in a frightened breath, stepping back without even thinking of it. There was a soft shushing in front of her and gentle hands steadied on her shoulders. The touch alone didn’t help but she knew it, was intimately familiar with it. “Forgive me. I – wished to speak plainly.” Athena reached up and touched his forearms to physically confirm that he was standing in front of her.

He wore light but scaled armor with gloves underneath his gauntlets, obscuring the touch of his skin from her. When she touched him she heard the soft, quick intake of his breath. “Then you are free to do so. Why the secrecy?”

Again, he laughed in a sound that was comfortingly familiar, and she heard the shake of his head from the shifting of his armor. “Allow me this. It has been... many years since anyone has seen me as someone outside of the wolf. It takes adjustments.” He cleared his throat and removed his hands from her shoulders and she could only imagine that he put them behind his back. She could hear him step back from her and the air between them grew cold. Magic still clouded and mixed the true identity of his voice, but her heart was full of nothing but hope. “I am always asking you questions and I realized it was rude of me not to allow you the same respect. Do... do you have any for me?”

She swallowed a lump of nerves and nodded without hesitation. “Anything?”

She could almost hear his smile. “Within reason. Yes.”

Athena ran a hand through her hair and made a hum of consideration. She gripped the root of her hair to make some sensation on her skin and reminder that this was real. She was no longer in the
in-between crossroads of the eluvian and she was not in the Fade. This was just him and her, and he was trying. “Did. . . did you rest by my side? That night in the Emerald Graves by the river. It felt like. . .” She paused and smirked while thinking of home. “It felt like when my own wolf companion at home slept by my side, but much larger.”

There was a pause before a soft answer with a smile on his lips: “Yes.” He took a step closer to her and she wet her lips before continuing. It was difficult to hear the song of the forest over the sound of her heart pounding in her ears.

“Did you protect my daughter in the Fade? As well as I?” Another small step closer.

“Yes.” He groaned and shifted his weight before answering again. “That demon of Despair was powerful. It has your scent now, knows your place in the Fade. You would be wise to keep yourself protected for the future. I pray that no such tragedy should befall you again, Athena.”

The sincerity and delicate nature of his tone nearly brought tears to her eyes. She balled her hands into fists as her side and looked down to the ground. Even though she couldn’t see him, it didn’t feel right to hold his gaze when she fought tears. “Why do you follow me, Fen’Harel? What use am I to you?” She refused to bring forth the animosity that she had when asking a question like that towards him. In the past, he had claimed that his people talked about her, or that he wanted to see the one they called Goddess. All things felt like excuses. She didn’t know if the elves talked about her or if he heard about it from his agents. She wanted the truth.

There was a shift in the air within the magic and it pressed against her with enough pressure to almost be an embrace. “You are the first in many eons to not run from me or fear the sight of me. You - are so complex and difficult to understand. You give blood, you give sweat, you give tears to a people that are not yours, for a world that is not yours. Why?” He asked while emotion choked his voice and nearly gave away his character.

Athena couldn’t help the soft tears that formed heavily in her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. Her stomach felt like it was flipped over, and she wanted nothing more than to run into his arms and confirm the suspicion and knowledge that she knew to be true. She wanted to trace the features of his face with her hands and let him know it was okay. She knew, she loved him still. “Because it is the right thing to do. I care for the people who have put their faith in me. It would wound me to know I have disappointed them in some way.”

He did not answer so she took a step forward towards him, hands wringing in nervousness as she cleared her throat. “This question may seem odd to you, but, did you bring me here, Fen’Harel? Are you the reason for me even being here?” She didn’t know why but the words continued to fall at a panicked and honest rate from her tongue. “I saw a wolf before I was brought through a rift, a wolf with red eyes and black fur and it looked just like –“
“No.” The single word was full of such genuine sadness and sincerity that she gasped and halted her words. The tears began to flow down her cheeks and her hands shook at her side at his confession. She had shown Solas the way she was brought to Thedas and he seemed confused by it all. But he answered now as the Dread Wolf and was honest, or at least it felt like it. He wasn’t the one who brought her over here. There was a door shutting in her mind that felt like closure and it welled up the emotions in her throat. She stepped forward again and uttered her last question, hands running through her hair over the magical veil that rested there before she wiped the tears from her cheeks.

“C-can I touch you?” The air halted in its current and stood still. The sound of sudden silence was so deafening it broke her heart. She attempted to contain her emotions, but they would not stop running down her face and onto the forest floor below.

“Yes – “Before she could finish another thought he stepped forward and took her into his arms. They crashed together, and she felt the warmth of a furred cloak press against the front of her body. Her hands gripped him underneath it as the power from the sudden collision and rush of emotions brought them both to their knees. She couldn’t pin why, but she allowed herself to sob in her arms, but even as she did it there was a slight smile on her face. His touch was known. It called her spirit and screamed of nothing but safety and warmth. The scent was comforting, and he held her silently as she allowed her emotions to flood out of her until she felt satisfactorily hollow.

Once she was able to catch her breath, she let out a sigh with half of a laugh. “I – uh – apologize. That was unexpected.” She paused and wiped her face quickly with the backs of her gloves. “It hasn’t been an easy time as of late.”

He hummed and relaxed his grip on her. Even as she cried, it felt like he was holding his breath. His hold on her was light but at the same time it was obvious he did not want to let her go. “There is no need to apologize. Grief is never easy, Athena.”

Athena couldn’t help but nod in agreement, looking up at his face with the mask still snug over her eyes. She twisted her mouth to the side and touched his chest lightly. It was armored and felt like dragon scale underneath her touch. They both stopped breathing in the same moment when her fingers began to trace their way up. Past the collar of his armor she felt bare skin and he turned his head, so her hand quickly moved to the hood at the back of his cloak. Instead her fingers followed that, lips half-parted and breath hitched as she felt over the wolf’s head cowl.

She could feel the tips of its ears and then the closed eyes before the bridge of the snout. As her fingers counted out to make sure there were still six, even on the hood, all of them opened underneath her fingers. She yelped and gripped the ears instead as panic flooded through her chest. He instantly chuckled underneath his breath and she could feel the hot puffs of hair on her face and
his chest move in front of her. Still, she moved on again from his ears and carefully moved her hands past the eyes and to the edge of his maw. Her fingers carefully traced the edges of the canines that hung below, and she moved to touch his face when he quickly grabbed her wrists when she was within inches of touching his skin.

They stayed in that moment, his refusal thickening the air and bringing a surprised gasp from her lips. She chided him. “For a wolf you are quite skittish.”

He released her hands slowly and sighed. “Normally people are not so eager to be this close. It is not something I am accustomed to.”

Her lips twitched into a frown. He had just held her sobbing for minutes but suddenly it was different when she wanted to touch him? It felt like a power play, and she wasn’t having it. She cast a barrier around the veil on her eyes and pulled hard. At first it resisted, but she cast flames at the tip of her fingers and tore through it to look down at him with a growl of frustration. He was barely crouched in preparation to stand, but he looked up at her under the hood on his eyes.

There was the slight hint of his jawline under it, but he angled it better and she imagined he was avoiding her gaze and looking down at the ground. Athena scoffed and threw the veil at his feet, watching as it dissolved into the ground. “What are you afraid of, Dread Wolf?” Silence was her answer. He looked to the side and clenched his jaw, refusing to answer her. She took a step forward and squelched down the urge to scream at him. He was on his knees before her, vulnerable, and actively avoiding her gaze. She wanted to throw the hood back and look into her lover’s eyes and let him know that she accepted him regardless of his past.

The only thing she would want to change is his future, if he allowed it.

“Are you afraid that someone might actually accept you? Befriend you regardless of – “ She stepped forward and he finally stood up and stepped back, his body on the borders of the shadows of the woods.

“That would be foolish and unwise. You – “ His voice cut off and he looked up so sharply she couldn’t help but turn around herself to see what distracted his attention. A swirl of wind from in front of her was the only sign that he had left, and a lingering warning before he dashed from the clearing. “Your companion is coming to find you.” There were only a few seconds of reprieve before Kain came dashing into the area with a concerned look on his face. She didn’t have to ask to know that she as late and people were asking about her. Athena let out a loud groan before turning around to kick a tree with a barrier wrapped around her leg. The force shook more than dozen pinecones from the branches, but Kain wasn’t having any of it.
“I know, babe. I know. But he can be TOOTHLESS!” She screamed into the forest, challenging her lover as he escaped back to camp. She ran her hands through her hair and let out a sigh, gesturing with her head back towards the resting place for the night. Kain bounded happily at her side, tail slowly wagging the closer they got. Even then, in the thick of the night, she could feel the bears surrounding the camp and protecting it. The moment the light of the fire hit her face she was called over to a make shift war table by Rathein.

The entire Inner Council was looking exhausted. Maps were thrown about the table and there were different sketches and plans thrown about. Cullen was in the middle of a briefing. “He is plowing through the forest with no intention of stopping while burning everything in his path. He has brought them all, Inquisitor. The Wardens, the Templars, and Leliana’s scouts have reported seeing multiple demons.”

The Herald hummed and looked over to her Hand, gently intertwining her fingers with hers as they surveyed the plans together. “Did you find any help out there in your trek in the woods?”

Athena cleared her throat and nodded, a slight blush of embarrassment coming to her cheeks. “Yes. Don’t laugh. But – we have bears on our side.”

Josephine nearly dropped her quill. “You went out into the woods. . .and found – bears?”

She couldn’t help but put her hands up and extend them far off to show them the size, a playful grin on her face. “Absolutely. Huge ones that want to help us. The Red Lyrium that Corypheus brings is poisoning the forest and they want to get him out of their home. I told Old Scarred Paw to target the Wardens and the demons since they don’t have poison in their blood –“

Cullen’s eyes went wide. “Old Scarred Paw? Wasn’t there – “ He snapped his fingers and looked to Leliana. “Wasn’t there a missive from the requisition officer in the Emerald Graves about such a creature? It had taken out almost ten men!”

Athena shrugged. “They stumbled into his home. He’s really quite friendly, and more importantly, he’s on our side.”

The Inner Council paused and looked to the Inquisitor slowly for her approval. Rathein was too tired to consider any other options. She let out a sigh and rubbed the back of her neck. “Alright
then. Fucking bears it is.”
The scene before them was pure and utter carnage.

Cullen’s strategy was flawless, and his troops couldn’t have been better prepared.

Josephine had called upon every connection they had to fund the march and ensure that there would be enough siege equipment, healing supplies, and soldiers from every estate within Orlais that had pledged their allegiance to the Inquisition.

Leliana’s scouts had been adept at giving them explicit locations of Corypheus’s separate camps and what kind of enemies they were going to face. She had worked with Athena to get her to communicate in short messages with a few ravens, but with the current strain from the wolves and the bears they were only able to immediately get a few results.

But they were still effective.

The soldiers reacted as she expected when they were told that the animals of the forest would be helping them. Some of them reacted with fear, discomfort plain on their faces as they appeared to be vigilant for their Commander. They were quickly soothed by the veteran soldiers of Adamant, who spoke in hushed whispers about how her “beast magic” saved them with a swarm of locusts. She noticed that the details were exaggerated when the elves spoke between one another, but ignored it and made her way to the front lines. The main bulk of their troops had been fighting for days. Every time they had a success Corypheus’s own hordes pushed them back two.

It was a fight to the finish and the Inquisition never wavered.

Rathein had brought the entire Inner Party with her to act as the pushing force behind the soldiers. They all arrived at the opening camp and Morrigan couldn’t help but smile. “I wonder: is it Andraste your soldiers invoke during battle, or does a more immediate name come to their lips?”

The Herald had the good graces to scoff. “Corypheus is weakening our forces and killing our men and you have the space in your thoughts to think of faith?”

The Witch of the Wilds nodded and looked to the forest. “If your scouts report accurately, I believe these ruins to be the Temple of Mythal.”
Athena and Rathein both answered in unison. “Yes, it is.”

There were explosions littered throughout the forest towards the Temple and the Herald did not hesitate. She flicked her spirit hilt to the side and summoned her blade with a nod of her head. “Alright. Let’s move out, everyone. Be on your guard because we have a lot of ground to cover.”

There were no rallying cries for the Inquisition necessary to boost their efforts. They were not the typical soldiers that ran into war. They were not the farmers, the blacksmiths, or the common people that looked to the Herald of Andraste for faith and guidance. They were all warriors of their own who mostly marched to the beat of their own drums. Granted, that did not mean there were not cries and hoots of excitement running through them as they began to run down the hollowed-out logs that created the path.

Bull affectionally patted his battle axe as the sun gleamed from his Dawnstone armor that Rathein had created him. It clinked against itself as they ran down on the outskirts of the battle. Varric looked up from his position and laughed out loud. The large Qunari soldier appeared as a pink disco ball when the sun caught it just right.

“Hey, if we can’t get the upper hand in battle, at least they’ll laugh themselves to death as Pinkie over here.” The group tried not to laugh with the severity of the situation hanging overhead. But Bull cracked a smile and chuckled underneath his breath. Athena was next to follow, her hand covering her mouth to try and suppress the sound. Most of the party joined in and it was Cassandra’s sound of disgust that brought them back to focus.

“Such an inspirational group leading the Inquisition into battle.” Morrigan murmured underneath her breath.

Rathein finally responded by turning on her heel and running backwards. She met the Witch’s eyes with a confident nod and grin on her face. “Fuck yeah they are. And they’re mine. I wouldn’t ask for anyone better.”

The light-hearted chuckles melted away into looks of determination. Athena extended her arm to the side in a whip of a movement and summoned her staff. The stormheart from around them gathered into a pitch-fork with a curved blade on the bottom at her will, solidifying with a flash of pure flame when she gripped her hand around the staff.

Morrigan hummed as they passed through the other end of the fallen log. “Mmm – do you feel the
magic crackling? Something more powerful than the red Templars stirs.”

The Sentinels.

Athena pushed forward with a fade-step, moving right past the Marquise Brialia and “Emperor” Gaspard, who shouted: “Glory to Andraste and the Inquisition! Orlais fights with you!”

The two were a moderate distance apart from each other but their forces worked as one, for now.

A chevalier used their large shield to push a templar into the Inquisitor’s path. Bull swung his axe into one as they passed by to break the seal on his weapon and get it dirty. Brialia vaulted over a Templar and ran at Athena’s side, her voice low but loud enough to be over the sound of battle. “The doors were shut here, Lady Wolfsbane. Something is blocking us out.” Athena blinked and looked over with a nod to show she was listening. “Maybe you can push through. You’re the only shem I know that can stand the damned place.”

A horror flanked them from the side and Kain leapt into battle, his fangs tearing at the fleshy bit of the man so that Athena could stab her staff into his chest and pour pure flames through his body. Brialia curved around back and buried her blades into the creature’s neck with inhuman grace, a wicked smile showing underneath the ornate mask she wore. Kain snarled and stayed at his companion’s side, looking to the forest with an excited expression on his face.

They’re here.

The group rounded the path near the Great Waterfall and Athena barely had time to be amazed by the landscape. The ground itself was buzzing with magical energy it gave fire to everyone in the party. It was eerily familiar of when she was in the Fade, of how the magic flowed through her veins as if it were the blood that kept her heart going. She chocked it up to being close to the Well of Sorrows, but it was invigorating nonetheless. There was a large roar on her right that shocked her core and rattled her shapeshifting senses. In an attempt to follow them, she ran to a large rock and vaulted off the top, using training and timing to land on top of Old Scarred Paw’s back as he ran into the fray. From the top of his back she scouted out the area and called down to Rathein.

“Marksman on top of the ruins and soldiers on the ground. Varric, Sera, take care of the archers. We’ll get the rest!”

The bears and wolves moved in a wave of fur through the waters. It was an absolute massacre and
Athena thrived in the chaos of it. A cool barrier tingled over her skin and she couldn’t help but grin. Solas was on the ground taking advantage of all of the water. Large icicles, larger than the ones he could normally summon, jutted from the earth and impaled the templar enemies. This made them easier targets for the creatures and the warriors to go after. Did he feel the increase surge of magic as well? Or was he simply getting comfortable with his increased power? Regardless, the barrier on her skin felt like silent encourage. *Go wild.*

She couldn’t help but feel excited as they rode down the hill on the opposite side of the falls. With the entire Inner Party and the creatures of the wild: The Templars didn’t stand a chance. Athena found her bearings and stood on top of Old Scarred Paw, targeting templars and lighting them ablaze with a flick of her staff. The bear underneath her was ruthless. His strength alone could knock over a Red Templar Behemoth and his roar stunned everyone that heard it, even the shocked Inquisition soldiers.

Even still, cries of victory began to ring out. “The Red Templars fall!”

From her vantage point she saw Rathein crack a smirk, until a sea of red brought her attention back to the thrum of battle within her ears. “Inquisitor!” She called out, pointing forward through a break in the trees. “An entire camp full of Red Templars!”

The Herald summoned up her spiritual blade and thrust it into the air. “Light it up!”

The camp appeared to be the forward camp for the Red Templars. A dozen large tents were scattered about through the forest and banners of Tevinter were hung from the branches. Athena targeted those first.

Two small fireballs caught the expensive fabric and burned it quickly. The ashes and billowing banners fell to the ground and lit the tents. Thankfully expensive fabric burned easy and Tevinter was not known for sparing a single copper. Something about being within the forest called upon her to speak the language of the People. Athena turned on her heel to the wolves and the bears, pointing to the crystallized soldiers that had been corrupted past the point of recognition. *Make it easier for the soldiers; don’t swallow their blood.*

The bears responded by head-butting the Templars to get them off balance and make them vulnerable for close-range attacks. The wolves were great at weaving through the tents and the trees with their agility and distracting the red lyrium barbs that the horrors could shoot. The barrier still tingled on her skin, so she decided to have a bit of fun while it lasted. Athena pushed her foot into Old Scarred Paw’s back and pointed towards a behemoth in the back of the camp. It staggered around with its heavy club of an arm, a feral cry echoing through the camp as it raised it above its head and slammed it down. Red crystals erupted from the earth to try and separate the Inquisition party, but she was already on her way.
“That one is ours, my friend. Kain!” Athena called as she threw her staff into the ground on the side near where Blackwall currently fought off a Warden, so it would stick and be there for her later. The bear began to run to create momentum underneath her, the wind blowing her hair back to reveal the almost wicked grin she had on her face. There was something purely spiritual about fighting next to such beasts, religious even. She didn’t believe in the gods, but she believed in the natural magic that ran in the soil below them, the call that connected her to the wondrous beasts below and around her. It caused her heart to beat with purpose in such a way that sounded the drums of war within her skull.

Old Scarred Paw stopped dead in his tracks and gave her the boost to jump from his back and pull her arm back to prepare for a punch. White and blue flames danced around her white knuckled-fist. The heat did not threaten her, but it certainly illuminated the monstrous features of the behemoth below her. It roared and then choked on the blood that filled its mouth when her knuckles collided with its jaw. The flames instantly burned the flesh that was left on his skin. The putrid smell would have normally caused her to gag but she was too high on the rush of the battle. The creature moved to hit her with her club, but she kicked her leg up in front of her and cast a stream of flames at its arm. There was a spot of weak flesh where the crystal met skin and it was her goal to destroy it and render the club of red lyrium useless.

Kain jumped up and nipped at the exact spot with his teeth. The behemoth roared and turned quickly to follow the black blur of fur that weaved in between the red crystals of lyrium. Athena opened her palm and sent a surge of magic to her own magic within the staff. It vibrated from the earth and then launched into her palm and upon contact she swiped upwards with the bottom of the blade. It sliced further into the rotten flesh, blood too red to be normal shooting in a stream. Arterial. Great. She couldn’t help but continue to smile as her and her wolf partner played a game of distraction and strike. It wasn’t long before she had severed the backs of the creature’s knees and brought him to the ground. Even face down in the earth he fought but all of the major tendons in his appendages had been cut.

Without hesitation she raised her pitchfork-shaped staff and buried it into his skull.

“Didn’t your mother ever tell you not to play with your food?” Dorian quipped with a grin. She turned to see them all waiting on her with mixtures of expressions. Rathein looked at the defeated creature and let out a whistle of appreciation, clapping her hands slowly while leaning on her staff for support.

Athena didn’t realize she was panting. She wiped the sweat from her brow and looked to the party. “Is everyone alright?”

Everyone nodded, save for Sera who had a superficial cut on her arm that Solas was quickly
wrapping. “Did anyone see anything other than Templars by any chance?”

The Inquisitor, who had already been briefed on what to expect, shook her head. “No – no sign of them yet.”

Athena put two fingers in her mouth and whistled to the creatures, aiming down the sheltered tunnels beneath the god-sized hollowed trunks and canopies. “Continue on that way. They have our backs.” She dispersed her staff and looked over to Solas, whose expression could only be described as amused. “I’ll get the front.”

She jumped and shifted into the midst of the bears and wolves into her own form. The power within the earth invigorated her. Her aura flowed like ethereal flame over her features and left a small trail when she ran. Old Scarred Paw let out a huff of a laugh before roaring his commands. The bears led the charge while the wolves, save for Kain, dispersed through the forests to act as scouts.

“Ya know – creepy as it is – her pets can kick some arse.” Sera grumbled from the back.

“The Wilds have always been a force to be reckoned with, but typically it has remained invisible to the unworthy eye.” Morrigan commented with her natural purr, glancing over at Athena as she began to run down the hills. There weren’t any signs of the elven warriors yet. She noticed that Abelas’s aura was impossible to ignore, much like Solas’s when he came to her in the woods under his divine guise. Would the other sentinels, mage or no, carry that same thing as well?

Her answer came in the form of a whisper through the trees. She jerked her head to find the source, but the words found her regardless. You did not lie to us. Your warning has been heeded.

She almost stopped dead in her tracks but continued to run alongside Old Scarred Paw. The great bear hummed in acceptance and she wondered if he could hear the words too. The red lyrium corrupts our forest and threatens the Temple of the All-Mother. Do what you promised and your duty. Protect it.

The group burst into the Ruined Arches and yet again she was stunned by the beauty of the place. Even though the temple was in ruins, the majesty and the power that ran through the earth fueled her steps. The pack of animals worked together to tear apart their enemies as they came up. They were ruthless and relentless. Athena had cast a barrier over her mouth to keep the blood out but even she received a thrill as her fangs tore through flesh like paper. Solas always hesitated before a kill. There was a twitch in his eyes, a pang of uncertainty she knew well after fighting next to him for so long. He thought them to be people with their own families, their own loved ones. After
seeing what horrors the Red Templars committed, Athena felt very little guilt at all.

Like the Wardens, they had made their bed out of fear. The Templars were always the one in power. They raped, tortured, and killed mages for no reason at all, still they craved more at the hands of Corypheus.

Athena had lost herself within the bloodlust of the battle. Templar and Warden became blurs in her mind as they tore from soldier to soldier. Her fur was painted red and it felt like they were about to break through when she heard a cry from behind her. She snapped from the haze of battle, a feral snarl on her lips when she realized what she was looking at. A red templar shadow burst from the fog, his blade digging deep into Rathein’s arm. It pinned her to the ground and she could smell the blood from where she stood. Bull roared and lifted his axe to catch the fiend, but he blinked back into shadow and disappeared.

Thankfully her senses were heightened. Surges of anger pumped with her heart and she took a moment to focus on the battlefield. The others were casting spells to find the creature as Rathein withdrew the blade in a fierce jerk that sent more bloody flying. She used the scent from the handle of the blade to track down the corrupted assassin. Athena sank her teeth into its ankle and snarled, ripping it from its stealth and into the fray. There was barely a second that went by before the rest of the party ended its life.

Solas had pinned the shadow’s legs so he couldn’t move, so it was helpless to disappear from Bull’s well-placed axe dissecting its body into two. Athena looked to Rathein with a soft whine. The Herald cursed and put her hand to the wound to stop the bleeding. “Are we close?” She asked between gritted teeth. Vivienne pulled out bandages and began to wrap it until she could further heal it. The mage only made two passes over her arm before the Inquisitor growled.

“This can wait. Samson is on the move. Let’s go!”

There was hesitation in the group, but Athena came up underneath her arm, surging and moving magic so that her size would grow. She then fit snuggly underneath her sister’s arm and helped her to run. They moved through the archways and then came to the front of the Temple’s gate. The white wolf paused and looked to Old Scarred Paw. I need to carry her. Press forward if you must, but the battle is ours. Protect your own.

The staircases leading to the two, large status of wolves was within sight. Were they put there as a constant reminder of Mythal and Fen’Harel’s friendship? Thinking of the Dread Wolf filled her with warmth, but it was Rathein’s cry of pain that brought her back. Vivienne was messing with the bandage again, but they didn’t have time. Her sister was one, like her, where she would sacrifice her own comfort for the sake of the group. She bent down and maneuvered to where Rathein could fall onto her back. The short-haired mage took a second, but she mounted it and gripped the fur that
grew in thick on the back of her neck.

“There. That must be the Temple of Mythal.” Morrigan said as they began running through the temple.

Vivienne clenched her jaw with warning. “Be careful, my dears. Corypheus is likely to make an appearance.” In the midst of her run, Athena glanced back at the Knight Enchantress and nodded. The mage gripped her staff and cast barriers over the entire party, the power of her spiritual blade flickering from the effort. “Prepare yourselves.”

Athena moved forward and broke through the arches. The group slowed, obviously stunned by the beauty of the temple and the litter of red templar corpses surrounding them. They all crouched behind the balcony and a sense of dread washed over them all. Sure enough, Corypheus stood at the front of the elvhen weapon that guarded the temple. There were a few Sentinels that stood, bound by duty to fight and protect their temple. Athena cursed and shifted her back to give Rathein the cue to get off.

“These are but remnants. They will not keep us from the Well of Sorrows.”

The Inquisitor moved, and Athena stood silently, looking for any of the Sentinels to catch her eye. They were all too focused on the Tevinter Magister in front of her. There was a brief moment of panic that flashed across her face. They weren’t moving. They didn’t need to die.

“Be honored. Witness death at the hands of a new God.”

The Sentinels looked up in shock as Corypheus entered the beam of the weapon. She glanced down to the group below them. Samson was surrounded by Wardens and Templars and an idea struck her. It was a foolish one, but it might work. What if there weren’t any Wardens in the area for him to possess? How far would his influence travel back to have to be summoned? It would give them extra time. In a spur of movement, she stood up from her position and allowed herself to be the only one visible. As Corypheus was blinded by the weapon’s beams she shouted out in the elvhen tongue: “Flee to the temple, you fools! We’ll cover your back!”

Her words pierced through the battle scene and things went quiet. The Sentinel backed up in suspicion just out of Corypheus’s reach. As the power of the defense mechanism and Corypheus’s might combined, she waved her staff in an arch over them and protected them in a barrier. “Go!”
Unfortunately, this drew Samson’s attention up to them. There was a disgusting sneer on his face as the elvhen weapon exploded around them. The dust gave Corpyheus’s chosen time to run across the bridge with his own small band of warriors, but Athena had other targets. She jumped from the balcony and ran to the warden corpses, spinning her staff in a circle and setting them all ablaze with the strongest magic she could muster. Rathein ran down and winced at the pain in her left arm, blood actively dripping down onto the ground.

“What are you doing? We need to follow Samson. We don’t have time for this.” There was no time for long winded explanations, so Athena looked to her sister and shifted her wrists to the side, sending another surge of magic into her fire glyphs that were eating away at the bodies of the fallen Wardens.

“Corpyheus uses the Blight in the Wardens to stay alive.” Solas’s eyes went wide and Vivienne cursed underneath her breath. “I’m trying to buy us time – Go! I can meet you.” She pushed with her magic against the Inquisitor towards the bridge. Thankfully Rathein wasn’t in the mood to argue so she just moved the rest of the Inner Party towards the bridge, Kain staying directly at Solas’s side and whining when he had to leave her. The bodies burned easily, and it was strange, but she could hear the high-pitched scream of the taint in their blood as it left their bodies. She couldn’t imagine what it was like to feel the darkspawn or to eventually go mad with their blood inside of them. Even still, her stubbornness wouldn’t have allowed her to fall to a person such as Corypheus.

She moved her hand to the last body and shot a stream of flame directly onto it. She furrowed her brows, pressing more magic into the attack until the flame turned blue. The skin did not burn. Fuck fuck fuck. Her heart dropped into her stomach and her eyes went wide. She brought her other hand into the attack as she began to step back. “Athena!” Cassandra cried from the temple’s entrance, her eyes cast to the sky. Fuck. The skin on the Warden began to shift and bubble up, corrupted magic shooing off her flames as if they were a parlor trick.

Without missing a beat, she turned on her heel and began to run. Her heart pounded against her ribcage and she desperately needed lyrium. Athena spun every bit of magic into her run, but the fade step could not beat the wings of the dragon as it closed in behind her.

Its roar felt hot on the back of her body so with a cry she threw her body through the door and rolled to stop herself. Cassandra and Blackwall slammed the door shut and the ancient enchantments flashed up the door to keep the dragon’s flame out. The entire party was winded. Panted and labored breaths filled the silence of the temple. Solas came to her side and helped her to a sitting position. Dorian brought over a lyrium potion and shared it with both of them.

Still, there was a dull headache in the front of her head. The high-pitched whine of the blight was close, and she looked around to them. “Does anybody hear that?”
Bull nodded and Solas made a hum while looking to the Inquisitor. The wound had not stopped bleeding, even as Vivienne poured her healing magic into it. Athena swallowed a lump of nerves and shook her head. She had that kind of wound before, except hers was a red lyrium barb from a spider instead of a Red Templar shadow. She attempted to wet her dry lips but there was nothing. So instead, she clenched her jaw and opened her palm to the side. Cole was quick to hear her thoughts and handed her his slimmest knife.

“Why isn’t the thing stopped, Vivienne?” Rathein asked, her voice weak and frustrated. Athena stood and walked over slowly, glancing to Bull with a knowing nod. He looked to the knife and cursed under his breath, gently finding a way to position himself behind the Herald and grip her shoulders.

“My dear, the wound is – “

“Corrupted. There’s a small shard of red lyrium in your arm still that isn’t allowing you to heal. Your body will eventually try to heal over it – so – “ The Inquisitor grinded her teeth and groaned, leaning back into Bull for support while nodding.

“Get it over, quick. We’re wasting time.”

Athena nodded solemnly, flicking the blade into her dominant hand with a click of her tongue. “Bull. Give her something to bite on. I’m speaking from experience, this is going to hurt.”
Hey all!

You have been wonderful and I just wanted to take this second to say thank you from the bottom of my heart and soul.

Somehow, my fic has rose to #15 of DA:I fics when you sort by kudos. I'm really at a loss for words. I don't think you all understand how much your support means for me and my writing career. I've started writing my own original story and even applied for a writing job for the first time. It honestly wouldn't have been possible without your constant comments, kudos, and support.

I'm eternally grateful. But stay tuned - things are about to *really* start heating up in this story.

The Inquisitor didn’t shed a single tear.

It took Athena almost a minute to find the miniscule shard of red lyrium embedded into her arm. It sang to her, pulled at all of her senses until she used the tip of the dagger to fling it from its place. Solas was quick to surround the cursed substance in flame until it faded into ash. Rathein cursed in whispers as Bull held her tight, but she didn’t even try to move. There was a determination and anger in her expression that Athena could recognize. Thankfully, it wasn’t directed at her.

Morrigan had read the ancient elvhen text and stated something about the passage rites, gesturing to the first small one as it lit up underneath her feet. Athena couldn’t help but groan in remembrance of the multiple times she had tripped over the damn things. That experience would save them time now, which was important for how short the Inquisitor was getting in her temper. “Do we really have time to dance around? Samson has blown a hole through the temple and will be getting to this ‘Well of Sorrows’ before we even leave this room.”

Cassandra made a small noise of agreement. “It feels like we would be wasting time. Corypheus is our true enemy here and he is outside those doors, apparently alive and unable to die. It would benefit us to move forward so Samson cannot get his hands on whatever Corypheus wants.”

Solas’s aura twitched in the miniscule way that she could recognize. Dorian assisted Vivienne with healing as her paramour examined the Temple around them. Athena looked to him and let out a sigh, looking back to the Herald and her close party. “Give me five minutes, ten tops.”
Varric huffed and crossed his arms. “Wait – seriously? You can do them that fast?” She twisted her lips to the side in a bashful smirk with a shrug.

“Unfortunately, yes. I have the damn things memorized. You know how many times – “ She began to start a rant but felt the pressure of her sister’s gaze on her. “Never mind. Yes. I can. You guys move up towards the main sanctum to explore the place and I will handle the puzzles. Whoever wants to join me if they’re curious can.”

The Seeker shook her head and Bull made a face to show his agreement with the warrior. Athena didn’t let down. “Believe it or not, Seeker, the Temple of Sacred Ashes had trials of its own that the Hero of Ferelden dealt with before reaching Andraste’s remains. Ask the Spymaster when we return. What if they had ignored the tests and trials laid before them and desecrated the temple? Or worse – what if they had poisoned the ashes like so many people had told them to do?”

The shock and frustration on her face was answer enough. She pulled her jacket forward and cracked her neck to the side. Solas cleared his throat and gestured to the first test that Morrigan was standing on. “This Temple appears to be sacred, holy to some. It would behoove us to respect it since it has lasted so many years.”

Athena walked past Morrigan and slowly walked along and around the blocks until they vibrated underneath her feet and opened the large main door that would lead to the others. Dorian raised a hand to his eyes to look through the door, whistling low underneath his breath. “This place is fascinating. How many like this do you think exist in the world?”

Solas’s lips twitched in annoyance. “A great many fewer than they were, thanks to some.”

“Oh, come now – how many times must be go through this?” The Tevinter snapped back while running a hand through his sweated hair.

“Once less.” Athena and Rathein answered in unison. The two women briefly smiled at each other as Morrigan led them up the stairs. Now that the red lyrium was removed from her arm, Rathein could stomach down elfroot potions and lyrium potions. The bleeding had slowed significantly, but the color was noticeably absent from her cheeks. Bull stayed close to her side with his axe strapped on his back. She swore that she saw his hand twitch to grab it every time somebody stepped on a branch or rustled some of the fallen stone. It was cute, but unnecessary. Rathein’s storm magic had only developed since the Inquisition had started. Even in her wounded state, Athena had no doubt that she could summon a storm that would bring the Temple to ashes.

As they moved up the stairs they not-so-delicately stepped over the body of a venatori mage and
red templar. “It appears this Temple is not as abandoned as it seems,” Morrigan purred.

“Yeah – and hopefully they don’t like the Templars as much as we do.” Varric quipped underneath his breath. Athena rolled her shoulders and smirked because as they walked into the main chamber there were only the bodies of Red Templars surrounding them. There were arrows and different marks of battle along their corpses, but thankful no Sentinels.

“Ah. Their hospitality extends here, I see.”

Athena scoffed. “Let’s be thankful. I’ll be right back.” She kicked the tip of her boot against the ground before zipping off into a fade step. She decided to start with the easier one first with the lever. She vaulted over the fence and ran along it, almost dancing as her feet collided with the enchanted tiles. Dorian followed her and leaned against the fence and smiled.

“And to think for a second I thought you were kidding.” There was a gust of wind as she moved by him.

“Nope!” There was a flicker of a smile on her face, but she refocused and completed the next puzzle with only a single stumble. Still, not many others were interested in exploring the Elvhen Temple. Its beauty was unparalleled from anything she had seen. The plants and wildlife had gone untouched for eons, yet it was preserved so perfectly. Even the air tasted old upon her tongue. She felt unworthy to be walking there, but something within her gut made this feel familiar, past the events she had seen in the game. It was an odd sensation that she chocked up to the exhaustion of battle, so she ignored it. She walked out with Dorian at her side to the next room when she heard a familiar question pierce the air from the vestibule they had been in before.

"Ah so they did decide to explore."

“Why would this be here?” Morrigan’s voice echoed. Dorian paused as Athena bit her tongue to keep from chuckling.

“What?” He arched a brow and nudged her in the side, the exhaustion plain on his face but it couldn’t overcome the charismatic’s man curious nature.

“Follow me, this is going to be good.” They ran up to the statue of the large wolf where Solas had his hands firmly placed behind his back with his jaw clenched. The others were resting and drinking potions in the area while Morrigan was looking over the statue. Athena brushed by Solas
and gently touched his lower back as she passed. He made a small hum low in his throat, but his gaze was firmly planted on the statue and the Witch of the Wilds that swayed next to it.

“In Elven Tales, he tricks their Gods into sealing themselves away in the Beyond for all time. Setting Fen’Harel in Mythal’s greatest sanctum is as blasphemous as painting Andraste naked in the Chantry.” Rathein groaned and Athena bit the inside of her cheek with a smirk, shrugging while looking over her shoulder to where the next puzzles rested.

“Would that be almost beautiful? Since she was burned at death I think her nudity in the Chantry could symbolize purity in a way.” Morrigan arched a single brow and didn’t answer, which only made her cheeky smirk break into a smile. “Just a question.”

“There is still a lot that we don’t know. Besides, if this is here, maybe the tales are wrong?” Rathein stated with slight annoyance in her voice. The wound’s bleeding had slowed but she was still moving without her usual speed and chipper energy.

“For all your ‘knowledge’, Lady Morrigan, you cannot resist giving legend the weight of history.” Solas nearly spat between clenched teeth. Athena glanced over her shoulder, noticing how he was carefully choosing his words here. “The wise do not mistake one for the other.”

“Pray tell. What meaning does our elven ‘expert’ sense lurking behind this?” There was a wave of shock through the group and thankfully most of them had the good sense to look annoyed. Dorian’s jaw was slightly open, and he looked down to her with his eyes wide. Are you hearing this? He seemed to convey through expression alone.

“None we can discern by staring at it.” Rathein let out an audible groan and stood up from her leaning position from the wall. She pointed to the set of stairs Athena had come back down with her arm fully extended and winked at Athena even though her face held no semblance of joking.

“Athena, please go finish the other puzzle so these two can make out once they’re done arguing. I think that would finally get rid of some of the tension in the air with these two.” Bull and Dorian both failed to hide their child-like laughter into the back of their hands. Blackwall huffed and Cassandra followed Athena into the next room, who walked with a sarcastic sway in her hips with a flip of her hand.

As she was leaving, she heard Dorian mumble something not-so-quietly to Rathein. “Wouldn’t you think that, you know, the “elven expert” who is actually elvish would know more about this whole thing?”
Rathein made a sound of amusement before elbowing the Tevinter in the ribs. Solas managed to stand a little straighter with wolf-like confidence in his posture. Athena could only smile before walking in to the final puzzle. It was the longest one that spanned the entire room. At once glance she let out a sigh and rubbed the back of her neck. “We are lucky that you have knowledge of these things, Athena. I cannot imagine stumbling around trying to do them myself.” Cassandra murmured under her breath, which earned her a playful scoff.

“I know that half the group out there wants to just jump down into the abyss.” She began stepping on the first tile and went slowly with this one. It was always the most complicated and would take more time if she messed it up. “But – even if you do not believe in the Elvhen Gods – there is a certain amount of respect you have to give to something that has stood time so long.” She gestured to the Temple around her and suddenly felt a pair of eyes on her. She slowly glanced over her shoulder, biting down the shudder that wanted to run down her back. But there was nothing. Abelas? Athena asked silently without even expecting an answer. Cassandra shifted her feet and leaned against the wall with her arms crossed over her chest. The Seeker never allowed herself to relax when there was the possibility for battle.

“Athena . . . Do you believe in these Elvhen Gods? You have said before your world had something similar to the Maker. What do you think of all this?” Athena paused on the current tile, looking around once more to see if anyone else was watching before shrugging over towards the Seeker.

“It is . . . difficult to say. I believe that the ones they name existed. I believe that the ashes of Andraste were used to heal Arl Eamon, so there must be power in that?” Athena jumped over the middle part blocking off the other side of the puzzle before continuing. “It is all very difficult. In my world, it was almost easy to dismiss religion. The world was millions of years old. Here . . . “She gestured to the whole of the temple by opening both arms and spinning around on the tile she stood on. “The evidence stares you plainly in the face.”

The Seeker hummed and didn’t say anything more. She kept her trained eye on the surroundings as Athena finished the final puzzle with a sigh of relief. The tiles flashed with a glow and then she felt a pull within her core, like she knew the door was open. The magic sizzled in the air and she heard Rathein give a small whoop of summoning to the both of them. The group had managed to crawl up the stairs to the temple and the door ahead of them was creaking open with magic in its joints. Athena and Cassandra joined them when a sudden uneasiness set into her belly.

Would Abelas say anything about their prior encounter? Could that be so easily explained without saying she had access to the eluvians? Suddenly her role felt very complicated. How much could she get away with in secret without the Inner Council judging her? They all functioned on their own without explaining every intervention to Rathein, surely, she could get away with that as well? Even if some of the others scorned her, lives were saved by warning the Sentinels and by using the bears. There were benefits that she would defend if questioned.
There was a press against her aura and she glanced to the side to see Solas arching a brow. She huffed a laugh under her breath. Was her concern so obvious? “Forgive me, just thinking about what is to come.”

He nodded sternly, the intense blue of his eyes focusing through the door. There was a subtle shudder of his aura, a vibration almost, that only made her feel more unnerved. She had told him the night before that they were going to meet ancient elvhen. Did Abelas recognize Fen’Harel? If Solas had served as a servant of Myhtal before he elevated to God-hood, would the Sentinels recognize him so easily? It would be a distraction from her presence and foreknowledge of Abelas; so, she rolled her shoulders and entered the temple.

“What was this chamber used for?” Morrigan asked the group as they all entered slowly. As soon as Blackwall entered in the back of the group, the door closed, and the Sentinels appeared in a cloud of smoke. Rathein didn’t bother to turn around.

“We’re being watched. Be on your guard.” Athena’s gaze was pulled up by Abelas’s presence. A chill ran down her spine. She clenched her jaw and turned her hands to fists at her side. The lyrium Dorian gave her definitely helped, but the battle through all of the Templars had still drained her. The leader of the Sentinels crossed his arms and waved over the group.

“Venavis – “Stop. She arched a brow and remained still with everyone else in the group. “You are not like the other intruders.” His eyes glossed over to Solas. “You have the features of those that call themselves elvhen.” He then looked to Rathein. “You bear the mark of magic, which is . . . familiar.” Athena almost let out a sigh of relief but then the Sentinel looked directly to her. “You – your warning was correct and therefore you have knowledge of the future.” The group naturally stirred and looked at her but by this point she was used to it. She nodded solemnly to Abelas, holding his gaze so she wouldn’t have to look at the others. She had filled Rathein in on the major details, not the specifics like exactly how she got a hold of Abelas.

“Yeah – it was weird for us too.” Varric quipped under his breath but loud enough for Cassandra to hear and quickly shoot him a glare of absolute annoyance.

“How has this come to pass? What is your connection to those who first disturbed our slumber?” Abelas shifted his weight and cast his judgmental gaze down over the Inquisition. Rathein groaned and looked up while giving a gesture of exhaustion.

“They are my enemies, as well as yours.” Her voice was beginning to grow weak, but she pushed through. Athena glanced over to her sister. She had been able to compose herself to appear regally still, even though the color was absent from her cheeks and the blood had soaked through her
“I am called Abelas. We are Sentinels, tasked with standing against those who trespass on sacred ground. We wake only to fight, to preserve this place. Our numbers diminish with each invasion.” He paused and began to pace. His movements were measured, perfectly timed. It reminded her a great deal of Solas when he was talking about something passionate like the Fade or the dreams he found there. “I know what you seek. Like all who have come before you, you wish to drink from the *vir’abelasan*.”

Morrigan whispered and leaned over to the Inquisitor. “The place of the —“

Rathein grit her teeth and shot her a quick glare. “I’m aware.”

Abelas stared them both down. “It is not *for you*. It is not for *any* of you.”

The Inquisitor put her hands up in surrender and nodded. “We understand that, and we do not want it.” She gestured to most of the group behind her, subtly save for Morrigan at her side. “We wish to rid you of the enemies that have trespassed within your temple.”

“Yet you enter this sanctum almost as readily as the supposed enemies before you.” The Herald clenched her jaw and looked over to Athena for a second of reprieve. She cleared her throat and looked to Abelas.

“We took the time to walk the practitioners path, unlike the ones who carved a whole through your temple. We entered with nothing but respect for this place and wish to be out of your hair —“

“Or lack there of . . . “ Sera murmured quiet enough for only them to hear. Athena sighed deeply and exhaled through her nose before looking up again.

“As soon as possible. We wish your people no harm.” She held the Sentinels’s gaze for a second longer. He nodded and relaxed in his posture.

“I believe you. Trespassers you are, but you have followed rights of petition . . . much quicker than most. You have shown respect to Mythal.” Athena fought to hide the sneer that glossed over her gaze, but she nodded and swallowed down a dry lump of nerves. “If these others are enemies of yours, we will aid you in destroying them. When this is done, you shall be permitted to depart . . .
and never return.”

Solas stepped forward and spoke to Rathein quickly. “This is our goal, is it not? There is no reason to hurt these Sentinels.”

Morrigan looked over with a cool expression. “Consider carefully, you must stop Corypheus, yes? But you may also need the Well for your own.”

Athena looked over and shook her head. “Be careful what you wish for, Morrigan. The prize is not as sweet as you may think.”

Rathein raised a hand to stop her, Morrigan arching a brow in confusion while shaking her head. The Inquisitor looked to Abelas with a nod. “We accept your generous offer.”

Abelas looked at their exchange with a curious expression on his face, gesturing to the side. “You will be guided to those you seek. As for the vir’abelasan, it shall not be despoiled. Even if I must destroy it myself.” He turned on his heel and disappeared into the darkness of the temple, leaving the Witch of the Wilds in shock.

“No!” The mage ran forward and shifted into a raven to take off after him, the haze of her purple aura trailing behind her flight pattern. Rathein did not move to stop her but the rest of the group let out mixed groans of frustrations. The older Sentinel on the left gestured for them to follow her. Already they could hear the sounds of fighting coming from beyond the doors. Bull gestured for the Herald to follow him, but Athena paused, her gaze going back towards the fighting.

“Hey, you coming, Walker?” Varric asked while replacing Bianca onto his back. She looked to them all then back at the door.

“You heard what they said. Every time they awake, their numbers grow fewer. I don’t know…” Athena rubbed the back of her neck. “I want to go fight with them. They’re the last of their people; it doesn’t feel right to let them die.”

That made the group still, but she looked over to Bull and Rathein. “I know she doesn’t have the energy to fight right now. Vivienne, can you go with her and heal that wound? Maybe she can get some life back into her by the time we catch up with Samson. I’m not asking any of you to go with me. But, this is something I need to do.”

Athena patted down her pockets until she found a purple vial of potion that was a combination
lyrium and elfroot potion. She downed it in one go and then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, looking to Rathein with a half smirk. “I’ll see you there.”

Rathein saluted with two fingers and turned towards the Sentinel. Athena turned on her heel and began to run when she heard additional footsteps running in time with her. Dorian was on her right with a roll of his eyes. “Don’t you say a word.”

She smiled and looked behind him to see Varric smiling with Bianca in his hands. “What can I say? She’s excited.”

There was a push on her aura from behind her, and she was not surprised in the slightest to see Solas there with staff drawn. Even though she was overjoyed to see him, his face was neutral and concentrated. “We must hurry; they might not last long with the number of Templars that are here.”

Athena nodded in agreement and threw open the first set of doors, looking upon the battlefield with a sudden smile of excitement. “Then let’s get to work.”
Well of Sorrows

The Templars did not make the fight easy.

The fighting between the Sentinels and the red creatures was tiring but she felt good in helping turn the tide. When they arrived the elvhen warriors were at first confused. They had provided safe passage, after all, so it was odd to see someone rebuke that blessing and choose to fight. It was quickly appreciated when the three mages spun their spells and ended or trapped the enemies. Varric’s adept use of his bow and his steady eye sniped the creatures that they could not see within the chaos. There was an energy fighting along the Sentinels that cleared her mind and exacted her movements. They were all fighting as a unit together.

The energy of the temple invigorated all of them and fueled her magic. Every piece of skin felt alive when it met the air and her nerves were hyper alert. If there was any shift or change in the air, she was immediately aware and moved to act. She was calling it her “spidey sense” within the battle, but Solas had picked up on it too. They normally fought in sync but there was a noticeable change in their fighting. She was more offensive while targeting out the Templars. She acted as a tank of a mage, drawing their attention to her and using the heat of her flames as a defense. If there was any gap in her defense or her attacks, he filled it and stepped into her side. They were never alone from fight to fight and there were moments when her hearing was occluded and all she heard was his heartbeat next to hers.

Even in the thrill of battle, it was calm and steady, as measured as his words.

The look of determination on his face had small hints of happiness. There was a crinkle in the sides of his eyes when he was able to successfully defend a Sentinel, or a nod of acknowledgement whenever they would quickly murmur a mas serranas under their breath to them.

They acknowledged him as kin, and for the first time in a long time, he was amongst his people.

There was something serenely beautiful about it that made her feel like a stranger looking in, but the Sentinels would give her these looks. They would glance at her then come back to look at her more fully. Their gazes would meet but she felt as if they were looking through her, instead of at her. It was odd, but she assumed it was a customs thing she was not familiar with. As she walked and fought through the Temple, her spirit felt alive like it did within the Crossroads. It was a bubbling feeling that filled every piece of her body, the physical feeling of a glass of champagne. Even with her mana fatigue and physical exhaustion, it felt good to fight.

With their help the Sentinels suffered minimal losses until they broke into the sanctum of the Well
of Sorrows. Samson’s men slaughtered the elves at their feet, quickly drawing a growl of warning from Athena’s throat. The way they carelessly took the lives of others infuriated her. Their blood stained the waters and she could feel the power that existed within the Well the closer they got to it. Its thousands of memories sang energy within the air. It felt like they gave life to the very plants that grew beneath their feet.

The other Sentinels surged forward to fight for their fallen comrades, but Athena extended a hand and stopped a warrior that held his Warhammer within his hands. “Let me avenge them, ally. I wish no more blood of your People to be spilt today. Help Abelas, the raven that followed means him harm.”

The warrior looked down to her hand and then nodded, gesturing back for the rest of his people to follow. Athena rolled her neck until she felt a crack, ignoring Varric’s plea behind her to stay quiet until the Inquisitor and the others arrived. She felt her body betraying his thoughts as it stepped forward and splashed through the water as Samson turned to face his men.

“You tough bastards. One day’s march, hours of fighting, and still fierce as dragons. The Chantry never knew what it was throwing away.” The Templar Commander grinned and clapped his hands together. One of his men gasped and pointed towards her.

“Samson, sir, watch out!” The Commander turned around as Athena stepped forward with open hands, nothing but hatred within her gaze. Her magic wrapped around the fallen Sentinels and she raised them up and out of the water so that their comrades could collect and bury them after the battle was won. “The Chantry apparently took out the garbage.” Her gaze assessed him fully up and down. The red lyrium corruption was plain in his features. The colors of his iris were stained red, the energy crackling with every movement he made. His hair and skin were not healthy, wrinkles and exhaustion within every corner of his face. She clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth and shrugged. “And trash begets trash, unfortunately.”

Samson let out a snarl of frustration, throwing his hands up into the air. “Hand of the Inquisitor. Here to do your Herald’s dirty work then?” He gave her the same measured look, shaking his head but she could only wet her lips like a hungry wolf looking at their meal. “Corypheus wanted you? Why? His demon in the Fade said you knew things, but here we are, still powerful enough to take the Well for ourselves.”

Athena raised a brow calmly. “My knowledge goes beyond the time of you and your little Tevinter mistake. You are simply a blip in history —” She curled her lips into a snarl while looking at the monster that was preparing for a fight by bolstering the crystals on his shoulders and punching his fists together.

“And not worth our time!” Rathein called from behind, throwing the rune over the group until it
attached to his armor and disabled it. The energy from Dagna’s creation sparked and hurt Samson. He cried out and clawed at it, the pain of the ritual bringing him to his knees. The rest of the group appeared behind them and the Inquisitor had some of her old energy back. She stopped next to her sister with a look of confidence on her face. Iron Bull had his look on the large monster in the back, mimicking his motions but bringing his large battle axe into his hands instead.

“What. . . What have you done!” Samson cried out while drawing his sword out in one smooth motion. The others did not hesitate. A red templar mage brought his hands forward and shot forth a stream of flame directly at Athena. She didn’t glance or move out of the way. Instead, she used the enemy’s own flames against them. Her body absorbed the attack and adapted to become one with it. She moved forward and kicked the mage in the chest with a flaming boot, pinning him to the ground and melting away bits of his armor as it melded with his flesh. His high-pitched screams were only temporary as Cassandra surged forward and sunk her blade through the man’s face.

Even as his blood spurted up and splashed against her body, Athena did not turn away.

Bull tried his best to draw Samson’s attention, but he was focused on seeking out the Inquisitor for himself. The fortified armor was weakened, but he was still able to draw strength from it and attack with the ferocity of a dragon. Rathein responded in kind. With her spirit blade back at full strength, she met him blow for blow. Sparks flew from the collision of their weapons, his red lyrium battling the purity of her spiritual energy within the blade. From behind the group, a lone arrow flew and found its mark within a templar at Athena’s back.

She looked for its owner and found a pair of translucent eyes staring back at her from the bushes. Lethallan. They seemed to say, a small curve of happiness in the corners that made her heart feel lighter. It appeared her message of peace had gotten across. The stricken enemy was not down for the count, so she turned with a spark of lightning between her hands. She used the water he was laying in and the electricity to paralyze him so that Sera could place another well-drawn arrow between his eyes. The two women shared a glance of appreciation before turning to their next enemy.

The battle continued as such for what felt like an eternity. Samson would move on the Inquisitor and the rest of the party would draw his attention away or weaken him until Rathein could jump back into the fray. Soon, all of the Templars were dead, their corrupted blood darkening the water until they could no longer see their own reflections on the surface. Corypheus’s General dropped his sword and fell to his knees in defeat, a sigh leaving his lips as his hands shook in fists.

“You have. . .ruined me.” He whispered, eyes shut in a moment of grief. Rathein nodded with a clenched jaw. She walked within arm’s reach of him and rolled her hand over his head and subdued him with a roll of magic. His body fell back, and his head went completely under water. Athena blinked in surprise and looked at the Herald who was beginning to follow Abelas’s trail. The short-haired brunette paused, glancing over her shoulder.
“Can someone take him out to Commander Cullen? He is heavy, so it might take a few of you. Go back through the path the Sentinel showed us.” Vivienne instantly wrapped her magic around the General and brought him to a sitting position. Athena could taste the spells within the aura since they tingled the air. The Iron Lady was continuing the sleeping spell. Blackwall brought Sera and Varric with him to protect her as they left the Temple. The rest of them did not pause any longer. They took off at a running speed towards the Well’s guardian as he created a staircase of stone and vines leading up to the well.

The intent to destroy was plain on his face.

Morrigan intercepted the elf and landed between him and the Well. “You heard his parting words, Inquisitor. The elf seeks to destroy the Well of Sorrows.”

Athena could not stop her frown. There were so many delicate words in this situation, so many decisions that could change the course of history. Being near the Well made her feel anxious, like there was a bee flying around within her stomach that was stinging every time she hit a wall. She cast her honeyed gaze over to the pool. Cole made a small sound while whispering next to her. “You can hear it too!”

“So, the sanctum is despoiled at last.” Abelas stated in defeat, raising his hands before dropping them in a gesture of surrender.

The Witch of the Wilds stood next to Rathein as if they were agreeing on the best course of action. “You would have destroyed the Well yourself, given the chance.”

“As is his right as its guardian and Mythal’s faithful.” Athena cursed through clenched teeth, glancing over at Morrigan with a gaze full of annoyance. Suddenly her love for the Witch was beginning to fade. So many of her actions throughout the course of Thedas reminded her of Flemeth. They were selfish, power-seeking. Even Kieran’s creation was a selfish request for power that turned into a maternal blessing. If Abelas did as he wished for the Well, she would kill him and take it for herself.

In this situation, she would try to kill him. Athena wouldn’t let that happen, but still, that would mean making an enemy out of a daughter of Mythal. Telling the truth of Mythal would reveal the actual existence of the Elvhen Gods all too early. Did Abelas even know that she still lived? Did Solas? She knew that they reunited after Corypheus’s demise, but this was months before that happened.
“To keep it from your grasping fingers! Better it be lost than bestowed upon the undeserving!” He pointed at Morrigan, vitriol dripping from his voice. Athena let out a small sigh in the form of an extended exhale through her nose. She didn’t blame him.

“Fool! You’d let your people’s legacy rot in the shadows!” Morrigan took a step towards Abelas but Rathein gripped her arm hard.

“Enough!” The Inquisitor cut off. Solas glanced over at Athena but she was transfixed by the well again. The eluvian looked to them overhead. There was a neutral magic living within its surface, a familiarity that called out to her. She had visited the spot before, but this time she was on the other side. The memory played through her mind and suddenly she grew nervous.

“The Well clearly offers power, Inquisitor. If that power can be used against Corypheus, why not use it?” Abelas made a noise of disagreement and shook his head. Athena took a step towards the well while swallowing a lump of nerves. It would be cruel to make Morrigan drink the Well. She would be bound to her mother for all eternity, or a different possibility, she would be bound to Solas when he absorbed her power. She wasn’t even sure if that was what happened in the future, but it was a possibility nonetheless. Rathein as well. Did that mean – was she the one to –

“Do you even know what you ask?” Abelas asked, his voice now softer. Athena closed her eyes and cursed herself over and over. She knew the burden, she was learning the language from Solas and would potentially be able to cipher out what they said. She was already a shapeshifter, like Morrigan, so shifting into a dragon would be incredible but not impossible. *Fuck.* She shook her head and let out a hum of consideration before quickly turning her gaze towards the sky.

“As each servant of Mythal reached the end of their years, they would pass their knowledge on... through this.” The Sentinel stopped and turned towards the Herald with a pleading expression on his face. “All that we were. All that we knew. It would be... lost forever.” Rathein’s face softened and her posture relaxed.

“I’m sorry... this must not be easy.” There was genuine sympathy in her voice that Athena noticed. She looked over her shoulder to the Inquisitor and then to the rest of the party. The majority of them were uncomfortable. Cole leaned over and said something to Solas, his eyes glued on her. Whatever the boy said, her lover’s eyes widened for a second and he subtly shook his head towards her. She glanced towards the Well and shrugged.

“You cannot possibly imagine. Each time we awaken, it slips further from our grasp... yet you have shown respect to Mythal. And there is a righteousness in you I cannot deny.” He fully faced towards Rathein after quickly casting a flicker of a glance towards Athena. “Is that your desire? To partake in the vir’abelasan as best you can to fight your enemy?” Rathein hummed with a curt nod.
“Not without your permission.” Abelas huffed and shook his head.

“One does not obtain permission. One obtains the right.” He took a step to the side and looked to the whole party. “The vir’abelasan may be too much for a mortal to comprehend.” He looked to Rathein with a heavy gaze. “Brave it if you must, but know you this: You shall be bound forever to the will of Mythal.” His gaze then fell to Athena and she felt its full pressure. She and the Herald nodded at the same time, but she knew it was only her whose mouth was dry. If she wanted to be the better person... she would have to take it. She fully knew the risks and what he asked.

“Bound? To a Goddess who no longer exists if she ever did?” Athena couldn’t help it. She snapped and turned on her heel.

“You wish to preserve the culture of the People so much, yet you spit on it!” Rathein pushed out with her aura but she slapped it away with her own, a spark of energy crackling in the air between them. Morrigan only looked to her with a cool glance, partially rolling her eyes while looking to the eluvian.

“Bound. As we are bound. The choice is yours.” She paused at the inflection in the sentence but shook her head.

“Is it possible that Mythal still exists?” Rathein asked quietly while standing next to Athena. Her hand brushed against hers as they both stared into the water’s depths.

“Elven legend states – “ Morrigan began but was soon cut off.

“’Elven legend’ is wrong, about everything, including her murder.” Athena felt buzzing in her head as the two bickered. With every second that went by, the pressure within her head and her stomach grew to a point that made her want to snap. She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath, gripping onto her sister’s hand while tearing her gaze to hers.

“Enough. We waste time with our words.” Rathein tugged on her wrist but she took a step back and towards the well. “I know the full consequences that come with drinking from the Well. None of us are truly worthy – but – “She took in a deep breath for confidence and walked into the Well, turning her back towards the eluvian and looking to Rathein with her arms wide in a helpless shrug.

The Inquisitor only looked back with wide eyes, as did Solas who took a step forward. Dorian’s
gaze fell to her feel and the waters around her, his head shaking and looking to the Sentinel for an explanation. She knit her brows but ignored it, letting out a sigh before smiling at her friend. “Let’s get out of here – okay - ?”

“Your pants aren’t wet.” Rathein stated plainly, almost like an observation from a child.

Athena arched a brow and dropped her hands to her sides. “Wh-what? What do you mean my – “ She dropped her gaze down to her feet and instantly lost her breath. From what she knew, Morrigan was able to wade into the center of the Well and drink from it. But now, it – it refused to touch her. Almost as if it had a mind of its own, it pulled back from where she stood in the Well’s center. Not a touch dropped her skin and anytime she moved the water shifted around her. “I... I don’t understand.” She ran a hand through her hair and attempted to wet her lips, but nothing came. Why wouldn’t the Well accept her? Why did it literally run from her touch and willingness to take it into herself?

Morrigan hummed and nearly purred with smugness. “The famed Witch of the Inquisition who claims to know the future does not know something? Tis peculiar indeed.” She gestured up to the eluvian with a playful smirk that only made her stomach sink deeper. “But look, Inquisitor. I was not lying about the eluvian; there one rests now.” The mage flicked her cat-like gaze to Athena, who was fighting the urge to drop to her knees in defeat. “Lady Athena, why don’t you see if you can activate it? You are familiar with eluvians, are you not?”

The group looked to her, but Abelas crossed his arms over his chest and leaned into the wall in an attempt to remain hidden amongst them and not draw attention to herself. Rathein cleared her voice and tried to break the tension building in the conversation. “Well, yes Lady Morrigan, she was in it, the same as you and I that day – “

Morrigan held her hand up and cut the Herald off. “Did you not think I would not feel you entering my eluvian that night or any night after? This Abelas spoke of his familiarity to you, I wonder how?”

Each word was a knife into her heart. She looked over her shoulder at the eluvian and shook her head hopelessly. Still, her body began to walk towards it and within seconds she was standing before it. It was much larger from this end, but she could feel the energy humming in front of her. She ran her hands along the elven glass as her lips began to tremble. There was no sound within the Well of Sorrows, even as the party members began to bicker and question Morrigan and Rathein.

She had to try, especially with so many eyes on her.
“Fen’harel enansal.” She whispered low enough for nobody to hear, pressing her hand with a pulse of magic into the eluvian.

A second passed but nothing happened, and she let out a sigh of relief, her body slumping against its surface. The glass felt cool against her skin, especially as silent tears began to run down her face. Morrigan let out a hum of disappointment, before clicking her tongue against her teeth. Athena didn’t have to open her eyes to know why. It started out as a tingling against her skin, like pins and needles that raced across her arm and over her forehead where her skin touched the eluvian.

Then like lightning it activated underneath her touch.

The mirror flashed blue and illuminated the Well of Sorrows where the sun’s light did not reach.

Athena let out an audible curse while stepping back, wiping her eyes quickly while looking into the glow of the elven mirror. “This makes no fucking sense.” She repeated over and over until those were the only words she could hear. Her fingernails dug so deep into her palm that she knew blood would soon blossom from the impact. Rathein cleared her throat and silenced them all, another voice filling the void.

“There. . .are other places, friend. Other duties. Your people yet linger.” Athena gasped lightly and spun on her heel, suddenly regretting every word she had ever said within that damned world. It shouldn’t happen, not there, not like this. She had wanted him to know so badly, but with all of this confusion the timing wasn’t right. The Herald looked up at her and put a finger to her lips. There were no signs of anger on her face, so she shrugged and gestured to Morrigan’s back as a warning.

Abelas looked to Solas and arched a brow. “Elvhen such as you?”

The distinction was silent to the others, for they were unfamiliar. But between them, it was loud, it was screaming in their faces. It was a phrase she had teased the Dread Wolf with over and over because she knew one day he would hear it.

And that day, she felt nothing but regret and fear.

Solas paused for a beat, his gaze never leaving Abelas’s.
“Yes. Such as I.”
Solas paused. He had heard that before, multiple times in the forest, under a guise. The form was necessary in his eyes, but they were little tests. There had been a comfort in being open in front of her. His words were correct, she had been the only one to not flee from him when he appeared as the Dread Wolf. In the past, it was a name and a form he used to strike fear into the hearts of his enemies. But for her – she found comfort within it; she now smiled and greeted him with open arms when she saw the black fur on the edge of the forest. It was an unfamiliar greeting that shook him to want to try it again.

She had spat when he questioned her, speaking of her daughter’s potential face markings. In that interaction in the Plains, she had stated she nor her daughter were fond of his kind. He had assumed then that meant the *evanuris*, but now seeing her in front of Abelas he had to wonder, did she mean all *elvhen*? No. That would be foolish and narrow-minded of her, two traits she had never shown in front of him. She had never judged him nor any other person with a sharp edge to their ear. If anything, she favored them, elevating them within her circle of friends to show their importance to her. It was a rare thing to see in people of Thedas, but, that description did not apply to her.

She had asked when trying to identify who his people were. She had been teasing the answers out of him one encounter at a time. She walked the line of her knowledge, giving him permission to open about his past life. She was always free to express her opinion and did not hesitate to do so. He was the victim of her sharp tongue on more than one occasion, but it was endearing how honest she was with him. There was no pretense when they met together as they did. They had met that night as companions instead of enemies, noticing the differences in each other’s postures and tones and caring enough to ask what was wrong. Even though she had only a brief interaction with him, she knew him well enough to know something was off that night. The evening before, he had been exploring the Fade to search for remnants of his People. All he found was ruin and ashes. It had dried his mouth and darkened the future for any hope of restoring his people. But even then, on that dreary night from the Fade, she had given him hope. *Old wolves can learn new tricks,* she had teased him.

“Do you want me to tell you of potential raw, burning chaos the future might hold?” She had nearly screamed at him when he pressed her on her future knowledge. Truly, it was no business of his. They had been open that they both had secrets that need not be touched on. Now that he saw it clearly, she knew it was a mutual understanding and want between them. Then her eyes had burned
and pled with him to not ask about what she knew, but even then, she was silently screaming at
him to trust her with his own past. It was a wicked dance they had been weaving since. . .since the
moment they had met apparently.

Athena had been passed out in the same healer’s hut as the Herald. The Herald was suffering from
the side effects of the Mark. Rathein had survived through bouts of fever and a systemic reaction to
the magic of the Mark. It was foreign and was not meant to interact with those not unworthy.
Unworthy. It was funny how his definition had changed over time. When he first arrived in Haven,
all he saw was the mark of humanity across the village. There were people willing to murder
Rathein over a supposed suspicion that she murdered the Divine. The world was in chaos, but it
was centralized in this village of renegade mages and rogue templars. Nobody had paid attention to
the other woman that had fallen from the Rift.

They had thought her to be an outlier. Her appearance paled in comparison to the Herald of
Andraste, who closed the Rifts with a single wave of her hand using a gift from the Maker and
Beyond. They had failed to see the other blessing that had fallen from the Sky. The healer, Adan,
had asked for him to assess her while he worked on the Herald’s wounds and controlled her fever.
Athena laid in the cot, face pale, breaths shallow. There were only minor wounds on her skin from
the fall, but the waves of her aura were unbelievable. They existed in flames, wisping and dancing
from her skin even as she slept. They had already removed the burnt and dirtied clothes from her
that she wore. They were folded in a pile next to the cot. When he examined them, he found small
bits of human excrement on the pants and potentially blood on the top. What had she been doing
before she fell from the Fade? What did she go through to escape from the Fade?

Not once, but twice had his beliefs and knowledge been shaken after the explosion when he
discovered two mortal women had survived being in the Fade physically. His beliefs had not been
sound ever since. The two women had proved themselves worthy time and time again. They shed
blood, they shed tears, and they sacrificed so many different parts of themselves for the comfort of
their companions. That was what truly shook him down to his core. If the world could raise
somebody like Rathein Trevelyan, and if an other-worlder such as his vhenan could flourish in the
state that Thedas was in, was the world truly doomed?

“Yes, Fen, Elvhen such as you.” She had said with a smile on her lips for the final time, teasing
him, playing with him in the forest. The forest had made her nearly glow that night. Its insects lit
her path and the creatures protected her as she walked blindly through the darkness. He was not
sure if she knew exactly how much the Wild loved and empowered her. When she was not
watching, the Haven pack would protect Lev’adin as she ventured outside of the Keep to pick
flowers for Syla or herbs for the kitchen. They protected Tobias on his final ride home. The howls
telling the story of his fall echoed through the mountains for days; he was immeasurably glad that
she was not present to hear their grief for her. They kept to the trees and protected Cullen and his
troops when they made their rounds outside of Skyhold.

They gave him his own comfort when he longed to sleep under the stars in the thick of the woods,
treating him as kin. But even still they always called her name. A long time ago, the wolves only
knew one kin outside of Skyhold, and there was a bittersweet feeling in knowing it wasn’t him anymore.

He had been blinded this whole time, not seeing the truth that she was trying to scream to him, trapped behind future possibilities the sensitivity of time. She had been so close, her hands hovering above his face. He had fought with every sense of his being not to tilt his head into her delicate and wanting touch. For too long he had denied himself the selfish wish of being truly honest with her and giving her everything she deserved: the truth. She had screamed coward into the night when he fled. Was he that? Had he become this toothless wolf pacing on the edges of history waiting for an opportune time to fight again?

Solas glanced over from Abelas to Athena and clenched his jaw to keep from gasping at her. It was always a shock for her in a foreign world of which she was so familiar. He knew the look on her face, the tears in her eyes, the torment painted plain across her features. She didn’t know. She didn’t know why the Well denied her or suddenly why the eluvian worked for her. There was no shock in his system when Morrigan spouted that Athena had been using the eluvians. If anything, it made him proud that she had developed such a system under their noses, especially his. Even still, the Witch was right. This eluvian required a key and from what he remembered from his times of Arlathan, the Well or one of its keepers was it.

That could only mean – Yes? The idea astounded him, but the solution would be out of his love’s hands. Perhaps she was more involved than she even realized, picked for a purpose beyond her understanding. There was a pang of pity in his heart and he hoped that it was not true. But how else could a woman from another world suddenly fall through the Fade into this one? Her gaze searched the sea of people until it found his, eyes pleading for answers and acceptance of the situation. He nodded subtly at her, a small enough gesture to bring a flood of relief over her features.

She deserved the truth. She deserved happiness in the days to come. When he looked at her, there were moments when he forgot about what he needed to do. The smell of her skin intoxicating him, poisoning him in a way that made him forget his purpose. The taste of her lips was the only cure, healing and hurting him in a thousand wonderful ways that made him want to be trapped within the sheets with her forever. Every second with her was a lifetime of happiness. The way she teased him for his quiet nature, pulled at his quirks that only she could see. The way she gripped to him when she slept as an anchor to the world or moved in the bed until she could feel the warmth of his body against hers. He relished in the things those things, those little movements that made him feel alive for the first time in a millennium.

“Elvhen such as you?” The Sentinels’ question hung in the air, thickening the space between them and stretching out the second for eternity. Solas hummed and nodded curtly, meeting the eyes of the elvhen with a small smirk on his lips.
Athena felt frozen within her place. Her knees shook, and her legs felt weak under the pressure of what had just happened. The eluvian behind her was only supposed to be opened by the person who took the Well into themselves, who in this case was Morrigan. The Witch took the opportunity of Athena’s stunned silence to convince the Inquisitor that she was the rightful person. She swayed her hips as she walked into the pool’s surface, looking up at her with a smug smirk on her lips.

Her confusion turned into anger, a growl forming on her lips as her magic bristled over her skin. There was a light touch on her shoulders pulling her back a step. Dorian whispered comforting words, but she didn’t hear them over the sound of her magic roaring within her blood. It was a beast of its own, fueled by her emotion and clawing at the cage of her mind. She flexed her hands at her sides and took in a deep breath, leaning slightly into her friend’s body to gain composure as she let out a heavy sigh.

“It’s alright, ‘mata. Nobody is mad. If anything, we’re relieved neither you or the Inquisitor had to drink from it.” He murmured again, his thumb stroking over her shoulder in a rhythmic motion that brought her from her lull. She clenched her jaw and nodded, pushing down her confusion and her grief over the situation. Rathein was still injured. Corypheus would soon break into the temple. They had things to do. As the Well swirled around Morrigan and she collapsed, Athena put two fingers in her mouth and whistled, beckoning the remaining companions to come up to her.

“Come. We do not have much time. Morrigan, are you okay?” She called down to the Witch with a curt and cold tone.

The mage was startled, elven whispers on her lips as she sat up from her position on the now dry floor at the bottom of the Well. She looked up to Athena with a clouded gaze, focusing her eyes and arching a brow in confusion before nodding at her words. She moved on from her and looked out and caught Abelas as he began to disappear further into the temple. He felt her gaze on him and paused, looking over her shoulder with a questioning look. She held his eyes for a second longer, nodding to him in silent profuse gratitude before he dissipated into the temple around them, leaving the area eerily still.

It did not last long. There was a scream of anger from across the clearing. Corypheus pointed at them from the balcony and summoned his magic. Dark, red, cracks of energy danced around his feet as he levitated and began to come over towards them. Any other moment and she would have thrown an attack at him. Today, she did not have the patience to waste a single thought on him.
Athena surged her magic into the eluvian and the light brightened at her touch. She groaned under her breath and shuffled everyone through: “Now! Through here!”

Everyone rushed through and Solas was the one to grab her hand through the eluvian and tug her through. Even as Corypheus’s visage appeared closer, she waited until the unknown spirit within the well levitated up and destroyed the mirror from its side. The result was an ear-shattering burst through the Crossroads that knocked all of them over from the sheer magical force alone. Her head was buzzing, and it felt like there were pins and needles in her fingers, but she knitted her brow and pushed herself up from the ground. The area between eluvians had shifted since she was last there, or it shifted based on her current desires.

If it was an inter-dimensional place like the Fade, could her powers as a Dreamer influence it too? The path to Skyhold was simple, short, and within sight. She was the first one standing, so she moved to everyone else and helped them up. When Morrigan grabbed her hand to come to a standing position, the Witch’s face fell to a softer expression, sorrow written across her gaze. “Athena – I – “

The tone was apologetic, and Athena clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth. She didn’t have time for false apologies when she had obviously been power grabbing the entire day. “Save it. We need to move. Inquisitor, are you healed enough to walk?”

The Herald stiffened at the use of titles between them but nodded and wiggled the fingers on her affected hand. There was now a dry stain of blood on her coat and Athena couldn’t smell anymore fresh blood in the air. “We’re all fine. Let’s get out of this place; it makes me feel funny.”

Everyone, save for Solas and Morrigan, nodded in agreement. They walked with purpose through the eluvian and it took less than five minutes for them to reach it. Morrigan activated it this time and the familiar blue light illuminated the exhaustion on their faces. She knew that in a day or so, she would potentially need to go through the eluvians again to retrieve the Inner Council and the rest of the Inner Party that was holding Samson hostage. It could wait. She needed a bath, and she needed time.

The Witch the Wilds shuffled everyone through and soon they were standing in the storage room in Skyhold. There was a unison breath of relief through the group, Rathein rubbing the back of her neck while looking to all of them. “Well. We’re back. You all did a hell of a job and I think we can call today a success as long as our troops didn’t suffer too many heavy losses.”

Bull huffed under his breath and playfully nudged Athena on the shoulder. “I think they’ll be better considering we had half of the damn forest tearing those Templars apart.”
Varric smiled and rubbed his hands together as if he were concocting a chaotic story to write down. “Did you guys see Walker riding a bear?”

Cassandra managed a happy nod. The safety of the Keep was spreading through all of them, but Athena still felt bristly. Her aura itched across her skin and she stretched her neck to the side, ignoring the playful banter while looking to her sister. Rathein felt the cold gaze and met it, shrugging while walking to the door. “Is there anyway you could go get everyone else? Obviously not the whole army but – “

Athena raised a hand with a heavy sigh. “Can it wait until the morning? I think I barely have enough mana left in me to heat my bath.”

The Inquisitor nodded stiffly with her hand on the door. Everyone else passed through but then Rathein stepped forward and pulled Athena into a passionate hug. There was not a single breath of space between them and she finally melted into the hug, holding back the sob in the back of her throat. Tears burned in her eyes and she simply allowed her sister to hold her in the shelter of the lonely room. “That’s what I thought.” The mage whispered into her shoulder, rubbing her back with her strong arm. They were both coated in blood, a mixture of their own and whatever the fuck they had been fighting. Warden, Templar, Demon, they all smelled of corruption on her skin.

She was going to find the sharpest rock in all of Skyhold and scrub herself pink. Rathein pushed back and held her at arm’s length, nodding with tears in her eyes as well. “I will see you in the morning.”

Athena wiped her eyes with the clean part of her sleeve and sighed, nodding in a minute gesture that was good enough for her friend. They left the room and Athena didn’t hesitate to weave through the garden and down to the basement where they kept the wines. Hers, the sweet white, was in the ice box in the kitchens where Syla used to work. The Keep was a buzz and there were gasps of shock and question as the Inner Party spread through to their rooms. “How did they get back so quickly!”

She didn’t even have the patience to roll her eyes. She grabbed a metal bucket and dunked it into a wooden crate that held the ice within the larger walk-in ice box at the side of the kitchen. Thankfully there were two bottles of her wine standing up on the shelf. She plunged one into the bucket while holding the other by the stem of the bottle in a tight fist. Dusk was setting upon Skyhold as she bolted up the stairs to her tower with Kain trotting silently behind her. He enjoyed the battle at the Temple, especially when they would work in tandem to bring an enemy down. But he even he was tired, his small little pants almost seeming to echo through the courtyard.

The moment she entered their tower and Kain was inside she kicked it shut with the back of her ankle. Leafy had been sleeping in her bed, that was obvious from her present scent in the room and
the long blonde hairs scattered across the pillow on her side. Athena’s lips twitched in a smirk as she walked down the stairs towards the bath. There was a flurry of movements: her starting the bath, drawing a heating rune on the bottom of the tub, and slowly stripping off the stiff armor that was caked in blood. It would need to be thoroughly cleaned or simply destroyed.

Even underneath the armor and the underclothes, she had dried blood on her skin and in her hair. She frowned and looked into a mirror, finding herself almost unrecognizable. The woman looking back at her was one who had seen battle, who had seen and caused death. It was savage in a way that made her stomach turn. She turned her back to the image and dipped herself into the bath. The heat hurt, but she didn’t care. She needed to tune out sounds, other people, and her thoughts if the water would allow. Already just from her legs being in the water it was tainted with the grime on her skin. Even still, she sat down in the tub and waited for the water to get deep enough.

Once it did, she turned off the water and dipped underwater in search of solace and answers.
Considering the Future

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's been 2 weeks!

I explained everything on my Tumblr, but essentially I got a new travel assignment in my job and have been adjusting and working more than normal. Things should be back to normal now since I have acclimated.

The task of getting clean from the bath was the best distractor from the swarming hive that was her mind. Every scrub, every lather, every rinse provided a reprieve. The sips of wine in between all of those actions helped as well. It took two different tubs full of scalding hot water for her to finally feel clean, and then there was a third for her to soak in and clear her thoughts. Rose petals and hibiscus oil floated on top of the water as she was submerged underneath it. Her hair floated around as a halo, only flickers of candle light permeating to the bottom of the tub across the darkness of her eyelids.

It felt comfortable down there. It felt right within the mixture of the heat and pressure of the water.

The Well had rejected her. Why? What reason did it have for doing such a thing? Did the water itself even have its own judgements? Or was there something so very wrong with her being that she could not take it? If it rejected her, why did her body act as the key to the eluvian? Was it the passphrase, or something more? Even though her body was clean her spirit felt tainted, unworthy of the burden of drinking from the Well of Sorrows. It would have saved them. She would have taken Morrigan’s burden of fighting Corypheus’s dragon during the final battle. It would have saved her from being chained to Mythal or her spirit for the rest of eternity. Even if she was being a power-hungry Witch at the Temple... it broke her heart to know that she had played a hand in the orchestration that tied her to her Mother. Even with the fate of Mythal hanging in the future, it was a cruel thing to do.

But she was helpless. It was either Morrigan or Rathein, and her sister would not be able to decipher half of the whispers that the Well put out. It would call her shem and fill her mind with nothing but riddles. That was the only option left but it still put the taste of bile in her throat. She sat up in the tub and gasped, gripping the sides of the tub while letting out a groan to mask the silent sobs that racked her body. Crying was the obvious choice, but she was filled with too much rage to be sad about the unknown. Her nails dug like claws into the porcelain sides until she lost the strength and slid back into the depths of the water with a cry.

Elvhen such as you.
Why had she been so stupid? She was teasing him like a teenager at school with a crush. She toed the line of truth and hung the words in front of him like food to a starving dog. Under the veil of darkness and the forest she conversed with the Dread Wolf – no – Solas as if she had a one up on him by knowing. But it did nothing but fill her stomach with self-hatred. It would have been easier to tell him before. But – she couldn’t have told him in the beginning. It would have been too easy. A foolish girl from another world with knowledge that she did not know? He could have called her an abomination and slayed her there before emotions had a chance to blind him from his purpose. There would have only been a flicker of loss for ending a life before he moved on with his life in the Inquisition.

But now things were too complicated. He had to know the depths of her knowledge now. They shared a glance after he spoke with Abelas in the Temple. It was filled with nothing but sympathy, but she saw through it. She saw through the calm polite guise that he put on for the rest of the party and for himself. He **had** to realize it at this point. But still he said nothing.

*Yes. Such as I.*

From this point, the ball was in Corpyheus’s court on when he would reappear again. It happened quickly within the world that she knew, but now? There were different factors. Perhaps it would take weeks, months even for him to gain the strength to reemerge. What would happen after his imminent defeat? She had evaded him long enough. There was nothing more to gain if she fell into his hands. Her power and knowledge alone could not revive him from the pit that the Inquisition had dug for him to be buried into. There was relief in that. What would that mean for Solas? Surely, he would still want to go and help his people. They were his driving goal in this. Without the orb, he would need to seek other sources of power for his revolution.

She didn’t know if she could support a cause that would end the world. There were too many beautiful things in that world that she cherished. She cherished the friends she had met, the family she had made. She cherished the animals within the woods and the magic that coursed through the veins of the earth. She valued the People that had come to trust her and take her in as one of their own even though her ears were curved. They were all things worth saving, worth improving. It would break her heart to fight against the one she loved so dearly. He understood her, truly understood her. They had been each other’s solace and safety since the start, even before the flirtation started. She could not be at his side when he ended the world, but perhaps she could save it? It would kill her to lose him now. For the first time in a long time, she felt like there could be a future with them beyond the end of Corypheus and the Inquisition.

*It was a long shot, but things had changed since she arrived, right?*

There was a burning in her lungs. The urge to cry ripped at her throat but she denied it, gripping
onto the sides of the tub to keep herself under more in a forced attempt to relax. She clenched her eyes shut and exhaled when a hand gently covered hers on the side of the tub. The gentle touch ripped her from her sanctuary, water filling her lungs as she gasped and sat up with a splash of water. She coughed and hugged her knees to her chest instantly, her body beginning to shake even though steam still rose from the water’s surface. Bumps ran over her skin and it took her a few long, labored breaths to quiet herself. The previous touch moved to her shoulder, a soft voice shushing her into comfort.

She found herself leaning to that side of the tub towards the voice, wet hair dangling over the edge as lips pressed against the top of her head. Static buzzed around inside of her head but the gentle words pulled her back into a semi-state of consciousness. “Are you alright, vhenan?”

Athena couldn’t help but huff a laugh and shake her head once. A shiver coursed down her spine and he wrapped his arms around her and brought her head onto his shoulder. His hand gently ran over the top of her hair, taking all of the moisture out of it with a wave of magic in an attempt to relieve her shaking. She sighed and rubbed her face into his tunic. He smelled clean, like he had just gotten out of the bath as well. At least he didn’t have any hair for the blood to mat into. “Should I be? I’ve run into the unknown before. But this... is a whole new level of fuckery.”

He nodded solemnly as she let out a frustrated groan. “A different word than I would choose, but, yes. What is it that concerns you most about what happened at the Temple? Everything appeared to go as you predicted.”

“Yes. As well as that.” He paused and leaned to the side and she felt the water begin to swirl after he pulled the drain on the bathtub. He reached behind him and fetched the towel while running his hand through it to push heat into the fabric. “You were willing to drink from it, even knowing the consequences? You were willing to tie yourself to an Elvhen God?”

She shrugged in defeat and let out a long exhale from her nose. “I... I don’t know. I was the only one who truly knew the consequences I guess. Not that Mythal is my favorite deity, but I wouldn’t wish that fate on anyone else.”

He made a noise of amusement in his throat before pressing his forehead against hers while wrapping the warmed towel over her shoulders. Even in her dismal state, she nearly purred at the sensation of the fabric against her wet skin. “I am almost afraid to ask your favorite. What do you know of the Well’s previous champions?” He tapped on her shoulders in a gesture to get her to stand and she followed while chewing the inside of her cheek in an anxious move. At this point, what could she lose by being honest?
“I know that... whoever drinks from it will meet with their intended bonded before the Inquisition is over. I know that Mythal can stop your actions if you drink from the Well and you are bound to her will. Like Abelas, but I feel, more absolute? More encompassing?” She stepped from the tub and shuddered with magic, copying the drying spell that Solas used in a wave of her aura from her face to her toes. He only nodded and pressed his hand on her lower back gently while using the other to pick up her hair brush from the vanity. “As to my favorite deity, I have only met one supposed one. The jury is still out on that one.” She said with a smirk on her lips and Solas chuckled low behind her.

Instead of moving to the bed she felt pulled to the loft. She was immediately thankful that she did. The moons glowed full through her window, illuminating all of the intricate details of his mural and the assortments of folded blankets and pillows on the ground where Tobi and Leafy used to sleep together. Athena bit back her grief and sat with her back pressed against the chest that contained his belongings, holding the pillow that still smelled of him to her chest. “I just don’t know how to proceed. It seems that every time I try to intervene and take a step forward, the world sets me two steps back. Perhaps it would be best if I just stopped trying?”

Solas gracefully sat down next to her and rested his arms on top of his bent knees. They both looked out the window with their shoulders touching, like old friends sitting on a bench watching the sunset. “I suppose it depends on what your end goals are. Do you see yourself moving on past the Inquisition once Corypheus is hopefully defeated? Would you stay by the side of your bonded sister until duty pulls you elsewhere?” He paused and then glanced to the side. “Would you stay with your daughter?”

Athena bit some dry skin from her bottom lip and let out a sigh. “Those feel like weighted questions, vhenan. Am I allowed to speak honestly and openly?”

He nodded and almost whispered with sincerity. “Always.”

She looked out the window and then over to the side at the mural. It had been such a strange day. Her and Solas had just been together the night before and then before she knew it she had thrown herself in front of a small army of chevaliers willing to defend a Dalish clan she had only met once before. Even still, it felt right. The elves had been hunted, tortured, and beaten for hundreds of years. It was horrific. Everyone acknowledged how terrible it was, but nobody stepped in to do anything about it. “I wish to help those who have put their trust in me. Syla, Loranil, Illrith, Leafy. . . all of them and more come every day and look to me. It’s still a strange feeling, but I do not wish to abandon them. Their plight goes far beyond the Inquisition and it will not end once Corypheus is dead.”

He paused and relaxed back into the crate, concentration obvious across his features. She looked
over to him and rested her hand on top of his elbow, her thumb stroking over the fabric of his tunic as he considered what she had said. “I am staying with my sister as long as she needs me, but she is strong enough and has enough resources at this point to be fine without my presence. I suppose a more important question is... what do you plan to do, Solas?”

He tensed underneath her touch and allowed his gaze to fall to the floor, his hand clutched tightly around her hairbrush. She looked to it and moved forward and nudged her way in until she was sitting between his spread legs with her lower back nearly flush to his abdomen. He let out a heavy breath, the hot air tickling her skin that was barely wrapped up in a towel. He leaned forward and kissed the clean and soft skin that lingered there. Even in the brief touch, she could feel the weight of the world on his carefully chosen words. “With Corypheus defeated, the Inquisition would no longer require my aid. There would be no threat to the Fade with the orb gone from his clutch. I may fall back into hiding since the fate of the mages and the Templars is uncertain. It will surely be one of the first things the Seeker or the Chantry tries to solve.”

She hummed in agreement and smiled when he gently took her hair into his hand. He ran the comb through it and used the idle motion to clear his thoughts. When he was really passionate about something or needed to work through his words, he would gesticulate, fidget with an artifact on his desk, or put his hands behind his back as a distraction. “I do not believe the Chantry would enjoy having two self-trained apostate mages around, especially one who has a mysterious artifact that even she cannot explain.” Athena groaned under her breath. The pull to the Fade was still there, but it was subtle. Every battle, every defeat of a creature, the pull to balance her power lessened... which could only mean she was growing strong enough to meet the need of the orb that had been crafted for her and by her.

“I agree. If the orb that Corypheus wields fell into Chantry hands...” His jaw clenched, and she looked over her shoulder to see the shadow of anger cast over his face momentarily. “They do not have the strongest history of using power fairly. It belongs with its people. If anyone other than the wise holds it, it will only end in ruin.”

Athena wet her lips and turned more to him, bringing the brush so that she could rest it on the floor on the outside of his thigh. “You’re right.” His brow furrowed, and he tilted his head to the side in slight surprise. She shrugged and tucked a stray hair behind her ear. “They already have called the Right of Annulment when there is something they do not understand. But would they even be able to wield it? Rathein barely touched it and the mark nearly claimed her.” He held her gaze as she pressed on, using a hand to keep the towel closed to reposition again to face him more directly. “Would it be able to survive Corypheus’s corruption? I cannot imagine that it would be unchanged after being in contact with red lyrium for so long.”

He almost cut her off with the speed of his words. “It is a powerful thing older than the books have written. Surely if anything can – “
She nearly pressed. “If it can’t – what then, Solas?”

He visibly paled at her question, realizing exactly why she was asking about it. He idly touched his hands against her sides as a physical anchor and met her gaze with a look of uncertainty. “Why – what do you - ?”

Athena attempted a smirk through their somber conversation, but she knew it only came off as sympathetic. “Consider it the next thing I will try to change. I do not believe it is lost forever, Solas. If it is, well, I suppose I will help you in whatever way I can.” The next smile was genuine, her hands gripping one to her chest while pulling the other one to her mouth for a gentle kiss. He lightly gasped under the feathery touch of her lips on his knuckles. Solas leaned forward and moved so that she could rest her head on his chest as he held her tightly against him.

“You offer more than you even understand, vhenan.” He said softly, his hands gripping to her in a strong yet gentle way. His gaze was out of the window at the moon and she nuzzled into his chest with a shake of her head.

“Even so, the future is uncertain, but I just wish for it to still be with you. As cliche as that sounds –” She felt her chin angled up as his lips came down and ceased her words, a hidden smile playing at the corner of his lips. He touched the tip of his nose against hers before shaking his head.

“It is not. I . . . You continue to surprise me with your endless hope. Even in the face of the unknown. It is a quality I envy in you, ma’fen. I wish to remain by your side to see where it will lead us.”

Us. The word put a flurry of energy within her heart as she sat up fully and kissed him harder, a hand cupping his face to pull him closer. He sighed softly under her touch and completely wrapped her up within his warmth, using his hands to pull her up into his lap fully to take full advantage of her close proximity. She was not some love sick teenage girl that required the validation of another. She had survived being ripped from one world to another. She had people that looked up to her.

And yet she did not want to imagine a future without him. They made each other stronger. They broadened each other’s viewpoints. They were partners in a chaotic world that tried to drown them all in a sea of entropy. He gave her air to breathe, a controlled steady force in the midst of it all. Her words were not wrong. No matter what happened she knew a few things to be true. She would support her family. She would support her people. She would support him.
Happy Holidays and Merry Christmas to those celebrating tomorrow/today depending on where you are in the world.

My best gift is having the most supportive readers I could ever ask for. I feel cheesy for saying it, but I literally can't describe how many bad days you guys have pulled me out of with your comments, kudos, and messages on tumblr.

Which, if you ever want to ask me something or just say hi, don't be afraid! I don't bite and love getting random messages. :)

So, thanks everyone for the continued reading and on we gooo ~-

“By the Maker- what is this place?”

Cullen was aghast at the sight of the Crossroads as the entire Inner Council was dragged through at a quickened pace to lessen the effects of the Elvhen realm. Athena had slightly more patience for the trek to retrieve the Inner Council and the party that had Samson that day. She was freshly bathed, sexed, and ready to deal with the politics that would follow their attack on the Temple of Mythal. When she left for the morning, Solas was already speaking with Rathein in the rotunda about future plans and what she thought about the Inquisition. Seeing the two as friends that could speak openly put a soft spot in her heart, especially when they both had looked over at her as she passed through and smiled. The party that had Samson contained had already been brought through and he was taken to the dungeons through the back ways. Cullen did not want attention drawn to him yet and he wasn’t sure if his safety could be kept if the entire Keep knew he was down there.

It was down to the leaders of the Inquisition then, and one of them was not handling it well. Leliana stayed next to Josephine and kept her safe as they briskly walked through the elvhen in-between world. If Athena felt an agent of Briala’s watching them, she made a subtle shake of her head to get them to leave or turned their path away from the known camps.

“Notice how the elves didn’t leave roads in their ruins? These are it. Morrigan calls them the Crossroads; I think it’s apt. Come on, we’re almost there.” The Commander rubbed his temples with a light groan and winced at the pressure on his head. Athena could see the eluvian to Skyhold, so she pointed forward to Leliana and Josephine with a sharp whistle. “It’s through there. Go on ahead, I’ll help him out.” The Spymaster moved without another word, pressing on Josephine’s lower back until their bodies were out of sight and on the other side of the eluvian’s gate. Cullen all but slumped against an ancient tree near them, pain written plainly across his features.

“I thought the nightmares last night were terrible. I was wrong.” He groaned in a tortured tone, causing Athena to frown and put her hand over his on his head.

“Hey – it’s okay. This place has this effect on most people. Can I?” She pressed her hand to his head and he did a subtle nod, sighing in relief as her fingers went through his greased, unkept hair and slowly put healing magic over his skin. She had been practicing healing with Solas when minor things came up and they had the time. The spell she was casting was a mixture of a dispel
charm and a healing charm. Dispel to banish the nightmares or demons that plagued him, and healing to clear out whatever it was in lyrium that caused such withdrawal.

“How was the inside of the Temple? I know we haven’t been briefed yet but – the others told us a few things.” The tone of his voice grew lighter, more normal as she worked her magic while pulling on small bits of his hair at a time to relieve the pressure as she had done a few times before on his worst days.

She shrugged with a small hum and began to speak matter-of-factly. “Morrigan received the power to commune with the followers of an ancient Elven God because it wouldn’t let me for some reason. We allied with some ancient elves and the group found out that I’ve had access to this place for a while. Nothing major.” She spoke calmly to not aggravate his headache with a teasing smirk. He reached up and grabbed her hand with a stern look that only the Commander could give.

“What do you mean it wouldn’t let you? You tried to take this, power? Isn’t that dangerous?” She swallowed a lump of nerves with a shy shrug, chuckling low in her throat because obviously his headache was better if he was scolding her.

“Yes, but I knew the risks, Dad. I didn’t want anyone else to get hurt. Surely you understand, you’re the fall on your sword type, same as I am.” She scolded right back, gripping him by the lion’s fur to tug him back onto the path. He smacked her hand away and kept up at her side with a frustrated gait, glancing over before gripping her shoulder to turn him to face her. She could only be smug at his response, putting her hands behind her back and arching a mock curious brow.

“What?”

“Did you just – did you just call me Dad?” He asked with a completely shocked and almost disgusted tone.

“Well sure. I know you normally have a lecture prepared for most things, but we all have to make our choices in life sometimes and this was one I was willing to make.” He went to chastise her more and she put her hands up in surrender. “Granted, I’m thankful it turned out the way it did. But, that’s the short story of it.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and arched a brow right back at her, almost leaning forward in a postural challenge before scoffing and throwing his arms in the air. “Maker – you remind me of my sister. Let’s get back before this place makes my headache worse again.” For a second she thought she heard actual anger in his voice, but when she apparently reacted surprised to his tone he gave her a playful wink before moving forward. She rolled her eyes and pushed his shoulder and walked with him through the eluvian. The blue magic shimmered behind them after they passed through it. Each time someone came through it looked like the room was getting cleaner. Maybe Kieran was tending to it while his mother was away? She turned on her heel and snapped her fingers, sending a pulse of magic to close the gate before following Cullen on the way to the War Room.

Once they got into the main hall, she saw that Solas was still speaking with Rathein, but it was out in the space to the side of the throne. Bull had joined them and seemed to have a shit-eating grin on his face about something but Solas was as composed as ever, maybe even slightly annoyed about the conversation at hand. He glanced over to her and lifted his chin, raising his brows in acknowledgement to their arrival. Rathein followed his line of sight and then noticed the Commander walking towards the War Room and brought Bull along with her. “Does he need to be present for the briefing?” Cullen whispered to Athena as they walked side by side through Josephine’s office.

Athena could only shrug. “Beats me. That’s above my paygrade, Commander.”
The five of them gathered around the War Table with Rathein in her usual spot at the center. There were different markers spread across the map but the bulk of them were still in the Arbor wilds. Leliana had suggested using the eluvians to bring the bulk of the army back but Athena adamantly refused. The more people that saw them, the more danger they were put in. She felt guilty enough using them to bring the Inner Council back, but Briala had trusted the location of the eluvian’s in her for her own use.

Bull pulled out an oddly carved marker of himself from his pocket and put it on the map near Crestwood. He cleared his throat and glanced to Cullen with half a shrug. “Sorry to interrupt, but the boss was talking to me about something she wanted the Chargers to do. It’s been a while, and with that Vint bastard on the run, we have a chance to breathe. While we do—He pointed one of his stubbed fingers towards the map near where he placed the marker. “We never doubled back and captured the Mayor that flooded the town. The boss asked the Chargers and I to take care of it, but – Alpha, I was wondering if you might be able to help us.”

Athena crossed her arms and raised a single brow. “Uh – sure – how?”

He glanced at Rathein and slowly that mocking grin came back to his lips. She got a pit in her stomach before he puffed his chest and clapped his hands together in excitement. “Dalish is good with magic, but its been too long to try and track him with our means. Plus, his place was swept after we left so there’s nothing left bound to him. You on the other hand, might be able to, ya know.” He tapped his nose and Athena felt the blood rush from her face to her hands.

Mana pooled within her palms out of reaction but Rathein could only chuckle and gesture for them to leave. “I mean, it makes sense to me. I can handle the debrief here, sis. Even if you can’t sniff the mayor out, you will be a great help to them.” The Inquisitor worked her way around the table and gave her a tight hug that was so quick she knew she couldn’t disagree with the apparent order lingering in the air. Athena’s jaw was on the floor and she didn’t come to until Bull was walking her out of the War Room with firm pats on her back.

Cullen was heard complaining loudly in the back about what had just occurred. “Did we just send our Advisor out on a hunting mission like a dog!”

Bull brought her attention back with a soft chuckle. “Okay we’re going to test this theory out. It’s raining outside but I asked Solas to go out into the woods and hide. Go find him and the Chargers will be in the tavern when you get back. We’re all packed up and ready to leave when you are for the morning.” Athena growled and couldn’t help but smirk as Bull nudged her on the side like a child waiting for approval.

“Oh - come on. The boys miss you and need a good trip. It’s been a while since you have come to do drills with us now that you have your ‘own’ people.” He gripped both shoulders and pushed her out of the door into the rain with a hearty laugh. Athena ran her hands through her hair and flicked the excess water to the side with no avail. There was another laugh from the side, Dorian standing with a parasol while sipping on a glass of wine. She turned on her heel and he flicked for her to go out to the woods.

“Go on, little wolf. I’ll meet you in the tavern with a warm brandy and we can talk it over before you leave.” Athena continued to stand in the rain and extended her arms with a joking smile.

“What? You’re not coming back to Crestwood? Didn’t you just love this weather?” The Tevinter immediately shook his head with a fallen expression.

“Maker no. You better hurry, lest you leave your lover out in the rain.” He walked past her with his boots splashing in the puddles. She looked to a clean part of the water and flicked it on the back of
his perfectly groomed hair with a small burst of magic before jumping down the side of the stairs to run across the bridge. If they wanted her to try the right way, she would need to shift. The entire idea irritated her, but it felt like there was more to the request. Perhaps the Chargers felt bad, considering the last time they had all interacted it was when –

No. The wound was still too fresh.

Magic coursed through her hands as she ran them over her form until she bent over and gently shifted into a wolf. Sure enough, even through the rain, the smell of Solas’s herbal drink and old books clung to the ground he had walked on. There was a small trail of steps from the bridge and she sniffed them out until she reached the edge of the forest. He wore boots that day? He was a man that painted with plaster but apparently did not like digging mud out from between his toes.

She scoffed a laugh and looked to the branches. He had climbed into the trees and ran away from the Keep to the west, much like they did when they ran through the Dales in a fade-step. They had danced that day in a space untouched by chaos and corruption, a space in between the physical and the ethereal that only a few could last in. The memory put a spur of magic in her paws that caused her to run through the forest with glee in her steps. Claw and the pack lingered on the edge of the forest, Kain now among them. They watched her with idle interest as she ran and tracked the disappearing path left until she found Solas sitting underneath a thick branch with his back against a tree trunk.

He was meditating in the Fade with his hands resting in his lap but when she arrived he opened a single eye to look at her before humming. “That was a pointless request of the Iron Bull to make. Did you not find it to be humiliating?”

Athena shrugged and shifted back immediately. Her clothes were soaked but somehow, she was still smiling. “Of course, but, I know he just wants me to come with the Chargers. They don’t have to make anything up to me, but I’m sure they all feel like they need to. Still, it would be good to go on an errand with all of them.”

“The Inquisitor has requested that I go with you as well. Something about keeping you sane amongst all of them.” He teased with a smirk on his lips. He stood from his spot and wiped the dirt off his pants before walking over to her. A small barrier floated above his head to keep himself dry and it expanded to her whenever he walked near. She was in the process of ringing her hair out when he ran his hand over the back of her head and down her shirt, doing what he usually did and ridding her of the perspiration in her clothes and hair. “How did you find me so quickly? I was masking my presence on the way here.” There was a delighted twinkle in his eyes that made her heart swell with warmth.

“I actually don’t know. I don’t know if it was your scent or your presence I was following, but I could tell that you walked through the branches when you could.” He raised his eyes brows and hummed while sounding genuinely impressed. He gently wrapped his arms around her shoulder to lead them back to the Keep.

“That is impressive, ma’fen. You and the Wild surprise me with how bonded you are at times.” Athena couldn’t help but laugh while gesturing to the forest around her.

“In case you have forgotten, these are my woods and I made an alliance with a group of great bears recently. Hell, I rode one of them into battle. But... I agree with you. Something about the woods just sings to me. You know I used to hate camping?” She said with a nostalgic smirk, looking off into the thick of the woods. She could feel the wolves watching them from a distance, and beyond that she could feel the smaller pack guarding the Dalish clan at the bottom of the mountain.
“Really? Did you have much experience with it as a child?” He asked with a smile on his face, gently linking her arm underneath his to keep her close and warm as they walked back to the Keep. There was something more relaxed about him, more carefree as they moved together. Athena couldn’t quite put her finger on it, but she liked the change.

“Yes, I was in this thing called the Girl Scouts. It’s... an adventuring group for young children. It was supposed to teach us wilderness techniques, but I loathed going on the trips. I hated getting my hands dirty and would have rather rode around with my friends on our bikes.” He made a hum of question and she used the water falling around them to form a messy one to life in her free palm with her less than child-like water magic. “A two-wheeled contraption used for transport. You would use your feet to pedal, the pedals were connected to chains, and the chains helped the wheels move. In my small city, it was the best way to get around.”

He rubbed his chin and nodded in amusement. “That sounds like a simple enough invention.”

Athena couldn’t help but smile. “Eluvians are much more convenient though. I am afraid to continue to use them.”

Solas glanced down and she could tell he immediately noticed the concern that was set into her features. She was chewing on the skin on the inside of her cheek and scratching at the skin near her thumb nail with her free hand. He pulled her closer to his warmth and shook his head. “However, you came to access them, you were trusted with them. You were trusted because you are not foolish, and you are worthy. Do not doubt your accomplishments, vhenan. I would continue to be cautious in your use of them as you have been.”

She nodded and leaned her head against his shoulder as they cleared the forest line and began walking across the bridge to Skyhold. “How long do you think we have before Corypheus resurfaces again?”

There was a subtle twitch in his arm that she assumed was of surprise. “Do you not know?” He hummed and nodded when she shook her head in refusal. “He is wounded, gutted by the defeat of his army. He is scrambling for one final confrontation. It will not be easy to recover from the humiliation he suffered at the hands of the Inquisition’s army. Weeks? He is desperate, so he will not wait too long to strike.”

Athena let out a sigh and itched the hairline near her temple. “There are so many things that need to happen between now and then. My mind is buzzing, but, I guess we can start by going to Crestwood together.”

He paused and smiled, looking down to her with genuine care in his eyes. “Yes, we can start with that.”
The tavern was full of people and livelier than ever that evening with the buzz of the Inquisitor returning earlier than expected after a successful attack in the Arbor Wilds. The Chargers were buying drinks for anyone that looked their direction in preparation for their travels the next day. Bull insisted they were excellent hungover travelers, but Krem corrected him and said that all that meant was that they took turns sleeping in the wagon with a thick blanket over their eyes and a potion in their hand. They were all perfect company, but she couldn’t help but notice the awkward sympathetic glances shot her way when she was intermingling with the group. Krem and Bull put on a good face, but Dalish and Skinner would rush to meet each other’s eyes when she looked at them and Grim was unusually quiet. After an hour, she moved to the second story and scooted into a booth next to Dorian.

He smiled and slid a glass of amber liquor in her direction. The drink had an orange peel floating on the top and he was sitting next to two empty glasses on his right on top of the full one in his hand. “You got tired of their company that quickly? This is going to be an awkward adventure for you then.”

Athena scoffed and took a long sip of the drink, groaning in happiness as the combination of the citrus and the strong liquor hit her tongue. “I’m just going to try and focus on finding the mayor and getting back. I don’t need my grief shoved into my face every chance I get.” The door opened, and a flurry of familiar voices entered in. Loranil walked in with Illrith and there was a peppy young blonde elf in between them looking at the expanse of the tavern. She quickly scrambled out of the booth and looked down from the balcony with a look of maternal judgement.

Loranil felt it immediately, looking up with a bashful expression. “Hey! Fen’Elgara! She just – wanted to hang out for the night!” The army lieutenant had come back with Samson as a request from Cullen and apparently had rejoined the group that was now filling her office on most days while she was gone. Syla had given her a small update and the scouts they sent out to listen for elven disturbances were trickling back in.

Leafy looked up in confusion and then her eyes lit up like the sun. “Fen’mae!” Without even thinking the young teen fade-stepped up the stairs and into a tight embrace. Athena couldn’t help but laugh and hold her firm against her as the elf spoke rapidly into her clothing. “I heard you rode a bear and fought with them in the Arbor Wilds. Loranil says you found a Temple of Mythal! What was it like? Was it beautiful? Was it full of ruins? Did you learn anything new?”

She pushed her back at arm’s length and kissed the top of her head before smiling. “I wish I had the time to tell you all about it, my heart, but we are leaving for another task in the morning. If you
would like, I can tell you a little bit if you stay at my place tonight? What do you say? Kick Solas
to the loft so you and I can spend some time together?” She tipped the girl’s chin up with a grin,
Leafy only nodding with a large grin on her face.

“I...I would love that. I’ve been with the pack while you have been gone! I can shift even faster
now, and Kieran has been telling me about his grandmother. Did you know she could turn into a
dragon?” Athena tried not to flinch at the mention of Flemeth’s name but nodded and grinned
wickedly with mischief shining in her eyes.

“That would be an interesting ability, don’t you think? Maybe one day we’ll see if you can fly like
I can.” She winked as her daughter nodded and fell forward into another hug. There was a still
moment between them as all the ambient noises of the tavern faded out with Leafy leaning down to
her ear. “I really missed you. I was worried about you in all of that fighting. But you’re strong,
right Fen’mae?”

Athena nodded into the embrace, now partially leaning back on the table behind her to keep them
standing. Dorian wordlessly moved the drinks so that not a single drop was wasted. “The strongest.
I would never leave you, my daughter.” She stood up properly and wiped the tear that was
threatening to fall from her eye. “Now, go have fun with your friends. Don’t drink more than you
can handle because we need to talk when you’re done, okay?”

The young girl – no – teenager ran down the stairs as Athena looked to Loranil and skillfully
tossed a gold coin down to him. “Take it easy, alright? First rounds on me.” There were whoops
and laughter from the group as they settled into their normal spot across from the bar in a section of
booths and tables. She couldn’t help but sigh and lean onto her forearms as she leaned over the
balcony to observe them. They had grown more confident the longer she knew them. Many of
them were shy, afraid to speak their minds when she first met them. But within the freedom of the
Inquisition under her protection, their true selves were coming out. She only wished to give them a
place where they could live independently without the fear of an oppressor or a
shem that could do
them harm coming to snatch it away.

“It’s cute when they grow up, isn’t it?” Dorian snarked from his spot in the booth. She turned on
her heel to rejoin him as he swirled the drink within his hand and set the now half-empty glass
down on the table.

“Going at it a little hard for a celebration of victory, aren’t we?” She asked with teasing sincerity in
her voice, nudging her glass against his in an odd toast to their self-destructive habits before up-
ending half of her drinks contents into her mouth.

“I’ve had a hard time sleeping recently.” He said matter of factly with a small twitch of his
mustache. She saw something more in his eyes, however, so she leaned into side and tried to get
him to open up his posture with his arm around her. He refused at first but relented whenever she pressed against him once more with a small hum of child-like annoyance.

“Really? You seemed to be sleeping just fine on the way to the Arbor Wilds. Why didn’t you say anything?” His lips went from the charismatic mask he tended to wear to that of a somber frown.

“I was sleeping fine, I guess. It’s more than I am looking for a dream-less sleep nowadays.” This caused her head to snap up to search for his gaze. All she saw was sadness. She dropped her drink and repositioned to where she was leaning on her side to look at him more directly.

“What’s going on? I thought you were having good dreams, Dorian.” His lips curled into a bitter snarl.

“Yes, and that is all they are. Dreams, Athena, nothing more. Why should I torture myself and continue in this delusion that can never come true?” He scooted in the booth more away from her and she was taken aback but finally nodded.

“I haven’t dreamt in the Fade in a while either, ‘Mata. You remember that last time with the Despair demon?” He nodded silently as she rubbed the back of her neck. “I just feel unsafe and I know if I bring those feelings into the Fade with me, it’s like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Even still, if it’s just a dream, you shouldn’t deny yourself happiness. It’s hard enough to come by in this whole thing.” She reached over and squeezed his wrist with a smile on her face. He looked to her with a hard gaze, held it, and then sighed before pouring the rest of his drink into her glass.

“I suppose you’re right. Want me to send your greetings along?” He asked with a soft smile. She nodded and nearly yelped in surprise when the Commander slid in across from them with a mug of ale in his hands. He looked to both of them and made a move to leave the booth.

“I apologize, am I interrupting something?” Dorian instantly shook his head with a showman’s grin and gestured to the table.

“No, my dear Commander, in fact you might be the thing to brighten this very evening.” The Ferelden stilled and slowly lifted his ale to his lips.

“I’m almost afraid to ask.” Cullen mumbled under his breath. Athena had the urge to kick him underneath the table and tell him to play along but she enjoyed watching the two interact. It was like two squabbling brothers, except one of the brothers had a large crush on the other one. On
second thought, it wasn’t like two brothers after all. “Are you seriously going with the Chargers as a hunting dog? It seems so ridiculous.”

Athena tapped on her temple and then snapped her fingers with half a smile. “It’s so ridiculous it’s almost as if that’s not what they need me for, right?” Cullen’s eyes widened and almost faded to the same sympathy that she had been getting from the Chargers all night. “Hey – no – not from you. He went out how he wanted and... yeah. I’m fine. Leafy is fine. If everyone could stop looking at me like I’m just a grieving mother in a shawl that would be nice.”

Both of the men chuckled, and Dorian pulled her into a sideways hug. “It will be fun, you, Solas, and the whole mercenary crew! Doesn’t that sound romantic?”

Both Athena and Cullen made sounds of disgust, shooting each other a child-like grin when they noticed that they spoke in a connected fashion. Dorian then was the one to kick the Commander underneath the table, arching a mischievous brow. “Surely, you’ve had someone to entertain you lately, Commander? You’re here. In the tavern. Smiling. Normally after a huge military operation you’re nothing but work, but here. you. are.” He reached over and took a long sip of Athena’s drink for dramatic effect. His words worked on the Commander and slowly a blush formed from his cheeks to his ears.

“That is absolutely none of your concern, Tevinter.” Athena sat up in her chair, so she could lean into Dorian more, creating the image that the two were an inseparable unit bent on embarrassing the leader of their troops.

“Ooh you must have hit a nerve, Amatus, look how he blushes. Come on, Cullen, tell us of the lucky girl – or guy.” She looked up to Dorian with a wink who couldn’t hide his grin. He rubbed his chin to try and hide his chuckle, but it bubbled into a laugh, which only caused the Commander to hide his face in his hands.

“Maker help me. I like to keep my private life just that, private. But if it matters so much to you too it was only temporary. It’s no more.” Dorian opened his mouth to make another witty come back but Athena elbowed him lightly in the ribs before clearing her throat.

“I’m sorry, Cullen, we didn’t know. You said it so quickly, you don’t sound too broken up about it.” Sincerity was slowly leaking into her voice, the sisterly part of her coming out above the somewhat tipsy woman that loved to joke with the Commander. He sat up and rubbed the back of his neck, the blush fading from his cheeks as he shrugged.

“Times like this, it’s... hard to focus on something else other than the task at hand. I’m sure you
two know how it can be.” Athena shrugged in return, raising her glass to Cullen before downing the rest of its contents. Dorian frowned when there was no more, raising up so he could meet eyes with one of the tavern workers to get two more and another round for Cullen. Athena was amazed how he communicated all of that with hand gestures and a smile alone, but within a minute there were three fresh drinks in front of them.

Dorian could only chuckle. “Don’t you think him and Inspiration would get along?” Athena was helping Cullen finish his first ale and she almost choked on it, turning to the side to swallow and cough heavily into the crook of her arm. The mage broke into fits of full laughter, running his hand through his hair while turning his back to the wall and taking up most of the booth. Athena took the opportunity to slide over next to Cullen and glower at the mage, the effects of the near choking experience making its show in a dark red on her throat and cheeks.

“When? Isn’t that a spirit in the Fade?” Cullen asked with an entirely unamused tone.

“Yes. And I would like my spirit friends to stay alive. Thank you, Dorian.” Inwardly she was cursing. The two would potentially make an insanely good match, but she was already dealing with one friend and his affiliation with a spirit. Two would drive her mad and Cullen had changed, but he wasn’t open minded enough to even consider a thing. “Cullen, can I ask you a personal question?”

He huffed a laugh and gestured to the table. “I don’t see why not.”

Athena tapped on her chin and leaned back into the wooden booth. “When was the last time you had a good dream?”

Instead of reacting negatively like she expected, he took it like a philosophical question. He traced the rim of his mug with a finger and let out a sigh. “Maker – it’s been years. For me it’s either been nightmares or darkness. I prefer the latter on most nights.” He took a long drink of his ale as Dorian almost looked slack-jawed at him.

The Tevinter slid out of the booth and waved to them quickly. “Well I suddenly feel as if my worries have gone away. I’m going to sleep. I’ll see you off in the morning, Athena. Make some room in your pack for that wine we like.”

Athena moved to the empty side of the booth with a smile, shrugging at Cullen before the two toasted to one another. For the next couple hours, they caught up as people rotated in and out of the booth. Sera was sitting with them the longest, going on about how weird yet “friggin sick” it was to fight with bears. Cullen immediately denied her request to have a pet baby bear. The tavern was
winding down when she heard a surprisingly sober call from underneath the balcony.

“Fen’mae! Let’s go!” Leafy cried with a wave. The other elves were filing out from the tavern, leaving her in front of Varric and Maryden by herself. Athena looked to Cullen with a shrug, pushing her final glass to the side before clapping him on the shoulder.

“Go on ahead, Leafy. I’ll be there in a few minutes! Find Kain and take him with you.” There was no response, only the shutting of the tavern door behind her. The Commander smirked and looked up to her at the contact.

“You be careful out in Crestwood. There are reports coming in of a dragon near the hold we have there. You know how the Iron Bull can get around those things.” Athena snorted a laugh while pulling her hair up into a ponytail on top of her head.

“I feel confident we could take that thing if it tried anything. If it does come up, you want a souvenir? I think a pair of dragon’s fangs would look rather intimidating at the edge of your desk. Your soldiers wouldn’t want to disobey you again.” She held her hands out to simulate the proposed decorations as he laughed.

“You are probably right. Here, I’ll walk you out.” The pair made their way down the stairs. Once they reached the bottom, they were greeted by a chorus of whoops and howls from the Chargers’ corner.

“Hey Commander!” Bull called out to him, summoning him over with a half drunken wave. Cullen turned on a heel and sighed, rubbing the back of his neck helplessly.

“They won’t stop unless I go, will they?” He asked quietly under his breath towards her. She shook her head and put her hands on his shoulders to turn and push him towards their corner.

“Go on, be social. I’m the one leaving in the morning; you enjoy yourself and try to get some good sleep tonight.” The last request was as sincere as she could make it before she turned and left the tavern into the spring evening. Thankfully the temperature was getting warmer, even up on the tips of the mountains where they were at. She didn’t feel the need to bring a coat anymore at night and she was delighted at that fact. As she ascended the stairs towards her tower, she heard two voices coming from inside, one deep and one light.

“Andruil? Loranil said that is who she thinks I am most like from personality alone.” There was a
sigh from within and she could only assume it was Solas. She imagined him pinching the bridge of his nose before continuing.

“There is more to her than her ferocity if you go by the tales. In her end, she grew mad with power and had to be struck down by Mythal. This practice you are considering... it is not something I am supportive of, da’len. I can give you counsel, but I would advise against it entirely. We had previously discussed you having doubts about your Dalish upbringing entirely.”

Athena waited outside of the door with a look of concentration on her face. He probably knew she was there, but it was rare to catch them in an open, trusting conversation with one another. “We have... this just feels important to me still. It will be the one thing I take with me.”

“For the rest of your life. Such a ritual is irreversible.” He commented with a grave tone but Leafy didn’t falter.

“I know, hahren. Do you think Fen’Mae will have a suggestion?” There was a light chuckle from Solas as Athena finally opened the door and came in. He looked up with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, gesturing to her while glancing back to Leafy.

“You would have to first get her opinion on the ancient elhven Gods first.” Athena could only huff a laugh and smirk, looking down as Leafy came and brought her into a hug. She bent down and kissed the top of her head, smiling as Solas looked to her for a comment on the conversation.

“We do not have enough time in the evening for that talk, my dear.” Leafy let out a sigh and nodded into the embrace, stepping back before looking at Solas and gesturing up to the loft with a raise of her chin. He smiled and raised his hands in surrender.

“Yes. I have been instructed of my reassignment for the evening.” He stood up and walked to Athena’s side, kissing her cheek before pulling her into a long, welcoming kiss that made her belly flutter. Leafy made a noise of disgust before running downstairs to prep for bed. He smiled under the kiss, stroking her cheek with the back of his knuckles.

“You have a bed you could sleep in if that would be more comfortable, vhenan.” She whispered in a breathy tone, her words stolen away by the surprise show of affection.

He shrugged and tucked a hair behind her ear that had been blown astray in the walk between the tavern and the tower. “The view from your window is breathtaking. I sometimes prefer a hard
surface on my back when I sleep."

Athena couldn’t help it. She winked and tugged on the wolf-bone necklace that hung on his chest. “So do I.”

He immediately caught on and the tips of his ears went pink, a dark look flashing over his eyes before he turned and went upstairs to his sleeping location for the night. Athena removed her coat, overshirt, and leggings so that she could change into a light pair of pajamas for the evening. Thankfully Josephine had caught the hint that they tended to wear less where she came from, so her pajamas were turning into tank tops and light fabric shorts that made it easier to breathe at night.

She got into the bed on Solas’s side and let out a sigh, rubbing a finger over her lips lightly in remembrance of the kiss she had just gotten. He was probably sad to learn that her daughter would be staying the night, but he could wait until the next night when they were camping. Leafy bounded up back the stairs and almost jumped into her side of the bed, nuzzling under the blankets that had a soft warming rune glowing in between the layers. She turned on her side with a smile, reaching out for one of Athena’s hands to hold.

“You’ve been okay, Leafy? She asked quietly, already hearing the deep breaths of Solas meditating from upstairs. The young elf nodded and scooted forward, looking down and unbraiding the braids in her hair.

“Yeah. I miss him, but, it’s getting better. Like you said, he wouldn’t want us to be sad.” Athena nodded and laid on her back, resting her forearm over her forehead as she let out a heavy sigh. Leafy only poked her on the side with a curious expression, readjusting the pillow under her head before asking. “Tell me about the Temple of Mythal.”

Athena turned with an arched brow, entertained by her persistence. Still, she smiled and nodded. “Ma nuvenin, da’fen.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Years, everyone! :)}
The next morning was nothing significant. Leafy assisted her in getting up to pack and gave her a good bye embrace before running off for her training with Fiona and Morrigan. The Witch of the Wilds almost seemed hesitant to take her that morning, giving Athena yet another sympathetic glance without rhyme or reason. She ignored it and said her brief farewells to everyone else that had come: Rathein, Dorian, Syla, and Cullen. The party was off at first light, but she was a woman of few words that morning. The evening before, her and Leafy had gone through every detail imaginable about the Temple of Mythal. They spoke of the bears, Old Scarred Paw, the eluvians, Abelas, the Sentinels, everything the young girl could think to ask about as she told the story. The mention of the Well gave her pause, especially when she heard about how it denied her mother. Leafy didn’t know what to think, or what it possibly meant, but she was confused by it all. They slept holding each other that night, but there was a feeling of things left unsaid or unanswered. It mostly came from her daughter, this air of consideration that followed her even as she left that morning.

She was brought from her thoughts by a wad of crunched paper thrown by Krem from the side. He sharply whistled with an apologetic smile, pointing down on a large map of Crestwood and the surrounding areas in his hand. “Sorry, Athena, you alright? You were really deep in thought there.”

Athena nodded and rubbed the back of her neck, twisting it until she felt a pop before looking over at the map. “Yeah, sorry myself, just stayed up late last night with Leafy and am thinking about some stuff. You ready to go over the plan?” They had been on the road for hours already and were getting to the base of the mountain. At the front of the group Solas and Iron Bull were conversing while simultaneously playing a chess game. Bull was deep in thought as well, and both of them had taken notice. She looked up to the Qunari man with her lips tugged to the side in thought before Krem let out a sigh.

“He still feels bad, you know. About his friend Gatt, about the assassins that followed. It comes, and it goes, but it wasn’t easy for him letting the Qun go. He was having one of those days until Solas started talking to him. He seems to help; the Chief looks better already.” The lieutenant smiled, and she couldn’t help but join him. The two at the front were total opposites. One was an advocate for freedom while the other came from a culture of utter control. Yet there they were, discussing different philosophies while playing a game of chess without a board. As she watched them, she saw Krem begin to grin out of the corner of her eye.

“So, the boss said you all were speaking of marriage rituals on the way to the Arbor Wilds. Said all the ladies save yourself nearly swooned when Solas described the old elven way of tying the knot.” A flush instantly spotted across her cheeks and chest as she turned to him with wild eyes.

“Rathein and Bull told you about that, huh?” She tried to keep her voice still and confident, but the sudden mention of marriage put her stomach into butterflied knots. Krem only nodded with a
mischievous grin accompanied with a wink.

“Come on, we’re far enough back that we can talk about it. Is that something you’ve thought of?” Dalish slowed her horse to try and eavesdrop but Athena nuded the horse with a small bit of magic to keep it going the same pace just out of reach of their conversation.

“I guess? We’ve talked about the future but the ‘m’ word has never really come up. Why do you ask?” The warrior shrugged while readjusting his armor. He rolled up the maps and quickly gave up the conversation of the mission for juicier details.

“You two have been happy for a while, about as long as the Chief and the Inquisitor. I’ve heard people asking around the tavern if the two most powerful women in the Inquisition were going to get off the market. I’m sure Josephine has a hundred noble men and women from Orlais and Ferelden waiting for a clear answer, so she can tear up their proposals.” Athena immediately frowned with a snarl on her lips.

“I am not marrying an Orlesian. I can probably count the number of decent ones on my hands.” Krem began to immediately laugh so she broke into a smile and shrugged. “I don’t know, for some reason the pressure hasn’t been there. It’s always one mission to the other—obviously.” She gestured to the group of the Chargers with a playful wink. “There hasn’t been a good time to talk about forever. In my world, it was customary for the man to ask first.”

Krem immediately scoffed and rubbed his hands on top of his thighs. “Yeah, you’re the type of woman that obeys a custom like that.”

Athena couldn’t help but laugh with him, a genuine smile spreading to her lips as he brought his horse close enough for him to clap her shoulder. “From what I can see, there is no good time for a conversation like this in this world with who we are. You’re the Inquisitor’s advisor, her sister. Do you ever see your life being simple?”

She looked up the front to ensure that Bull and Solas were still in their conversation before shaking her head. “No and I suppose there lies the problem. Why are you pressing so much? You have a bet going on or something?” Krem balked and nearly jumped on his horse, chuckling under his breath before rubbing the back of his neck with guilt rising with the blush on his face.

“You little snake!” She teased at him, kicking her foot against his side. “You’re lucky that I don’t tell your horse to buck you off!”
The warrior almost giggled, keeping his hands up to defend her pointless and childish smacks against the side that she could reach. “Hey hey hey, that aside, I was still being serious. Life’s too short. I think we’ve all learned that, don’t you?” There was an edge of sorrow in his eyes that stole her breath away, her features falling before she nodded in agreement. Krem let out a sigh and brought his horse close again to pat her on the thigh sympathetically to get her attention back to his gaze. His voice softened, and she slowly looked up to him. “Hey, it’s alright. You know that’s what this trip was for. Being together and moving on.”

Athena smirked and shrugged, leaving the lieutenant to rub his grin and wink at her to break the tension. “Although, if you do happen to use your shapeshifting to find the mayor, that’s another bet I’m going to win.”

The road to Crestwood seemed almost light-hearted. The people were hearing of their victory in the Arbor Wilds and of the defeat of the bulk of Corypheus’s army. There were still bandits and minor parties trying to throw chaos into the world, but the sight of the Iron Bull and his company of mercenaries normally made them steer clear. If they didn’t, the fights normally didn’t last long. It was a surprisingly sunny day when they trotted into Crestwood. Solas, the Iron Bull, and Athena were recognized, and the villagers waved at them. Some of them had even begun to rebuild some of the houses in the valley now that the dam was shut.

The three plus Krem climbed the steps to the mayor’s house to look for any clues. The door was closed properly, not hanging off of its hinges or busted through. Bull hummed and looked around. “Looks like someone has been taking care of the place. Want to see who?”

Athena nodded and placed her hand on the door, pulsing her magic through the house to search for traps. Her aura filled the air of the room, its heat curving its way into every nook and cranny of the small house. But still, no triggers, no traps. She nodded and turned the doorknob to enter the house. It was only slightly dusty, but everything seemed in place from when they left it. The bed was made, decorated with apparel from Ferelden and Denerim. She ran her hands over the sheets as her lips twitched into a frown.

“His guilt does not allow him to go far.” Solas commented with ice in his tone. She felt his aura follow after hers, rifling through the books on the wall and the objects on the mayor’s former desk.

Bull huffed under his breath. “He probably was a good man once and cared about the town.”
Athena rolled her eyes and faced them with her hands on her hips. “Sure, until he murdered half of them. I understand the Blight did a lot of terrible things to people, and I wasn’t here to see it. But we saw what he did in the caves behind his old house. The town is forever scarred by his mistakes.”

The Qunari met her gaze and nodded solemnly, a sudden smirk coming to his face. “Hey, do you feel anything of his in here, Alpha?”

She couldn’t help but scowl, begrudgingly tapping into the abilities that allowed her to find Solas that time in the woods. The magic tingled on her skin and when she opened her eyes she knew her eyes were probably slightly aglow due to Bull’s raised brow and Solas’s slight smirk. She looked on the bed, the desk, and then grumbled.

“Fuck.”

Bull looked in the direction she was looking at: the ground. “What? What do you see?”

There were footprints, maybe a week old that led from the bed out the door. She sighed and itched the side of her head while following the trail. They went down to the beach on the water front and then towards the path to the hills. “I hate it. But you’re right. I can kind of feel where he went. Ooh! I have a friend out there that might know where he went.”

Krem made a noise of questioning as she gestured for them to follow her. “Get the rest of the group. I feel like it won’t take maybe a day for us to find him.”

Solas walked at her side and smiled at her with pride in his voice. “Truly?”

She shrugged and rubbed her hands together in preparation to shift. “Probably. He wasn’t a mastermind or anything. I agree with Bull that he probably used to be a good person, or still thinks he is. He wouldn’t let the town he loves out of his sight. Now, as humiliating as it is, I want Krem to win a bet.”

Her lover tilted his head in confusion before she shifted fluidly into her white wolf form. She shook her body from nose to tail and waited for the rest of the Chargers to show up. Just for show, she sniffed around on the ground near a foot print and made a noise of familiarity, throwing her head to the sky with a mock howl. Krem was laughing into the back of his hand as Solas rolled his eyes. She continued the path until it curved from the beach onto the mountain trail. There was a
small pack of wolves in the area, but she wasn’t quite as familiar with them as she was another creature. Athena rolled her mind back and pulled onto that old tether, one of the first animals she connected with besides Kain.

Thunder, the Crestwood plains druffalo, groaned from his eating place among the herd and looked in front of him as if she were standing there. She projected the image of the mayor into his head and he exhaled heavily through his nose in an exasperated fashion, slowly turning his body towards the caves where Stroud and the Templars used to hide out. She faded back into her regular mindset before sending thoughts of immense gratitude. Athena shook her head to rid herself of the fade-dust settling in on her mind before giving a sharp yelp of urgency to follow towards the rest of the group. Solas was only mildly amused by her antics, knowing fully well she could have accomplished the same results without changing into a wolf for their entertainment. He looked to her with a single arched brow and she shrugged with a soft whine. She looked back at Krem who still had a childish smile on his face.

“You know where he’s at, huh girl?”

That was it.

She reached forward and snapped at his hand with the full intent to leave a bite mark as a reminder, but he jerked away instantly, putting his hands up in surrender.

“Last one, I swear. Dalish, Skinner, you guys want to run with her? You’re the fastest of the group and can probably keep up.” The two elves bumped hips with a smile before running up to her side.

“Ready when you are, Athena!” Dalish said excitedly, getting into a stance that would normally indicate they were about to race.

She rolled her eyes over to Skinner who sighed, flipping one of her daggers in her hand before sheathing it on her hip. “Give this one to us, Athena. Magic can be terrifying or exciting, and this one is pretty unique.”

Athena didn’t hesitate to run off on the trail towards the set of former Red Templar caves. Hopefully the area had been cleared out before he camped there, or else he would surely be going mad from being in close proximity with the corrupted titan’s blood. It was jutting out of the ground the last time she had been there, which made for a good hiding place if you didn’t want to be found. The three elves and she weaved on the trader’s route and then scaled up the mountain, stopping just before the cave. There were no longer any red Templar scouts nor archers awaiting them. There was only an eerie stillness that came from the remains of the red lyrium shattered on
the ground.

The sensation caused her to immediately shift back, her gaze flicking about to take in the details. There was a decimation of the area, streaks of flame scattered on the ground around the red lyrium with large shards of it broken off and turned to ash. Solas bent down and touched his hand to the scorched earth, clicking his tongue against the back of his teeth. “There was not an expedition for the Inquisition to destroy any remaining Red lyrium, was there?” He looked over his shoulder to her and she shook her head.

“Not to my knowledge, but I know Varric wanted us to destroy any that we came across just as a personal favor to him.” She looked to the cave and saw that the door was still intact, pointing up while nudging Skinner in the side. “Look, whatever did this left the cave alone, go check it out and we’ll stay out here.”

The rogue grabbed Dalish and made their way into the cave as Bull and the others arrived. The Qunari took in the whole scene and slowly a smile spread to her face. Athena’s mind was right with his, her gaze looking off to the left where she knew the Crestwood dragon rested. “How much do you want to bet dragons don’t like red lyrium, Bull?”

He nodded and patted his axe on his back, clapping his hands together and rubbing them with a chuckle. “Oh yeah. This stuff pisses me off enough. I can’t imagine what it does to one of those things. Look! It came down and ripped this apart with its claws and fire. That must have been a sight to see.”

Solas hummed, taking a step back in to take in the whole landscape. “Yes, that appears to be it. We connected to magic are innately sensitive to it, and dragons are the epitome of that connection. With the red templars gone, it saw its opportunity to strike and took it.” He followed Athena’s gaze out to where the distant sounds of a dragon’s roar echoed. “They are marvelous creatures – but – this one seems quite close to the village. Was there not a woman that we saw out towards that way? Living on a sort of farm in front of the ruined keep?”

Athena let out a small groan. “Yeah, the Naturalist, that guy’s ex-girlfriend from Crestwood.”

“He’s not here! But it looks like he was here recently!” Skinner called out from the cave, bounding down with Dalish at her side who was snacking on some preserved meat she found inside. Athena opened her hand and the elf grinned and tossed her a piece. She took a bite and looked to the piece in her hand, somewhat frowning as she tucked the small piece into the back of her teeth and gnawed away at the tough texture.
“Druffalo – he’s getting desperate, this shit is tough and barely salted. Aw man, I hope it wasn’t a friend of Thunder’s.”

Bull rubbed his chin and looked down the path that led out of Crestwood and towards the other major cities of Denerim. “I bet he probably had to restock and went to markets down the road. We should have someone guard this place and see if he comes back. Alpha, Solas, you guys think you can handle that?”

She looked to Solas with a shrug before nodding back to Bull. “I don’t see why not. This gives us some shelter and more than likely the dragon won’t come back here since the red lyrium is gone. How do you want us to contact you if he’s here?” She winked and leaned back while continuing to chew on her jerky in a non-ladylike fashion. “I could howl if you want, but I don’t know how far out that will reach.”

The Qunari made a quick hum of realization and then patted down the pack on his side. He rummaged through until he pulled out a small horn that was similar to the one he carried. Krem’s face fell at the sight of it, his hand brushing the horn he carried around his waist. “Here, it’s what we use. Blow it twice if he comes back and three times if you need help.” He tossed it to her and she caught it, looking over the horn before catching sight of a small etched in design on the side. The design was a small sword, probably an inch or so big. She ran her thumb over it and looked to Krem who only nodded to the question that was forming in her mind.

“Feels right that you should have it, right?” The lieutenant walked over and patted her on the shoulder as she silently stood. “Remember. Two blows: mayor. Three: help. Hopefully we’ll be back before the night tomorrow.” The short-haired warrior looked to the rest of the mercenaries and swirled his finger in the air as a gesture for them to get ready to move. Bull nudged her with his arm as he walked by, smirking over his shoulder as the group made their way down the path towards Denerim.

“Be good, Alpha. See ya, Solas, and... thanks.” The mercenary leader stopped in front of Solas with a smile. He could only return it with a smirk and a nod, keeping his arms behind his back with a friendly, relaxed posture.

“A game when you get back? Perhaps one time you may actually win.” He asked with the smug personality of the Dread Wolf peeking through his normal scholar persona. Bull only huffed a laugh underneath his breath and shook his head as he did it, patting him on the shoulder before officially taking off with the rest of the group. Athena was looking over her horn in her hands, wondering if Tobi ever had a chance to use it. Did he use it when he ran after the Red Templar? Or did he storm in bull-headed without any reservation or fear?

As usual Solas ripped her from her thoughts with a touch to her arm. He gestured with a tilt of his
head towards the cave before pointing off towards the fields and the wilds. “Shall I search for a place to set up camp? It would not be wise to set up camp near his residence for fear that we might scare him off. I can set wards and signals around the cave so that we know if anyone gets close. Considering your distaste for the rations in the mayor’s home, would you like to hunt for something better? I may still have some of the food that Syla packed for us.”

Athena couldn’t help but smile. “Us? You got a care package as well?”

The tips of his ears turned pink and answered with a helpless shrug. “My pack was mysteriously full of food after I loaded it onto my hart the morning we left. Perhaps my association with you has increased my popularity among the residents of Skyhold.”

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek gently, lingering before answering in a low, hushed tone. “Or people are finally seeing what I see in you, vhenan. Do not allow me to take credit for your endless work in the Inquisition as well.” She began to walk backwards away from the cave towards the bottom of the hills. The dragon would hopefully be sleeping in the evening in the pits at the bottom of the wall on the other sides of the ruins. There was a hill on the side of the former Keep that had good pickings for food, if not the swamp and pond near that. She turned on her heel before exclaiming a final tease, her body shifting back into a wolf soon after. “Try not to be lonely without me, Solas. I’ll come find you when I’ve found some food.”
Predator or Prey

Near the ruins and the cave there wasn’t much for hunting. Thunder’s herd kept the plains busy and she did not wish to hunt among them or instill fear in her friend’s allies. The druffalo approached her from the side as she walked down the trail. He butted his large head into her body until she gave him some sort of affection, snorts of gratitude urging from the bottom of his throat as he tilted his head to find that sweet spot where only her nails could find. He had somehow been kept free from the dragon’s grasp. When she asked how, he merely made noises of happiness about the whole situation.

“Yeah, well I would hate to be dragon food as well. Get some rest, big guy. I need to go find some food.” She pressed her forehead to his head and nuzzled into it slightly. She had to ignore the overwhelming smell of his fur and the potential manure that stuck to it, but it came with the territory. She had wished for more woods, more cover than the plains and scattered trees that she had, but for now it worked. Past the pond where they found the remains of the spy who betrayed Leliana, there was untouched land. The pond had a strong enough aura for people to keep away, the sense of death and decay weighing even her mind down. But with a fast-enough fade-step, she was able to skip over the pond and skid to a stop on the other side.

Solas wasn’t on her tail and she couldn’t feel his aura nearby. Had he set up camp already? On the trip to Crestwood, he seemed unnaturally... joyful. He would glance back at her and when she met his gaze, the tips of his ears would turn pink and he would smile with undeniable affection on his eyes. The look made her heart melt into a puddle in the base of her belly, it twisting, and stealing her breath at every chance. How was it that she had a God in her heart? How was it he, the man who inspired a rebellion against the Gods and trapped them away for eternity, held her heart within his hands? It had to be witchcraft. Even with all of the praise, all of the accomplishments she had done within the Inquisition, she still felt like the outcast from another world at times. But he saw her amidst all of that. There was a silent kinship between the both of them, a history that no one else could comprehend.

There was an entire world behind their hearts that was invisible to the rest of the world and their friends. No matter how thoroughly they explained it or drew it out, they were pieces of history like stories written in a book. She loved him. It was plain; it was simple. She loved waking up next to him in the morning and seeing that he still faced her, his hands reaching for her if she managed to move in her sleep. She loved the small things he did for her like heating her towels after a bath or touching her in minor ways when he had his icy persona on in front of others, just a small reminder to her of his devotion. She loved that whenever he talked to her he would lose his words like a shy schoolboy speaking to a crush. It was so unlike what she had known of him before coming to meet him. She had assumed him to be the quiet, distant lover that never opened up. He invited her in and allowed her to coax details from him. There was a delicate dance of speaking of the past that they both understood, and they danced it well. He would come a step forward and she would find a way to match it.

The floor was like a thin sheet of ice and they knew how to step in ways that wouldn’t let them fall
through. As Krem had said, she was not the type of woman to keep to customs or be the damsel blinded by love. But Solas put a fire in her and loved to watch her burn, shine in front of others. In the heat of battle when blood splattered the front of her armor and there was a frenzy in her eyes, he still found her beautiful. Athena had received nothing but unconditional love from him, but there was still a pit of doubt that sat like a rock in the bottom of her heart. Everyone knew what happened next and she was there. Crestwood. The word was poison upon her tongue. Her hands patted on top of her thighs in anxiety, her mind completely distracted from the task of finding food. There was no vallaslin to remove, no freedom to give. She had been a free woman since she fell and was finding ways to free others herself.

He had shown her time and time again that she was different, that things were different than what she knew. She tried to change the fate she knew to improve the lives of her friends and family, but that same fate found a way of biting her in the ass. There was nothing but heartbreak in this part of the story. Nothing but a stone that would sharpen her heart to a fighting edge to use against her enemies. There was enough overwhelming evidence to prove his love for her, but her own experiences and knowledge of the world kept her terrified. In her trek to find food, she put her back to a tree to find something solid to keep herself on. Her hands smoothed out her hair before gripping the tops of her knees as she bent over to find her breath.

There was a pressure on her body, like a spectral hand choking the life and stealing the sanity from her. Tears formed in her eyes and she couldn’t help but think to herself. Please let me be different. Please let me be different. The thoughts became loud enough in her head that she was threatened to scream them into the plains.

“It is too beautiful a night to be as distressed as you are.” The moment the voice sounded she felt the pressure disappear from her body. She had thought it to be a manifestation of her anxiety, but she whipped around to see its source.

The Dread Wolf had his head tilted in confusion at her, all six red eyes softened with a look of sympathy. She wiped her eyes and was not surprised to find tears on them, a forced smirk coming to her lips as she stood to a full posture. “You are getting your strength back. I can normally feel you coming.”

He made a sound of mixed emotion in his throat, clicking his teeth together with another shake of his head. “I did not conceal my presence on this evening. You were so deep in your thoughts you didn’t even feel my coming. What a hunter to put herself in such a vulnerable position.” Instead of laughing at his sarcastic jab she frowned, dropping her hands to her side before leaning against the tree again. The urge to cry welled up in her throat and left it dry. She closed her eyes and let out a heavy sigh, slowly counting to ten in her head to keep her emotions in check. There was a feeling against her right hand, something cold and wet that turned into fur. He guided her hand onto his back and allowed it to run through the depths of his fur. “What troubles you, Athena? Did you not just leave the company of friends?”
She clenched her hand and grabbed a fistful of his fur. It stopped his movements, but she used his presence to ease her sliding to the ground. She sat with the tree at her back, the bulk of his body at or above eye level. He readjusted and walked away for a moment. Her eyes were still closed so all she felt was the breeze of his absence before a weight pressed down on the tops of her thighs. Her hands reached out and felt his head there. As she stroked his fur, a sound resembling a sigh escaped him and she found the gestures to be calming.

“I was, I mean, I am fine. I was just ambushed by my own thoughts, that is all.” He moved his head into his touch and growled in happiness.

“Ah yes, it is a pity when that happens. What did they ambush you with?” Athena paused in her petting and realized she needed more time to choose her words. He was bold to approach her this soon considering she had just left Solas’s side only moments ago, but she imagined this would be one of the last times they saw each other like this. It would be one of the last times where they played this charade and danced this dance. Even though the truth would free them in a sense, this was a place to be safe in their secrets.

“You never responded, Wolf. You have gotten stronger, haven’t you? I can feel it now even with you on top of me.” There was a dull pressure in his presence that her aura fought against. It wasn’t the cold comfort of her lover’s, no, this was something made of stronger stuff. It was a constant reminder against her skin, against her mind, against all her defenses. It seeped into the cracks like darkness and was present everywhere he was. It had changed from their first encounter in the woods. This Wolf, this God in her lap was coming back into his own.

“Yes, but this is only a shard of it. You have never seen what my enemies would in the past. I have kept it restricted as to not draw attention.”

“And now?” She asked softly, scratching in a spot behind his ears before moving to simply rub his ears gently as an idle task for her hands.

He moved, and she opened her eyes to meet his gaze, her own tired and lids heavy with exhaustion. “Would you like to see it for its truth?”

Athena wet her lips and moved her hands from his head tentatively to pull her coat tighter around her. Curiosity got the best of her and she nodded, wiping the tears from her eyes one more time. He stood from his position and backed away until he was at the edge of her feet. He planted his paws into the ground and looked to her for a final time wearing a look that she knew very well. He was silently asking for permission to continue in fear of making her uncomfortable. Did he wish to flex his legs? With his power returned, it would be odd to accustom to the role of a present God again. Even without his orb, the Gods of Arlathan were known for a reason. She let out a slow breath and nodded, barely finishing the breath before it was torn from her throat in a gasp.
The world grew still around them. Every particle floating in the air froze in place and the rocks on the ground began to vibrate. The air felt like it was being drawn in towards him, as if nature itself waited for him to move next before it continued. Then, all at once, all six eyes opened, and she felt his aura burst from the cage where it had been hiding. There was no wind in the air knocking the trees back, no explosion like she expected or had seen in countless shows.

There was only pressure, gravity that sunk her into the ground and knocked her head back against the tree in shock. The sense of dread was overwhelming. It felt like tar sticking to every fiber on her skin before it permeated and flushed her mind. Her own aura rose in defense and fought back with a burst of ethereal flame. It was instantly squelched underneath the weight of his. There wasn’t an attack; this was merely his full presence without hiding. This is what the old world of the elvhen knew when it was his height. The figure of the Dread Wolf stretched to above the trees until he was looking down at her from above their tips. His expression was calm, as if he weren’t even trying in this show of force, but she could feel his gaze assessing every micro movement she made with her body and her aura. How strong must the old race have been to withstand this in daily passing? How far had the world fallen to be so taken aback by the strength before her? Without even thinking she gasped for breath, her hands ripping the air in front of her before actual flames summoned from her palm and swiped out in front of her in defense.

If this is what he was like, he had returned to a greater strength and would be seeking out Mythal. If this is how strong he truly was, that could only mean the end of this arc of the Inquisition was ending. There were still too many things to do, too many things running in her head that would have to come to an end before Corypheus did. There was then the thought of what would come after, in the period of the unknown before the Exalted Council occurred. She wished to change their fate so that he wasn’t facing them alone, so that his goal wasn’t to end the world as they knew it in a rain of fire. If he was already this close to that goal of power, then she was running desperately behind.

“Enough.” She croaked, falling forward on her hands and knees as her breaths came in pants. Her hair fell forward to veil the weakness on her face. Her body shook with each breath. Athena fought the urge to press her head to the cold ground for some sort of anchor. But. She would not bow. He was not greater than her, even with his power growing. They were equals. They were partners, but oh how defeated she felt. If he wished to end the world to resurrect his own, would she be strong enough to stop him? In the future, he could solidify his enemies to stone with a single thought. She knew she had been growing stronger as well through their journeys and her training. It was nothing like that.

She felt helpless and defeated.

“Athena.” He withdrew it all in a second until there was an echoing stillness in the air. He walked forward and nudged her forehead with his cold nose. She did not move. Her hands gripped to fists in the ground and her mind swirled with a thousand different fighting words to throw back at him.
in defense. They were all stolen away when she felt hands smooth over her hair and touch the side of her face. The voice was still the same, mixed, deep, and measured in cadence, but he had shifted in front of her. “Are you injured? Are you alright? I did not realize it would hurt you. I would never – “

She pushed off the ground backwards into a kneeling position, one hand keeping his hand to her face. The hood of the Dread Wolf covered his face and hung forward, but she could see his lips slightly open in shock and his other hand on her thigh. “You did not hurt me.” She wished to turn her head and kiss his hand, but she paused, sighing and tilting her head into his hand. “Congratulations, Fen’Harel, you are unmatched. I have not seen a power like that in my time being here. You no longer need to hide in the shadows.”

He gasped lightly, withdrawing his hand from her face as if it burned while keeping the other one on her leg. “Is that what you think that was for?” Fen’Harel clenched his jaw and looked down to the ground while crouched on one knees. “You have never run from me. You have never shown fear in your eyes. Even now, I saw only sadness, but no fear. You claim I have no match, but I have seen such power in you, Fen’Elgara. Not every mage can summon a creature made from pure flame, communicate with herds of creatures at once, or defeat a demon of Nightmares as powerful as the one you obliterated.” Athena’s eyes shot wide and she covered his hand with hers on her thigh in a search for some comfort, some semblance of reality. “So why sadness? What is haunting your thoughts even now?”

There was nothing in her mind at that moment. No urgency telling her to run. No fight or flight response filling her head with ideas. There was only stillness, as if her mind was a long string pulled taught to the point of snapping in half. The only thing left was honesty. “You know I have knowledge of the future, Fen’Harel. What do you do if you know something bad might happen? What do you do if you know that there is a chance that there is nothing but pain ahead of you?”

His hand moved underneath hers, but he did not raise his gaze to hers fully. There was a twitch in his neck and he tilted his head to the side before letting out a sigh through clenched teeth. “I did not imagine you were the type to allow the future to be written for you. You do not give up control that easily, Athena. But. . . “He leaned forward, and she felt the pressure of his gaze as the hood was within inches of her face. She held her breath in anticipation for his answer, subconsciously linking her hand with hers in search for an anchor. His voice was low and for a moment the haze of the glamour faded away and there was a singular voice that instantly put tears in her eyes. “I would never stop fighting; I have never stopped fighting for what I want. You would not be the woman I know without doing the same.”

There was a push of movement and suddenly there was warmth, lips against the top of her head and a hand on the side of her face. Athena didn’t dare to look up, only to relax and smile underneath the gentle touch as his voice grew dark in tone and hushed against her. Just as she grew used to the comfort, he pushed back to a standing position and began to walk away, the tips of his cloak falling away from her feet. She found herself standing forward with a hand extended, her face now dry of tears and her heart swelling with confidence. “Wait – where are you going?”
He paused and looked over his shoulder and she saw a smile peak out from underneath the hood. “I must go. We will meet again, Fen’Elgara, but not like this. Keep fighting and perhaps next time we meet, you will have no match in this world.”

Without another word he nearly vanished into the growing fog around them, leaving her alone with the tree at her back. She allowed her hand to drop to her side with a light-hearted sigh, shaking her head as she followed the path back to the cave where she had left Solas. Even if he didn’t know it, he had rid her of some of the self-doubt she had been carrying around. She would not allow herself to be a victim; she would not take a refusal without fighting for what she wanted. What she wanted was the future her people deserved, the future she deserved full of happiness and freedom.
On the way back to the camp she had picked off three rabbits that were hiding at the base of the trees near the pond. She could have done better, but with the intervention from the Dread Wolf she was scrapped for time and energy. If she were in the right mind, she would have reacted at his touch, yearned for more, done something besides sit there like a scared child afraid of the unknown. Him coming to her like that was a large step, a phenomenal step that gave her hope for what was potentially to come. It wasn’t his power that necessarily scared her. It was to be expected; he had been growing stronger and looking back she knew it the whole time. He was using less and less lyrium vials and handed them off to friends after battles. Everything was crisper when he casted and it had purpose. She was curious to know what he was fully like in his prime, but at the same time she knew she wouldn’t have to wait long.

*That* was what scared her. It wasn’t the sheer presence of his power, how it surrounded her and threatened to choke the life out of her just from standing in front of it. If that was how strong he was, how close he was to getting to his peak strength, then they were closer than she thought to the fight with Corypheus. They were getting closer to the point where her foreknowledge would no longer matter. It was a blessing and a curse. She had ideas for what she would want to do for the future but there was no foundation to springboard herself. She did not lie when she talked to Solas. There were people that looked up to her and pledged themselves to her. She would be betraying them if she did not dedicate her future to protecting them and serving them back. The first idea in her mind was to find them a location outside of the Inquisition and flourish as their own, not like the Dalish, but something more akin to how it used to be in the times of Arlathan. A sacred place, protected.

The Emerald Graves could be a start. If they found a place near the Giants, it would be defended by the area’s natural creatures and the land was nourished enough they would be able to grow whatever they needed. The idea of making a utopia for the freed elves of Orlais and the Inquisition put a smile on her face, removing any of the doubt that had previously been there. There was hope for the elves and it didn’t mean killing every other lifeform on the planet to do so. Did it mean she disagreed with her lover’s plan to tear down the Veil. No. The veil was an unnatural creation; it would be like learning on Earth that Heaven was a real place that the Archangel Michael separated with a palpable field. If the world found out, there would be some willing to tear it down themselves.

Athena had begun to follow Solas’s trail that he left behind from the caves. It was across the pond in the direction that she had initially traveled, but then she heard the sound of running water. He had gone uphill to find the pond’s water source. She pushed through a secluded gathering of trees, lifting vines from her face to see a small expanse of river that was roughly ten feet across and deep
enough to stand in. He was standing near a tent he erected with something in his hands, it hidden by him standing partially to the side. There was a look of concentration on his face, something that even potentially mirrored anxiety? She knit her brows in confusion and purposely stepped on a twig to announce her arrival.

“Sorry it took me so long. I got sidetracked in my own mind and scrambled to find some rabbits.” He quickly packed whatever was in his hands back into his bag, a slight blush coming to the tips of his ears. He cleared his throat and smirked, turning towards her with a slight shrug.

“As-as the best of us do. Would you like me to start preparing them? I used some of what we had to make a stew; I assumed you would hunt rabbit or something small of the sort.” She shook her head and patted on her hip where she kept the small blade that Cole insisted she always carry. What happens if you run out of magic? The boy always asked her when she was training. He had placed a blade in her room on the vanity every day for a week until she started carrying it around concealed on the inside of her waist band. She spun the knife in her hand and tossed one of the rabbits at him.

“We can do it together. I never would have thought a place so beautiful would be here in Crestwood. The rest of the area seems so mired by tragedy, the air is heavy with it.” Athena walked over to the campfire and sat at the side, skillfully sliding the dagger near the feet and pulling it over the small hare’s body. He turned and sat on the ground near the small fire he made, looking at her with an odd nostalgia in his eyes.

“Do you remember when we were first in the Hinterlands? I do not think you had ever seen an animal gutted in front of you before.” She flushed with embarrassment and scoffed in a mocking tone, averting her gaze to the fire before sliding her blade up the center to gut her prize.

“A lot of things have changed since that first excursion with you, Cassandra, Varric, and Rathein. To think: that was before the mages, Redcliffe, everything. Who knew when we first started what it would lead to?” Solas chuckled low in his breath.

“You, for starters.” Athena nudged him with a playful scowl before sliding her knife along the known points to get the best small cuts of meat. When she was done she tossed them into the travel-size pot a bit at a time. “But I agree, much has changed. May I ask something pressing?” She arched a brow and nodded, giving him a gentle nudge to continue. “Is there a reason why you have not been in the Fade recently? The spirits are asking about you and I am afraid I did not have much of an answer to give.”

She opened to her mouth to speak but then closed it, shaking her head with half a laugh. “I know it must seem like I am wasting my gift as a Dreamer, but ever since Inspiration was changed. . . “Her mouth went dry, but she swallowed the distasteful memory and continued. “And the Despair demon that came to me, I haven’t felt as safe. It’s not that I am unable to defend myself, but there
was a sincerity to the demon’s words that touched me to my core. I guess that’s the danger of them though, right? They sound so convincing?”

He made a small sound of consideration, tossing his own bits of meat into the stew before tossing the remains of the rabbit aside. “That is where they are more dangerous, but you have been strong enough to defend yourself for a long time.” He flicked some of the loose blood from his fingers and wiped them on a cloth that was sitting between them. “Does the Desire demon’s illusion still plague you?”

She groaned deep in her throat and leaned to the side to where her body was flush with his. “No, not really. That faded away once I actually lost someone... but that pain is beginning to fade as well.”

Solas turned and kissed her on top of her head, speaking kind words against her skin. “It will take time, vhenan. The stew will require some time to cook, would you like to bathe before dinner?” He pressed his lips to her temple this time and she couldn’t refuse. She looked at the dried blood on her hands and knew that her skin was covered in the sweat of a few days’ travel.

Athena glanced over at the water near them and nodded, shrugging off her pack and letting out a sigh of relief at the thought of scraping some of the grime from her body. He was already in the process of delicately removing his tunic and pack, placing them both delicately to the side. She draped her clothes over her arm, leaving her underclothes for the creek, and looked over her shoulder at him with a lingering gaze. He slowly lifted the necklace from his neck and draped it over the tunic, tending to it with great care. She clicked her noise against the back of her teeth, gesturing to the necklace while walking backwards towards the creek. “I don’t think we have ever talked about where you got that, Solas.”

His eyes glanced down towards the wolf bone, his lips pressing into a firm line before he looked back to her and followed. “It is from a time long ago. Did you know wolves used to be a sacred animal before the tale of the Dread Wolf spread?”

Athena bit her bottom lip, thinking back through the knowledge she had known before combined with the information she had learned from books and others in Thedas. She then nodded with half a shrug. “I know there were the Emerald Knights, right? They were elvhen warriors that always fought with a wolf by their side. They weren’t domesticated; the two were partners in and out of battle.”

Solas almost instantly broke into a smile fueled with pride as they stepped into the water. It was slightly cold, but she pressed out with her aura to warm the area around her to make the bath more pleasurable. She heard him pause, to presumably finish taking off the rest of his clothes, but he hummed when his body hit the now-warmed water. “That is correct. The artifact I swear... it is a
fragment of that time lost, before wolves became a totem that the Dalish use to scare away long-forgotten deities.”

She couldn’t help but frown slightly, turning towards him as she removed her underclothes and threw them over onto the pile where her jacket and other clothes rested. Her gaze slid over her lover’s and she managed to catch the moment where his expression went from somber to a darkened hunger. She used that change in tone to slowly sway her hips as she walked into deeper water, using a soft stone she found on the shore to wash away the blood on her hands and arms. Just being in the water felt heavenly, let alone getting the dirt off. She bent down to completely submerge herself and run her hands through her hair when she felt a shift in the water behind her.

As she stood, Solas pulled her hair back over one shoulder to expose a now clean and soft nape of neck. He eliminated the space between them and pressed his chest to her back, bending down to gently brush his lips over her neck in a light enough gesture to make her shudder. She lost the battle in being pragmatic with him, a warm smile spreading over her lips as she raised a hand to hold him behind the neck. He took the cue to continue, sighing against her skin before bringing a small piece in between his teeth to bring a groan from her lips. Solas gripped her hips and pulled her against him, trailing his kisses up to her ear before pausing. She let out a sigh, thinking it was a tease, but then he simply rested his head against the back of hers while controlling his breaths.

She moved to turn but he kept her still with his hands on her hips, his fingers slightly tensing into her skin. “Solas, is something wrong?”

He paused again before letting out a sigh that slowly turned into an awkward chuckle. “I have a question that may be odd, considering its timing, but it has been on my mind for a few weeks now.” He tilted his chin up just enough so that he could kiss the back of her head, leaving her itching to turn towards him but she stayed with him at her back while shrugging softly.

“Alright, my ears are open.” He was so close she could feel his lips twitch into a smirk against her hair.

“What would your family think of this? Think of us?” He opened his mouth to continue before nodding slightly to himself. “Your father?”

She tensed underneath his touch and almost choked on her own saliva, clearing her throat with a small hum of curiosity that was hiding her obvious fear of the origin of the question. “Considering I am with a person who was thought to be of a fictional race, I think they would be shocked first.” He relaxed his hands and wrapped them around her, pulling her close to her in a backwards embracing while nodding silently against the back of her head. His touches were tender, almost solemnly so. It put a lump within her throat and tears in her eyes, but she couldn’t quite place why. He sounded so vulnerable when asking about her family. They had spoken at length about her past,
but the subject of their families had never been breached. Why now?

“Do you think that it would be an issue?” He asked with no judgment in his voice.

Athena shook her head. “Not at all. That wouldn’t matter to them at all. Only one thing really would.”

He hummed, and she wriggled so that she could turn around and face him, pressing her bare chest against his while catching his gaze. His breath caught in his throat, his eyes having melted from the hooded veil of hunger to being seen with his defenses down. She smiled at him, raising up to cup his cheek within her hand. He cleared his throat and tilted his head into her touch, eyes fluttering shut as he sighed. “And what would that be?”

“Do you love me?” His brows furrowed, and he was taken slightly aback, his grip flexing around her.

“Of course, I do. There is no doubt, ma’vhen’an. Never in all of my years. . .have I met a person that would ruin this world if they were no longer in it.” He relaxed his grip so that he could stroke his thumbs over her lower back, sending small shivers down over skin her in a wave of goosebumps.

“I am not even from this world, Solas.” She couldn’t help but smile at him endearingly as he answered.

“Exactly.” She gasped softly in her throat, a mixture of excitement and fear gripping her heart. “This world was desolate and damned. . . until you.” Athena couldn’t even fight the overwhelming urge to kiss him. She pulled him down to her and brushed her lips against his, a small gesture of gratitude for his words before the strangled moan that came from his throat sent her over the edge. He kept one arm on her back to hold her against him, the other curling a fist into her hair to anchor her mouth to his. She didn’t know what else she could do to show her bottomless appreciation, her love. She was not as poetic as he was when it came to choosing words. Even when he was having difficulty choosing words, the ones he did speak sounded as if spoken from a sonnet.

Ma’vhen’an. My heart, my home.

He felt the whole world change when she entered. Not only that, but he said it was damned until she came. Did that mean she could change his mind about the world? She could be instrumental in
saving the lives of thousands from an end of burning chaos? The idea put terror in her stomach but it was overwhelmed by the warmth of his body against hers, the desperate clinging of his hands on her skin and his mouth on her lips.

They acted as if they breathed from one another, only stopping for air when they moved from their mouths, to neck, to ears, to chest, anywhere that they could reach without falling into the water’s depths below. Every kiss felt like a promise of time, adding up to eternity on her skin in between hushed whispers of love and devotion. There were no doubts in her mind. Every time one tried to bubble up or there were thoughts about the next day and what could come from it, he erased them with his gentle touch across her skin and his aura against her spirit.

There was no subconscious battle for dominance; they were past such things and nothing needed to be proven. They were partners, equals both in bed and out of it. He was growing stronger but so was she. As he rose to his original power, she gained new abilities and connections. She was not the Lavellan that she had known; she was not a halla, an animal of prey to be hunted by a wolf such as he. She would refuse rejection and demand the love that they deserved.

“Athena – please – “ He pled against her skin in between pants, his body stepping backwards out of the water while his hands refused to release her. She moved with him as if they were one, her lips constantly nipping, kissing, licking the water from his skin until his back hit a tree near their campsite. Solas moaned at the change in texture on his skin, Athena taking perfect advantage to kiss along his collar bone, her hands linking with his at his sides and squeezing as if he held her life within his hands. He turned and broke her concentration with a simple kiss against her brow. They stilled together, gazes drawn to one another as he gently sat on the ground, urging her down with gentle touches.

Their pants were in unison, sweat already sweetening their skin. He reached up and pushed her hair out of her face, coming back to cup her cheek in his hand and stroke his thumb across her cheekbone. There was a gloss across his gaze as he smiled up at her. She let out a small whimper of need at his presence between her legs, his arousal pressed up against his stomach and underneath her. “Ma’lath, you are truly divine.”

There were no words on her tongue, he had stolen them away already without any promise to return. Gazing up at her through hooded lids, Athena was glad they were already on the ground because her knees felt weak. In the heat of that gaze, she felt powerful; she felt desired. She lifted her hips and he adjusted his body to press himself at her entrance. She bent down and captured his lips gently, sighing into a small mewl as he filled her. For once that night, there weren’t any thoughts in her mind. There were no nervous intrusive specks about what happened in Crestwood, there were no doubts about their future, there were only his hands. There was only the heat of his body against hers, the perfect mingling of their magics that sparked in the air around them and on her skin. It was if she was caught in a never-ending shiver, every nerve on her body was lit aflame at his touch and the trails of affection on her neck up to her ear.
They moved as one, needing no cues as to where to go next. He moved within her and shrouded her mind in a haze of passion. There was a flutter, a swell within her core that she knew wasn’t anxiety. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end and she found his lips with her own, whispered pleas for release spilling from her mouth as her hands gripped his neck and shoulders for purchase. With sweat on his brow he simply nodded to her request, groaning while running his hands down the length of her back to pull on her hips against his own. With her body in his knowing hands it did not take long, her mind washed white as her hands tensed in their place on his skin. She released wordless cries and moans into the crux of his neck as her body shook, his only following moments behind her with a strangled cry of his own.

Breath by breath they relaxed into one another. He let go of her hips and gently cupped her face, sitting up more to capture her lips as a final gesture. She shuddered even at that. She was smiling at his touch, returning everything in kind. Until she wrapped her arms around him in an embrace to catch her breath. Solas nudged her cheek with the tip of his nose, getting her to arch her head so that he could kiss her temple and then the sensitive part underneath her ear.

Then, in a deep, breathy tone, he whispered words that sounded familiar but foreign in her current state. “Lasan ara’sal, sule ha’lam’sal’shiral.”

It almost sounded like a confession for he wrapped his arms around her and rested his head against her chest. They took in one another’s touch until sleep threatened them. He carried her back to their shared bedroll underneath the stars, tending to her and the camp before she was pulled into the darkness. Just as she was about to sleep, a force from within clarified what he had said, it being the final thought in her mind before she slipped into a state of dreaming.

*I give you my soul... until the end of life’s journey.*
Athena woke with the morning, the sunrise coming through the canopy of the lush, green trees onto her face. Solas had moved and gotten up a little before her, and from what she could hear he walked away from the camp as silently as he could. He probably needed to reassess his wards that he had erected near the cave, just in case they missed the mayor when they were bathing the night before. He had taken his pack and disappeared past the pond near the direction of the cave. He had kissed her on the temple before he departed, a gentle reminder of the night before and the promise he had made after their bout of heated passion. The small gesture woke her with a smile but he pulled the blanket up over her shoulders as a gesture of silent permission for her to keep sleeping. She waited roughly half an hour more before rousing from her sleep.

She went through her morning routine: washing her clothes in the river and eating whatever was left of the stew that had left cooking overnight. Thankfully the fire died out, so the embers kept it warm without overcooking it too much. She saved a bowl for Solas and began to pack up the bedroll and her pack just in case they weren’t returning to the same place that night. He had been gone for over two hours at that point. The caves weren’t more than a little walk away, especially if he fade-stepped. She tried not to wonder what was taking so long, but he had a horn of his own that didn’t belong to the Chargers and knew how to call for help. Not that he needed it, judging by the show that he had done as the Dread Wolf the night prior.

He couldn’t have had doubts or regretted what he said. . .right?

No. She instantly cursed herself for thinking such things, chewing off dead skin on the inside of her cheek before letting out a groan. She had no reason to be self-conscious or have doubts. The night before. . . had been one of the best moments in their time together. There was no time for thoughts, no time for doubts.

As the sun began to soar into the sky, she went to the side of the water to try and practice any ice spells to pass the time and easy her worrying mind. At first she tried just freezing water, but she was only able to hold it for a few seconds. The intensity of the heat in her aura was overpowering and she couldn’t switch gears enough. Storm magic was similar to the school of fire magic, it drew on the same wavelengths of her emotion. Ice magic required a steady mind and a steady hand, like the kind that Solas and Vivienne had. They were able to lock away their emotions, hone their abilities and focus on the task at hand. Rathein and Athena, they used the chaos of their mind and channeled it into their hands. They were destructive natures on the field. Rathein even chose a specialization that typically comes with hardened discipline, but even then, her storm magic soared through her sword with each swing. Athena was the same with her shifting. She burned, as many people had said before in a multitude of tones and situations.
Which is why she couldn’t get the fucking ice to stay frozen.

“Something must be on your mind if you cannot accomplish a task as simple as making ice.” Solas called from behind her, his tone light-hearted and mocking.

She huffed under her breath and picked up a rock instead, skipping it along the top of the water with a sarcastic smile. “It’s almost like my lover disappeared this morning with no explanation after a wonderful night of love making.”

His chuckle started out low and turned into a laugh that he tried to hide with the back of his hand, eyes alit with joy. He walked to the side of her and twisted his wrist once, sending a stream of ice onto the top of the water in front of them. It looked thick enough to ice skate on, which earned him a playful side-shooting glare.

“Forgive me; I was assessing the wards we had previously placed and scouted out the dragon’s rest area. It is still sleeping but I think it will wake soon. It is not going to be a bad day for weather and they typically hunt when the sun is out.” Athena now broke into a laugh, a hand running through her hair before rubbing the back of her neck.

“Are we talking about the weather right now?” She looked to him with a smile.

“And dragons, but – yes. Apparently, we are.” He smiled and looked down to the ground in a bashful way, tilting his head as if he were looking for his words. He put his arms behind his back and rubbed his thumbs over the tops of his hands. She saw the slight nervousness in his movements and the ice began to melt on top of the water.

“Are you okay, Solas?” Athena turned towards him and softened her expression, all sarcasm and joking falling aside.

He nodded with a gentle smile, catching her gaze with a loving one of his own. “Yes, there is just something I would like to show you.” He extended his hand to her, giving a slight tilt to his head with invitation written all over his expression. “Come with me, vhenan.”

Athena took his hand, but she doesn’t remember the conversation on the way to the cave. It was silent between them with small touches of affection being shared. He would help lead her over the hills, his hand never leaving hers, his thumb occasionally stroking over the top of her hand, his lips brushing against her temple and the top of her hair, the light-hearted tone he had, the never-ending
kind look in his eyes, the look of hope on his face. Those are the things she remembered. They were so uncharacteristic of him, unreal even. It put a spark of hope in her heart for everything that was to come. When he looked at her like that, touched her gently in a way that only a lover could, she felt like she could face a dragon head on.

They walked through the cave together and then there was an eerie silence. They walked through what felt like a physical wall and, sure enough, there was tingling on her skin that was akin to the wind blowing on the back of her neck and causing a shiver. It was invigorating in a way and she could feel her mana pool surging underneath the nerves on her hands. It felt like they were asleep and roaming in the Fade there was so much power in the air, but she knew that if she even thought a spell into existence it would come without hesitation.

“The Veil is thin here. Can you feel it on your skin tingling?”

The familiar words struck likes knives against her resolve, weakening it until it threatened to shatter within her body. She felt her heart flutter within her chest. She attempted to wet her lips with no avail, squeezing his hand with a slight nod. “I noticed it... the last time we were here, when we were –“ She swallowed something that felt spiky and hard down her throat that settled like a rock in her stomach. “Killing the drakes. I didn’t have time to appreciate it then, but this place is truly beautiful.”

She looked over the large Halla statues that had old and fresh moss growing from their flanks, the waterfall behind them glittering as the light broke in through the top of the cave. It was merely a glimpse of what the elvhen world had been like before, but the sight took her breath away. She continued to look around and noticed his pack sitting by the edge of the water with the top flap open, a beautiful thin fabric resting atop it roughly the width of her finger. He cupped her face and drew her attention away from the object, a soft smile on his face. “Yes, and that expedition holds many memories with you that I hold dear. I thought this location, this place. . . would be the perfect place for me to show you what you truly mean to me.”

She lifted up onto the balls of her feet in reaction to his words and in anticipation of what was to come, leaning her body into his until she could feel the comfort of his heat against her skin. He tilted her head up as he cupped her face, brushing his lips against hers before naturally being drawn into a deep kiss. She let out a small sound of appreciation, cradling his face to hers and memorizing everything about him with her hands and lips. Her hands stroked from his cheekbones before they anchored his neck to her, her tongue dancing with his until he broke off with a smile on his lips and half a laugh.

Athena attempted at a smirk, transfixed on the deep swirling ocean of his eyes. “I thought how you felt was pretty clear last night, Solas. What you said – at the end –“
He shook his head slightly, his lips tugging into a smile. “They still ring true, but – “ He looked down to the ground before meeting her eyes again, more confidence in his gaze and voice. “The gift I wanted to give you most – the truth.”

Two icy daggers plunged into her heart and she suddenly felt like prey, even though everything in her spirit and her logical mind screamed against it, her heart was pattering and slamming against the confines of its cage. Every time she tried to avoid a tragedy in Thedas, something else in the universe would come to bite her in the ass or the event still played out in some sick macabre way. Would the same tragedies she knew befall her? Could she sit back as a spectator on her life and watch the same scene she had memorized play out? Her voice stumbled, coming out cracked and nervous as she tried to speak up. “Solas – it – it’s okay.”

He gripped both of her hands and squeezed gently, furrowing his brow at the change in her tone and expression. “Athena, you have become more important to me than I could have ever imagined.”

She looked down to their hands, her knees beginning to tremble as she clenched her eyes shut since he couldn’t see her face. “You have no idea how much you are to me, vhenan.”

Solas paused, taking in a deep breath. “Then what I must tell you – the truth”

The daggers all stabbed through the confidence and defenses of her heart, eyes opening wide as her mouth barely formed the whisper. “Solas – don’t. I . . . I know.”

He stilled, his hands tensing around hers as her eyes began to gloss over with tears. She slowly looked up to him and the sight of her getting emotional softened his expression to something of sympathy, but he never let her go. “Forgive me, allow me to clarify. What . . . what did you expect me to say, Athena?” She could feel the slight desperation in his voice for her to break the seal of the conversation and her mind was too scrambled to refuse him.

“Elvhen such as you, ma’fen. I know. I’ve. . . known.” Her voice fell to a whisper, the urge to sob rising in her throat in a wave of nausea but she kept it down. Fear raced through her body and tore the tears from her eyes, pure panic replacing it.

He let out a sigh, stepping forward to press his forehead to hers in yet another show of gentle compassion. “I had suspicions in the Temple of Mythal. You have access to the eluvians, you knew of Abelas and the Sentinels, how could you not?” There was a growing tension in the air, and she did not know if the source was the conversation or her own paranoia, but it felt thick on her skin like sweat. “Why did you not say anything, vhenan?”
Athena huffed a small scoff, looking to him with a sterner expression with a single yet defiant shake of her head. “Why didn’t I? Solas, why didn’t you? How many times did we meet in the woods or the plains? How many times did you approach me as the Dread Wolf with the intention to tell me?”

He pressed his lips together in a firm line, releasing her hands without taking a step back but there was an obvious shift in their features. But he did not answer, he simply let out a deep sigh through his nose while averting her gaze. She pressed on, trying to meet his eyes. “Did you ever plan to tell me before? Or was it only now?”

“I tried.” He nearly spat in a strained voice, eyes slowly flicking over to her. “The words, the situation, it was never right. How long have you known? How long did you meet me, confide in me, knowing that I was both?”

It was her turn to balk, eyes widening but with no logical explanation. She eventually sagged her shoulders and tucked a stray hair behind her ear, but she held his gaze unafraid. “Since before my fall to this world. Since the beginning.” There was a small amount of surprise on his face, a twitch at the corner of his eyes and a slight dilation of his pupils. “It was not my secret to reveal, Solas. I did not want to come to you before you were ready.”

He took a step back and straightened his posture, which only made her want to reach out to him, but he stepped back and paced in front of her. “In the beginning, when you fell from the Rift? Why not then? It could have been in the air from the start, we could have been free from this burden.”

“So, Solas, we were not as we are now in the start. Then, in Haven, I was a foreign girl with knowledge I shouldn’t have had in a time when the Divine was dead and there was a hole in the sky threatening to tear the world asunder. It would have been foolish of me to reveal myself, especially to you.” The words came out faster than she meant and the moment she saw hurt flash across his face she clenched her fists at her side.

“To me? What do you think I would have done?” His voice was turning into the one of total control, each syllable turning into a sharp, icy point that impaled her spirit.

Athena hesitated but under the pressure of his gaze and with the fire of rebellion and panic burning in her belly, she continued. “What do you think, Solas? If I had come to you and said I knew who you were? Me, a stranger with knowledge that you were somewhat responsible for the explosion of the Conclave, the death of the Divine, and Corypheus’s rise to power? I was powerless, a novice mage, it would have been easy to eliminate that threat!”
Solas stopped in his tracks, whipping towards her with an expression that screamed betrayal. He clutched the fabric of his tunic near his chest, shaking his head back and forth. “You think I would have simply ended your life as if it meant nothing?” His voice began to shake and for a second he lost the control over his tone, fear mingling into his words as it fell to a whisper. He pointed a single finger into his chest and spoke. “I am not the monster that tales tell of me; I am not that cruel.”

She looked at him now and saw the conflicting natures of the two entities she had known and loved since her time here. She saw the Dread Wolf that she had known fighting her word for word as they had done so many times before, their twisted dance and arguments of times since past. But now, she was able to see the expressions and pain of her lover, knowing that it was her who caused the anguish on his face. But as she had been with the Dread Wolf, he deserved the bitter, honest truth as well. “You are not cruel, vhenan, but I know of Felassan’s fate. . . and I did not wish to share it.”

Something broke across his face, a turn to despair as the hope faded from his eyes. She gasped silently and put her hand over her mouth, wishing to turn back time for only five seconds so she could find a way to rephrase it. He met her gaze and she took a step towards him, pleading with her body and soul. “Solas, we are not in that time now. Things have changed!”

He furrowed his brow, turning to the side with an icy demeanor with his gaze on the water. He took in a deep breath and sighed, turning his face to her without directly looking at her. “You. . . you said something in the start of this, you said ‘don’t’. What did you anticipate that I was going to say?” She remained silent and retracted the hand that was slightly reaching for him, crossing it over her chest so that she wouldn’t fidget anxiously at her side. “Is this yet another thing that you have known?”

She felt a hot wave of shame flush her chest and neck and he recognized it, stepping back with a sound that originated from a place of true hurt. It tore her gaze up and she saw the familiar move of him putting his hands up and taking a step back. “How many times have you instructed me to turn my gaze away from the past? That there is nothing that can be changed?” He let out a sigh, the muscles of his body relaxing into one of defeat. “I was selfish – I thought that there was a chance that things could be different. In another world. . . “

Athena couldn’t help it, she took a step forward and cried out in desperation. “I’m already from another world, vhenan!”

He winced in pain, dropping his hands to his side. “And yet it continues to hold us back. You deserve better than a future that will only lead to ‘chaos and burning flame’. ” He was quoting her and her eyes widened, her head shaking once as she pressed.
“We deserve better, Solas, and we can make it better. Together. Just – please.”

Solas met her gaze and she saw a gloss over his eyes as he instantly turned away, battling within himself before turning away and walking from the cave. “I’m sorry. I cannot.”

“Solas!” Athena cried out, the tears returning and burning at her eyes.

“I cannot right now.” He continued to exit the cave, stopping before disappearing into the darkness with his hand on the cave wall and his head turned towards her over his shoulder. “I need a moment. I do not wish to cause you any more pain, vhenan.”

He then continued walking, leaving her in the light of the cave calling out for him one more time. Sobs racked her body and she collapsed to her knees, nothing but self-hatred and self-loathing pumping her blood through her veins. It felt like there were claws tearing away at her stomach, the pressure of it constricting around her throat in a grip that would not allow any air through but pushed every scream out. Minutes of wordless sobbing passed, her head finding comfort in the coolness of the grass beneath her. Sobs turned to whimpers which faded to shallow breaths, tears silently rolling down her cheeks as she sat up and looked to the ceiling.

She thought she knew. The thought turned to vitriol in her belly. She thought she knew everything, and it caused her to distrust the man who loved her. Her supposed superiority over situations from her past knowledge led her to be alone. His absence brought an icy chill through the cave and suddenly she was looking for a way out. His absence was suffocating and she needed air, she needed the sun on her face and to get out of this fucking place that had only brought her suffering.

Athena scrambled to her feet, preparing to run for the exit, but something caught her eye. Sitting on top of his pack was a fabric, green and gold lined made of material that looked foreign, even to her. She knelt beside it, running it through her hands before dropping it with a gasp as if it were on fire in her hands.

“The ribbon was a symbol of their eternal tie to one another, body and soul.”

It had been a passing comment, a story told between the group about different customs. The fabric in her hands was of high make and she could feel his presence all over it. She dropped the thing and ran for the entrance of the caves, hope putting speed into her steps. If he had brought that, then he had not intended to end it, he had intended to seal it. His confidence in them was so strong - Lasan ara’sal, sule ha’lam’sal’shiral. He had already proclaimed his intentions, she was just too
blind to see it.

She burst from the cave but there was no sign of him. Even when she pulsed out with her magic, he had sealed himself away so tightly that there was no trail to follow. There was no scent path, there wasn’t even a lingering warmth from where his steps were.

He was gone.

“Solas!” She screamed out with her hands cupped around her mouth, the fear and panic of truly losing him pushing her to start running. She was frantic. She went to the pond, she went to the trail, but there was nothing.

He had vanished with the hope of their future together. Even though he said he needed a moment, she felt his final answer within her gut. She slowly walked to where he had scouted that morning for a last effort in finding him, but instead she saw Judith leaning on the end of her pitchfork while looking out towards the plains. Athena approached her with a broken expression and a staggered walk, hair blown to bits from fade-stepping across the area.

The Naturalist shook her head and sighed. “Well, there goes another one. Poor Georgie; he only wanted to get a look a little closer. I told him not to but, hey – weren’t you with the Inquisitor?”

Athena only nodded softly, the gesture minute but enough to answer the question. “Yeah, you’re her advisor, the Witch of the Inquisition, right? You lot have defeated a dragon before. Think you can take care of that thing? I ’eard the Chargers were in town. That Qunari you were with could take care of this pest easy.”

She looked up from her fixed point on the ground and saw the Northern Hunter perched atop the ruins at the base of the hills. It roared to the skies, bolts of lightning erupting from his maw into the air surrounding it. Her heart beat through her mind like a drum, the raw intensity of her emotions flaring sparks of her own on her fingertips. The buildup of emotion prickled her magic on her skin and it demanded release, it demanded an escape or it would ruin her from the inside out. Athena wet her lips and nodded, fastening her pack on the side of her hip. “You’re right. I think we can, or I can.”

Judith paled in realization. “Wait, what?”

Athena ripped Tobi’s horn from her pack and blew it into the air three short times, quickly putting
the horn back into her pack before taking off at a run down the hill. Judith called after her while running to the edge of her property, dropping the pitchfork in desperation while screaming: “You’re going to get yourself killed, girl!”

She couldn’t hear her. The roar of her mana sounded like a violent ocean within the confines of her mind. The raging of her heartbeat beat the story of her heartache in a rapid rhythm, her feet following suit in time. She was halfway down the hill running towards the dragon. She abandoned her pack at the edge of the ruins after pulling out a healing potion and a lyrium potion and shoving them in her pocket. The Northern Hunter looked up from its perch and gave a small growl of warning, but she did not stop. Her feet bound through the dirt as she charged mana into her palm before jumping into the air.

A single fireball launched and knocked it on the side of its head to truly start their fight. It was a starter shot, something akin to a hard slap that made its head turn to focus on her directly. The dragon snarled and leapt from the ruins in front of her, planting its massive claws into the ground before roaring its acceptance of her challenge back to her.

Athena felt empowered, frantic even looking into the eyes of the dragon. Solas’s touch, her vhenan’s love, gave her the strength to fight such things without fear in her heart.

The absence of such a presence would have to do it as well.

Chapter End Notes

200 chapters.

I know I have said this a million times, but I literally could not have made it this far without your constant love, support, kudos, good vibes, random messages on Tumblr, comments, everything you put into reading this fic of mine.

I was thinking this might end somewhere between 250-300 chapters, but we’ll see where it goes because I have a few more archs that I want to do and I basically have the final chapter written in my head so we still have some time!

Thank you, thank you, thank you. :)
Flight

There were no words to describe the fear she felt in her heart at looking at a dragon alone.

There were no words to describe the fire pumping through her veins, fueling her muscles, her mind, and her magic.

There were no words to describe the heat coming off her enemy’s body as it flapped its wings and roared its acceptance of her challenge.

But most importantly, there were no words to describe how fucking stupid she felt charging in like she had.

Solas had always called her reckless. Most of the time it was in a teasing manner at how she got hot headed about things or ran into a battle without communicating her plan. Which she was doing at that moment in time, but there was no space for logic in her heart. He had left, but it wasn’t truly by his own hand. She had pushed him away. She had let her doubt, the little things she knew, get in the way of what he was trying to show her. If she was correct about what the ribbon was, he was fucking trying to marry her.

Then why did she get so scared? Why didn’t she trust him?

The dragon opened its mouth and spat out a ball of lightning that burst at her feet in a puddle of miasmic chaos, bits of the magic sparking off until it found a victim. She jumped and rolled out of the way quickly, knowing the dragon’s strategy and way of fighting from her experience before. So sometimes it was helpful and sometimes she could listen to what she knew. But how many times had she tried to avoid a potential situation and it still came back to bite her?

Fuck it. They weren’t merely bites.

She saved Stroud and Hawke and the world took Tobi from her.

She tried to avoid the same fate that Crestwood brought and –
Athena couldn’t even think of it. The memory tasted like bile on her tongue and it sent pain through her heart as if there were an ice pick lodged in its center. There was no way she could escape it. The pain was in her stomach, her chest, her limbs. It urged her to curl into a ball and submit, cry, do anything but fight the fight she had thrown herself into. Even still she didn’t know why she did it. Her body had fallen victim to the blind running of her mind, desperate to get out of the cave and into something tangible that she could control.

Magic swirled within her palms and she threw her hands out to scatter a half dozen fire mines around the dragon’s feet, all the while taunting it with her never-breaking gaze. The dragon growled, snarling at its own claws as fire erupted and snarled around its legs like vines created from flame itself. The thorns attempted to dig into the side of its dragonscale hide, but it only succeeded in making purchase in between the scales. It dug its claws into the earth to anchor itself low before flapping its wings at an angle, creating a gust to draw her in.

There was no fighting it, and she knew that it would damage her to keep casting at it. Instead, she moved low to the ground and pushed from it with her feet, using the strong gust that the dragon created to spin in the air and summon wings from her back in a burst of power. Surprisingly, its eyes widened, as if it had never seen that trick from its targeted meal before. Athena held her hand out to the side and summoned a lance of mana, stabbing it at the side of its neck before standing beneath its stomach and mirroring its movements.

He said he had needed a moment. Not that he was sorry for hurting her. Not that he was a distraction. He said that he needed a moment. Did that mean there was still a chance? It was the identical dialogue that had been her downfall. It was the thing that had burst through the haze of their perfect night the evening before. Even still there was warmth on her collar bone and the top of her chest where she was sure he had left small marks for her to cherish. There was an ache between her thighs that stood as evidence of the night he pledged his soul to her. So why had she doubted?

The dragon moved and swiped with its claws, but she attempted to maneuver around it, stabbing her lance at its joints to cripple it while crafting new fire mines to slow its pace. Eventually it grew sick of the dance and pushed from the ground, flitting to the other side of the battlefield. It glared at her and she could feel that its gaze originated from hatred. Hatred that she wasn’t going down as easily as the other dozen fleshlings it had consumed.

A soft sound echoed through the valley three times. It wasn’t enough for the dragon to hear, but she whipped her head to the side and gasped. Who did the horn belong to? It was deep and low in tone, leading her to believe that it came from Bull’s horn that he carried on his hip. It was the largest of the Charger’s and he had the largest air capacity to make the sound happen. She didn’t want to wait to see how close they were. This was her fight. She had run into it like the damned fool she was and she would finish it.

While in the midst of her thoughts, the dragon launched another clap of lightning from its maw that
hit her square in the chest. Athena was thrown backwards, stunned on the ground with the small jolts of electricity twitching her muscles. The earth began to tremble as the dragon jumped over to her, its head hovering over her body with a smug, haughty snarl. She summoned a barrier over her skin and attempted to break free from the paralysis, but with each step of its body it sent more surges of electricity into the soil itself to keep her pinned. It looked down at her, a mixture of growls and snarls coming from its throat as it raised its neck up and opened its mouth.

The lightning spawned in the base of its throat, rippling out in waves of light that illuminated the cold expression on her face. She regained control of her arms and pushed them up to release a stream of flames at the dragon’s face. It turned its face slightly to the side to avoid the streams before quickly turning and snapping at her hands.

The force of its teeth hitting one another was so loud that it grew a gasp from her throat, her body twitching finally back into her control. She didn’t hesitate to flip over on her stomach and attempt to push into a run. It didn’t last long. “Fuck.” The dragon pushed her to the ground with the bottom of its claw, each claw digging into the fabric of her shirt without hitting her flesh. It was playing with her and suddenly she felt sick to her stomach. Was she so helpless that she was being played with by a prey greater than her? Her pride felt wounded, her heart was tired, and it was getting more difficult to fight back against the dragon. The heat of the dragon’s breath passed on the skin of her back, sending chills of panic up her body. She gripped the grass underneath her and yet again heard the three horns of the Chargers. The sound was closer now, perhaps up by the caves where they had left their wards for the mayor.

If she waited, they could fight it together.

_I would never stop fighting._

Fen’Harel’s words echoed into her head and it gave her a lightning bolt of confidence through her body, as if it were a call from her own spirit. There was a roar from her left side, and she turned just in time to see a blur of dark grey fur charge in and collide with the side of the dragon’s side. The strength was enough to push the dragon off of her and from its balance, giving her the time to stand up and get into a firm position in front of her savior. Thunder dragged its hooves into the ground and roared at the dragon with as much ferocity as he could muster. Athena couldn’t help but smile, putting her hand out in front of him before pointing back to the herd he had left behind. “I will be fine, friend. Get the fuck out of here; I don’t want you hurt.”

Thunder groaned and nudged his large nose against her chest but she forcefully pushed into his neck and towards the hills. “Go now!”

The druffalo made a noise of reluctance before turning and moseying up the hill. The dragon noticed its slowed demeanor and opened its mouth to spit another pool of lightning at her friend.
She extended her hand to the side and instead of resummoning her staff, she summoned a thin rope of flame matter. As the dragon prepared its attack, she whipped it along the side of its head, flames cracking across the gaze of the Northern Hunter. It’s head twitched to the side, eyes narrowing in anger as it looked back to her, its maw vibrating as a snarl echoed from its throat. It pushed its claws into the ground and beat its wings in an attempt to bring her closer but she had found her strength; she found her will to strike back.

She pulled her other hand to her chest in a quick fist, the stone of the earth jutting up and fortifying the strength of her legs. She stayed put, refusing the pull of the wind with a steely glare of her own. Instead of being pulled forward, she dismissed her whip and clapped her hands forward, sending a large, never ending blast of flame towards the dragon. Athena used the current of the wind against the Hunter, surrounding it with a tornado of fire that threatened to touch the sky. It roared, stopping its own assault before thrashing against her attack.

Through her flame, she could feel the integrity of it’s scales burning into ash. She could feel her magic seeping in between the scales and melting through the tough hide underneath. The dragon’s cries grew high pitched, its wings frantically pushing against the ground until it did something that she wasn’t aware it could do: it flew. With all of its strength it pushed through the dome that was her magic and burst into the sky for sanctuary. Large drops of dragon’s blood fell down into thickened pools and Athena didn’t even have to tap into her aura to feel the magic pulsing from the piles. Her left hand began to twitch, the pull from the Fade tugging at her very core. As the dragon ascended into the sky, she looked down to her palm, flexing it before aiming it towards the pools of dragons blood.

They had been initial ingredients used to bring her orb into the physical realm in the first place. Perhaps if she had more of it. . . the balance would be restored, and she would be able to use it outside of the Fade. She would be able to help; she would be able to fight in the days to come as a player in the Great Game of the future. The blood disappeared from the ground, leaving not a single drop behind, as the ingredient was broken down and disappeared as a stream of glitter-like magic in the air. Something within her clicked and she let out a deep breath, her gaze slowly returning to the sky as the dragon disappeared from her view. If she didn’t end it now, it would only return to do people harm. Judith’s list of the fallen would continue to grow and then Rathein would have to get involved.

If she finished it now more people would be saved, potentially even herself.

Athena removed her pack from her back and rested it on the ground, cracking her neck to one side before clapping her hands together and spreading them out until her lance of ethereal flame formed in her grasp. She swirled it around in her hands and plunged the tip into the ground, a surge of mana bursting from her in an outwards circle. A glyph of power formed underneath her feet, the fire scorching a design into the earth below that once complete it burst into life. Wind bellowed from beneath her and she held her hand out to test the current. It felt warm against her skin, something akin to dragons breath which was only fitting of the situation at hand.
The dragon released a roar in the sky that was followed by yet another three horns, this time they sounded close enough to be near Judith’s house. It was the same deep tone of Bull’s horn, meaning that either Solas didn’t hear the call . . . or he did not wish to respond. The thought made her lips curl into a snarl, wings of chaotic flame bursting from her back. She may have – no – she was at fault for doubting their relationship. She knew that truth so hard it tore at her heart from the inside out. But he waited so long to trust her, even after stringing her along as the Dread Wolf time after time. He had stated his intention to tie his soul to hers, but still he ran.

Her anger at herself and at him was like acid on her tongue, tears threatening to fall but evaporating from the flames before they formed on her face. The dragon spewed a stream of lightning towards the ground. The lightning created a shift in the air, a negative change in pressure that caused every hair on her body to stand on end. It gave her a micro-second of an advantage, but she used the technique of a fade-step to push from the ground and launch into the sky after the creature. It turned its head to look around at her and roared once more. The speed of the wind made her deaf to its cries as she jabbed forward with her lance, sending a multitude of small fireballs at its hide. They collided underneath its right wing and the thinner skin of the wing began to char and burn. It tilted to the right and she pushed in another surge until she was on the creature’s back. It immediately flipped into a barrel roll, which was difficult to imagine with such a large creature, but she simply jumped up and waited for it to rotate before coming back down again, this time striking the tip of her white-hot lance into the already weakened spot. Blood gushed from her attack and flowed down into the air, ribbons of her triumph decorating the skies.

The cry of the Northern Hunter fueled her more, so she pushed the staff down further until her hands nearly hit the hilt of the hide. The wings began to push in a chaotic rhythm as they lost the strength to keep the dragon afloat. Their bodies careened from the sky down to the ground and the dragon slowly turned until it was facing belly up. The sun peaked through the clouds to illuminate her standing on the creature’s chest with her staff bloodied in her hands, wings and a corona of flame empowering Athena as she raised the lance of her own making into the sky for one more attack.

The dragon’s eyes blinked slowly, its gaze focusing on the mortal that held its life within her hands. Survival spurred the dragon to keep trying so it moved her claw and managed to grip around her waist, catching her off guard. Its claws closed like a cage around her waist and she could feel the heat coming from its body. Lightning twitched through her body, ripping a cry of pain from her throat as she raised the lance and fought to gain control of her body.

There was a second of clarity as the dragon lost strength and she took it.

Athena thrust the spear down into its heart and twisted while directing flame and all of the magic
she could muster into its body. The dragon roared with blood ribboning out of the sides of its mouth. It struggled to keep its claws closed around her but there was strength in its dying movements yet. As it released her, its claw dragged across the bottom of her belly, tearing through her armor and into the flesh beneath. There was no time to scream, no time for the pain that shot through her body, she only felt rage towards the dying beast and lifted her spear only to plunge it into the open wound that led to its heart.

“Be done with it!” She screamed, her voice croaking as it released her from its grasp. There was blood pouring down its claws and she didn’t have to look to know where it had originated from. Still, she continued on and knelt on one knee, placing her left hand over its scales even as the ground came within closer view. Her mana began eating away at the creature: scale after scale and one drop of blood after another, she consumed the beast and its essence. It deteriorated into the air, its roar being one of the final things to echo through the ground as they collided into the earth below.

A high-pitched ringing echoed through her ears and her breaths came in quick, panicked pants. Her hand went to grip her wound but all she felt something smooth, something abnormal that threatened to spill through her fingers onto the earth below. Eyes wide, a million curses fell from her lips as she pulled on her mana stores to heal the connective tissue that had been burst open in her abdomen. As the dust cleared, the only thing standing behind her was a large dragon’s skull that appeared to be picked clean of any flesh or blood. It stared at her with a barren gaze, its voice almost mocking in her head.

Reckless.

Athena plunged her lance into the ground and leaned on it for support, shadows and voices racing across her vision as her mana depleted and stole the staff out from under her. She fell onto the knees and let out a strangled cry, but it wasn’t from pain. No, adrenaline had stolen that from her and her only purpose was to keep conscious. She held onto her belly, cursing herself for her foolishness, cursing herself for her recklessness as her vhenan had always chastised her for.

It had caused her to lose him, and potentially so much more.

“Athena! Shit – oh fuck – Chief, get over here now!” Krem called but his voice was lost to her. Darkness trickled in on her vision and fell onto her side into a puddle of her own blood, her eyes rolling back into her head as her body felt suddenly cold.

Something hummed within her body and mainly within her hand. A defeated smile curved her lips as she fell into the Fade, suddenly feeling at peace and at balance for the first time since Command had “blessed” her with the cursed orb.
That satisfaction was stolen away when coldness enveloped her mind, icy claws stroking down her mental barrier like nails on a chalkboard. She rolled her eyes and mind back into the Fade but all there was around her was an impenetrable inky blackness. Athena stumbled forward with her hand over her abdomen, blood dripping from her body even in the Fade. Dozens of eyes watched her from outside of the barrier, creatures yearning to get their piece of the dying woman that had nearly scraped Godliness.

“I’m so sorry, Solas; you always warned me about this part of my nature – this – “ Her jaw began to chatter and she felt the blood drain from her face, her feet stumbling forward in a disjointed step where each one threatened to make her fall. “This recklessness. I don’t know if you can even hear me –“ Tears formed and streamed down her cheeks, a wordless sob of anguish gripping her throat. “Please, vhenan – wherever you are – know that I’m sorry.” The strength to speak those words were all that she had left, her body falling forward weakly as her barrier crumbled down.

She expected the grip of demons as her body disappeared from the fade into what she predicted to be eternal darkness, but the last thing she felt before her mind went completely numb was two warm arms catching her before she hit the ground, a panicked scream echoing through the entirety of the Fade and every other realm it could reach.

“Vhenan!”
There was no grip with consciousness, only small blips of conversation that pierced through her haze when Dalish and Stitches healed some portion of her wound. Elfroot potion was dripped down her throat one drop at a time, frantic but trained hands stroking her throat to coax her to swallow. Even in those periods of wakefulness, she could barely move and did not have a scrap of energy to respond or open her eyes. She simply listened and would let out the occasional groan when they reinforced her bandage or moved her.

“Damnit, Alpha, what got into you?” Bull cursed as the wagon soared over the roads back to Skyhold. Their speed was obvious with how terrible the wagon and the horses took small bumps in the road. There were many times when the wagon almost flew before it quickly came crashing down onto the road. Krem sat silent on the other end of the wagon, shaking his head back and forth while keeping Athena’s head on his thigh to rest as the others worked on her.

“How long until we get to the closest village?” Grim grunted back and shrugged and the Qunari slammed the door shut. “She isn’t going to last long like this.”

Krem shushed him sternly and delicately tucked Athena’s sweat and blood-stained hair behind her ear, patting the grime from her face with a cool cloth.

“She can hear you, Chief, shut it. Do we have any healers that we know of near here?” There were a cacophony of sounds coming from various species of animal outside of the wagon. Bull pressed his lips into a firm line and lifted a cloth to look outside the wagon.

“That Druffalo has been following us for a long time. I don’t think it can keep up much longer.” Dalish ripped off a piece of bandage with her teeth and pressed it across Athena’s belly, using a small bit of paste to keep it adhered down on the other side as Stitches instructed.
“Nothing has been right. It doesn’t make sense; she isn’t this stupid normally and she had to have heard us coming. No offense, Athena.” Krem said while gently rubbing his thumb over her temple. The lieutenant was being surprisingly gentle but she didn’t have much to respond with to show her gratitude. Instead, she twitched her lips before falling back into a state of observant exhaustion. She was exceedingly tired, which from what she knew in her previous days as a healer, meant she had lost an exuberant amount of blood. If what she felt in her hands before she fainted was true – Krem was right, there wasn’t a chance that she could last long in a medieval environment like the one they were in.

Magic, technology, or no, evisceration was deadly.

“I have my theories, but that’s not what I’m worried about right now. I want to get her stabilized and get a letter back to the boss. She would want to be the first to know about this.” Krem made a noise of frustration low in his throat.

“I think there is one person who would want to know more.” The lieutenant bitterly snarked. Bull hummed in agreement, pushing his back into the corner of the cramped wagon. Athena could feel the tension in the air and it almost pushed her to succumbing to the sleeping aspects of the potion that they pushed down her throat, but she fought to stay awake. She had passed out even from the Fade, if she fell again, who knew if she would wake up.

All of a sudden the wagon screeched to a halt and Krem threw his body over hers and clenched to keep them from moving too much. Bull’s head smashed against the wood while Dalish and Stitches held her legs still with cries of confusion. Rocky’s voice could be heard from the back of the wagon where he corralled the other horses, most importantly Prince.

“What is the Witch doing here?” He called out while throwing his hood back.

“What the fuck.” Bull stated coldly, moving to crawl over all of them without an ounce of grace before jumping from the wagon. Krem opened the door to the front of the wagon and shook his head in confusion.

“That makes no sense, how did she know about this?”
As if answering for all of them, a voice raised its volume louder. “The Call of the Wild goes far beyond the limitations of a mortal scream. Your Witch in there has friends, friends that have called for help, and so here I am.”

Morrigan’s voice was unmistakable. Athena stirred, eyes rolling underneath her lids but she clenched her hands into fists and spat: “Bitch.”

Krem’s eyes went wide and he returned to her head, cradling it into his lap while shushing her gently. “Shut your mouth, Athena, and keep your strength.”

“Allow me to assess her, please.” The voice was closer so Morrigan must have moved to the opening in the back of the wagon. The weight shifted and suddenly she felt cold, slender hands on her skin near her abdomen. There was a sharp intake of breath when she lifted the bandage, a different magic falling into her body that stitched different pieces together. “This is temporary but we must return her to Skyhold. The magic is stronger there and we can be of more help to her.”

“We know, but that is days away.” The Witch clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth and shook her head.

“Only if I allow you to take your way. There are other paths, one that your horned friend has already traversed. There is a door, hidden in the woods but close by. We can use it to take her directly back to Skyhold. We can only take a few, the rest and the wagon will have to go separately.” There was sharp neigh from outside and Athena would have smiled if she could at Prince’s insistence on going. The horse raised back on his hind legs and kicked his front hooves into the air, stamping them into the dirt with confident energy.

“A few and that creature, I suppose. What say you, Iron Bull? You are the supposed leader of this group, are you not? Who shall you bring?” Bull’s hand itched towards his axe but he looked to each of the Chargers, silently assessing their strengths and weaknesses in such a situation before nodding.

“Krem and Dalish. Everyone else can keep going with the mayor back to the Keep with the horses. Double time, as few stops as you can manage. Here, give her to me.” Krem assisted in sliding her on a blanket towards the edge where Bull could gently hold her in his arms. Gentle as he was, the slight bend in her waist drew all of her attention to the gaping wound on her lower belly. She felt the pure pain of the attack for the first time. It blew her eyes open and she let out a cry of anguish, turning her head into the chest of the Qunari to stifle her cries and look for something to grip onto. He tilted his head down and she felt his cheek brush against the top of her head.
“Hey hey hey, Alpha, hold on, okay? We’re getting you help.” He looked to Morrigan and nodded and soon the group was off. Every stride was a jolt of pain through her body and she fought through fits of fainting, gasping back into consciousness and crying out. There was fresh blood against her bandages but there was no time to stop. Dalish cast healing magic on her every chance she could but their mission as to run, run for Skyhold as fast as they could.

Minutes that felt like hours passed and they broke through a barrier when a familiar tingle passed over her skin, but still they ran. Morrigan led them through the Crossroads until the familiar scent of Skyhold surrounded her with comfort. Even though it was in the thick of night, they took the back hallways and side paths until they reached their final ascent up a flight of stairs. Soon Athena felt a soft mattress underneath her back that wasn’t her own. The scent of the room was familiar but she knew it wasn’t her tower. Kain, Leafy, or Solas’s scent wasn’t there, but for some reason Bull’s musk was. Where had they taken her?

The answer came in the sound of a strangled, panicked cry. Rathein had entered her bedroom to see Bull resting her sister in the middle of her bed, blood blossoming from her stomach and dripping onto blanket they had transported her on before. She ran and jumped on the bed next to her, frantic hands gently pressing against her skin until they reached the top of her bandages. The Inquisitor audibly swallowed, sobs mixed with noises of confusion escaping her lips before she took in a deep breath through her nose and steeled her emotions. “Dalish, get some fresh water. Krem, get Kain, he is probably going to be panicking if he knows she is home. Do not tell anyone of what you see here until we know what to tell the others.”

Then the air grew thick with the presence of her chaotic storm magic. It coated her skin and sent every nerve alight, the hairs on the back of her neck standing on end as her sister turned to look at the Witch of the Wilds that stood on the edge of the bed. “You were so desperate to steal the power of the Gods? Well fucking use it. Do everything you know how, use every tool in your arsenal, but help her, Morrigan.”

The Witch started by weaving her hands in the air, casting a spell that set over Athena like a blanket but it held her in place. She tested it out and attempted to move even a single finger but was unable to. Athena suddenly felt claustrophobic, her breaths coming rapid which only caused her abdomen to flex and bleed more. Rathein turned into Bull’s chest and sobbed, her questions echoing through the chamber. “What happened, Bull? You were only supposed to get the mayor!”

The former Ben Hasserath held her in place, stroking his large hand over her back as Athena fought against the spells for consciousness. “I couldn’t figure it out at first, but . . . she fought and killed a dragon single handedly. Grim and Rocky are coming back with the skull as proof along with the mayor. Normally she doesn’t do something like that unless she is pissed off or hurt. I’ve been on the receiving end of it myself a few times – and . . . she was alone, kadan.”
Rathein pushed from his chest and began to pace around the room, rubbing the back of her neck. Suddenly, she stopped, her gaze falling over her sister’s body as realization set in like a wave of cold dread over her body. “Wait. . .someone’s missing. Bull. . . “ She turned on her heel and looked to the Qunari, anger trickling in and sharpening her words. “Where’s Solas?”

Days went by while Morrigan researched through tomes and scrolls of ancient knowledge. Still, she was hesitant to try anything extreme on Athena. Slowly everyone in the Inner Circle was informed and they all took shifts monitoring their friend, but mostly keeping an extra eye on the Witch of the Wilds. That particular afternoon, Dorian was at his best friend’s bedside with his head in his hands. There was a commotion in the stairwell when all of a sudden, the door was flung open and a wave of cold energy entered the room.

“You don’t want to see !” Rathein cried out while reaching for the intruder but they immediately crossed through the room and sat on the bed.

The familiar magic was enough to wake Athena from her spell-induced sleep, but she was still trapped in Morrigan’s paralysis. Familiar and loving hands pushed a hair from her face, utter silence filling the space of the room. It then shattered, as was the tone of the voice that spoke. “What were you thinking, vhenan?” The voice was soft, a whisper, but filled with so much pain in every syllable that her heart ached more than her belly. He leaned forward and pressed his forehead against hers, taking in a deep breath before letting it out in a shaky sigh that was barely on the side of control.

Dorian woke from his slumber, making a hum of contemplation before looking over his shoulder at Bull, who had gone uncharacteristically quiet. Rathein cleared her throat, rubbing the back of her neck in an awkward motion before sitting on the bed next to Solas. “My friend. . . we are trying to figure out the details on the battle. Do you know what happened?”

Solas shook his head once, sitting up to a stiff posture but his eyes never left Athena’s body. “The dragon had decimated an area near the caves where the Templars formerly occupied. She had expressed concern over the Naturalist, the woman named Judith. I. . . imagine she felt compelled to protect her.”

“Alone?” Rathein’s voice was attempting to be unbiased but the suspicion was plain.

He opened his mouth to speak when Bull leaned against the wall with his arms over his chest.
Athena panicked underneath the spell, knowing exactly where the line of questioning would lead. But they didn’t know, they didn’t understand. It was her fault that he had left, her fault that she had been alone on the battlefield. It was her own damned pride that spurred her to fight the dragon alone, to be distracted by her thoughts and her own pain. They wouldn’t understand that.

“Alone?” He repeated, turning towards the Inquisitor with a weakened gaze.

Bull didn’t give him time to make an answer, huffing under his breath. “When Athena is pissed, she needs to burn off the energy someway. We’ve all seen it; it is what makes her such a great fighter in the big battles. Now, what we can’t figure out is, what would spur her to be so pissed off that she wanted to fight a dragon alone?”

The air went thick with silence before Solas hung his head, hands clutching the sheets as his gaze fell to the floor and hardened into something of stone. Athena felt movement on her right where Dorian sat, but she continued to fight against her bonds. Days of potions and rest had given her an ounce of her strength back, but she knew that was no match for Morrigan’s magic.

Crack!

Dorian’s fist flew and collided with Solas’s cheek, knocking him from the bed but he recovered and stood, squaring his shoulders at the Tevinter. The mage reeled his hand back to throw another punch but Rathein pushed his shoulders back even as he screamed. “You bastard! What did you do to her!”

“Nothing that was unexpected.” He answered softly, the tone pained enough to bring fresh tears to her eyes. Dorian pushed the Inquisitor into her lover before striking forward again, catching Solas on the other cheek. He moved to push the elf against the wall but there was a swirl of magic in the air, a creeping ice and gravity pushing out from the God towards the Tevinter.

Fuck fuck fuck. Athena thought to herself, throwing all logic out of the window and using every bit of reserve and strength to fracture Morrigan’s paralysis spell. The Witch hummed in curiosity, apparently being the only one to watch Athena through the encounter. The splinter in the spell was enough for her to break through, pushing herself up to a sitting position even as the pain nearly compelled her to scream and cry wordless pangs of agony. “Will all of you just stop!” Her hands shook against the bed, her tired and weakened gaze lifting to Solas and him alone.

His magic snapped against his skin like a band and he shouldered past Dorian to come back to her side on the bed, cupping her cheeks instantly and brushing his lips against her forehead. She covered his hands were her own, her movements shaky, frantic words falling from her lips in a
“I’m so sorry, Solas, I had no right. I never meant to hurt you.”

He shook his head against hers, pressing his thumb against her lips to silence her words. “Sh – vhenan –

“Ah!” With the breaking of Morrigan’s spell also came the breaking of her pseudo-comfort. Indescribable pain like fire through her veins caused a scream to erupt from her throat, her body curling forward and falling into his arms. Every reasonable thought vanished and the only thing on her mind was the pain. It dominated her body and soul. “Fuck, Solas, it hurts. Please, make it stop. Gods, make it stop.”

Morrigan rose from her chair and moved to the other side of the bed, rubbing her hands on the tops of her thighs in preparation for another spell. Solas’s sob cracked and it was suddenly obvious how close he was to breaking himself. “I know a spell. It...will allow you to rest until you are healed.” The subtext of if you are healed was evident in the air but she didn’t care, she nodded into his grip as he laid her back on the back. Suddenly everyone was surrounding the bed. He explained for the room as his magic washed over her mind and body, relaxing every nerve and pushing away the pain.

“It is called a uthenera. It is a technique used by the elves of old to rest. It separates her mind from her body temporarily, giving her access to the Fade as her body mends.” Athena felt the darkness and pull of the Fade, but she reached out and gripped his thigh as a final move, whispers of ar lath ma slipping from her lips as sleep claimed her.

Rathein let out a sigh, leaning forward against the end of the bed in relief. “How long will it take?”

Solas shook his head. “However long it takes her to heal. There is no knowing. Days? Months? Years? The damage is extensive, Inquisitor. It...” He paused and put his hand over hers, gently moving it to the side of her body as he gathered the strength to utter the next words. “It will be a wonder if she survives, but this will help.”

The Inquisitor let out a sigh as she pushed up from the bed. “Come then. Let us all go inform the Inner Council of what’s happened. Morrigan – you stay and keep working, please.” Everyone moved towards the door reluctantly but Solas stayed on the bed, his thumb stroking over the top of her hand, his gaze taking in her pale features, her sunken cheeks, the stench of death in the air. “Come on, Solas, we can’t help her now. I need your assistance with another matter.” The Inquisitor’s voice grew cold, professional and official as if she were giving an order. He clenched his jaw and nodded, dragging his body from the bed and leaving after a final kiss against her forehead. Fight, Vhenan. He whispered silently against her skin before departing, leaving only her and Morrigan in the room.
The Witch let out a sigh, sitting on the edge of the bed next to Athena. She lifted the bandages to assess the damage fully, taking note of the infection setting in on the sides and the soaked lower level of a thing-gauze like fabric clinging to her cavity with every ragged breath. She had seen such injuries in wounded animals on the edge of the Wild, but this woman was no such thing. Even if it looked grave, she had taken on a dragon single handedly after what appeared to be a tragic encounter with a loved one. That took a strength that not many people possessed. It would be a shame if that strength was wasted on such a mortal wound. She tapped her finger against the side of her thigh when a raven flew through the window and landed on the edge of the wooden bed frame at the base of the bed.

“How peculiar.” Morrigan purred, reaching her hand out to invite the bird to perch on her arm when it burst into full size in a pulse of magic.

“I can help her, you know. This is an area of expertise for me.” The voice spoke smoothly, almost like a salesman that was trying to pass off a horse on its dying leg. The Witch pursed her lips and took a step back, taking in the careful advice of the whispers coursing through her head.

“Of course it is, demon, but you cannot help us here. Begone.” She commanded. The creature clicked its tongue against the back of its teeth.

“Choice. Spirit. It is not as you think. Regrettably, I owe her a favor, and this seems like the perfect opportunity to cash it in.” He grinned and looked to Athena’s body in the bed, shaking his head back and forth. “It would be a shame if the Inquisitor found out that you allowed her sister to die. The weight of her survival seems to be resting on your shoulders. What did you do for them to put their trust in you?” He looked to the Witch with a measured gaze.

“You... owe her a favor?” She asked, the swirl of the Well rising up and answering her questions before she could even form them into words. They verified what she knew; Athena had struck a deal with the demon. Striking a deal wasn’t accurate, she blackmailed him into a favor. It was bold, Morrigan thought, especially for a woman unknown to this world and the true workings of demons. She pressed her lips into a thin line and crossed her arms over her chest. “How would you help her?”

“It would require a great deal of magic, but let me say it would be a large favor asking her to survive. She would be able to leave her death bed and live a long, healthy life. But then our deal would be complete, and we would be free from each other hopefully for a very long time. What do you say, Witch of the Wilds? You do not have many options or you would have done them already, I suspect.” He bent and rested his forearms on the end of the grand bedframe, looking between Athena and Morrigan with a sly grin.
Morrigan paused, tapping her index finger against her opposing forearm with a sigh. “You would not harm her in this exchange, spirit? There are other spirits that state what you speak is true, but I do not trust you. Promise to me you will not harm her and that she will be as you say.”

Imshael met her gaze and nodded, the sides of his eyes crinkling into a smile that made her skin crawl. “I never go back on my deals. Will you allow me to get started?”

There was a thick silence in the air only broken by the slow and shaky inhale of the wounded woman on the bed. The Witch took in a deep breath and nodded, moving away and gesturing to the bed before putting a ward over the door to keep the others out and the sound in.

The “choice spirit” raised his hands and tilted his head back, mouth remaining in a smile with no whispers or praises to an old God to give him power. He didn’t need them. He flexed his hands out and quickly clapped them together, a field of chaotic, red energy forming between his palms before descending down upon her in streams of unknown magic.

Athena was slightly aware in the Fade, her eyes slowly opening as a groan vibrated low in her throat. There was no blood on her hands, at least not anymore. She could feel strength returning to her body and she used it to push up to a sitting position, looking down at her stomach. There was something happening on the other side, that much was obvious, but it was difficult to tell. She pulled her knees to her chest and rested her forehead on top of them, letting out a deep sigh that felt like it had the weight of the world within it. She felt a presence on her right, Harmony appearing with a spear in his hand as if to defend her from a hoard.

“Something is coming.” He stated flatly, squaring his bare feet into the earth of the Fade while scanning the horizon.

Through cracks in her consciousness, Athena could make out some of the words from the other side.

“It is done.” Imshael stated, a strike of maddening glee within his words as he didn’t even so much as pant from the effort it took.

Morrigan ran her hands over Athena’s abdomen, small pulses of magic searching out for any hint that he broke her truce. Suddenly the Witch’s eyes went wide, panic shooting across her face as she lashed out at the demon with a swipe of her nails, purple magic striking through the air towards him in a missed spell. “You liar!”
Imshael shook his head, wagging a single finger back at her. “Is she not healed? I did as I promised, Witch, therefore the deal is done. Now, if you will excuse me – “

The demon shifted into a raven and disappeared from the Inquisitor’s room, leaving Morrigan to sit on the side of the bed, her hands gripping the sheets as she looked to the ceiling and whispered. “I am so sorry, Athena. Please try to understand.”

In the Fade, Athena’s eyes went wide. Why was Morrigan apologizing? She felt better than ever, her strength was slowly returning and she could feel her presence solidifying in the Fade as if she were dreaming on any other night. There was color in her cheeks again and there was only pain in her abdomen, but it wasn’t nearly as visceral as it had been. Athena ran her fingers across her stomach and there was the presence of scarred, gnarled tissue across the base of her lower belly. Everything seemed fine, so then what had happened to put such grief in her fellow mage’s voice?

“Hello, Athena.” Imshael materialized in front of her and dismissed Harmony with a wave of his hand. The spirit clung for a moment before his body turned to dust and blew away from them. Athena moved to stand, wincing at the tight pain in her stomach before arching a brow.

“You. . .helped me?” The demon grinned and gestured to her body.

“The deal is done. You no longer have claim of a favor over me.” Athena patted herself down, assessing herself with magic until her aura scanned over her lower abdomen. Something hurt, hurt enough to pull her to her knees. There was scar tissue deep within that had been healed into a gnarled, chaotic mess, but everything else had returned to normal order. It was as if the dragon’s claw had run over one place alone, one organ alone. Athena’s eyes went wide in realization, her hand clutching into a fist of her shirt over her belly.

“What did you do!?” Her words trembled with rage, eyes tearing up to glare through the demon.

“The wound was extensive, girl.” His gaze then took on a darker turn, his power creeping from him in dark, inky tendrils. “You tried to blackmail me? Me? The originator of blood magic? Who. Do. You. Think. You. ARE!” He raised a hand as if to strike her as he stalked towards her, letting out a sigh and pulling his magic back in. “I did what I promised to the other Witch. You are going to live a long, lonely life. Unfortunate about. . .ah, what were their names. . . Suledin and Salahn? They looked so precious in your dreams.”
Athena couldn’t help but clap her hands over her mouth in an attempt to hide a sob but he ran forward and gripped his hand around her throat to stifle it. He nearly spat down at her, his eyes never leaving hers even as his lips stretched up into a manic smile. “I want you to remember for eternity how you fucked up, how you attempted to outsmart me. I want you to suffer for how you humiliated me in my own game.”

She swallowed, the gulp of air tight in her throat. “Eternity?”

Imshael’s grip tightened until she could no longer form words. “Listen to what I said. A long, healthy life is what I promised you and your friend. Do not try and escape this blessing. Athena. I will know. Now.” He bent forward and pressed his lips to her forehead, sneering as she tried to jerk away from him. “Enjoy your suffering.”

His body disappeared into dust and darkness consumed her in the Fade. It did not allow her to escape, however, no, Solas’s spell kept her trapped there. Fear and panic tore at her insides, leaving her screaming wordlessly into the Fade for anyone that would hear her. Nobody was listening; Imshael had banished them all away. Nobody was listening, save for one, and they had been listening since the start of it all.

Despair.
There's a few switches between location/POV here. I tried to make them as seamless as possible.

She didn’t want to believe him. She didn’t want to believe that the scrap of a dream she held on to could be wiped away in a single move, but the hollowness inside of her gut told her otherwise. She knew he wasn’t lying, but that was inside her past the regret, the rage, the pain, the utter self-loathing that paralyzed her in a position on the floor where her head was against the cold Fade earth and her hands were clenched up on her chest, endless sobs echoing out through all of the Fade.

No benevolent spirit would come near her.

Her energy was too dark, too tempting to be sucked into the caress of the malevolence that lingered inside all of them. Inspiration’s whispers were at the corner of her mind, but she had been helping someone else when she came into the Fade. She was already too far away and now even she could not stand to be close to her. It was all too much.

For what felt like days she sobbed, screamed into the absence of the Fade with nothing to comfort her but a lingering dread that was on the edge of her gaze. Every now and then, a figure would appear before her before disappearing again. Rotten rags floated around its sullen gaze, mouth perpetually open in a silent scream, claws clicking against one another as it floated through her mind. In between those spaces, she would catch fragments of what happened where her body was.

Morrigan had a mild moment of panic, pacing throughout the room cursing every God she could name from history. It had been days since the demon had left the room but there was a new energy gathering around her, something much darker than before. The Inner Council had formed in the room and that is when Cole appeared. He was cross-legged at the foot of the bed, keeping his body in a diagonal position so that he could keep Athena in his peripherals while facing the Council. “She’s cold. Hurt, but not hurt, isolated and sleeping.”

Cullen made a noise of disapproval, his tone strong and protective. “How did she get like this?
First we had heard she was going to die, then all of a sudden she was healed but recovering, and now this?”

Leliana’s gaze flicked from Athena to Morrigan, the cool expression of the Spymaster turning into something of icy hate. “Our resident Witch of the Wilds is being awfully silent in a situation where her knowledge of magical situations would be so vast.”

Morrigan glared right back from her position in a chair behind the Inquisitor’s desk. “It is a complicated matter and I am not sure if Athena would wish for me to share it.”

In the Fade, Athena laughed darkly, her hands gripping into her hair as she fell onto her side. “Bitch. You mean how I attempted to blackmail a demon to help people and it bit me in the ass? How I’m cursed?”

The words echoed from Cole’s mouth as if he were a speakerphone, the entirety of the room jumping in reaction. Cullen’s hand jumped to his sword but he quickly caught on, knitting his brows and looking to the spirit boy who only looked up with an innocent and perpetually confused look on his face. “Cole, can you hear her? Can you see her there?”

The boy nodded, the front flop of his hat covering his face before he took it off and rested it in his lap. “Yes, when I’m close to her. It’s hard, because she is so far away, but it’s like a whisper – here.” He then pointed to his chest and then scratched a bit at the shirt underneath.

This didn’t help the Commander’s mood at all. He let out a groan and pinched the bridge of his nose, letting out a heavy sigh. “That demon, she briefed us on this – what was his name? Imshael? The one from the Emprise du Lions?”

Athena whipped her head up from her position on the ground, shooting to a standing position while looking for them as if they were transported to the Fade with her. Their voices sounded from the thin air, but - There was nothing but a murky fog all around her, providing just enough light to see
within her mana’s reach but nothing beyond. There were only shadows, curious demons keeping
themselves at a distance, but what was holding them back? Still, she found the strength to answer.
“Yes, that’s the one, Cullen. He owed me a favor, and I guess he cashed in on his terms.” The
words halted in her throat as another sob threatened to burst but Cole could not communicate that in
his translations.

The Commander rubbed his neck in frustration, pacing at the edge of the bed while murmuring
something about the temptation of demons. It was low enough for her to not hear but it didn’t make
her any more frustration. She extended her arms and screamed into the Fade: “Let’s get it all out at
once, shall we? All of the judgment, the disappointment, ‘ooh look at the mage playing with
demons.’ This is your chance because I will not allow it again.”

Cole repeated the words but they did not come with her anger and personality, they came hurt and
confused in his typical tone. He was trying to figure out what she meant by it and if the demon was
him, but everyone else heard her self-loathing translate into depression. She was hiding that stage
of acceptance underneath the rage and vapidly aggressive self-loathing that trapped her in the Fade.

Mana fumed from her skin like ethereal flames, licking into the earth below while partially
illuminating the landscape in front of her. Her stalker became solid in her vision, the demon
swaying into a shape as its endless stare broke through her. It saw through her rage, it saw through
the massive flaw that led her to where she was. Instead it saw the heartbreak, it saw the barren
well of her emotions that she was constantly attempting to scoop from to keep face. Even now,
even a cold body in the bed of her sister, she was fighting to show that she wasn’t weak. She was
trying to prove herself as someone strong even though her future had just been ripped from her in a
moment of hubris.

Pride.

The word felt like fire on her tongue, sending tears down her cheeks and making her hands shake.
However, it wasn’t a Pride demon that stood in front of her. It wasn’t a Pride demon that had
stalked her since the loss of her adopted son. It wasn’t Pride that looked oh so promising with its
claw extended in a warm invitation.

“What do you want from me?” Her voice broke, revealing the true nature of her pain as she sunk to
her knees at the bottom of the demon. It floated in front of her and reached forward, its cold caress
across her cheek sending silent sobs across her body. It did not make her feel worse, not, instead it
reminded her of its previous promise.
Apparently demons were the only ones holding their promises that day.

"There will be a day when you are vulnerable.

Cole’s eyes flew open in realization. The boy sprung forward from the bed and gripped Cullen by the lion’s fur, ignoring his twitch away before speaking in a hurried and low voice. “She’s going to ask for his help. He is hungry, and she can feed him longer than anyone else can!”

“When you are weak—"

Cullen shook his head and put his hands over the boys, meeting his eyes instead of turning away. “Who? Who are you talking about, Cole?”

The spirit gripped his hair and turned on his heel, disappearing then reappearing by Athena’s head. He supported it in his lap, his fingers nervously drumming on her shoulders. “Too much hurt. It’s suffocating her, cutting everything off. I can’t reach her, only whispers, but Despair is there. He knows. He has been waiting.”

“When you are alone.

Leliana and Josephine gasped in unison, the Antivan turning her head and stifling a cry into her friend’s shoulder. Morrigan let out a hum and shook her head, a cold and concentrated face coming over her as she looked out the window. Cullen nearly roared, knocking over a side table that had her bandages and water on it. “Are you just going to sit there, Witch!”

“On that day -"

Morrigan turned her head slowly as if she were looking at the situation from a thousand yards
away. Her demeanor was cold, detached. “This is her battle, Commander. The body has been fixed. The mind has to follow. We cannot help her.”

*I will be there.*

Cole began to rock above her, whispering passing thoughts that were going both through he and Athena’s mind. Cullen swallowed hard in his throat, pressing his eyes together before letting out a hard sigh through clenched teeth. Sweat beaded on his brow before he drew his sword and pointed it at Athena’s chest. “Yes I can.”

*And you will call for me.*

“I refuse to be possessed.” Athena fought hoarsely against the demon’s comforting touch. She unwillingly tilted her head into its hand, the sick haunting song of its allure pulling her in.

“Possession is for those who are weak and seek things outside of their reach. I do not require such things. My bounty is plentiful right. Here.” It’s words were articulated with an almost mechanical click of its tongue against its many row of jagged, broken teeth. It’s claw dragged from the bottom of her ear along her jawline until it held her gaze on him. She stared into the swirling draw of its eyes, the blood draining from her face even as she outright refused him.

“You want nothing of mine. I am barren, demon, there is nothing here for you to spoil.” Bitterness sharpened her words to an edge that spat like venom into the demon. It did not flinch, if anything, it’s expression softened in pity as it kept its claw on her chin.

“I can take this pain, Athena. I do not require your body nor do I want it. You are trapped here in the Fade. Give me this pain, give me this hurt that weighs on your shoulders and you can be free here.” Athena could feel the truth in her words and it gave her pause, made her consider. If it did not wish to possess her, that meant that she wouldn’t become an abomination. Her body would remain the same on the other side... it would just give her a moment of fucking peace.

“You have to hurry! It almost has her! Claws reaching, grasping, holding her in place. She’s strong, so strong, but it’s horrid. It’s using her hurt against her.” Cole pat his hands on the bed to hurry the Templar that stood on the foot of the bed. Her body was unchanged, save for the two streams of silent tears sliding down her temples into the fabric of Cole’s pants. If anything, her
skin felt colder and it had lost that natural flush that went across her cheeks.

These things were typically hard to notice but as a trained warrior Cullen had been taught to look for any changes in a mage. They were all signs, signs of change, signs of attack. Athena had a tendency to attack when her emotions were at a peak. She easily flushed from her chest to her neck, so he knew that something was coming if the blossoming of color was at her throat, especially if she was looking at him with an angry stare over some detached thing he might have said without thinking. The woman on the bed in front of him, the near corpse of a person that was fading away as he panicked. . . she was unrecognizable.

He still had his sword shakily pointed at her body but then he realized, he couldn’t kill her. No matter how many Harrowings he had witnessed go wrong, it was always difficult to swing the sword. But this, she was almost like family. The Inquisition had become an odd family but the other-worlder before him had always kept an eye out for him, and he for her. He lowered the sword with a groan, pain shooting across the front of his head. Not now. He was raised his sword and therefore his body expected lyrium. It still hungered for the blue demon that existed within the vials. Still, he hesitated. Could it help?

“This could all be a bad dream, Athena. This could be another fantasy, another character that you have seen trudge through this hellscape.” The demon worked his magic as he attempted to take complete control, his claw idly stroking the bottom of her chin to keep her gaze transfixed upon his. Athena meant to fight, hell, she knew better, but there was something alluring about his idea.

This could just be another playthrough. Instead of fucking up her future with someone who truly, deeply loved her, this could just be another round of the game where she was sitting on her couch, in her house, with her roommate watching with her cat in her lap. None of the people she had met would be real to her. Even then as the demon worked she could feel her thoughts compartmentalizing each of them back into their tiny fictional boxes inside of Victoria’s head. Gone was the fierce warrior that was beginning to lead an elvhen rebellion, that had recruited people from the bounds of servanthood and slavery, and she could feel herself fitting inside of an old skin.

The skin was familiar, warm even, but something inside of her core knew it was just wrong. Victoria didn’t fit anymore.
“Cullen, you have to do something. She doesn’t look well.” Leliana commented with an icy tone as she continued to hug Josephine from the side. The Commander looked to her and nodded, his shoulders sagging in defeat.

“Please, can you go get the Seeker? She can help better than I. Morrigan, please get her daughter and her wolf. The wolf will either be in her chambers... or mine.” The Spymaster didn’t hesitate. She moved with the Ambassador quickly from the Inquisitor’s chambers and down the stairs towards the training grounds. Morrigan walked with a stiff posture, eyes flicking over to the fellow Witch of the Wilds on the bed before disappearing down the stairs. The Keep was eerily silent that day. The entirety of the Inner Party was aware of Athena’s injuries and nobody wanted to move in fear that it would injure her more.

Varric and Bull fought to distract her daughter but every hour she attempted to fight past the guards that were guarding the entrance to the Inquisitor’s quarters from the main hall. Cullen clenched his eyes shut and fell to one knee, his hands desperately clutching the hilt of his sword as its tip began to grind into the stone of the floor below him, straight through the rug decorated in the way of the Free Marchers. If he waited for Cassandra, there was a chance that Athena would be gone forever.

This wasn’t a mage going to a demon for power or blood magic.

This wasn’t Kinloch.

This wasn’t Kirkwall.

This was a friend, this was family that was suffering because she had made a mistake. There were times when he was trapped in Kinloch where he fell victim to the trances of demons. They tortured him with memories of his past and potential futures only to take them away. They taunted him with his darkest fantasies and nearly lured him to acting them out within the cold confines of the Keep. He had nearly fallen once, and that near fall had almost cost him everything. He had to fight against them and endure to stay alive knowing what was at stake. Athena wasn’t helpless nor naïve, she had done it to try and help their family.

The ideals clashed together in his mind, tears stinging across his gaze. He knew of something that could help, something that *he* could do before Cassandra arrived. It wouldn’t be as strong as if he were on lyrium, but he had to try.

Cullen brought both of his hands to the hilt of his sword and assumed the position of a Templar. It was something that was drilled into him since boyhood and it was something he would likely never forget. He focused on his faith, focused on the reality of the world in front of him, and focused on
the woman in the bed in front of him.

“Those who oppose thee shall know the wrath of heaven, field and forest shall burn.
The seas shall rise and devour them.
The wind shall tear their nations.”

He groaned as the ancient words of the Chant of Light began to take hold, a lingering power striking out to fight off the magic that was within her and through the Fade. It was a purge, plain and simple, and unfortunately it was something she was familiar with. Her body instantly arched out of reaction in a silent agony, the tears flowing freely as he spoke. But still he persisted and gathered his strength, like she had done so many times for others.

There was a break in the trance. It was a single bolt of lightning on the horizon of the Fade that caused the demon to turn and stop his spell.

“Hm. . . “ It hummed and as its claw fell from her chin she gasped for air, falling forward on her knees in a series of deep heaves to fill her lungs with life again. The pain it had devoured returned at once in the form of icy lances striking into her belly. She folded her arms over her abdomen and cried out, looking to the never-ceasing lightning that filled the Fade with a holy light of reckoning.

She recognized the fire from the first day she had fallen from the Rift. She had refused for Cullen to do it himself since it normally required lyrium, and considering his voice was one of the last ones he heard before falling into the demon’s trance she was terrified that he had taken to it again. All because of her. Because of her mistake. She stood and screamed at the fire and lightning as it approached, throwing her arms out in challenge.

“Stop it, you fucking fool! Leave me be with my pain! Let me waste away in this land where I can’t hurt any of you anymore!” The flames approached and for once she saw fear on the Despair demon’s face. It shrieked and all of the wispy rags stood on end in preparation for an attack. The closer the flames grew, the louder the Commander’s words bellowed through the Fade.

*From the face of the earth, lightning shall rain down from the sky.*  
*They shall cry out to their false gods –*

The lightning burst through the realm of the Despair demon and shattered its barrier, striking
through the earth in a path to its targets. It forsake no one, gathering both the demon in its ethereal glow. She was lifted from the ground as a familiar white-hot pain surged through her veins, it only adding to the visceral anguish that existed within her body underneath the scarring left by the dragon and her own pride. She gripped and contorted her body as her body was lifted from the ground, her eyes turning just in time to catch the demon reaching out to her for a final time, its shriek dissipating into the world with the rest of its body.

And find silence.

The prayer finished and all of the light snapped into a normal existence. The lightning went back into the sky of the Fade and released small snowflake shaped fragments of light. Athena’s body fell unceremoniously to the ground, her connection to the Fade flickering in and out of existence as her body and mind fought the Templar’s advances. Her eyes were blown as wide as they could be, pupils dilated to a point where her eyes appeared black as she simply focused on her breathing.

Pain coursed through her body with every beat of her heart and she knew that she would never be able to be rid of it. Although she was cured, both she and the pain would endure and linger. She closed her eyes in an attempt to search for the blackness of a fadeless sleep but it never came. The uthenera kept her within the Fade as her body healed, and she knew that. Athena began to silently cry once more in a moment of utter helplessness, her body too weak to put forth the effort to sob.

She had lost her love. She had lost her future. She had lost an escape from the pain.

There was nothing left but the utter silence of the Fade and the absence of spirits.

In the midst of her cries, however, came footsteps so light they almost didn’t register as making a sound. Persistent, determined, they came to her side and were accompanied by a hum of curiosity. Strong hands lifted her body from the ground and she did not have the strength to fight it. They came to a standing position and cradled her to their armored chest, the shadow of a cowl covering their face. Athena had a moment of curiosity between the moments of weakness, opening her eyes to catch a glance of gold looking on the path straight ahead. She closed her eyes again and returned to her quiet mewls of agony, knowing very well that Despair was dead and gone from theFade.

However, it appeared that Sorrow had taken its place.
Sorrow

Chapter Notes

I promise, this will be the end of Athena's pity party. It looks up from here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They walked for hours.

His stride was confident and steady, each step a soft thud against her body that send small jolts of pain out like a web from her abdomen. He never had to adjust his hold on her and the warmth of his bod was almost comforting. She didn’t wince, she didn’t sob, she simply sat in silence and allowed the gentle rock of the person’s walk to lull her into a false sense of security.

The environment around them switched from the icy grip of Despair to something warmer, more familiar. A cool breeze blew across her cheek as did the comforting smell of fresh cut grass and lake water. The sound of birds chirping in the trees drew her from her rest, eyes blinking against the gentle sunlight on her face. Before her. . .was a beautiful grassy clearing that led up to a peaceful lake. The sound of nature filled her ears and she couldn’t help but soften her expression at the sight of it. This was her lake, it was her campsite that she had visited in her dreams multiple times before when she needed a rest.

“How are we here?” She asked without looking up, her gaze completely transfixed on the water before her.

“I whispered peace into your mind and it led me here. Apparently this is where you wish to be.” The voice said as still as the water in front of them.

He slowly moved into a kneeling position and sat her on the ground, a blanket appearing below them in her favorite colors: green and blue. At a time the colors had brought her joy, the color of her lover’s eyes contrasted against the stark green of his sleeveless undershirt that she only saw when he was painting or resting in their shared quarters with a book in his hands. Before that it had been the colors of the sky reigning above the fresh cut grass that she was sitting on. They were always hand in hand, the colors and peace, but at that moment they brought her nothing but melancholy.

“How did you find me?” She paused, failing to wet her lips as shaky hands moved into her lap. “Even my friends in the Fade were too scared to come near me due to Despair’s influence.” Her
voice was distant and barely recognizable, the automatonic voice of a person that felt hollow, barren, and severely detached from herself. Her rescuer simply smirked and leaned back, the sun reflecting off from his golden armor as he pulled his hood back.

“Everyone who was in the Fade could feel you. You were not hiding yourself when you entered, but I dare not think you could help it.” Athena looked over to the elf, her eyes slowly gliding over the tree shaped vallaslin on his face, a thin braid of silver hair flowing over his shoulder to the center of his chest. The removal of his hood showed the hardened features of his face, something that would show on a soldier that had served as long as he had. There was barely any emotion in his face, only a spot of intrigue around the corners of his eyes. He bent his legs and rested his arms atop his knees while looking over to her with a raised brow. “Do you understand why you are here?”

Athena scoffed a laugh at him, glaring out of the corner of her eye while throwing her hands into the air. “Solas put me into an uthenera and then a demon put a curse on me. I’m assuming it’s a mixture of those two things?”

Abelas blinked once and continued. “The demon’s curse healed your body completely, save for a deep scar. The uthenera is only intended to keep you in the Fade as long as your body is physically wounded or your mind needs repair, at least those are the conditions that were set when it started.” He stated plainly, leaving Athena to furrow her brow at him with anger seething into her features.

“You’re telling me my mind needs repair? Is that why a Sentinel of Mythal has traversed the Fade to find me? Surely there was someone else to come and find me.” Perhaps my former lover, if he were interested. She thought to herself bitterly, pulling her knees closer to her chest before casting her gaze to the lake. Thankfully the scene stayed serene and she thought in the trees on the other sides she caught a glimpse of her friends in the Fade checking in on her, but the sight vanished as soon as she recognized them.

“It is not. . . my duty to explain it in its entirety, but you and I are connected in a way, Athena of the Inquisition. I was able to feel your distress, even in the physical realm. It was not difficult to track you down in the Fade, even with the Wolf’s presence. It was not an easy task to shield you from his gaze.” Athena’s eyes widened and she felt her cheek twitch in annoyance, but she attempted to hide it. In a few words she had thrust too many questions in her head. They buzzed around like wasps in her mind, stinging at every shard of hope and instilling a sense of fear in her heart.

“What do you mean. . . we’re connected? I am not of your people. You have made that abundantly clear, Abelas.” The elf broke his icy demeanor and managed a subtle sneer in her direction. She could feel the increased intensity of his gaze even though she refused to meet it. The camp was far too distracting and calm for the conversation at hand, but, it was a fragment of home and it did bring her peace.
“You felt a pull in the roads between the eluvians, did you not? No typical mortal could have found their way to the Well of Sorrows by chance. Something led you there, whether you recognize it or not. It is that connection I speak of.” Abelas’s voice was intrigued, and it was the odd change of tone that caused her to look to him. He was so much less threatening with his hood down, sitting casually on a blanket near the lake. For a moment, he looked normal, but much like Solas recently, there was an ancient power that emanated from him and made her skin tingle.

“I suppose. It is strange, but I always feel like I know where I’m going in that place. That is no coincidence?” She asked, only to receive a small shake of the head from her protector.

“No, it is not.” Athena let out a groan and rubbed the back of her neck, burying her head into the comfort of her knees away from his gaze.

“And you’re not going to tell me why?” The elf let out a small chuckle that was full of nothing but snark.

“No. I cannot.” It hurt, but she chuckled as well out of frustrations. The miniscule movements and twitches in her abdomen pulled on the tight scar on her belly, drawing a hum of consideration from the Sentinel.

“What did you do to anger a Forgotten One, Athena? The stench of his magic is all over you.” He raised his lips into a snarl, his magic slowly pressing out to test hers. He was not gentle with his assessment, it almost felt like an intrusion but she knew she was helpless. She let out a sigh and relaxed her knees, holding her hands up in surrender as he poked and prodded to feel out what had happened. He knit his brows in concern, relaxing his own knees to a more casual position. “I am sorry for your loss. That scar. . .runs deep.”

She couldn’t help but huff a sarcastic laugh, self-consciously rubbing her hand over the fabric that covered her belly. “It apparently was a trade. He wanted me to live a “long, lonely” life for my attempt at outsmarting him. To answer your question, I tried to essentially blackmail him so he would leave the Inquisition alone. Otherwise he would have died. He valued life, but did not value being outsmarted in his own game. I suppose in the end he was not outsmarted, however.” It took every ounce of mental fortitude to not crack under the emotions rushing through her head, but she managed to let it all out in a shaky sigh at the end of her words.

Abelas’s face hardened into something of concern. “It is still cruel, what he did to you. The only benefit you received was surviving the dragon’s attack.”
“Surviving? I will do more than survive, it seems. I never imagined myself growing old to begin with, let alone potentially longer then that.” There was a sense of unease in her voice, her hand running through her hair in a small attempt to calm her while the other fist a clump of grass on the ground. Abelas looked her up and down, still holding onto his expression of concern.

“That only depends on your actions. From what I can assess – “ There was another sharp jab of his magic intruding into hers and she was able to push it back out this time. However instead of a gentle nudge, the Sentinel was pushed back on the ground still in his sitting position but this time he was three or four feet back. There was a scar on the earth where his armor dragged and she blinked, looking to her hand as if it acted against her own will. Abelas smirked. “You can still die, Athena, do not be so arrogant with your returned strength.”

“Wait – what are you saying?” The Sentinel pressed on.

“Anything can die. Mythal was slain in her own temple and only a scrap of her essence was able to survive. The Old Gods can die when an Archdemon is slain. Even that Forgotten One you managed to insult can die.” He pushed to a standing position and walked back over to her, standing over her while looking out at the lake. “In all of my years, in a deep sleep and in the waking moments, I have learned that life is always temporary. I have seen too many of my own kind fall to not believe that.”

He looked down and held his hand out to help her up. She looked to it, up his armored arm to his face. She never expected him to be anywhere gentle. He was arrogant, elitist, and reclusive from what she saw in the Temple of Mythal. He wasn’t looking at her like he was expecting something or expecting her to say something. He was simply there. Athena swallowed down something akin to nerves and took his hand, letting out a gasp as pain shot through her stomach. It caused her to stumble forward but he caught her, his grip as firm as when he carried her through the Fade. “Why. . . why are you here, Abelas?”

The Sentinel stilled, his gaze locked on the lake. “In another life, I was simply Sorrow in this place. I felt called to people such as yourself, and the effects of that life appear to have lingered.”

She fully stood, wincing as she tested out the stretching of her stomach that felt like she was eternally in a stomach crunch. “Broken people, you mean. Why not my other spiritual companions?“ Abelas looked across the lake to where she had last seen her friends lingering on the edge of the water, shaking his head subtly.

“They are still learning. One is a babe in their position, one looks for a world beyond this one, and the other has taken residence in the lair of the Nightmare Demon that was slain.” He paused and looked to her in a matter-of-fact way. “Do you not desire for me to be here? I can leave you to your peace if –“
“No!” She quickly said, a flush coming to her cheeks out of embarrassment of how fast she said it.
“I mean, please, stay. I do not wish to be alone.”

The elf stilled, looking at her as if for the first time, and then smirked with a nod. “Very well. Would you like to walk? It will help with the healing if you stretch that.” He gestured to the scar hidden underneath her clothes, but when he mentioned it she felt naked as if it were the only thing anyone would ever be able to see. She gave a gentle nod while walking slowly along the lake bank. She had the urge to wrap her arms around her stomach but in its place a large band of fabric appeared in her hands. She wrapped the thing around her abdomen until it felt taught, giving her core support like a brace.

The two walked in peaceful silence for an immeasurable amount of time. The area was still there, birds chirping and flying through their vision while occasional echoes of memories ran in front of them. A gentle breeze blew through the trees and caused them to dance and sway in the rhythm of her breaths. The entire place just screamed serenity, healing. It was exactly where she wanted to be at that moment in time. After a long while, Abelas finally spoke. “Why did you fight that dragon by yourself, Athena?”

She looked to him with an arched brow. “What?”

He looked to her, hood still down and posture slightly more relaxed. “It was impressive what you did, felling it by yourself and bending its energy to your will. But aid was minutes away, why did you not wait for your allies?”

Athena flushed and balked, scrambling for words while fumbling with the tight fabric band on her stomach. “I – uh – honestly I do not know.” She looked to him and huffed a sarcastic laugh. “Forgive me, I have had so little interaction with you, it is difficult to open up about my most sensitive moment.”

The Sentinel fully smiled, bitterness painting the expression on his face. “It appears my time in physical form has changed my spirit. I used to be told that I was a calming presence to be around, even with my trait of Sorrow. Sorrow is not a spirit that inherently holds melancholy; it is a part of grieving – it is a part of normal life.”

She couldn’t help but chuckle at him. “Perhaps Mythal should have picked a more approachable body for you when you crossed over – perhaps large with a beard or something. Something huggable.”
“The All-Mother did not bring me over for my services as Sorrow. That . . . is for another time. You’re avoiding my question.” He stared down at her with a small amount of jest in his gaze. Athena scrunched her nose up and continued to walk, wondering if all elvhen were similar in their omnipotent sarcasm or if it was just the ones she surrounded herself with.

“In my weakest moments. . . I wish to feel strong. I had lost control of a situation I thought I knew well, of something I thought I was prepared for. The dragon was a seemingly easy obstacle that appeared in front of me. It was hurting people, Abelas, it had already killed people and it is not in a dragons nature to stop – “

“But you could have waited. In this place I have seen your memories, I have seen your Sorrow. Even after everything you have been through, why do you feel like you must prove yourself?”

Abelas crossed his arms over his chest and sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose with a clenched jaw. The long braid of hair moved in front of his chest and she had the urge to yank on it to grab his attention, much like a petulant child. “Even so. There is a reason you are here, I am trying to help you get past it. You have proven yourself to many and have shown my people in the Temple of Mythal that you are willing to look beyond your race to help those around you. Even when you were granted safety, you broke from the path and fought beside my warriors. It was an admirable thing to do.”

Athena opened her mouth to snap back with an antagonist comment but he pressed, walking back to her while pointing to the lake and beyond it. “Your spirit has turned others against their twisted nature, returning to them to what they were meant to be. You have freed those who did not have the strength to help themselves and have given them true freedom: the freedom to choose. So why do you still feel the need to prove yourself to the world?”

She put her hand over her chest and took a shaky step back, tears in her eyes as she shook her head. Each question felt like a claw ripping through her defenses and showing her raw heart to him. They were honest and unshielded. He did not have the delicacy of being gentle like a friend would. He
simply called the shots as he saw them and as he had seen them through her memories. But the curt nature of his questions felt like accusations and they wrapped around her heart, constricting it until she lost the battle against her panicked breathing. “I don’t know!”

She snapped back at him, throwing her hands into the air with an air of defeat. “I was dragged into this world by something that appears to be the Dread Wolf but is not. But before that? I was lost, Abelas. I was going through life feeling like I didn’t know what I wanted to do with myself.” Athena took in a shaky breath and continued, the rage at herself fueling her own words as she pointed to the ground. “Even here, I thought I knew what was supposed to happen. I thought I knew what would help, but I don’t. Every time I try to help, something bad happens. People look to me, they flock to me, but I don’t know why. I’m not this strong person that was born of greatness or trained as a warrior. I just happen to be here!”

Abelas blinked once at her, as if her words were nothing more than simple conversation. “Yet you endure. You help, you fight. You never give up on anyone else but you are in a constant battle with yourself. That is a battle you will always lose. That is something I have learned over my many years here and it is something you need to learn if you are going to survive.” He walked closer to her and for a second she thought he was going to grip her shoulders but instead he crossed his arms over his chest and leered down at her. “Trust in yourself the way you trust in others. Therein lies your strength.”

Athena opened her mouth to speak but closed it, letting his words hang between them in the air. Something felt like it clicked within the air and the environment changed. The sounds of the memories played around them and the forest felt more lush with life. It was as if the place was trapped in time and were not allowed to move forward until then. Instead of saying anything, Athena simply smiled and nodded slowly. Abelas gave her a simple smirk in return as he unfolded his arms, gesturing back to the path that would lead them to where they started.

“How do I go back?” The Sentinel shrugged and gestured to the area around them.

“How do I go back?” The Sentinel shrugged and gestured to the area around them.

“‘This is your memory, you are to do as you –’ “

“I can help now!” An innocent voice popped up behind them and they both whipped to see Cole standing in the Fade with an almost grin on his face. He ran to Athena and grabbed on her hand, giving it a squeeze before pulling her in the direction away from where they had come through the trees. She stopped on the edge of them, looking to Abelas before turning to Cole. “Give me a second, babe. I’ll be back.”

She jogged over to the elf, slightly wincing at the pain in the abdomen before stopping in front of the Sentinel. Now he looked expectantly at her, an eyebrow arched in intrigue before she let out a small sigh. “Thank you, for finding me, for. . . everything. This was an unexpected surprise that I
do not know how to repay you for. Now I don’t think you’re this kind of person, but I have to do it anyways.” Before he could argue she stepped forward and wrapped him in a hug. He kept his arms stiff at his side and he only looked down at her until she stepped back, blinking before nodding to her.

“I have been told there is a place for my people if we seek it. I think whoever told me that was correct, just not in the way they imagined.” Athena made a face as Cole grabbed her hand again, urging her to come to the warm light of consciousness.

“What?” Abelas broke into a smile, nodding to her as her body faded away.

“I will see you again, Fen’Elgara. Endure.”

Chapter End Notes

Congrats! You have made it through my dark arc. I’ve appreciated all of the feedback and questions and I will continue to answer any that come my way. :)
Awakening

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everything hurt when she woke.

The Fade had only been a fraction of what she felt when she woke up, flames eating away at her lower belly as she twitched her hand and tested out the capabilities of her motions. A groan subconsciously left her lips when she pushed herself to a sitting position, eyes finally opening to look around the room. She was still in Rathein’s room and it appeared that they had changed her clothes to something resembling pajamas. They might have been the Inquisitor’s due to the fit and she looked at the deep blues of her shirt before lingering at the bottom of the hem. She slowly lifted the shirt to see what she knew was there. The rough texture of the deep scar underneath her fingertips dried her mouth and stole her breath, but it was healed. There was that.

“Oh shit – she’s awake!” A familiar voice rang out from the side of the room and she looked over to see Hawke and Fenris playing chess near the Inquisitor’s desk. The Champion of Kirkwall grinned and walked over to the bed, clapping her on the shoulder in a firm gesture that caused her to groan in pain.

“Yes, it would appear that I am. You’re back from Weisshaupt?” Fenris pulled out a letter and raised it into the air silently as Hawke explained.

“The Inquisitor wrote to us while we were on the way back, and there was a side note from Varric asking us to come too. For a while they weren’t sure if you were going to make it, but then suddenly you made this big recovery and it was a waiting game. Still, we volunteered to take shifts watching you. How are you feeling? Are you hungry?” The mention of the word drew a roar from her stomach which brought its own amount of pain with it.

“Uh – yeah – but I would really like to bathe first.” Fenris huffed over by the chess board as he continued to play himself.

“They’ve been bathing you every other night. The Tevinter normally does it. He insists on which soaps they use.” There was a definite bitterness in his words and she dreaded the interaction between the two. Hawke’s gaze softened on her lover but she shook her head and gestured to the door with a point of her thumb over her shoulder.

“I’m sure it doesn’t feel the same as scrubbing the shit off yourself, right?”
Athena could only nod, pushing herself to the side of the bed. Everything felt light and her stomach was abnormally hungry. She ran her hands over her sides again before blinking with her brows furrowed. “How... how long was I out?”

“How. . .how long was I out?” Fenris answered plainly. Athena only stared at the floor with a groan, putting her head in her hands with a shake.

“Fuck.”

Hawke snorted a laugh. “That about sums it up. I wish I could have seen you take on that dragon though. One on one? That’s awesome. Come on, let’s get you up.” The mage stood in front of her and held her hands out just in case she needed support. Athena pushed from the bed and immediately regretted it, the pain paralyzing her legs. She stumbled forward with an unexpected yelp but Hawke was there to catch her in a strong, supportive embrace of sorts.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get your strength back. I’m sure being in a bed for three weeks wasn’t easy. Then the Templar did that purge on you? Yikes, what a month.” Athena still couldn’t get over it. Three weeks. Thankfully it didn’t seem like Corypheus had returned but she didn’t like feeling helpless. She groaned and went to fully stand, using Hawke’s shoulders for support before nodding with a small smirk of hope.

“I had forgotten about that. Is Cullen alright?” The Champion rolled her eyes and scoffed.

“He’s always fine. He’s just been quiet since then. I’m guessing you want to bathe back in your place?” Fenris had stood and was walking over to walk with them, the familiar red scarf tied around his right hand. She smiled with a nod, steadying herself while taking her first independent step.

“Yes please, but. . .if we could take a round about way, I really don’t feel like drawing attention.” Fenris made a hum of consideration.

“Which is wise considering the demon ran off to tell everyone you had woken up.” Athena looked to him but then clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth.

“That would be Cole. Let’s hurry then.” Hawke and Fenris each took turns helping her down the stairs. In her time hiding in Skyhold away from Cassandra, the Champion of Kirkwall had learned
the back ways through the Keep so that she could play cards with Varric at night without anybody noticing. There were ways which Athena hadn’t even taken before but eventually they arrived at the side door into her quarters. It was dusk and the soldiers were in between shift changes on the battlements. Everything was still within Skyhold. Hawke quickly opened the side door and let the three of them burst through, instantly shutting the door behind them with a sly grin on her face.

“That was close, I think somebody almost saw us down in the courtyard. But nobody has really been in here while you’ve been out, except for that wolf and the little girl.” Athena didn’t even have to ask to see why. Her side of the bed was messed as if someone had been sleeping in it and there was blonde hair on the pillow while there was a Kain-shaped imprint on the other side, Solas’s side. The thought made her throat hurt from already shed tears but she shook away the memory and looked to Hawke and Fenris.

“I think I can manage from here – “ Hawke put a hand up to stop her.

“Nu-uh. I don’t want you passing out on me or stumbling up the stairs. We’re with you until you eat. Now let’s go before I carry you downstairs.” With the size and strength of the battle mage she didn’t want to argue. Athena stumbled down the stairs and leaned against the vanity while Hawke helped her get ready. She refused the let the other mage help her undress and playfully glared when she wouldn’t leave the room. She felt comfortable around the other woman. Perhaps it was their shared situation of normal people shoved into unnatural scenarios, but she just felt normal even with the other woman’s titles and accomplishments.

There was something to be admired in that.

The water felt scalding against her skin but she didn’t care. With almost a violent urge she scraped all of the dead skin and grime from her body, taking a moment to breathe in the lavender and vanilla soaps that lingered in the bath water. Hawke was using the tip of a dagger to clean underneath her nails, yelling up at Fenris when he had questions about things. “Where did this painting come from? The technique is wonderfully done.”

Athena stilled, hollering up back at him. “Solas did it.”

Hawke winced and mouthed a silent apology before smiling. “If it makes you feel better, Fenris did what your guy did. Except he didn’t let it go as long. But he came back, maybe yours will too?”

She could only shrug in return. “I wouldn’t blame him if he didn’t. It was a mutual hurting of each other, but, that’s neither here nor there. I’m getting out.” Hawke handed her towels and stood on standby as she got from the bath and stood on the rune-warmed mat. Instead of using a spell to dry,
she used the towels to absorb all of the water before pulling her hair into a tight bun. The weeks of recovery were evident on her body. Her cheeks had grown more shallow and there was an obvious leanness to her body. She turned side to side and grimaced at the sight of the ungodly scar against her skin.

Before she could feel too sorry for herself Hawke nudged her with her clothes, humming in agreement and celebration as she was able to get herself dressed by herself. Just as she was beginning to feel somewhat normal there was a violent knocking on her door upstairs. Hawke and Athena froze, looking up as if they had been caught with their hand in a cookie jar. The voice on the other side explained everything, it bellowing through her tower.

“I know you’re in there, Champion! I saw movement from the battlements by my office. You have no business in there!” Hawke then broke into laughter, covering her mouth with her hand while pointing up.

“He doesn’t know! Why don’t you go answer the door. I think it’ll give him a heart attack.” She then moved to go upstairs but stopped with a charismatic wink. “But I have to watch.”

Athena slowly made her way up the stairs as more threats came from the door but it never opened. Fenris leaned against the side door with an amused expression on his face, smiling when Hawke made her way up the stairs and joined him. Athena cleared her throat and went to the door, taking in a deep breath before undoing the latch and swinging the door open.

A red-faced Commander nearly bellowed at her again but the color drained from his face when he saw her. He looked to her up and down, one hand supporting him as he leaned against the door frame as his jaw clenched. “Maker – Athena!” The anger was back before he pushed himself into the room, Shouldering his way past her. In her weakened state she couldn’t push back, her body pushing into the door as she chuckled under her breath. Hawke was keeping herself from cracking up, tears in her eyes at the Commander’s reaction. He paced the room like a lion, running his hand through his hair while his anger almost appeared as steam coming out of his ears. He then stopped and turned to the two foreigners, pointing out the door with a solid command. “Out.”

Hawke tried to protest but Fenris pulled her from the room, a final invitation to the tavern echoing in the room as they were forced to leave the tower. Cullen faced away from her, his breaths coming in deep, measured movements where she could see him shake on the exhale. Athena closed the door and moved through the thick silence, resting her hand on his pauldron gently. “Cullen, it’s – “
breaths. “Are you alright?”

He was scared, frightened even, and for a moment he sounded like the young man trapped behind a spell within Kinloch Tower. She could only nod, tightening her grip on him in fear that if he let go she would fall on the ground. “I have had better weeks, but I’m better now. Are you okay? The last thing I remember. . . You were murmuring some prayer.”

Cullen gasped slightly and pushed her away. She stumbled but caught herself with her back foot, bringing her hands in front of her chest with a scowl on her face. He looked ashamed, rubbing his hand over his face and then through his hair. His gaze was completely fixated on the ground. “Cole said there was a demon near you. I didn’t know how else to help.”

Athena shook her head and smiled, walking towards him again while pulling on the hand blocking his face so that she could get him to look at her. “Hey – Cullen – I’m alright. You helped me and slayed the demon that was near me. It. . . had been following me for a while, since Tobi.” Her voice then fell and her eyes widened in a terrifying realization. “You didn’t have to drink lyrium, did you? To do the purge?” Her words grew frantic and she nudged him in the chest to trigger a response. He immediately put his hands up and looked to her, shock filling his features as well. “Maker – no. It isn’t necessary to perform the abilities. It just. . . helps? I confess the headaches afterwards were not pleasant, but Cole said that it was successful so that eased the pain a little.”
She let out a sigh and nearly slumped to the ground in relief. If she had been the thing that drove him on lyrium she would have preferred to stay in her ignorance in the Fade. The pair sat in their tense silence for a minute, catching their breaths as the thoughts churned in their heads.

“We thought you were dead, Athena.” There was a groan of frustration and he looked up at her, leaning against the end frame of her bed with his arms crossed over his chest. “I warned you about that dragon.”

Athena scoffed but then immediately smiled, pushing him in the shoulder hard enough for him to make a groan of pain as his body pushed back into the bed. “Are you really giving me an ‘I told you so right now?’ Really, Commander? I would like to see you try to do what I did and then come at me with that snark.”

Cullen finally broke his solemn look and cracked a smirk, the corner of his lip tugging up with an air of smugness. “Just. . .don’t do that again. Please.” The Commander then quickly shuddered as if ridding himself of the situation before nodding towards the door. “Let’s go get you something to eat. You were getting thinner everyday in that bed.” He walked towards her and pressed his hand against her side to get her to turn towards the door. The small motion sent a shiver down her spine which drew a gasp from her body. She took a step forward and stabilized herself against the end of her bed frame, eyes wide as a pulsing, sharp pain radiated out from her scar. He instantly retracted
his hand as if he had done it. “What’s wrong?”

She cursed. “Mother fucker. It just... hurts, is all. Can you get me some elfroot potion? There should be some on the vanity over there.” She flicked her hand to the side of the bed where he instantly began to dig through her things, moving over a large set of papers that she was sure was from Josephine in case she ever was able to return to her post. He opened all of the drawers before coming across a small black case that held around a dozen small vials of different colors. He grabbed the first red one he saw and removed the cork, handing it to her so she could empty the contents into her mouth.

The moment the bitter root potion hit her tongue she let out a sigh of relief, its effects soothing some of the sharp pains and reducing it to a dull ache. Cullen had his brow furrowed in concern but he let out a mixture of a groan and a sigh through clenched teeth, pressing on her lower back again to help her towards the door and down the stairs. She almost refused to hold his hand and use him for support but he stood firmly by her side, his hand hovering just in case she stumbled or needed it.

Thankfully the night provided them with some subtle cover of anonymity... that was until she hit the tavern.

“What do you mean she’s gone.” Dorian was screaming at Fenris, who was leaning against the bar with his arms cross over his chest and a smug sneer on his face.

“Just as I said, Magister. She is no longer in the Inquisitor’s quarters.” Cullen grimaced and went to hold his arm over her chest to stop her from going in but she pushed right past him, wincing at the effort before storming through the tavern. Everything went quiet except for the argument between the two men.

“It was your turn to watch her! Or is that kind of task below you, Fenris?” The mage nearly spat, his aura rolling off of his skin in waves of dark and antagonistic energy. Athena tapped Dorian on the shoulder but he appeared to not feel her. Fenris began smirking and it did nothing for her patience.

“Dorian.” She stated simply, pushing her hand into his back. He held a hand up without turning to look at her.

“Hold on, Athena, I’m –” His eyes then went wide and he turned on his heel, looking at her like she had risen from the grave. Shock turned to happiness which quickly twisted into anger. He went to turn and release his rage at Fenris but Athena slid in between them and put her hands on her best
friends chest.

“I asked him to sneak me out. It’s not their fault. For the love of the Gods – get me something to eat. I feel like I’m going to pass out.” There was a sharp whistle from behind them and she saw the gloved hand of Varric Tethras wave her over to an empty booth where Cole was sitting next to him with an excited look on his face.

“Got it covered, Walker. Or should I call you Slayer now?” Athena grabbed Dorian’s hand and dragged him to the booth, inviting Cullen over with a quick glance accompanied by a smile. The Commander shrugged and followed, bringing up a chair to the end of the table as she glanced down at the bowl of soup hungrily.

“Cole ran to me to let me know you were waking up and probably would be wanting something to eat.” Varric pushed the bowl towards her with a grin. She did not hesitate in picking up the spoon with a shaky grip and putting the first sip of broth into her mouth. Dorian was sitting abnormally silent next to her and it felt like everyone was just watching her eat. She then made a silent decision after realizing she would be running into the same situation every day until everyone in Skyhold knew.

She held up two fingers to the table and Varric arched a brow at her. “What’s that for?”

“I get two weeks. No questions, no pressing, no stories. Two weeks for me to recover and then I’ll talk about it, alright?” There were looks shared across the table but Cole nodded emphatically.

“Okay!” He seemed to smile, nudging her bowl towards her again. Athena continued to eat in their confused silence, Dorian finally relaxing back into the booth while rubbing his temples.

“This is going to be a long two weeks then.” She shrugged and looked up from her bowl, glancing over to Varric.

“Where’s the Inquisitor? The Chargers?” Cullen choked on the ale he had picked up and cleared his throat, glancing to Dorian before speaking plainly.

“Closing the rifts that remain. The Chargers are scouting out Haven again since there have been no signs of Corypheus.” Dorian then scoffed.
“Yeah, the Inquisitor is with the perfect traveling team. Solas, Vivienne, and Sera.” Varric couldn’t help but laugh as Athena paled.

“You’re kidding.” The table then began to smile but Cole tilted his head to the side.

“She thought if she brought them, he might be distracted, for good or for bad. She couldn’t be here to see you die. She left to do good because she couldn’t do anything here.” Athena looked to the kid and held his gaze for a second before returning to her soup as the table fell back into an uncomfortable silence.

Chapter End Notes

You're welcome. No cliffhanger this time. ;) Getting back to normal.
Transparency

The rule of two weeks was finite that night, except for one. Athena had returned to her tower with Dorian’s assistance and the mage was insisting that he slept with her that evening. She was exhausted from everyone’s attention on her and even though she had just woken from weeks of rest, she needed a moment alone.

“Come on, Amatus, what if something happens?” He opened the door for her as she slid past him with a wince across her face.

“Then I’ll be in the comfort of my own damn bed. I’ll be fine. I kept my dinner down.” The Tevinter frowned.

“Half of it. Don’t think I didn’t see you sneak to the side of the tavern before we left.” He silently took her jacket and helped her get undressed as he had done every night for the last three weeks that she was helpless. She hesitated before taking her shirt off, looking away and sliding under the sheets in one smooth motion. The feel of her own sheets against her skin felt familiar, comforting, and safe. Even with Solas’s lingering scents on the sheets it felt more like home than anything.

“Look – I won’t mother hen you anymore. Just, don’t be foolish, okay? I just got you back and it would ruin my week if you were to be hurt again.”

There was sincerity within his sarcasm so she sat up and grabbed his hand, pulling it close so that she could brush it against her lips to silence him for a moment as he looked down at her with kindness in his eyes. “Your whole week? Dorian, I am honored. I am fine. I made the two-week rule for myself too. . .to give myself time to heal and get back to where I was. I figure by that time I’ll be hurting less, physically and emotionally. Okay?”

He leaned down and kissed her on the head, almost like a father tucking their child in for bed, before gently tapping her shoulder with his knuckle. “Alright. I trust you. Sleep well, Athena.”

He opened the door and she went to tuck herself in, until soft footsteps filled the room in his absence. She rubbed her face into the pillow, imagining she had heard things, until a warm body slipped into the bed before her and firmly wrapped their arms around her back. The petite hands accidentally rubbed over the scar and then instantly retracted, a small gasp coming from Leafy’s mouth as she sat up. Athena didn’t hesitate to roll over and pull the girl into a wordless, tight embrace. The teenager didn’t cry, she just gripped back tightly as if Athena was about to fall through her fingers.

The two rocked back and forth, hands gripping for some sort of reality, until Athena turned her
head and let out a sigh with her cheek rubbing into her daughter’s clean and blonde hair. The elf began murmuring something into her chest but it only came out in a series of mumbles. She smiled and pulled back, tucking her hair behind her ear while looking at her expectantly for a clearer statement.

“Everyone thought you were going to die. I knew you weren’t. I kept having dreams that you were okay. Are you okay?” She asked softly to finish, looking up with a strong and confident gaze that reflected the fierce hunter spirit that resided within.

Athena could only smile and cup her face, giving half a shrug with a smile. “I’m alive. That much is for certain. I still have to get back to where I was before since I’ve been asleep for three weeks, but I’m here, da’fen.” She said gently while leaning forward to press her forehead to her daughters. There were a few beats of silence, the two women gripping one another with their hands behind the other’s neck. Leafy never showed a shard of weakness, her grip and her expression strong.

“Can you tell me what happened, Fen’Mae?”

She took in a sharp intake of breath, wincing at the pull on her scar, but she wet her lips and nodded slowly. “For you, always.”

She told her everything. She told her of what she knew from her previous life, what happened in the cave, and what led to the dragon fight after. Athena told her of Imshael and Cullen saving her life from the grip of Despair. The talk moved from the bed to the roof to the floor in front of the painting to the bath then back to the bed again before Leafy sat with her arms crossed and her gaze straight on the roof. She had remained mainly silent during the explanation, only interjecting to react or to ask pressing questions to get more information. Athena did not hold back, her daughter deserved to know everything. From what Cullen had told her, Leafy had injured two guards trying to get into the room to see her.

Kain knew she was alright through their connection, but he had refused to eat for several days until Cullen coaxed him out of Athena’s tower with freshly cooked bacon. Athena sipped on an elfroot potion to dull some of the pain that had peaked when she cried while speaking of Crestwood. Her eyes were red but the elf before her stood firm. She finally uncrossed her arms and took a sip of the wine that Athena regrettably let her drink.

“Solas is the Dread Wolf.” She stated matter-of-factly.
“Uh-huh.”

“I shot him with an arrow?” There was a slight amusement in her tone as she leaned back against the pile of pillows that had accumulated on the bed.

“Yes you did. Barely.” Leafy’s face fell back into one of concentration, her mouth opening and closing a few times in consideration before speaking again.

“The *vallaslin* are slave markings?” Athena couldn’t help it. She snapped out and grabbed her hand, squeezing it to catch her gaze.

“*Were* slave markings. They are whatever you make them, *da’fen*. That may be how they were created, but they have changed over time, the Dalish and other elves have been proud to wear them and honor the old Gods.” Leafy’s face contorted into confusion.

“But they weren’t actually Gods – right? They were strong mages?” Athena sighed and sat next to her on the bed, clutching a rather fluffy pillow while crossing one leg over the other.

“Yes, but does that mean their ideas are worth abandoning? Does the mage Mythal still not stand for matronhood and love? Does Andruil’s teachings still not guide the arrow of every hunter that calls on her name in the woods? The lessons left behind by your ancestors are what you make them, Lev’adin. Do not let them hold you back to stay in the old ways. Move forward and pave your own path while never forgetting what your people had to do to get there. The heart of the People is strong.” She looked over to her daughter, her breath coming quickly from the effort of speaking so much. The dullness had turned sharp but she hid her wince through another sip of bitter elfroot.

Leafy took everything in, only nodding while holding the pillow to her chest. “I think I still want to get them. It’s been a part of growing up in my clan for as long as I can remember. If I didn’t go through that... I wouldn’t feel right. Lathari was a First – she knows the ritual still if I want.”

Athena reached over and grabbed her hand, giving it a squeeze. “There is no rush. You do it when you decide on what you want and who you feel guides your spirit the most. Promise?”

A sudden spark of inspiration flew across the young girl’s face and she smiled, squeezing back before scooting down until the covers to turn on her side in preparation for sleep. Athena sidled down beside her, frowning for a mere second because she caught the slight hint of Solas’s scent
still on the sheets, but that pain was drowned out by the love and care she had for the girl in her arms. Leafy never doubted, never faltered in her goal of moving forward. She had so many troubles in her own life, but she still managed to look out for her.

There was a punch of sadness to her gut – her daughter was managing to take care of her mother when she herself had her own lifetime full of hardships. She was abandoned by her clan for showing great gifts and because of years of superstition. The Dalish were proud and their teachings were to be cherished, but there were some practices that were too old and harsh to keep true. For now, the two women had each other, and it felt like that they were all they had. She had her family of Dorian and Rathein, but she knew destiny would tear them away from her so that they could go down their own paths. The only ones whose futures had yet to be written were the people who pledged themselves to her. She had been given a curse – no, a gift, that she could use to help right the wrongs that had been done to her people.

The next morning she was trying hardest to make it like any other morning, but that seemed near impossible. Kain had burst through half way into their sleep and attacked both of the women with shows of affections. His endless whimpers and cries of worry kept them up for an hour until they were all able to settle, but just as they did, the sun began to creep into their quarters. Leafy woke with a groan, pushing Kain off of her chest as the wolf pounced as if he were a puppy all over the bed. Athena rubbed her face in the pillow while echoing her daughter’s groan. She didn’t even know what to expect that day. Where did she start?

Josephine and Leliana had to know of her awakening by then. They would give her a few hours of a grace period before bringing her back into the fold of Inner Council workings. She wanted to check on her own people first. The office was a great place to avoid nosy people and it would allow her to get her head back into the game. Leafy helped her get dressed since her stomach had grown stiff over the night. She sipped on elfroot through their morning routine, taking great care to wrap her bandings tightly around her chest and abdomen for extra support. Kain never left her side, allowing himself to be used for support when she took a sharp intake of breath from a sudden wave of pain.

It took slightly longer to get there, but she was walking with pseudo-confidence out of her tower and down the stairs. Leafy was at her side with her hands twitching to use magic, eyes flicking back and forth for any potential threats to her mother. The morning crowd was just beginning so they slipped through the great hall and down the stairway to the left. Varric simply twitched his quill in recognition of their arrival, a mischievous smirk twitching his lips as they passed. Even though the courtyard was nearly empty, her office was bustling.

Elves were buzzing back and forth with different scrolls, missives, and duties. In the middle of it all was Syla in newly tailored clothing with her short, red hair styled so that her hair swirled across
the top of her forehead. When Athena entered the room, it was as if the air was sucked from the cavern. Everyone stopped to look at her and she cast her gaze over the lot of them, her eyes fixating on a particularly powerful new decoration hanging in the opening of the cave.

The dragon’s skull had been mounted with heavy chains to the walls of the cave. It hung openly with its back to the mountain pass below. It stared at them all but at first she was intimidated by it. It was the beast that had bested her, but then as Leafy squeezed her hand she realized it was the opposite. She had felled it single handedly, escaping with only a scar. “Fen’Elgara!” Loranil called, the hunter elf stepping in from the side before dropping to a single knee with his fist over his heart. She scoffed lightly at him with a playful tone, tapping the bottom of his chin.

The scarlett haired elf immediately sprung up and wrapped her in an uncharacteristically tight embrace, the room chuckling in response to his greeting. “Creators we were worried about you. We never doubted you though! Only Fen’Elgara could do what you did.”

Athena blushed and playfully pushed him off, tucking her hair behind her ear while scoffing. “Cassandra’s taken down a dragon single handedly with the help of a mage or two. . . ”

Her warrior rolled his eyes and gestured her off. “Fenedhis, she comes from a family of dragon hunters. You! You fell from the sky from a place without magic. Just let us be proud of you.” He smiled with genuine pride in his eyes as she looked to the rest of the room. There were more people than she recalled and she knew she would have to learn their names. They all held the same glimmer of hope that Loranil had she suddenly felt overwhelmed by their mysterious pride and support.

She cleared her throat and grinned at Syla, who was waiting anxiously with a similar smile on her face. “Alright. Catch me up and don’t leave out a thing.”

Loranil, Syla, Illrith, and Lithari were all gathered around in her desk in a circle. Eventually she got tired of feeling above them behind the desk and moved her chair to the front of the circle with her back facing the door so she could sit in a more casual position as she wrote things down on the scroll with a clipboard similar to Josephine’s backing it. Meetings like that was where she started to miss a pen, but the quill was becoming a fun things to use. Even still, it made her feel fancy as the feather twitched back and forth as her quill danced across the scroll.

Loranil updated her on their soldier count. They had over six dozen for themselves and counting as more recruits came in or transferred over from the Inquisition soldiers. “Are they really separate?”

The elf would then wink. “To the Inquisitor? No. To you, yes.”
Syla updated her on the background side of things, like the new members and what was happening around the Keep. “There was a small skirmish between some of ours and a few Orlesian nobles. Lady Leliana stepped in before anything got too ugly, but I imagine there might be some tension from the Baron. . . “ Her voice faltered for a moment, Illrith grabbing her hand to rid her of the memory of her former tyrant of a master. “Even if he was not a well-liked man, there is gossip of how he passed. The Spymaster soothed those worries and things have been calm since, but still tense. Now that you are awake, those that were worried feel much safer than when you were indisposed.”

Lithari moved in her chair, running her hand over her cleanly shaven head, fingers absent mindedly running along the grooves of her vallaslin. Athena looked to her next and nodded for her to continue. “Keeper Hamel has sent letters saying that the wolves of the pack have grown closer to them. They have allowed them into their camp and many of the warriors have taken wolves as partners, not companions. They hunt together and the Keeper has made many comparisons to the Emerald Knights of old. He sends his greetings.” She went to move from the Dalish and magical advisor the elf still held her gaze, piercing lavender eyes looking almost nervously.

“What is it, Lithari?”

“This next one is of a more personal matter. But, your daughter.” She let out a sigh and looked around to make sure the young girl had gone to get a meal. “She is requesting to get her vallaslin placed. Loranil and I have spoken to her about it, but she seems determined. Even this morning she wished to set a day. It is customary to wait until the chosen is of adult age, but considering the circumstances and everything that has happened, she feels that she is ready.”

Athena pursed her lips, and looked down to her scroll and the lines and lines of text she had written over the course of their meeting. “And how do you feel about this? Has there ever been a child that has gotten their markings before the typical time?”

“Yes, but their readiness is normally determined by the Keepers.”

She scoffed lightly underneath her breath. “I doubt she would wish to return to Keeper Hamel for his permission. As kind and wise of a man as he is, he still turned away one of his own. As her mother, I do not have a problem. As a former First, you are the closest this group has to a Keeper. I will leave the matter to you, Lithari. I trust whatever decision you make.”

The elf blushed softly but nodded firmly, glancing to Loranil with a look of determination. There was an unspoken message between them, but Athena trusted them with her daughter’s life. They had looked after her when she was gone for three weeks. They had protected her and they held her
best interests at heart as well as the interest of their people.

Athena smiled and looked over to Illrith, the dark-haired man who was flipping a dagger in his hand while flicking his gaze to his beloved to make sure she was alright. “You asked me to check in with the Dalish and the elves in the alienage? Since the Blight, King Alistair attempted to bring peace to the alienage as repayment for what happened under Arl Howe. Well with his Uncle Arl Eamon whispering into his ear, the status of the alienage has fallen into the backs of their minds. There is not a constant stream of fresh food and many of them are beginning to turn hungry. What are a couple elves when the entire kingdom is suffering from the Breach and still recovering from the Blight?” He asked bitterly with a narrow stare.

“What of the Dalish in the Brecilian Forest? From what I knew they had engaged into trade with humans and the like again.”

The rogue shrugged. “They have, but, Corypheus’s reach goes far and their woods have become tainted with small bits of red lyrium that finds itself there from the armor and blood of Red Templars. It seems many more Templars than we expected were tired of the establishment that they had been living in for generations. The Dalish have moved camp and there is no trace of them besides aravel trails that are days old.”

“Only because you’re not looking hard enough, friend.” There was a new accented voice from the front of the room close to the door. None of the elves recognized the person and they all had looks of apprehension and annoyance on their face at the new intrusion. The accent seemed familiar and Athena arched a brow, thinking to herself. Was that Antivan? Her eyes widened when she heard the familiar chuckle of Leliana dance through the room and she fought so that the blood wouldn’t drain from her face. She turned in her chair and bit her tongue to fight the reaction that made her want to jump behind her desk.

The Nightingale was standing casually with her shoulder leaning against the wall, arms crossed behind her back with a cheeky smile on her face. Next to her was a caramel skinned man with a charismatic smile on his face, arms crossed over his chest with a smug expression. He dressed mainly in black except for the silver thin plates of armor that cascaded up his legs. She caught a small glimpse of two freshly cleaned daggers on his hip. Her eyes finished on the silver crow attachment that hung over his head and she swallowed a lump of nerves and a fresh wave of being star struck.

Zevran cleared his throat and bowed, blonde hair falling around his face before he stood up again and moved his hood from his head. “Zevran Arainai, at your service.”

Leliana couldn’t help but chuckle again, hiding her mouth behind her hand. “This Crow is a dear old friend of mine, but I suppose you know that already, Athena?”
Athena couldn’t help but nod silently.

“The Inquisition was helping him with a situation, so he needed to make an escape. I secured him passage to Ferelden, but he surprised me by coming here instead.” She elbowed her friend gently in the ribs and he shrugged.

“The Crows network is vast. I should know, I helped form half of it since the Blight. But – ah times change. What better place to hide for a while but surrounded by my own kind in the most powerful group in Thedas?” There was an air of charisma and not giving a fuck that made her roll her eyes before standing. She could feel the others tense around her as she was not able to hide her wince, a hand going to her scar to support her belly underneath the bandings. Zevran narrowed his brows and gave her a once over, looking over to Leliana. She nodded in response to his silent question, the elf clicking his tongue against his teeth before extending a hand to her.

Athena placed her hand in his and he bowed once more, brushing his lips over her knuckles with a wink so quick it appeared to be habit. She didn’t fight the blush on her cheeks but she controlled her facial expressions to be one of authority. “I’m Athena Wolfsbane, Sorciere of the Inquisition. It is a pleasure to meet you, Zevran. How... long will you be staying with us?” Her gaze flicked to the other Inner Council member, who only shrugged in response with an entertained expression on her face.

“For as long as necessary, I suppose. Will that be a problem? I’m sure I can find *some* way to be useful around here.” The inflection was obvious and there was a deep sound of wood against stone as Loranil pushed from his chair as a show of protection. She didn’t have to turn around to see his look of disapproval towards the newcomer.

Athena gave a diplomatic smile in return, fighting the constant battle of a face of respect versus the fan girl that was waving pompoms inside of her mind at the way his words sounded like pure sugary syrup to her ears. “I’m sure we can find something for you to do. These are my friends and confidants.” She pointed her thumb over her finger and adjusted the angle to move towards the direction of the person she introduced. “Loranil – he is in charge of our forces. Lithari – oversees the Dalish and is the magical advisor. Illrith – Spymaster and Syla – she runs everything and everyone else while I’m away. Everyone, this is Zevran. He is – I’m sorry – was an Antivan Crow and assisted the Hero of Ferelden in the Blight.”

Greetings were exchanged back and forth but she could still feel the tension in the air. She cleared her throat and nodded to Leliana as she left the room, looking to the Crow with an assessing gaze. **Well fuck - what do I do with him.** “Excuse us, Zevran, but we were about to finish up our meeting. You said you had intel about the Dalish of the Brecilian Woods? Please, enlighten us.”
Zevran, The Exception

Chapter Notes

Now beta'd by the beautiful morgalahan! <3

That had been one of the longest days of her life.

The meeting with her people was fine, relaxed, and they allowed her to set the pace in catching up with their affairs. Once everything was in order after lunch, she made her way to the Inner Council meeting with elfroot fresh on her tongue.

That meeting was grueling. The other three did not hesitate in updating her on everything from Samson’s trial to what was left to her by the Inquisitor. Cullen tenderly went over the details of how the Inquisitor left with Solas, Vivienne, and Sera to close the rifts and how long they were estimated to be gone for. There were rifts in the Hinterlands and Crestwood that still needed to be closed as well as ones close by in the Exalted Plains. The two mages assisted in their travel with fade-step magic, but that could only get them so far.

They gave Athena the privilege of writing a letter to Rathein, letting her know she was awake. After hours of deliberation on what to do next and where to station troops, the Hand of the Inquisitor found herself alone in her office. The only light in the room was moonlight that came through the opening behind her and candles scattered around the room. She had summoned two mage lights to bob in the eyes of the dragon skull that hung behind her. With exhaustion in her movements, she rubbed the back of her neck and her arms to work out the soreness from being back at work already. Her body had been healed, sure, but there was a weakness that came with being in bed for three weeks.

She had seen it in her former patients that were on life support for that long. Their skin would deteriorate and their cheeks would grow sunken in. Athena had magic and potions to thank for sustaining her, but she was still catching up. She raised the quill back to her scroll and worked away at a letter to Rathein. She tried to be diplomatic but at the same time compassionate, since she would probably be reading the letter in front of the others. She’d have to ignore her two week rule for now since her sister would be demanding information the moment she got back.

Any way to soften the blow now would save her later.

For the eyes of Rathein Trevelyan, Inquisitor of the Inquisition, Herald of Andraste, Head Bitch in
My sister,

I am awake, for all things considered. I woke last night after being watched over in the Fade by Abelas, the Sentinel from the Shrine of Mythal. Once I was healed enough physically and mentally, Cole found me and brought me back to consciousness.

I know you have a lot of questions, and I promise I will answer them in time. The most important one. . . do you remember the demon Imshael? The one from the Emprise du Lions?

He fulfilled his end of the bargain.

Her quill began to shake and she let out a sigh. She rested the feather beside the scroll and rubbed her palms into her eyes to fight off the exhaustion that threatened to drag her into sleep. She would finish this letter. . . then sleep. She had gotten enough sleep for a lifetime, plus she wasn’t exactly sure what she would say to Inspiration, Harmony, and Wisdom if they were to show up in her dreams.

“Hard at work, but do you ever have time to play?” Zevran purred from the doorway, ripping her gaze from her scroll to the door. She hadn’t even heard him enter and she was positive she had locked it. He was holding two glasses lazily in one hand with a bottle of something in the other.

“How did you get in?” His face fell and he looked to the door incredulously and shrugged.

“Do you really think I do not know how to pick a lock, Lady Athena?” She blinked once and looked to the door, trying to think of a polite way to say the word no from what she remembered.

“I don’t know how else to put this but – “ She stammered. His lips tugged up into a snarl-like smirk as he walked towards her desk.

“I will admit. In my youth, many of my targets were men or women that I was intended to spend the night with. Why pick a lock when you are invited in?” He flipped one of the glasses over and slid it to the side of the letter she was writing and popped open the cork. Athena held a hand up to refuse but he looked to her with an arched brow. “You need something to wash the taste of elfroot from your tongue.”
Athena pursed her lips and glanced at the wine. She sat back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest with a displeased expression. “Did you come to hide or to spy on me? I’m aware I have no shortage of enemies in Orlais, who knows how far that spreads.” She narrowed her eyes at the elf, taking note of the curved black tattoos that shaped the side of his face down to the warm smile now on his lips.

“Do not fear, Lady Wolfsbane. Leliana is a dear friend and the Inquisition is providing me cover. I am yours –” There was an obvious flirtation to his words but she only blinked once at him before he pulled up a chair on the other side of her desk. “The Inquisition’s that is. May I ask what you are working on?” He placed the cork from the wine bottle on the desk and poured the sweet drink into the glass above her scroll. From the smell alone she could tell he had managed to find her favorite sweet wine. The smell of pears and apples hit her nose and she managed a twitch of her lips as she fought a smirk.

“There is that loyalty I have heard of. Please pull up a seat.” She couldn’t help but wink at him and push all of the sarcasm she had into it before bringing the wine to her lips. Sure enough, the fresh taste overpowered the lingering presence of elfroot on her tongue and she let out a soft sigh of relief. “I am writing a letter to the Inquisitor to let her know of my survival. The Inner Council thankfully left that task for me, but I am unsure of what to tell her.” She paused for a beat then looked to the elf who had just reclined in his chair and put his Antivan leather boots up on her desk. “How did you know about the elfroot?”

Zevran poured himself a glass of wine and then looked to it after he sipped, his brows raised in consideration before he drank another bit. “I assumed. Leliana curtly told me about it, since the details were not hers to share. But . . . you listen in enough and you find out. Your friend Dorian is not the most quiet talker, especially when he is upset, which he has been at Fenris for a bit. The two do not get along.” He chuckled low and looked over to her, eyes flicking between the glass of wine and the flask that had elfroot potion in it. “Does it help?”

Athena kept her grip unnaturally firm on the wine glass, resisting the urge to take a sip of potion to dull the pain that gnawed at her from her belly. “Sometimes. Sometimes it takes my breath away and I struggle to walk, so it helps with moments like that. Especially when I get up from a chair or am taking the stairs. Surely there is something else you could be doing than sitting in my office this late at night?” She felt on guard around the Crow. Typically she would have been overjoyed to see somebody she recognized, but he was too observant and she felt like he was seeing straight through her.

He tilted the wine glass and looked at its contents without looking over at her. “So quick to rid yourself of me? Forgive me, I was curious to learn more about the women who defeated a dragon single handedly.” He made a move to stand but she realized how rude she was being, reaching forward to stop him with a shake of her head.
“No, please, forgive me. I’m just. . . in a tough spot writing this letter.” She sighed and sat back into her chair, quickly taking a swig from her flask before washing it down with wine. “I heard her cry when she saw me, I could hear bits of what people were saying when I was barely breathing. The only reason she went to close the Rifts with – “ Athena paused, realizing she couldn’t even say his name yet without her abdomen clenching and her throat going dry. “The others is because she didn’t know how to help. I don’t know what to say that won’t make her rush back here. I do not wish her to abandon her duty.”

She put her quill back down to the scroll to squeeze out another sentence.

Nevertheless, I am alive and well. Do not fret anymore and please continue your work in closing the Rifts.

I have received your instructions of my duties while you are gone and the Keep will be well tended to while I get my strength back.

“I’m sure she would appreciate the truth. She seemed like a strong-willed women in the letters I received from her, and the small interaction we had. You have returned to your duties and are now enjoying a drink with an incredibly handsome assassin.” This thankfully made Athena smile as she emptied her wine cup and gestured to him for more. “If I include that last bit, I think somebody else will drag the entire party home.”

The rogue grinned knowingly. “Solas?” A boulder dropped into her belly but she nodded, the teasing smile falling from her face without her permission. He had been there. He had helped in putting her in that sleep. He had seen the wound at its purulent worse and then Rathein had the sense to drag him away to try and distract him. Even still she knew it wouldn’t work. He would be too wound up in his own self-pity and self-hatred, much like she had done in the Fade with Abelas. He would blame the whole thing on himself even though it was her that pushed him away. “He seemed to be a quiet fellow. He was there the day the Inquisitor left. Were you two..?” He asked again knowingly and she narrowed her eyes at him.

“Involved? Yes. You can stop playing the coy spy thing with me. You’re a smart man, Zevran, you know more information than you let on and I’m not going to play into your hand. If you have a question, just ask it of me. You’ll find I’m capable of being just as honest.” The elf looked to her and tilted his head in acceptance of her words, finishing off his own glass before pouring them both a new one.

“Must I follow this two week rule that is spreading amongst your companions? I do not know how long I am to be here and it would be a shame if I did not hear the surely marvelous story of how
you bested a dragon single handedly.” She continued writing with a flash of an annoyed expression.

I have met the Antivan Crow Zevran that is staying with us. He is... persistent but a familiar face. So his presence is appreciated for now.

How goes the Trip Round the Rifts? You have the patience of the Divine considering who you took with you. Though I do not know if it was intentional or not, sister. Druffalo fur rolled up works great as an ear plug, or leftover wax from a candle as long as it’s not too flaky.

“I suppose you do not, Zevran. I’m sure the Spymaster has told you, but I know you. I know all about you and your travels with the Hero of Ferelden through the Blight. They are the main highlights of the journeys, but that includes some conversational bits as well. It seems only fair that you can know some things about me to make them even.”

Do not rush in coming back. I am fine, the Inquisition is fine. Please be safe.

Love,

Your sister, Athena Wolfsbane, Sorciere of the Inquisition, Hand of the Inquisitor, Dragon Slayer

She wrote the last title with a bit of a smirk to herself before folding it up and flicking her fingers to summon a raven that was perched on the dragon skull. It cawed and its call echoed through the office. She tied the letter to its leg and sent it off into the night. It passed two of its brethren that were also on the skull waiting for her word. They didn’t need to be caged, they understood her pulses of magic well enough to want to wait around. Plus, she was like Cullen and tended to give them table scraps since her appetite was low.

“What made you want to fight that dragon alone? The Hero – we fought two fully grown dragons and they were not easy opponents. I’m surprised you were able to survive at all.” He pulled some bread out of his pocket and unwrapped it from the white cloth it was in. He quickly broke it in half and slid some over the desk onto her side casually.

Athena mulled over the answers in her head while swirling the wine around in her glass. She watched the way it almost came over the edge, it constantly dancing along the line of chaos. Perhaps she could use him as a practice run for everyone else? They would all be asking the same questions, but would have a million follow-up questions because they knew the back details of her relationship with Solas. “Simply put: I was hurting. I had... made a misstep in something I thought I knew and it led to hurting the person closest to me. Everyone assumes he hurt me. I heard that much. But – we both played a hand in it. Afterwards, I was just so angry at myself and there was
that dragon.” She looked over her shoulder at the dragon skull and let out a mixed sigh. “I’m sure you can work out the rest.”

He let out a long hum and downed his entire glass of wine in two large gulps. He licked his lips of the stuff and narrowed his brow in the direction of the wall in front of him, not meeting her gaze before smirking. “You know there was a time during the Blight. I looked over from my tent... to see that silly Templar giving Lady Cousland a rose.” He shook his head with a sad smile on his lips, running a hand through this hair before letting out a deep sigh. “Morrigan tended to sleep by herself at the edge of camp. I took every dagger I had and practiced throwing them into a single groove in a tree near where she rested.” He pulled a flask from his side and took a drink of something stronger than her sweet wine. “I did it until I couldn’t raise my arms above my head. I understand what happened, Lady Athena, I understand well enough, more than most would care to admit anyways.”

Athena’s mouth fell slightly open in realization, sympathy edging the lines of her gaze as she raised her glass to him and finished hers off as well. The wine mixed with the elfroot brought a warm sensation to her chest and colored the skin on her neck, and cheeks. She relaxed fully back into her chair and exhaled deeply through her nose, a hand idly itching at the scar underneath her bandings. “You didn’t have to share that... so... thank you, Zevran. How long did it take you to get back to normal?”

The rogue smiled. “What day is it?” Athena’s eyes instantly widened. “I jest, I jest. From that night, I would say a week. Then she started talking to me about how happy she was and I found my jealousy becoming smaller and smaller. But your situation is different. There is hope, no? From what I understand he returned to your side when you were on your healing bed. He only went when the Inquisitor pressed him and began speaking of duty and how they all still had a mission to fulfill. He would be an idiot to not come back to a face such as yours.”

She playfully glared at him, tucking a hair behind her ear while fighting the blush that came with his compliment. “So he would. You flatter me, Zevran. Unnecessarily I might add.” She looked over to the man and allowed herself to feel that rush of attraction towards the familiar face. The pull of his gaze and the charm of his smile brought a tightening in her thighs that she had not felt in weeks... which unfortunately led to a pull on the scar in her belly. The wave of pain that moved through her body was unexpected and she gasped quickly, a groan slowly echoing from her throat as her hands gripped the table to try and get her in a standing position.

Her vision went entirely white and all she could focus on was the pain. Had she gotten up too fast? Was it too much just by coming back to the office that day? If she couldn’t write a set of simple scrolls, would she be able to help in the battle against Corypheus? The awful words whispered through her mind, an agonizing constant reminder of what she would have to face for the days to come. Long, lonely life – would the scar always be like this? There had to be intention in the pain she was feeling, there was no other logical excuse in her mind.
“Shhhhh, Shhhh mi brujita.” Little witch, Zevran purred as he appeared behind her with a gentle hand on her back. Athena couldn’t help but sigh at his light touch, eyes clenched shut until the wave of pain passed. He gently rubbed with the tips of his fingers on the tight muscles that connected to her lower back that contracted when her belly spasmed. “Do not push yourself so much, Lady Wolfsbane. The work can wait.”

She grit her teeth and turned her head towards him, fingers clawing at the surface of the wooden desk. “Unfortunately, the world will not.”

Athena pushed herself into a straight standing position, eyes cast to the ceiling as she took in a deep breath and exhaled, her hand moving to press against her stomach as she closed her eyes in concentration. She focused on the pull of her breath through her chest, the relief in her body as the pain began to subside. Once it became manageable she pulled her flask to her lips and took a long, bitter draw of elfroot potion into her mouth.

Zevran made a noise that resembled disappointment before he removed his hand from her back, letting out a sigh while grabbing the two wine glasses from the desk. “Would you allow me to walk you back to your tower?”

The Sorciere regained her composure, glancing over at him with an icy glance. “I don’t think I will require such a thing, do you?”

He noticed the change but broke into a smile instead, which unfortunately broke through the wall that she had quickly erected and softened her expression. “Of course not, but do it as a favor to me since I enjoy your company so much, no?”

Fuck. Athena rolled her eyes playfully and nodded, knowing full well he was probably watching her to make sure she didn’t have another pain episode. They left the office and she did a once over before closing the door behind her, a small gust of wind from her magic snuffing out the light from the candles on the walls and in the dragon skull. Her rogue companion snuck off and put the wine glasses in the kitchen before returning at her side, clearing his throat with a fist to his lips. “What, daresay, are your adventurous plans with the world tomorrow?”

She raised her arms to the sky in a stretch and relaxed them with her hands behind her head, a soft smile curving her lips as she came into contact with the moonlight. “I think it would be best for me to get into the training ring. I need to flex my muscles and get some of my strength back. I can’t act like I am a wounded animal and the Inquisition needs to see me in my full strength.”

He clicked his tongue against the back of his teeth. “Ah – to see the dreaded Fen’Elgara in even a
practice battle? That is not something I would miss. They tell me you got that nickname from turning into a large wolf made of fire in the Plains to scare off some Orlesian chevaliers.” He gestured with his hands in the air as if he were telling a story with a glimmer of curiosity in his sideways glance. “You know the Warden and I came across a woman who could turn into a dragon. A flaming wolf is almost as impressive as that.”

Athena could barely contain her laughter, which twinged but she pushed through it, her body tilting over until she could support herself on her knee. Almost as impressive, my ass. Zevran scratched the back of his neck and bent down to catch her gaze. “I did not realize I was funny in that moment.”

“What happened to that dragon, Zevran?” The elf blinked as she continued walking towards her tower through the courtyard.

“We killed her, unfortunately.” Athena wagged a finger in the air, turning on her heel so she could walk up her stairs backwards while facing him.

“So you think. That dragon is indeed alive and well, thanks to a familiar face you might know named Hawke. But for how long? The world does not know.” She lied, moving backwards until her hand hit her doorknob. He ascended the stairs and stopped a step or two below her, a testing glance going to the distance between them before he stopped. He stiffened and sighed. The Crow bowed his head and winked to her as if it were habit.

“Curious. I will see you on the training grounds, Lady Athena. I expect to see your best.” Athena melted back into herself for a second, flashing a confident smile.

“As much as I can bring, Zevran.”
Athena had never been a fan of yoga when she was back home. She was typically impatient with it, and definitely not flexible enough to do some of the mind-breaking moves required to achieve the ultimate nirvana during a class. But when she rolled out of bed stiff as a corpse the next morning, she figured it had to be worth a try. She choked down an entire vial of elfroot before gathering a thicker blanket to head out onto the battlements as the sun rose. There was something romantic and peaceful about the morning.

Blackwall could be heard from the grounds training with some of the younger recruits. Their thudding footsteps sounded out from the dirt below and she waved to the Warden. She whipped her blanket in the air to rid it of any wolf hair and dirt before laying it on the ground. She raised her arms to the sky and started, fingers wiggling to test and stretch every muscle fiber in her body. It felt so good even as the tendons pulled on her belly. It was like stretching the second day after an intense workout. It hurt, her mind hated it, but it felt so good on her body. Ten minutes went by undisturbed as she worked her way through different positions. She would only move on when she felt her body grow comfortable in a certain pose and no longer benefit from the stretch.

With her chest pointed towards the sky, Athena was stretching in something that she had dubbed “the cobra” as a teenager. This put the most strain on her belly, but it felt so good to pull on that tightness that she let out a sigh mixed with a groan. She had her eyes closed to enjoy the morning sunrise on her skin without being blinded, so she only knew that two people were approaching by the sound of their footsteps. They sounded like boots, hard, heavy boots so she presumed the visitors to be men.

One of them cleared his throat in a paternal way and she rolled her eyes underneath her eyelids. *Cullen.*

“Can I help you, Commander?” She asked without verifying her guess, smiling when he answered her.

“What *are* you doing?” He asked in a bemused tone, his companion remaining silent.

“Stretching. Do you not train your recruits to do such a thing before drills? No wonder they and
you look so stiff all the time.” He scoffed lightly under his breath and she smiled, pushing from the ground with her palms to straighten her legs and hang her head between them. Which put her ass straight in the air. The other voice coughed to presumably cover a blush so she looked over to see Blackwall with his head respectfully turned away. The Commander looked amused, and watched with his head tilted to the side as she switched positions.

“They do, just not like this. Minor things for their arms so their sword arms don’t get locked up.” He paused and knit his brows together. “I am not stiff.” He muttered petulantly, which brought a chuckle from her and Blackwall both. The bearded warrior couldn’t help it and broke into a laugh, prompting Athena to give up on her routine and join him. Blackwall blushed and rubbed the back of his neck as she patted him on the back, a tear leaking from her eye at the embarrassment of their Commander.

“I certainly hope not, in public? Disgraceful! Besides, these stretches were focusing on my core — “ She slapped her hand against her lower belly with a proud smile. “I’m going to try and get back into my training routines today so I wanted to be limber.”

Blackwall raised a brow. “Who are you sparring with?”

She twitched her lips to the side and shrugged. “No idea. I was going to set up where Dorian and I used to train and just go through some of my old spells with a staff to get my body used to the idea of fighting again. I can at least hone my barrier skills and practice inside of them so I don’t disturb those around me. If you’re free later I can bring a staff and we can spar?”

The warrior smiled beneath his beard. “Take your time with it, my lady. You know where to find me if you’re feeling up for it later.” He gave her a wave and nodded farewell to Cullen before heading down the stairs. The Commander still looked unimpressed, looking her up and down as she took another drink of elfroot to help with the pain before she started her training.

“You sure you’re feeling well enough to train, or even fight?” His gaze softened on her and she rolled her eyes at him and his paternal tone.

“Are you fine most days with your headaches? How would you feel if I asked you all the time if you were in fit condition?”

He shook his head and frowned, his typical brotherly features hardening while he crossed his arms over his chest.
“It’s not the same. Mine is old, yours is fresh. Additionally, I had Cassandra watching me and checking in on me. You would be wise to let somebody do the same.” He gave a half shrug before continuing. “You’re allowed to have a bad day with this, Athena. At least you could go to someone that understands. I know what it is like to grin and bear it when you have your own pain trying to hold you back.”

Athena opened her mouth for a witty retort but failed, instead walking over to give the firmly postured man a quick hug before descending the stairs with him at her back. “I will keep that in mind, Commander. Perhaps once I’m back in shape in a day or two you could spar with me like old times?”

The Lion gave her a genuine smile with a nod. “I’ll hold you to it, Athena.”

The magic was willing, but her body was not.

Her aura was like an impatience animal under her skin. It left her feeling taut, as if it were going to burst from her pores and devour those around her once she let a small gap in the door of her magic open. She was near the large clearing that she used to tell stories at. When she started talking about training there, a few people who were simply conversing cleared out but the more curious ones stayed. Syla had brought most of her work with her so that they could talk in between training sessions.

When Athena had to stop due to the pain, her right hand woman did not even flinch. She would merely pause her sentence as if her leader were clearing her throat or coughing, and would then continue. She went from her simplest spells to more complex ones and would not move forward until she had grown comfortable with the previous. For hours she was stuck on making a fire mine. It would fizzle out or it would only make a small flame when she threw a rock on it.

Syla had brought her ice water and she was sitting exhausted with her back up against the wall of the area in the shade. She rubbed a cold cloth on the back of her neck and glared at all of the failed scorch marks across the stone fire ring that she would have to repair when she was done, if she had the energy. She was doing her best to limit her lyrium intake since she was only practicing the basics, but she felt every spell scrape against the bottom of her mana pool. It was exhausting.

Athena beat her head gently against the wall as Syla recited lists of their new soldier assignments and those who would need to be promoted. The sun was coming to its noon position when she felt
something pressed into her hands. She opened her eyes and looked at Cole who was sitting on the
ground in front of her. He had just handed her a bowl of soup that had small bits of what looked
like chicken floating in it. She blinked and tilted her head in confusion, stirring it around with a
spoon and seeing what was probably supposed to be noodles floating in there.

“He wanted to try and make it from memory. It smells similar, but I didn’t taste it myself.” Varric
explained as he walked up and pulled a small stool up to sit on. He had his spectacles on and
carried a title-less leather bound book tucked underneath his arm. She looked to the bowl and then
shrugged, taking a small sip of the broth.

It wasn’t terrible, and with Cole’s hopeful and excited face looking towards her she refused to
make any negative expressions. There was a lot of salt. A lot of it, so she raised as many mental
barriers as she could so he couldn’t see into her thoughts. The chicken was cooked perfectly, thank
the Creators, but the noodles were an odd mixture of flour, sugar of all things, and salt. Definitely
salt. Still, the thought that went into it filled her more than the food itself and she cleaned the bowl
before reaching forward and removing Cole’s hat just so she could ruffle her hand through his hair.

“Thanks, kid. That was great! What are you two busy men up to today?” She asked with a genuine
smile. Syla looked to her own bowl of soup and poked at the chicken with her spoon. Athena shot
her a sympathetic glance and angled her body to block the boy’s view of the elf behind her.

Varric chuckled under his breath. “He’s been itching to help, saying he can feel a lot of hurt or
something like that. He can’t seem to find it though. Something like ‘it’s here, but not here. Guilt,
incredible guilt.’” The dwarf mimicked the spirit boy’s voice and gestured his hand through the air
like he was weaving a spell through the Veil.

Cole then blinked once. “Varric is working on another book. He isn’t supposed to. But he is.”

The dwarf jumped on his stool and scratched at his temple with the tip of a clean quill. Athena
made a hum of consideration while her gaze bounced between the two. “What do you mean he isn’t
supposed to? He’s an author, Cole. Writing is what he does.”

“But you told him not to.” He answered simply, his voice innocent and free of any knowing of the
situation. She took a moment to process it and then her eyebrow twitched as she looked at Varric.
She glanced to the book at his side and raised a brow silently, pressing every question she could
through the air between them as the dwarf cleared his throat and proceeded to pretend not to know
what they were talking about.

“What? It’s just for me. I’m not selling it. I figured while Hawke was here she could finish
proofreading the next bit that I had. It’s been a while since there has been any new material so I’ve had time to compile my notes.” Athena’s lips twitched into a frown before she sipped on her water again, Varric immediately noticed the change in her demeanor. “Don’t worry. That song isn’t in here. That’s for you three.”

She shook her head and shrugged. “Nah, you can include it. In your personal book of course.” She winked at him before sighing and continuing, pouring some of the ice water over her cloth and using it to wipe across her brow and chest. “He liked my stories; he would want them to be shared with other kids.”

Varric broke into a greedy grin. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

Athena looked over her shoulder to Syla, who was attempting to hide an excited smile on her face but switched into a professional neutrality when she caught her glance. She rolled her eyes back to Varric and nodded, shooing him off with a gesture before returning to training.

The next few days consisted of all of the Inner Party members stopping by to check in on her while she slowly improved. Zevran would sit in the shadows of the wall and read a book or write letters with a group of ravens sitting around him pecking at the crumbs he left out for them. He said he was catching up with his informants, but she knew that he, and the rest of them, were keeping an eye on her. She felt good, she felt stronger as each day went by. Her movements became more fluid and within five days she was sparring with Blackwall using a simple iron staff against his blade.

She had agreed not to use magic and the exercise was to stretch her body and reacquaint herself with going against an opponent. But ever the teacher, he was apparently not holding back and would call out her weaknesses as he saw them.

“You’re still too emotional when you attack. Use that strength to strike but don’t let it show.” He slashed horizontally at her flank and she whipped her staff up to catch it, sliding it down along his blade to push him back from her a few feet.

“Conceal, don’t feel, eh?” She asked with a smirk, sweat beading and dripping down her face. He was wearing his light training leathers but she was too hot in the sun and was wearing a pair of loose cotton pants and a old tank that had wider ripped arm holes. It made her feel freer to move and more like how she used to fight. Her armor never graduated past the light class. They had learned to enchant the fabrics that she wore because she refused to use a staff most of the time. She
used her emotions and her movements as fuel for her magic. Blackwall had said he expected that to make her predictable, but her variations in spellcasting disregarded Circle magic, so those familiar with it wouldn’t know how to counter her.

The warrior caught her in the side of the face with a quick punch that was supposed to disorient her. Dorian and Zevran winced in unison, pushing coin back and forth. However Athena didn’t let it daunt her. She may not have been able to use spells, but she pushed her magic out to fill the space so that when he moved within it, she would be able to know. He shifted and moved to thrust his sword forward directly towards her chest and she sidestepped bringing her staff underneath it and twirling it quickly to dislodge the blade from his hands. It landed near the two gamblers, who looked at it as if it were a harmless bird chewing seed and not a sharpened weapon launched towards them at random. Athena then knocked her opponent in the ribs and aimed the end of the staff at his neck, her breaths coming in quick pants, which pulled excruciatingly at her belly. But the victory overpowered her pain.

The bearded man held his hands up in surrender and smirked. “You’re almost there, my lady.”

“Yes, but her face gives some of her moves away like you said. To truly surprise someone you need to master your face.” Zevran commented while making a sweeping motion over his own features.

Dorian cracked a laugh and took a sip of his own tea-like drink. “Sure – or she can sprout her fire wings and surprise them that way too, or ride on the back of a bear. Our Lady Wolfsbane is not short of surprises when she gets really worked up.”

Athena grinned and took his drink from his hand to steal a sip. It was sweet and had lemon and strawberries floating in it. She finished the refreshing drink for him and he made a noise of disapproval. “Yes, you may have a drink. How silly of me to think you were going to ask.”

She then moved from the tea to the flask on her waist and took a long drink from it, sighing as the relief spread through her body like a wave of warmth. Everyone stiffened up when Leliana came up to the training ground, and then raised a small note with a look of confidence on her face. “The Inquisitor was dealing with a Red Templar encampment in the Storm Plains but is due to return in a few days. She sent a letter just for you, Athena.”

The Spymaster handed over a thankfully sealed letter and she opened it in front of them. The letter was curt, but she could feel her sister’s sarcasm and relief all over it.

*Madame Sorcière,*
Please do not attempt to die again before we return.

Inquisitor Rathein Trevelyan

Athena couldn’t help but grin as she read it. Once she finished she pocketed it and the realization hit her like a wall of ice. When we return. That wasn’t just the Inquisitor. Solas would be coming with them and she hadn’t seen him physically or spiritually since the incident. Her eyes widened into a moment of panic and Zevran immediately noticed.

“What’s the matter, chica? Something concerning in your letter?” She shook her head and gripped her staff again, twirling it in her hands. She looked to Blackwall and allowed her worry to transfer into her voice. But instead of weakness, there was a harsh strength to cover it all.

“Don’t take it easy on me next time. I could tell when you hesitated.” She touched her hand to her face and twitched in the realization that the blood had already stopped flowing and that there wasn’t an abrasion underneath it like she expected. Still, the blood remained to cover the evidence, or lack thereof.

“You are still doing fine —” Blackwall reacted, his voice softening a bit but she snapped back at him.

“Fine isn’t good enough. Not for me and certainly not for Corypheus.”

The next two days only intensified. Her nerves got the best of her and she lashed out at anyone that she thought was holding back. Blackwall had backed off and simply watched her training while Dorian tried to, but his habit of being the mother hen forced his hand when he saw her wince or grab her stomach. She knew better, but she kept feeling like they all saw her as weak then, damaged. Nobody rose to her challenge and she had had enough. She was facing off against Cullen and there was the aching itch in the back of her head that he was going easy on her as well. Even though she had been pushed to the ground multiple times, he was sporting a new bruise on his cheek and had received multiple blows.

She had never won a sparring match against him, but he was beginning to “look” tired.
“Come on, Commander. Don’t you dare.” She spat out, pacing in the training grounds like a lion about to pounce on her prey.

He strengthened his grip on his sword and shield, looking at her over the top of his defense. “Athena. Don’t be like that. We’ve been at this for hours. You’re improving still – you just – have – to – give – it – time.” His words were punctuated by defending blows from her. He’d allowed her to use magic so she had given up the staff and instead focused on her movements. She punched towards him and finally swept her foot up in an arc that sent a wave of flame at him.

He grimaced behind his shield until the flames were gone. Her breaths were frantic and she couldn’t help but feel like she was taking steps backwards. She ripped her flask from underneath her shirt and took a swig. Cullen noticed and opened his mouth to speak but she was too riled up, too self-conscious, and too afraid of the Inquisitor’s return to allow him to.

“Please, Cullen, don’t. I just need to keep pressing so I can get back to how I was. I’m so close but I feel like you are all treating me like a child! I can take care of myself and I won’t be able to grow if I’m not pushed to my limits. So. Hit. Me.” She emphasized, throwing her hands in the air with an exasperated groan.

What felt like a tickle went through her arm and by her cheek, and whatever caused it struck Cullen’s shield with a resounding thunk. He pried it lose immediately and snarled, tossing the slim throwing dagger in the dirt, but she touched her hand to her cheek. Blood came from it, and the cut was so superficial it barely hurt – but there was something else charged in the strike. Electricity? She turned around slowly and saw Lev’adin with her hands spread, an electric field sparkling between her fingers, and Zevran standing behind her with a victorious grin on his face. He waved his other throwing daggers at her teasingly as her daughter looked more determined.

Her gaze went beyond the two, tears filling her eyes as she saw a rather exhausted looking Lieutenant drop his Warhammer to tighten his gloves. He called out from behind Zevran while shaking his head. “You want a fight? We won’t hold back but I don’t know if you can take all of us.” Krem warned, sympathy flashing over his face for just a second before hardening into that of a trained soldier.

Bull hummed in agreement behind him, clapping his axe into his hand while winking with his lone eye at her. She couldn’t breathe. The Chargers had come back and they had heard her – and without hesitation they were preparing their weapons for a duel. They had traveled days back from Denerim and from Haven on their mission, but they were still willing to push for the fight that she needed.
They knew her, and Bull knew what she needed.

Fucking Ben’Hassrath.

Lev’adin started the group attack by launching a ball of lightning towards her. Once Athena blocked that with a barrier shield, it was really revved up.

One by one they came in their coordinated attacks, like Bull had taught them. They were not holding back. Athena felt small scratches appear on her arms and the blood dripped down them. What no one saw was how quickly they healed, and how with each stitch of her skin closing, she felt herself becoming whole again.

Her speed increased, spells weaving and moving from her as if they were air. Bull almost caught her knees with a low swipe of his axe but she switched into a fade-step and jumped onto the axe, pushing herself off to grapple him in a move that he had actually taught her. She wrapped her legs around his neck and pulled on his horns towards his blind side until he had to let go of his weapon to try and grab her. He gripped on her legs and pulled her forward while bending over to help her clear his horns. She rolled forward and slammed her hands against the ground, surging her energy through the earth until it responded by wrapping vines around Bull’s hands and feet.

He roared but she grinned back at him, twisting her wrists to send a surge of electricity through the vines. The Iron Bull fell to his side and let out a groan of frustration, eye narrowing at her. She ran to jump over his body, pushing from his ribs before twisting in the air to dodge another one of Zevran’s daggers. She came within a step of him, flashing a wild grin before throwing punches and jabs with flames surrounding her fists. The rest of the warriors took a break as the two danced on the battlefield. He would duck and dodge her attacks with a cat-like grace, coming up with his blades as extensions of his hands to try and land a small cut on her arms or face just to show that he could hit her.

Still, the smell of her blood fueled her fire. She quickly dropped down to avoid a blade, but she was a fraction too slow and caught his other hand, which had turned to the side so he could form a fist, directly to the face. It knocked her head back and he followed up with a strong punch to the chest, sending her directly on her back. Before she could regain her breath she felt cool, sharp metal against the bottom of her chin and the heat of another person sliding over her so he could put his smug expression within inches of her frustratingly defeated one.

Krem hooted in exasperation at her finally being put on the ground, the warrior dropping his Warhammer so he could lean against the fence. Athena’s breaths were coming in quick, hot pants. Sweat dripped down her temples and stuck her hair to her head, but even with the pain that came with every deep breath she felt good. She felt accomplished. She felt better than she did sitting behind a desk catching up on letters that Josephine had given her. Her lips curved into a wide,
genuine smile and she clenched then unclenched her hands, commanding the vines to release Bull and disappear back into the earth.

The metal underneath her chin disappeared and she then felt him lean to the side of her face. He was close enough for her to feel his own smile curve slyly. “Now I think I understand.”

She caught her breath before asking. “What is that?”

“If this is how you are while you still think to be in recovery, I can only imagine what you are like at full strength. Do you think you have more to give?” He asked with a wicked grin.

Athena could only laugh, reaching up to touch him lightly on his cheek. “For you? I’ll try.”
“You’re getting stronger, da’adahl. You gave me quite a lightning burn earlier.” Athena commented with a smirk as her daughter punched her in the shoulder where the abrasion was.

“Not that it did much good! It’s not there anymore. Is that because of the . . .the thing?” Leafy asked, her voice dropping to a whisper as she drew her knees to her chest on a chair next to the tub where Athena relaxed. She was sore so there was a good deal of lavender and soothing salts in the water that was hot enough to nearly burn, but it felt good and her spirits were high. For one of the first times since Crestwood, she was happy.

The Chargers had treated her to drinks and a meal after their training sessions and they were all just able to talk. They had cleared the area of Haven and reported that there wasn’t anything there. Even with Athena’s pressing and knowledge that Corypheus would return to the Temple of Sacred Ashes, Bull denied anything odd. If anything he said there were less Templars than they had expected and the group they did see didn’t seem to have any order. All sense of leadership had disappeared and they were rogue-like units traveling the land now. It didn’t make sense, but perhaps their leader had truly disappeared and was scrambling after the events at the Temple of Mythal.

It gave her a spark of hope and it seemed contagious. The Iron Bull had heard of her rule before meeting her, and the Chargers only pressed once or twice before she refused them. Instead of focusing on her failures and her pains, they talked about her recovery and what had happened since she passed out that didn’t have anything to do with the attack. Krem did manage to sneak in a comment that it was his idea to hang the skull in her office for when she woke up.

She rewarded him by buying him an ale.

That last day was the first day that felt normal and she did not want to lose the high. “Yeah, I think it is because of that, but you’re the only one that caught one. Zevran gave me a few looks, but he didn’t say anything yet.”

“He is really nice. He tells me stories of when he was with the Hero of Ferelden and everything they have seen. Morrigan says not to trust him. . . but I think she is wrong. She is sad when I talk about you, do you know why?” Leafy frowned and Athena opened her eyes and glanced over to her with half of a shrug.

“She probably blames herself for what the demon did, but, that was my own damn pride. I’ll talk with her when the time feels right. How has Kieran been?” The girl’s face fell and then she shook
her head, one hand itching at the base of her scalp.

“He has been having weird dreams. Sometimes he’ll fall asleep in the daytime when I’m practicing my spells and I can hear him saying things in a strange language. He wakes up in a sweat but doesn’t remember a thing, except for fear.” There was a mild sense of concern within the young woman’s voice and Athena could hear her trying to hide it. She sat up from her bath and rinsed her face one more time before looking over to her daughter.

“Would you like me to try and see what the cause is? I have a hunch, but it should be fixed soon. I can try and give him peace until then if you wish.” The elf nodded emphatically and ran to gather fresh towels. She waved her hand over them to try the heating rune that Athena had been teaching her but instead a small spark of electricity shot from her fingertips and lit the cotton with ease. The two yelped and Athena reached forward and dunked the flaming fabric into the water with a sigh, giggling at her daughter before shrugging.

“You’ll get it eventually. Here, this is one that someone else taught me.” She glanced over and tried to hide the nervous glance at the avoidance of Solas’s name but her daughter did not catch it. Athena pulled the drain on the tub and then stood up, making sure that she had her daughter’s eye. She brought her hand in front of her crown and then slowly swept it away, taking a few extra seconds to allow her to watch her aura cling to the water droplets before flinging them into the bath. The result left her hair and skin as dry as before she had gotten into the bath. Leafy made an “o” shape with her mouth and looked her body up and down, not even taking the nudity into account – they were family – but more amazed at the magic.

“That’s a neat trick! But – you need to sleep! Go help Kieran!” She threw her mother’s pajamas at her before rushing her upstairs. Athena then pretended to play heavy and useless, throwing a hand over her forehead in mock exasperation.

“I can’t go on! The gravity – it is too much!”

Leafy made a noise of confusion. “What – do – you – mean – by – gravity?!!” She then pushed with all of her strength and made Athena fall forward onto her hands and knees.

“Oh yeah. That hasn’t really been researched here, has it? Never mind. That’s for another day and over a good meal. Come on, let’s get to sleep, sweetheart.” Athena then flipped Leafy’s braid up into the air to annoy her, childishly smiling as they both climbed into bed. As Leafy went through her own nightly ritual of undoing her braids, Athena lay on her back and tried to not let the fear of going into the Fade consume her. It had been a long time since had to face her friends in the Fade. Harmony had come to defend her when Despair had claimed her. There was a look of determination in his eyes, one that went past any other spirit that she had seen. What was it about the ones that she interacted with that defied the definition of Spirit?
It didn’t take long to enter that dream space with Leafy wrapping her thin arms around her belly, hands barely brushing up against the scar that weighed heavily on her mind. She took in a deep breath of their combined soaps and the sense of home within her tower before rolling her mind back into the green comfort of the fade. She half expected to feel a stinging slap of cold against her face but it wasn’t there – and that hurt just as much.

Athena fully materialized and dressed herself with a flowing cotton gown that swirled around her bare feet as she walked into her area of the Fade. That night, it was a return to Central Park with the skyscrapers looming over as silent guardians in the other worldly dream state. She let out a soft sigh of relief at the solace in the area. There were no demons and the friendly spirits had returned to view her memories as she lived through them again. One in particular came back and linked her arm onto her side before gently resting her head on her shoulder.

“You feel like you again.” Inspiration commented, her energy bright, warm, and loving. It surrounded her body like a hug and made her feel like she was full of melted chocolate. Athena responded with a smile and a tilt of her head against her friends, relishing in their shared touch before humming in her throat.

“Some changes, yes, but if you’re here that means I am not as dark and twisty as I was. Harmony tried to be there, but Despair pushed him out.” She spoke in almost a whisper, like she was afraid to disturb the peace around them.

Inspiration could only shake her head. “He was so strong, but your pain at the time was worse. Wisdom also advised us to keep our distance, but Harmony let his former identity overpower his purpose for a moment. That is why he was at your side.”

Athena looked to her friend and arched a brow, her steps slowing so she could think clearly. “Wisdom told you to stay back?”

The spirit hummed in response. “She knew that someone was coming. She might be able to explain it better herself.” There was a surge of power that came from the bright spirit of Inspiration, it surging through the area like a warm breeze until the familiar elf with the green aura appeared with her hands clasped behind her back.

“I had a feeling you would recover soon. Good evening, Athena. I am glad to see you doing so well.”
Upon seeing the spirit Athena couldn’t help herself. She let go of her friend’s arm and stepped forward with hesitation in her voice. “Wisdom, where is Solas?”

The spirit pressed her lips together, reaching out with a hand as if to comfort Athena but she let it fall to her side. There was a strength within the spirit that Athena had missed before, something eternal and absolute. It crossed over Wisdom’s features in a flash before she shook her head. “He is doing what he has always done. He is enduring, Athena, in the only way that he knows how.”

Something in her tone picked at Athena’s core, as if it were a wound that the spirit was trying to let bleed again. She tilted her head in confusion with a slight bit of anger, hands gesturing out to grasp for more details. “You have seen what I know, Wisdom, you know what future will happen if that continues. I’m assuming you advised otherwise?” The spirit opened her mouth but closed it without answering, holding the woman’s gaze in silence. Athena pressed on. “Do you find what he is doing to be wise, dear friend? Wolves do not do well in solitude.”

“I tried, Athena. He is beside himself with guilt and grief. He blames himself – thinks what happened to you to be a tell for what is to come in the future.” Athena raised a hand to cut her off and shook a finger. There was another presence that appeared behind her and she didn’t have to guess who her spike in anger had summoned.

“I know ma vhenan, Wisdom. We were both at fault but now everything is in the air now! There are no lies! We have something to springboard off of for the future. He has to know that – “ She stopped and stepped back from the spirit, her back brushing against Harmony’s front. “He has to know that, right?” The last words were a whisper in a defeated tone, realization setting over her features.

Solas was the lone wolf. He put himself in seclusion throughout history even though his greatest fear was dying alone. There was a chance at having companionship, but he was too obsessed, no – too comfortable in his isolation to think anything else could work. Was there a possibility that he could come back and be just as cold as she knew he could be?

All she knew was that if she heard the words “harden your heart” come out of his mouth, she would kill him.

“We spirits are influenced by the subconscious desires of the person who has sought us out. We can influence their course in life, but cannot change it. That is up for the people in the physical realm to do.” There was a knowing look in her eyes that gave Athena a certain Transfigurations Professor vibe that sent chills down her spine.
“I will do my best. He is stubborn and has many more years of planning than I. Very. Very. Stubborn.”

There was a scoffing laugh behind her as Harmony clapped both of his hands on her shoulders and pulled her backwards so that he could put his face near hers with a wicked grin. “Thankfully – so are you, wolf. You are getting more people behind you every day, and they all trust you with their lives.” Wisdom nodded in agreement and uncrossed her arms, walking over to put a hand on Athena’s shoulder.

“Do not think yourself so weak, Athena. You are gaining strength, and thankfully you still have time. Do not lose faith in your cause, or in him.”

Athena let out a soft sigh, her gaze slowly glossing over to the skyline above her memory of Central Park. The skyscraper where they had their first kiss still stood, a beacon of better times. It was strange how that time felt more carefree, when they were able to hide behind their lies and the weight of their futures. Now, even Corypheus didn’t feel like the largest threat.

“I will be fine as long as you do not lose your faith in me, my friends. You have been there since the beginning.” She met gazes with Inspiration, who could only give a giddy smile in return. Athena perked up, remembering the first reason for why she came to the Fade. “Inspiration, can you check on a young boy for me? He has... the possession of the spirit of an Old God inside of him but he has been having terrible dreams. You may need Command’s help to check on him, if she is available.”

The spirit smiled. “You have not needed her in some time. I am certain she will be able to help.” There was a rustling next to Athena’s physical body and she could only assume that Leafy had woken up before her. She smiled to her spirit companions, pulling on that earthly tether knowing that she felt slightly better than before.

Her daughter had already gotten ready for the day and left with a dash. She left a note behind on her pillow that had obviously been quickly jotted with a messy quill. *Going to show Kieran the wolves!*

Athena couldn’t help but roll her eyes. Lev’adin had endless energy that could not be satiated. Even after the training yesterday, she wanted to go for a hunt with the wolves. She could feel her packs on the edges of her mind; thankfully, they were not reliant on her. The former Haven pack was bonding with the clan at the base of the mountains. The pack in the Emerald Groves had miles
and miles of land to run and hunt through. There were small whispers talking about how the corrupted red crystals were disappearing from the forest, but nothing more then that.

Things were looking up.

She was tightening the wraps around her scar when there was a knock on the door. Athena arched a brow and quickly finished, throwing on a tank top over before answering the door. Cullen and Kain stood next to each other with mischievous looks on their faces. The Commander had a red vial in his hand as he lazily dropped it down to his side. Kain sniffed it aggressively, licking into his glove before giving Athena a warning glance.

Shit.

“Go find it.” Cullen commanded with a smirk. Athena turned to jerk and follow her wolf but the Commander held her in a sibling-like embrace with a firm arm over her belly to hold her against him. “It’s been two weeks, Athena.”

“I don’t care. This is cruel.” He shrugged behind her and she was too angry to notice how close he was to her.

“You did the same exact thing to me. Believe me, it helps.” He murmured softly as Kain excitedly ran and dropped vial after vial at their feet.

“Youys was an addiction, you hadn’t had it in months. My pain is fresh – it’s!”

He cut her off short. “Does it help?”

She couldn’t form an answer, her mouth hanging open as unspoken answers raced through her mind. The most resounding? No. It had become almost a habit. Anytime she felt a twinge or a wince of pain through her stomach she raised the flask to her lips and just hoped that it would go away. Even when she was training with Zevran the day before, the pain relief was nonexistent. The adrenaline of a good fight had done the job for her.

Fuck. She didn’t need it.
Kain was playing his deranged game of fetch and dropped half a dozen vials and then tackled her to the ground to wrestle the flask from her belt. She raised her hands up and let out a sigh of defeat, glaring at Cullen with a tightly clenched jaw. He was right, and it was an ass move, but he was right. She had been using it as a patch instead of dealing with the pain. It had been two weeks. If she could fight and take a hit like she had the day before, she didn’t need to be sipping on elfroot potion throughout the day. Somewhere inside of her mind, she was grateful. It was beginning to bleach her taste buds so that everything she ate tasted off.

“I hate you.” She murmured like a child, giving her wolf obligatory affection when he dropped the last thing at Cullen’s feet with excitement in every tail wag. The Commander bent over and picked up the vials, putting his face closer to hers but he could only smile with a smug expression while shaking his head.

“No you don’t. Will you at least come train with me this morning? That will buy you time before the masses begin attacking you with questions.” He pocketed the potions and then extended a hand to her to help her up, which she simply glanced at.

“Are you not going to do the same?” He shook his head once more.

“No. I figure you will tell me if you want to.” Kain began to lick the side of her face and whine for her to get up so she took the Commander’s gloved hand and pulled, wincing at the strain on her stomach before standing to a full posture. His expression softened but she shook him off, fighting the urge to glance at his potions.

“At least take those to the healer’s tents. The soldiers and the sick will use them better than I.” She let out a sigh and grabbed a simple wooden staff that was leaning against her door frame. “Alright then. Let’s go greet the day with you kicking my ass.”

That day... he did not hold back.

But she did not lose her footing a single time.

They started with the simpler drills like simple strikes and blocks. But soon he realized that she wasn’t backing down and they moved into full on combat. He would occasionally glance over her shoulder at the opening courtyard behind them, but she chocked it up to him always being on high
alert with passing civilians. There were horns intermittently going off for arriving nobles and returning soldiers from the Temple of Mythal. She started to tune them out after a while. If anything it infuriated her that he wasn’t giving her his full attention, so she would reward him with a quick jab of her staff into his ribs or a pop of her knuckles against his temple if she could get close enough.

At different breaks more people began to show up and watch them spar, but she paid them no mind. When Cullen needed a water break, Zevran would step in and help her with her close hand to hand combat. They were in the middle of a fast-paced dance when Zevran’s eyes flicked over her shoulder but he quickly followed it up with a jab at her cheek to keep her from looking. She growled and threw more weight into a punch then she should have and he pulled at that arm and nearly flipped her on the ground.

As he pulled on her weight she yelped and pulled on her mana to transition into a fade-step and move the energy from her to him, essentially glitching out of his grip and re-appearing a foot backwards from where she was.

“Cheater!” Cullen called from the side with his hands cupped around his mouth.

She shook him off and ripped a ribbon from her wrist with her teeth, holding it there while she gathered her hair in one hand so that she could tie it up. Athena didn’t have to look to know that there were more people watching them fight, and from the mana presence alone she knew Dorian was watching somewhere close with Dalish nearby. Once she got her hair up Zevran put his hands up against and began shifting his weight from one foot to the other, goading her into fighting with a wiggle of his eyebrows and a gesture with his front-facing fist.

Cullen came over and tapped on the elf’s shoulders to put himself back into the fight, Athena tilting her head in surprise while whining in confusion. The soldier shrugged. “I got my breath back. Come on, now. It’s been a while since I have gotten this much training of my own. Let’s see if you can really tire me out.”

Athena grinned and opened her hand to the side. Zevran tossed her the wooden staff she had been using and she caught it before spinning it to her side. “Tire you out, Cullen? I didn’t think you were the type to ask so boldly in a public space.”

The Commander scoffed and looked to the side to try to hide his joking smirk and she used that advantage to come up at him with an easy downswing. As they were getting back into their groove of fighting, Zevran made a noise to get her attention.
“Hermosa, can you clarify something for me?” He asked while stroking his chin, his eyes flicking back and forth between opponents.

“Sure – whatever you want, Zevran.” She managed to get out in between blows, arching a brow because Cullen was taking a second longer than he had been before to decide his moves.

“Why did you think you were going to get hurt again?” The question made her pause, allowing Cullen to get a good strike with the base of his hilt on the side of her ribs. She groaned and gripped it, stumbling backwards with a curse before putting her staff up in a defensive mechanism.

She didn’t have time to think over what to say, so she just spoke freely in between strikes and kept her eyes on the Commander at all times. “There are just certain things... that seem to happen no matter what. They can be words, phrases, or sometimes entire situations.”

“Hm. And you know these from your... window that you gained your knowledge of Thedas from?” Zevran made a rectangle in the air with his hands, mimicking how Athena had tried to describe a television to him days earlier after a training session.

Athena nodded curtly and then cursed out loud again when Cullen’s blade cut straight through her staff. He smirked and lunged forward and she could only dodge it by side-stepping and pushing his blade away from her with a pulse of magic. “Exactly that.”

“So you were afraid that what you saw, what you thought you knew, was going to happen again?” He asked while rubbing the bridge of his nose, looking up with an expression that was coy, knowing, and sympathetic all at the same time. Athena only caught a glimpse of it before she had to drop down to a position where she could try to sweep Cullen’s legs out from underneath him with a stronger kick of her own.

When it worked she rolled to the side and stood up and nodded, her eyes never leaving her opponent even though the conversation was growing increasingly uncomfortable out in the open.

Zevran pressed on. “But it didn’t?”

Cullen quickly got to his feet and kept his shield up, eyes narrowing at her in preparation for a spell. He was right. She punched forward and shot a small spurt of flame to distract his eyes so she could come at his shield with another kick that had fire wrapped around her foot. “No. It didn’t – so I freaked for no reason.”
Zevran raised a brow. “Freaked?” The word sounded foreign on his tongue and she quickly rolled her eyes.

“Panicked, jumped the gun, whichever word you want. I didn’t trust in what happened here and was trying to go from what I knew, even though we’re so many months and events into this what I know is starting not to matter as much.” She spoke rapidly as the moves between her and Cullen began to quicken. Her sparring partner was panting for breath but his eyes widened for a second when he realized that her limits of knowledge were beginning to run out. Athena only confirmed it with a quick nod before sneakily pushing her foot on the ground to manipulate the earth underneath him and attempt to cause him to trip.

He was getting too used to her tricks, for the moment that he felt the earth rumble he stepped to the side and re-gripped his sword. Zevran clapped his hands together. “Ah, I see. So he was hurt, you were hurt. He took a walk to gather his thoughts and you –” He pushed his hands together and then pointed them at her as she roared with a strike and punched Cullen’s shield so hard with a force punch that it pushed him back in the dirt at least four paces.

She stood with her hands at her sides, her knuckles bloodied from the combat as her breaths came in ragged, frustrated beats. Before she could answer, somebody else did, somebody whose arrival horn she had tuned out.

“Fought a dragon,” Rathein finished, the tone one of resounding realization.

Athena whipped around, eyes wide, mouth partially open as she still attempted to catch her breath.

The Inquisitor stood with her arms at her sides, sympathy filling her expression as she dropped her staff and pack that she had been carrying. Vivienne and Sera were standing behind her, but Solas was nowhere to be seen. Athena glanced to the archer with a silent question on her face but the elf shook her head and shrugged, her entire composure screaming that she didn’t care where he was. Rathein walked forward and quickly brought Athena into a tight hug that took the air from her lungs, but she didn’t care. Athena returned it immediately as the two women fought tears in the comfort of one another’s embrace.

She heard a Varric’s signature chuckle as he walked over to where Zevran was standing. He hummed in his throat and she could hear the smile in his next words. “Two weeks, Crow.”

The elf answered in earnest, happiness and relief in his response. “Yes – two long weeks.”
Rathein let out a large sigh before she pulled her sister out to arm’s length. She ran an assessing gazee over her form and grinned. “Two weeks since you woke and you’re already besting the Commander?”

Athena shrugged. “Yeah, I got better.”

She then saw a blur of blonde come from the size, next to Krem and the Chargers. “Better enough for a story?” Leafy sheepishly smiled with twigs and dirt on her face from her time spent with Kieran and the wolves.

The Inquisitor smiled as well with a shrug, arching a brow in silent question which led Athena to roll her eyes dramatically before scoffing. “Well. . . . I guess it has been a long time. What better to welcome my dear sister home then that?”

There was a general sound of happiness through the group and a few of them began to disperse now that they had gotten some of their answers about what happened in Crestwood. Athena shot Zevran a glance full of gratitude and he could only smile back, which melted some of the shock from her heart. She turned back to Rathein and rubbed the back of her neck, trying to find the words to ask what she was afraid to know.

Where was Solas?

As if reading her mind, Rathein clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth and began to remove her gloves. “I don’t know. Yesterday there was this strange raven by the camp. It had an aura with it, something dark, so he went to investigate because he thought it was that demon from the Emprise du Lions. Have you seen the demon since. . . .well, you know?”

Athena clenched her jaw and shook her head, rage and sadness swirling within her belly like liquid fire. “No, but if I ever do, I will destroy him to the point where history will no longer remember his name.”
Half of the day was spent in the War Council room updating Rathein on everything that had happened while she was gone. The Inquisitor had eliminated a great many rifts on her journey, but she was relieved to be home. At first, she had thought the bickering would bother Solas, but then she realized that his patience was more developed than hers. It drove her mad on the third day and she just fell into a quiet reserve for the rest of the trip. Athena couldn’t help but laugh and break the severity of the council meeting. It was contagious, and Leliana, Josephine, and Cullen all joined in on the laughter at the Herald’s expense. Rathein simply sighed and rubbed the back of her neck.

“Yeah yeah, soak it up. I at least was productive! Josephine you would have been proud at how many ravens I sent off the last couple of weeks. You won’t have to write my letters for me for a while.” She stated with a smile on her lips, all of them forgetting the potential of Corypheus’s return for a few minutes.

The Antivan tried to contain her laughter, jotting down a quick note with her quill before winking at Rathein. “Oh thank you, Inquisitor. I am eternally grateful for your due diligence.”

The Inquisitor then turned to Leliana. “I met your Antivan Crow this morning. How much longer is he going to be hiding out with us here at Skyhold?” Cullen tried to hide his eye roll but Athena shot him a glance that shouted “caught you.” He rubbed the bridge of his nose but she caught him smirking underneath his glove.

Leliana shrugged and crossed her arms over her chest. “He states he still has business here that he is working on, but won’t tell me what it is. I trust he isn’t causing any trouble?”

Athena shook her head and stepped forward while playing with a wooden wolf figure on her edge of the map. “No. He has been helping me with my training and has taken a liking to Leafy. I’m sort of keeping an eye on him when I can.”

The Spymaster raised a knowing brow. “Why not two?”
Thankfully, she was wise enough to fight a blush and only raised a brow in return. “Seems inappropriate, don’t you agree?”

There was a moment of awkward silence until Rathein cleared her throat and gave Athena a wicked, knowing smirk. “Shouldn’t you be going? I believe you have to be at the story grounds at sunset.”

Athena looked from her papers up to the Inquisitor, tilting her head. “That is hours from now. I was thinking of staying here to make sure that everything on my end is in order.”

Josephine smiled and tapped her quill against her inkpot. “If we have any questions, your Lady Syla is quite knowledgable on your side of things. She can give us the details. Go on, Athena. Do you know what story you are going to tell?”

She couldn’t help but wink coyly. “But of course, Lady Montilyet, but I cannot reveal my secrets, even to dear friends.”

The Antivan smiled with a blush on her cheeks, dismissing her with a gesture of her feather. Athena stacked her scrolls and took them with her at a dignified but hurried pace. She turned the corner sharply and ran down to her office. She left her things on her desk before giving Skyla a quick briefing. The elf was excited. There was an energy in the air that couldn’t be described. For the first time in forever, things were beginning to feel like normal again. Before all of the tragedy, before all of the battles and the war. Athena the Other Worlder was going to tell a campfire story from her home land for all of the Inquisition to hear.

She kissed her right hand woman on the cheek in a flurry of excitement before and rushing off to find her daughter. The young girl was in the garden with Kieran and immediately sensed her excitement before she arrived. She put down her staff and threw her hands up so Athena could bend down and hug her. Kieran looked on with a happy yet blank expression, his eyes taking in the whole situation as if he were analyzing a thousand year old scroll. She didn’t care. She buried her head in her daughter’s neck and put her down when her stomach began to ache. “Are you ready for your role tonight, my little princess?”

Leafy got back on the ground and blew some hair out of her face. “I am not a little princess. I’m getting older, Fen’mae. I’m not a little child anymore.”

Athena tilted her daughter’s chin up with a single finger, smiling with nothing but pride in her eyes. “No. You are right, my darling. You are no longer my little princess. You – are a Queen.”
There was a lump of nerves sitting like a stone in her stomach as she supervised the piano being moved out to the campfire. The story that night did not have much music, more of an accompaniment to the story as she told it. Dorian used magic to levitate it so that the strings would not be thrown out of tune by their heavy labor. Athena assisted, her magic moving more fluidly, as if it were the very air around them. Everytime she noticed something different about the way her body or her magic moved, it made her slightly anxious about what her future held. But she kept that locked away until she could unpack it at a later date.

The crowd was already bustling and nearly full. As always, the orphans and children were sitting in front. Leafy was not a part of them. Ever since the Wintersend Ball, Leafy had been spending more of her time with her people. When she didn’t sleep in Athena’s tower, she slept in the quarters that all of Athena’s people shared. Most of them would pass out in cots scattered around her office or they would sleep in a pile with blankets and pillows thrown on the floor. It wasn’t that they didn’t have the accommodations to sleep well, but most of them were raised in group areas so they slept better having the heat of another beside them.

The Inner Party tried to keep to the back just in case they needed to sneak away on business, but they were all there. Even Madame de Fer had kept up her curiosity and came with a glass of what looked like champagne, leaning against the wall while speaking to some visiting nobles. Athena narrowed her gaze. Were they the Baron’s family? They must have come long after his death to pay their respects to Vivienne. Still, she wasn’t sure how to feel about the nobles watching her fairy tales. She knew there were judgmental people in the crowd, but Orlesians took it to an entirely new level of petty talk.

Still, she looked to her friends and family in the crowd and couldn’t help but smile.

Cullen walked over and, surprisingly, was without his armor for once. He wore modified formal wear but in relaxed gray colors and tailored pants so that he could blend in better without the lion’s mane catching the light of the fire’s glow. “Are you alright? You appear to be a little nervous.”

Athena wet her lips and shrugged slowly. “I haven’t performed since Tobi was here. I’m just... missing him a little.” Cullen’s brows furrowed in what she could assume was guilt so she put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. “Do not worry yourself about it, Cullen. There is no blame on your conscience. He would want you to lighten up and enjoy it! So get in that crowd so I have some faces to look at when I’m nervous.”

The Commander visibly relaxed before rubbing the back of his neck in a mixture of anxiety and relief. He followed her order and went to his place in the back just at the same time as her piano was finally all set up. Leafy gave her a large grin, nodding to confirm that she was ready as well. Without much of an introduction, Athena walked over and began to play a familiar tune on the
piano. It had been the main love song of another classic tale, singing of dreams and romance, but when she played it now the tune was twisted and slowed. Time and perspective had distorted it, which seemed all too perfect for her story choice that night. Once the music lifted into the air the crowd began to hush all at once.

The only sound aside from her piano was the frantic yet controlled movement of Varric’s quill against his paper as he kept up with her scenes. “I once told the tale of a young beauty that was cursed on her name day. A terrible and powerful witch came to her kingdom and put a curse on her, saying that on her sixteenth birthday she would prick her finger on the needle of a spinning wheel and would never wake again.”

There were murmurs of recognition and some of the children’s eyes lit up in excitement. Assuming her role, Athena’s lips curved into a wicked smile, mischief lighting up the features of her face as she continued. “Well what if I were to tell you that the story you know isn’t all the same? What if I told you that it is important to learn both sides of every tale?”

Athena hummed to herself as her fingers shifted into the tune she remembered, the discordant melody floating through the air and sticking to each person like a plague. “I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream.” Her voice was low and the key was not like they remembered, magic pulsing into the piano which was so full of life it had rid itself of all imperfections and nearly glowed next to the campfire in the thick darkness.

“What if I told you that the true story lay in the mind of the great dragon that was slain? What if I told you.. that the person who held the truth behind the story.. “ The notes seemed to linger for dramatic effect, holding in the air until she could smile and glance over to Leafy. “Was the Witch?”

A buzz of excitement and realization went through the crowd, many of the Inner Party smiling from the back. Her heart was warmed by the sound of Dorian’s laugh. Oh, my brother. She thought to herself, glancing over at him to scold him for his outburst. “I know you, that look in your eye is so familiar a gleam.”

Her fingers danced slowly over the piano’s keys, much like a mournful waltz as her body bobbed forward to the beat. It was difficult to not think about her missing lover as she sang the lyrics, her aloof Dreamer who had danced with her many times before through the forests of the Fade and the physical world. Even now, as she tried to capture the attention of the crowd, her own was constantly being pulled towards the possibility that he was out in the world hunting Imshael. Would he come back? Would his grief keep him from returning? Wisdom had said that she would need to be stubborn and persistent, all the while keeping her own goals in mind.

Would there be a point where she had to choose her own people over him? The thought nearly
halted her song but she shook it off with a quick blink of her eyes. “Long ago in the forested Moors, there was a beautiful faerie named Maleficent. She was a young thing, growing up in the safety and magic of her woods. There were many different creatures that lived there, much like our own, but it had not seen the scourge of mankind. The forest was pure, untouched, and filled with so many possibilities.”

“Faeries, you see, were powerful things capable of great magic. This faerie in particular was blessed with a beautiful set of russet colored wings.” As she began to tell the story, the music stayed in a similar melody but her magic expanded from the piano and began to manipulate the fire. Her story came to life within the flames, a large canvas of light and sparks playing out in the air before them. From the embers of the campfire came a forest with small sparks representing the faeries flying back and forth. A large elk with flowers in its antlers strode on the sides as the epitome of strength and grace. A pair of ethereal red wings sprouted from her back and she smiled as some of the children gasped in awe.

She had grown, however, and the fire was just an illusion. If curiosity were to overcome them, which she had learned that it would from the past, the picture would shatter momentarily and return. “In the time of her youth, a hunter boy from a neighboring village managed to find himself in the thick of her woods. Instead of shooing the intruder away, she opened her arms in friendship. The two were an unlikely pair: human and faerie. He had never seen someone of her kind and was struck by her beauty, even as a child. Their shared naivety of the danger of their relationship kept him coming back. They grew up together, and those feelings of friendship eventually turned into something much deeper.”

There was a soft, romantic sigh from the back and she knew without looking up that Cassandra was beginning to swoon over the romance of the start of the story. Hold onto your seat, Seeker, this will not play out as you think. She thought to herself with a smile. “Unfortunately that love could not stay pure. The King of the local kingdom tried to conquer the Moors and the faerie Maleficent fatally wounded him. On his deathbed, he made a declaration. He promised his kingdom and his daughter to the man who brought down the faerie. The boy turned man, Stefan, revisited his old friend Maleficent to find that she was no longer the young girl of his dreams. She had matured and blossomed into a beautiful faerie of adult age. Her charm was undeniable, but there was a dark greed for power within Stefan.”

The scene shifted and the illusions became twisted, their edges jagged. The woods that once held inviting and pleasant eyes shifted into something with malice in its heart. The children clutched one another as the shadows played to the worst of their imaginations and even Athena felt enthralled by the soon to be evil that would take over their protagonist. “During that visit, Stefan did something unspeakable. He drugged her, made her unable to fight back like the coward he was. But that childlike love he felt for her kept him from striking the killing blow. Instead – he cut off her wings with iron – which is poisonous to the fairies and their like.”

She sliced her hand through the air and mocked agony on her face as the fiery wings disappeared from her back. They fluttered helplessly in the air before disappearing into the campfire, a small
burst of ash accompanying the mournful tones of the piano.

“Maleficent woke up tortured, betrayed. The man she had cared for and loved since her childhood years had stolen something precious from her. He had stolen her innocence. The Moors was turned twisted and dark. Time passed and the faerie grew reclusive, relying solely on her shapeshifting companion, who she had crafted in her loneliness.” Kain let out a whine of recognition at Leafy’s feet, seeing a small bit of himself within the story. Athena could only sigh and smile at him, humming to herself as her fingers worked on the piano in a slow, mechanical fashion.

“But then everything changed. . . when the newly crowned King Stefan produced a daughter – a princess named Aurora.”

The story continued.

Lev’adin played a beautiful Princess Aurora that turned into the Queen that joined both the Faerie and the human kingdoms. Athena couldn’t help but hope that her daughter was truly to have such power in her future. Unfortunately, the likely possibility was that she would be caught in a power struggle between Solas and her mother. Athena would be fighting to preserve the world they lived in now while Solas would be fighting to tear the Veil down and return the world to the state of Arlathan. Leafy spoke like she was on her mother’s side. . .but, when presented with the possibility of restoring her people to what they once were. . . how would she choose?

“And I know it’s true that visions are seldom what they seem.” The song was littered throughout the story but she began to finish it now. Each note of the piano put out a pulse of magic through the area and withdrew the illusions back into the normal glow of the fireplace. Something responded in turn to her magic, something sorrowful and distant. She couldn’t take the attention away from the song to identify it, but from the sniffles she heard in the crowd she assumed it was one of the mages letting their mana loose from the emotions that the story pulled on.

“But if I know you, I know what you’ll do.” Athena thanked her two actors for their work with a silent nod as she continued to sing. The lyrics always reminded her of her distant lover, Solas, but even now thinking of him brought tears to her eyes. She was supposed to have grown stronger than ever, but the thought of him potentially returning left her feeling raw and vulnerable. Typically, she felt that way after telling a story anyway, but something about this one in particular made her feel mentally and physically drained.
“You’ll love me at once, the way you did once upon a dream.” The piano finished its final notes with a satisfied hum, almost as if the instrument were sighing in pleasure from finally being played after all this time. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes, slowly taking her fingers from the keys before resting them on the tops of her thighs to indicate that the story was over. There was barely a second that passed before the crowd began cheering, starting with the children in the front row.

Athena couldn’t help but smile and stand, gesturing to her daughter and the ever loyal Kain before bowing herself. The children rushed her and gripped to her legs and grabbed her hands. Their little bodies jumped up and down in excitement as they all chattered on at once about how much they loved this version of the story. “The Witch was so exciting, Lady Athena!” A young girl piped up. The comment filled her chest with pride and she could only smile at them while responding with terse thank you’s. Performing had taken more out of her than she had anticipated, and the pull of her bed was calling her.

Mother Giselle ushered them off as usual and she walked over to where her group of comfort had gathered. The elves were all patting Lev’adin on the back and teasing her for how she blushed at compliments. Loranil gave Athena a thumbs up, and she smiled before continuing to walk towards the back, almost missing another elf who had a wicked smirk on his face.

“The Sorcière does have a soft side after all. Here I thought she was this ferocious huntress that devoured chevaliers in her sleep – but alas. She is soft like the rest of us.” Zevran teased while poking her on the shoulder.

She rubbed the back of her neck and let out a sigh with a smirk on her lips, shrugging innocently. “What can I say? I have a love for fairy tales. They bring hope to people in otherwise dark times. “There was an bit of sadness on the edge of her smile and it did not go unnoticed.

He put his hand on her shoulder and tried to catch her gaze. “What is wrong, chica?”

Athena shook him off and rubbed her hand over her belly, which didn’t hurt but she was getting anxious and wanted to get out of the crowd. It had been a stressful day from start to finish and with every new person that looked over to her she felt claustrophobic. “Nothing, Zevran, nothing. It’s just . . . been a long day. Story telling can take a lot out of me. I used to tell stories for someone else, but he isn’t here anymore.” The words were coming in a current she couldn’t control so she shook her head and shrugged helplessly. “I just need to go to bed. Can you make something up for me to the others? I’m sure I’ll be fine in the morning.”

The elf attempted to reach for her again but she snuck out of the clearing and edged her way through the Great Hall. The emotional exhaustion was itching at the back of her mind like an insect. Still, it was slightly calmed when a smaller hand gripped hers as she weaved into a hallway.
that would break her out by her tower. “Fen’mae... I miss him too. Is that why you got sad all of a sudden?”

She nodded, slowing down her walk since they were out of eye sight of the others. It was a part of it at least. There was a nagging feeling in the back of her mind that she could not get to go away. She knew it was more than exhaustion, but it tugged on her very core. She knit her brows and let out a sigh, looking over to her daughter. “That among other things. You did well tonight. Did you enjoy the story?”

Leafy beamed with a grin that could light an entire room. “I like how it focused on a different kind of love for once. Romantic love is nice, but I think it’s important to look at the family kind. It is what has kept me going during my hard times. The people appreciate seeing it.” She grew quiet for a moment before looking up with a hopeful smile. “I was going to go on a hunt and then go tell Tobi the story at his resting place. I think he would like hearing it... do you think he would?”

Athena’s eyes instantly filled with tears, a sad smile curving her lips as she nodded. “I think he would like that very much. The wolves would love to hear it as well.”

“Would you like to come?” Leafy invited, no trace of hope or expectation in her voice.

“I... do not know. I don’t know if I have the strength to go and see him right now. What about in the morning? We can do it together?” Lev’adin accepted the answer and Athena saw such maturity in the young woman, it made her proud. There were many times when her daughter was strong in moments when she could not be, but they would have to trade off when one was strong and the other was not. Lev’adin walked her up to her tower door and rushed in for a tight hug. Athena could feel her daughter smile against her skin and she bent down and picked her up as much as she could into a tighter hug.

“Ar lath ma, Fen’Mae.” She whispered softly, gripping tighter back before running off down the stairs. Athena huffed a smile and walked inside of her room, lightly shutting the door behind her as she let out a sigh of relief. There was comfort in the smell of her room, the inviting allure of her blankets that still had wrinkles in them from the night before. Leafy had left her bow and quiver haphazardly balanced against her side of the bed so she leaned them closer to the door just in case she needed to come back and get them. She made her way downstairs and washed her face in the basin. The cool water was refreshing against her skin that almost felt hot to the touch from nerves, a sign that her aura had been active during the story. She let her hair fall down out of its ribbon and ran a brush through it until the day’s sweat and disheveled look was forced smooth.

Even if she had been faking in front of Zevran then, there was pain in her belly now. She felt at the bandings underneath and cursed that they weren’t providing the support that they used to. It had also just been a terrible day and she was itching to get them off. Athena trudged back upstairs and
stood in front of her wardrobe with the doors wide open. She glanced down to the drawer in the bottom left, knowing that a certain elf’s spare tunic still rested in there. She slowly removed her own shirt and dropped it into a small basket to be laundered before her hands came to her abdominal bandings.

There was a knock at the door and Athena huffed, not even bothering to look over. “Leafy, if you forgot something you can just come in and take it before your hunt. I think you left your bow by the door.”

The door opened and then shut, but she didn’t hear the familiar pattering of quick footsteps down the stairs. Athena arched a brow and finished removing her bandings, holding them in one hand while popping her head out from the wardrobe. “Did you see it? I thought I put it right – “ Her eyes went wide and she clutched the bandings in her hand, her body moving as if she wasn’t controlling it until she was standing directly facing the door.

The sound of panting came from the door and she slowly dropped her arms to her side. Her throat was dry, a slow but persistent heartbeat thundering within her ears. It was as if the wind was sucked out of the room and only roaring silence replaced it. Thunk. A heavy pack was dropped to the floor with tired hands and she followed the wet and weathered thing up to its owner. His eyes were fixed on her, not her eyes, not her face, but the healed yet gnarled scar that ran across her lower belly. She wanted to cover it out of shame but a sudden calm resolve came over her, something steeled and cold.

It had been two weeks since she had woken.

She had trained, she had fought, and she had endured. She had done all of these things surrounded by her friends and family. She had found the strength within them and herself to grow stronger than she had been before. She had found solace in the Fade once more and she had found the compassion to tell stories again.

She had done all of these things without him.

Athena’s posture straightened, her jaw clenched as she reigned in her surprised gaze to something more hardened and ready. She gripped the bandings in her hand firmly, lifting her chin until she felt like she was almost looking down at him. He visibly flinched at her gaze, not rising to meet it as his shoulders sagged down from the weight of their combined emotions. She felt as if she was tightening every muscle in her body, preparing herself for some kind of attack -

But he still managed to break her with a single word.
“Vhenan.”
Impossible.

That was the first word to come to her mind, even though it was entirely reasonable for him to be there. He had been with the Inquisitor’s party but was torn away due to his own quest for vengeance. Vengeance for a crime that wasn’t his to avenge. The gesture was sweet, romantic almost, but those fleeting thoughts were buried by an immense fear that shook her body cold. What was she afraid of?

Words failed.

He was back. He was in her room, which made everything they had gone through real. It had been easy to heal with him gone. She had leaned on the support of her friends and family without having to see her guilt and grief walking around the keep of Skyhold. She was able to heal without the other half of her heart there, but now that it was back, she began to feel just as broken as she had been two weeks prior.

But she wasn’t.

She had grown strong, stronger than before even. She had turned Imshael’s curse on its head and used it to its full advantage. She had never been able to best Cullen in combat before but that day she had knocked him on his back even while being slightly distracted. Things were coming quicker to her, her reflexes faster, her spells lighter, and that was only in sparring. She had yet to truly test her abilities and with every day that passed, the itch to try something new grew larger.

Time stretched out into a millennia as he took another broken step towards her, the air thick with the silence between them as she clutched the bandings in her hand until her knuckles went white. He was getting close to her, close enough that she could smell the woods and rain on the wolf fur sash that he wore over his shoulder. It was garb that he started wearing towards the end, towards when he would leave the Inquisition for his own plans. The thought put a knot of emotion in her throat but she fought for it to not show on her face.
Everything was visible on his face though. All of the walls had broken and she could see every shred of pain, every shred of guilt etched into his knit brows, his slightly slack jaw of disbelief as his gaze took her in. Not all of her, just the blatantly obvious scar at the top of her pants line. She wanted to flinch and hide it from him, but the raw pain on his face put tears in her eyes. She took a step backwards but there wasn’t much room for her to escape, the backs of her knees hitting the bed as she looked at him. He took another step and closed the space between them, both of their breaths coming painfully ragged.

Solas reached out for her and she held her breath, her bottom lip beginning to quiver from the anticipation and emotions running through her veins.

“I – “ His voice cracked and his gaze fell to the ground.

“You left.” She snapped, surprised at herself but the words came quick like a viper’s venom. Her scared gaze suddenly hardened into something analytical, piercing as if she could see through his body. He came into her tower without even knowing what to say. All he could do was look at her scar, he hadn’t even glanced up to meet her eyes. Had she done all of that work for him to only see her for her own mistake?

“Yes.” He answered, hands closing into fists at his side.

“Why.” It wasn’t a question, it was a demand, all of the hurt she had been pushing aside for her own benefit coming back to her in a pulse of fire through her spirit. It hurt, suddenly everything in her body hurt. The inside of her body matched the intensity that was painted on his face clear as day. He gasped softly, head tilted to the side.

“I. . . I could not stand to sit and watch you die. I could not sit and be helpless.” The painful, broken whispers that fell from his lips twisted her core in a thorned grip, each syllable breaking her defenses down to rubble. She wanted to be mad. She wanted to be furious and push at him until everything was answered between them. There was a vacuum of emotion that existed within him at that moment and she could feel it. His aura was almost non existent it was so tightly wound against him, as if he were still afraid of letting her see how he felt even though he wasn’t hiding his expressions. It was even more obvious when she heard the small pit-pat of water hitting the ground. She put a hand to her face, thinking that her body was crying and she didn’t realize it, but the sound was not hers.

Athena gasped, truly looking at her love again to see that he was shaking his head, soft tears falling from his face as he held himself back. Everything within his body was rigid, unforgivingly so as he stood within arm’s reach of her. Before she could even deny herself the urge, she reached forward and touched his cheek gently. He tilted his head into her touch, his entire posture relaxing as the tears flowed more freely. He fell to his knees in front of her, gripping the fabric on her thighs as he
pressed his head against the lower part of her belly.

“I am so sorry, vhenan.” He cried against her skin, the wetness of his tears like ice against her scar.

She felt frozen, the anger within her faded away. She realized. . . exactly how cold it had felt with him gone. Her knees began to give so she sat on the edge of the bed, cradling his face against her skin as he finally had the chance to mourn. She’d had her opportunity. It had felt like there were days in the Fade where she screamed and cried until her face felt raw from the tears.

He. . .He had kept his distance, and was forced to by her protective companions. They probably assumed he wasn’t capable of feeling so deeply, so genuinely. He kept his polite mask on for all of them, but not for her.

She had the privilege of seeing everything.

“This never should have happened.” He gripped her pants tighter with a firm shake of his head. There was resolution in his words, as if he would be able to undo it all. She tried to soothe him, her hand gently rubbing over the top of his head as her initial shock and rage melted to match him. Every second that went by she released tension, as if she had been tightening her body for the two weeks that he had been gone waiting for him to return.

“But it did, ma’fen. It’s. . .we’re going to be alright.” He trembled beneath her touch and she wanted to fall down on the ground next to him. With him in her lap like this, it reminded her of when he’d returned after Wisdom had died and they’d just fallen asleep together. There was a light flicker of his aura, almost like a tendril reaching out and stroking along the first layer of her skin. Did he want to see how deep it went? She took in a deep breath, her hand freezing on top of his head, before letting her guard and her aura fall to him.

She didn’t expect how quick he would be, how uncontrolled his magic was as it searched and flowed through her like a river released from its dam. Athena released her hold on him and clenched her hands into the sheets at her side, eyes shut as she controlled her breathing. It wasn’t painful, per say, just invasive in a way, but she trusted him to know everything. He needed to know exactly how deep the wound went.

The air went still, every fragment of dust floating as if trapped by time. There was a resonance through her core that told her he’d found it, a quick sharp jolt like a fresh dagger. But she was so used to the pain, she barely winced. His eyes were blown wide, hands releasing her pants as he appeared to stop breathing.
His hand twitched against her leg, and when he spoke his voice sounded almost foreign it was so far away. “I never understood how much I wanted that future...until it was gone.” His breath hitched and he tilted his face to where she couldn’t see it, almost as if he were ashamed. “Salahn and Suledin...that were their names, were they not?” His voice dropped to an angered whisper, his aura beginning to prickle still within her.

“Ir abelas, vhenan...” The apology fell from her lips before she could even think, tears streaming down her cheeks and landing atop her thighs. Without hesitation he shook his head and leaned forward, pressing his lips to the center of the scar. The sensation sent a shock through her system but she was too overwhelmed to respond to it. Instead her hands began to tremble, eyes shutting because she could not bear to see his expression in that moment. His gesture was so soft, so tender compared to how she had been feeling. It broke through everything that she had put up, all of the anger and frustration against him and herself. It left her raw, vulnerable in a way that she could not put words to.

Solas shook his head once more against her skin, placing another kiss along the scar which drew a soft cry from her lips. He repeated the gesture, again and again until her whole body was nearly trembling. He scaled up her stomach, one hand grasping hers until he could cup her face and meet her gaze for the first time. His eyes were still glossed over with tears, and she knew hers had to match. She clutched his hand tightly and cupped his face as well, letting out a ragged cry as she pressed her forehead against his.

His thumb stroked over her cheekbone and she could tell that he was still trembling slightly too. He tilted his head against hers and pressed his lips to her cheek. The warmth of his lips radiated through her body, tugging on strings in her core that she didn’t realize were still there. Athena moved her hand and laced her fingers with his, tilting her head slightly towards him as he murmured soft words against her skin, apologies in different languages but the message was as clear as the moonlit sky. She moved to meet him, a final sigh escaping her lips as he kissed the corner of her mouth, a rapid anticipation building up into her stomach until she couldn’t contain it anymore.

Athena released his hand and cupped his face entirely, relishing in the contact with his skin. He hesitated at the corner of her lips, meeting her eyes for a brief moment before inhaling deeply and crushing his lips against hers. There was a second where they both paused, almost shocked that they were kissing again, but he let out a hard, shaky moan against her and every bit of fortitude in her melted away as warmth between her thighs. She mimicked the sound, soft tears still streaming down her face. They weren’t of sadness, they were of joy.

There was a click within her spirit that happened as his hands slid along her skin, worshiping and cherishing every touch they could get. His shaky hands smoothed over her shoulders, gripping on her side as he leaned more into her, making their way down to the curve of her hips. There was a spark of discomfort in her abdomen, something that she had grown used to over the last two weeks,
but it was masked by him sliding his hands onto her backside and lifting her partially off of the mattress so that he could slide onto the bed over her in one smooth motion.

She gasped both in surprise and pain, gripping his shoulders as her head fell back on the pillow. He took a second to appreciate the skin of her neck and shoulders before stealing the moan from her mouth with his own lips. There was something perfect, something that felt like home being within his touch and under the weight of his body. She breathed in his heavy scent of forest, fur, and the slight bit of mint that had been on his tongue. She yearned to feel his skin against hers, feel the heat of his chest on hers, so her hands began to scramble and nearly tear at the fur sash on his shoulder and the armor underneath it.

He quickly assisted in the effort to undress him, only sitting up from her for a moment to get the heavier pieces off. The metal bits of his armor clattered against the floor but she was mesmerized by him, streams of moonlight coming in from the top of her door that led to the battlements and the light that flooded in from her upstairs window. She admired the defined muscles in his arms as he removed his tunic, even throwing the wolf bone necklace on the pile of clothes he had created to the side. The moment she saw skin she reached out to touch it, sighing at the familiar feel of his stomach, chest, and arms beneath her delicate fingers.

Solas rolled his eyes back and hissed through closed teeth, almost as if enchanted by her touch alone. She allowed her hand to travel down so that she could grab the top of his pants and pull him back down to her. He caught himself by landing on his forearms next to her head, cracking a smirk at her insistence. The small glimpse of happiness melted her even further, her hips remaining firm on his as he brought them down against the inside of her thighs. The friction brought a soft moan from her lips, a sound filled with a deep need that she had pushed down for weeks.

It mirrored through Solas, the sound vibrating against her neck as he stilled against her. She could feel his want as it pressed against her inner thigh, her own smile curving at the sides of her lips before that old friend called pain revisited her. Every time she had a flare of pleasure, a flare of something positive, it tugged against her scar and flashed through her body like a sharp fire. She had to wonder if it was part of Imshael’s curse, or his self-admitted shoddy healing. Even still, the moments in between the pain where she could feel Solas’s lips against her collarbone or his hands against the curves of her breast overshadowed all of it.

Athena arched her back against his touch and he quickly got rid of her bandings, allowing the cool spring air to run across her skin. She looked up at him in the light and saw only adoration in his eyes, a deep longing within the swirling blues and grays of his gaze that was illuminating the lines of hunger on his face.

His fingers ran atop her waist, tugging silently at her pants as he dipped back down to kiss down along her skin, between her breasts, and over her scar line. A shiver filled with anticipation racked down her spine as he encouraged her to arch her back further off of the bed so he could nearly tear
her pants and smalls from her legs. He threw them on the ground unceremoniously, laying hot, heavy, wet kisses from the inside of her ankle up her leg to the inside of her thighs. Once he moved past her knees he slowed down in ascent, eyes flicking up to catch hers, leaving silent promises of adoration and forever within each slow kiss on her sensitive skin.

When he reached his nirvana between her legs, he paused and she could feel his slow, steady breaths against her tender skin. It drove her mad, soft cries escaping her lips as she fisted the sheets into her hands. He kissed her, as if those lips were the ones on her mouth, gently and slowly until he drew the shakiest of moans from her. He was always a man that took his time with things, who could not be rushed. He knew what he was doing, especially in this case, but it simply took time for him to do what he wished to do. She knew, she had tried to rush him in the cave at Crestwood. Her own fears had conquered what her logic and his actions had drawn out for her.

He brought her attention back with a slow lap of his tongue, his eyes flicking up over her belly to catch hers before the dark, hungry look in them was concealed as he closed his eyelids to focus on his task. Each movement, each breath, each move of his tongue against that specific bundle of pleasure unfolded with his touch. It was a puzzle and only he knew its solution. She twitched beneath his touch, groaning, gasping for air as he began to fill her body with new warmth. The usual cold of his aura was tender and warm, filling her body like honey and sliding against hers as if it were coaxing it out of hiding. She could feel the drying tears on his cheeks against the insides of her thighs.

“Solas – “ She cried out as he tasted her entrance, her back arching up from the bed before he slid his hands to it and held her up, positioning himself to where she knew that he was completely enraptured by her scent. His obsession with her was maddening and endearing all at the same time, making her heart swell until her body caught up and shattered in his grasp. Every muscle in her body shook with release, eyes blown wide as she was at a loss for words.

He devoured her arousal, worshipping the final shudder before climbing up her body with slow, lingering kisses. He paused at her navel, his tongue flicking to its base and moaning at the taste of her sweat on his tongue. She began to sit up, her hands touching his face with urgency to get him to come to her quicker. He still continued his slow ascent, cherishing every bit of skin he could get to before she claimed his lips with her own. He reeled as she tasted herself on his tongue, cupping her face with one hand while sliding down his breeches with the other. Soon his skin covered hers, the feel of his warmth comforting her in ways she hadn’t known possible.

Athena felt the tip of him against her center, and as in his usual way he paused, his gaze taking in all of the features of her face as he brushed her hair to the side with the back of his hand. He angled his head, the shadow of a smile on his lips. “Athena – I – “

She stole his next words with a gentle kiss, stroking her thumb over his cheekbone with a small nod and a gentle smile. She angled her hips to meet him and he gently began to move within her. She
relaxed back on the bed, eyes closed to enjoy the sensation, but there was an increasing fire that burned throughout her belly and soon she found that he had stopped because she was clutching the sheets in pain. His brows were furrowed in concern, a slight look of hurt over his face as he raised his hands up as if her touch were doing it alone.

She shook her head and pointed to her belly, “It’s not you – it’s this damn thing.”

He let out a broken sigh, rubbing his hand over the scar and sending small pulses of energy through it that felt like a calm wave rolling over a shore. It moved through her as he did, moving in time with his hips as he withdrew and slowly entered again. To his relief, she sighed in pleasure, a moan leaving her lips once she could release the sheet and grip his hand instead. He pinned it above her head, tracing the line of her body with his free hand until he could establish a rhythm.

Athena squeezed his hand, head thrown back in euphoria as his magic and his hips rocked through her body. He nestled his head in the crook of her neck, whispering, moaning her name over and over again. The sound of her name on his lips, it was better than any promise or explanation of what had transpired between them. Her name on his lips was a sign that he was home, that they were together, that they felt like one again.

“Ma vhenan –“ He choked down a moan, the motions of his hips beginning to grow erratic. The feel of him inside her, how her walls pressed down against him with every thrust, the cloud of his scent over her mind, it began to fill her again in a way that made her skin tingle. She echoed his sentiments in soft mewls, her lips searching for any purchase on his face, neck, and shoulder. He released her hand to grip both of her hips so that he could thrust into her with more force, chasing both of their releases until he cried out. Their magic swirled together within her and burst at once, sending every nerve within her alight with a fiery sensation that spread goosebumps over her skin.

Their ragged pants were almost in unison, sweat beading on her brow as a wistful smile lingered on her face. He brushed his lips against her cheek before withdrawing himself, sighing again at the sensitivity of it all before laying on his side facing her. She did not want to leave his heat, so she simply stretched out her aura to find her shirt from that day, bringing it to herself so she could offer it with a raised brow for him to clean himself with. He looked at it and shrugged, sitting up on his side of the bed while doing the task.

“Rathein says. . . a raven drew you away from the party?” She asked barely louder than a whisper.

He paused, jaw clenching before nodding. “Imshael. I recognized him immediately. He tempted me with talk of completing his deal with you. His deals are never what they seem, so I sought him out to explain. It took me hours before I realized it would be easier to see what he meant myself.”
Athena averted her gaze, glancing over only when he offered the cloth to her. “Morrigan accepted it on my behalf. I cannot lie and say I would have refused it were I conscious.” He grew silent when she mentioned the Witch, but she quickly cleaned herself up and threw the shirt over near her laundry basket with a shake of her head. “I could feel myself slipping with each breath. I thought things had been bad before, but that. . .that was –“

“Reckless.” He finished with a whisper, a sarcastic smirk on his lips before he fell back into his quiet concentration. Solas let out a heavy sigh, extinguishing the lights of all of the candles with a wave of his hand. Athena shuddered at the sudden darkness, turning towards him while drawing the blanket up over them both. “We can speak of such things later, but for now, tonight, allow me to simply sleep with you again in my arms. It. . .has been too long.” There was a soft shift in his voice.

The exhaustion had finally set in. Athena smiled and turned to where her back was against his chest. He shuddered with a sigh, pressing the length of his body against hers while wrapping his arms around her protectively. It felt odd without the wolf bone pressing into her back, but she was grateful for the extra skin she could feel without it while settling into his strong grip.

The evening seemed more pleasant as they drifted to sleep. The air had a lighter feel to it as the spring winds turned to summer, and Athena could already tell that things would be different. She was content with a fade-less sleep for the night, needing nothing but the heat of his body and the press of him against her back to be comfortable. But the night did not go as well for Solas. He twitched in his sleep, lips murmuring and whispering while he rubbed his face against the pillow and the back of her neck. It only woke Athena a few times, but she was able to soothe him with a quick kiss on his lips before switching positions to be more comfortable for him.

Morning came, and as usual he was the first to wake. Athena barely stirred in her sleep as he slid his arm out from underneath her neck and got dressed. She thought she heard the moving of something in her wardrobe, but even she didn’t know where half of their clothes had ended up the night before. The thought put a smile on her face, especially when he bent over the bed and placed a small kiss on her forehead. The gesture was enough to put her back to sleep for another hour and when she woke sunlight was flooding through the loft upstairs. She groaned as she awoke, suddenly aware of the cold at her back.

Why did he have to be such an early riser sometimes?

Athena wet her lips, stood from the bed, and looked around her room. Something was off. There was an energy in the room that didn’t feel quite right. She glanced to the door. Leafy’s bow and quiver were still leaning against the doorframe where she had left them the night before. All of his clothes were gone from the floor and he had picked hers up and put them in the basket. Was that the rustling in the wardrobe she had heard? She walked over with a slow, apprehensive walk like a wolf assessing their kill, when she saw something that stole her breath. The drawer, the one in the
bottom left, the one that had gone untouched for weeks and more before that, was empty and ajar.

He had taken the spare tunic from her wardrobe.

For some reason, this small detail suddenly made the thing that threw the room off so obvious. She slowly looked over her shoulder at the edge of the bed on his side. He had pulled the sheets up and made his side of the bed, but on his pillow was something that wasn’t supposed to be there. The wolf bone necklace was resting on top, its leather cord wrapped around it so it wouldn’t get caught within the sheets.

Athena walked over with a shaky touch, letting out a sigh of defeat as her fingers ran over its ancient edges. He was never without this. The only time he was... was when he had given it to her as a sign of comfort during the Orlesian Ball. Was this the same thing? Was he giving it to her for comfort... in place of - ?

A wordless cry of anger left her lips as she rushed to the side and quickly got dressed, ignoring her abdominal bandings and the pain drumming through her body. She barely had time to run a brush through her hair before she was out the door with the necklace in her hand and a pocket full of gold coin.

Because Maker knows she would be needing a drink that night after murdering the God named Dread Wolf.
To say that she was having trouble controlling her emotions was an understatement.

Athena slammed the door of her tower shut, nearly pulling it from its hinges while clutching his precious wolf bone in her hand. She turned down the stairs on the battlements as Cullen was just leaving his tower for the morning. He caught one look at her and instantly began to walk towards her but she raised a hand and met his glance. The fire in her eyes was enough to make him stop, and she fade-stepped down the stairs and stormed up the next set at the end of the courtyard.

Varric and Dorian were speaking over their cups of tea by the fire. The dwarf looked up with a smile. “You’re up early, Walker.”

She looked to the right towards the rotunda and reached out with her aura, and it prickled like flame along the door that separated the rotunda and the main hall.

Dorian shuddered within it and raised a brow, and his gaze dropped to the necklace in her hand. “What happened?”

“Is he in there, Varric?” She spat, her voice low but measured so as to not draw more attention. Like that mattered. He put his tea down and stood up, his gestures pleading but when she refused to back down in her posture he dropped them to his side and shrugged.

“Yeah – he came in earlier than you. He seems quiet, and that’s saying something.” She couldn’t help but tilt her head to the side to pop her neck. It felt like her blood was boiling beneath her skin, coming off of her in waves of heat. He had the nerve to leave her that morning with no note- no mention of anything – no apology – and then act like he was the wounded one? Always the fucking martyr. He had to fall on the sword so that the others around him could be better protected.

Athena was the type to pull that sword out of his chest and use it to defend her damned self.

Dorian move to stand but she was already moving, his voice falling to whisper behind her. “Amatus, what is wrong?”

She didn’t have the words to tell him nor the time. She needed to get to her vhenan before bravery left her steps and her tongue. She burst through the door of the rotunda and saw him sitting behind
his desk calmly, with a book in his right hand and a quill in his left for taking notes. He let out a sigh when she walked in, closing the book with one hand before looking up with a guarded yet cold expression. “Sorciere.”

The title was a slap in her face, and all traces of decency and manners fell to the side. She had intended to be nice when asking him questions, if obviously angry. Fuck that plan. She gripped the wolf bone necklace and took a step forward, then launched it towards him at full force. Thousands of words swam through her mind, awful impulsive things, so she had to pick carefully. He dropped his quill and caught the artifact with one hand, expression twitching into hurt before falling back into the mask of areserved man.

“Yet again you let the wolf say what you cannot, coward.”

His eyes widened and the corner of his lips raised in a snarl, fearful that people would be able to put two and two together. But the fact of him being the Dread Wolf was a revelation that would shock the Inquisition. Nobody would expect it, which gave her a bit of leverage when speaking of their situation in public. He calmed his face but kept the anger of his reaction in his gaze alone as he looked down at the necklace.

“I thought it was quite obvious.” He gripped it tightly and looked up again, sadness replacing the snap rage that had been there before. “I did not wish to cause you further pain.”

Athena threw her hands up in the air, her aura coming off of her movements like wildfire. “Great fucking job you did there, hahren.”

There was movement from above in the library and she could tell people were listening, but she didn’t care. Her hands were clenched into fists at her side and she wanted answers. She wanted to know how a man named Pride could be proud of himself for leaving a woman the night after their reunion. How he could plead apologies over her skin and still decide to walk out the next morning. He glanced up and gave her a pleading glance, his own body rigid and controlled. “For now, we must focus on what matters.”

Oh no he is not! There was a swell of power within her stomach and it tasted like bile in the back of her throat. She shoved her hand in her pocket and pulled out a gold coin, flipping it in her hand before closing her fist around it.

“Harden your heart – “
“Already done, Pride.” She wrapped her mana around the gold coin and threw it at him with all of the force she could muster. He managed to catch it but he slid back on the floor, eyes looking at his own hand as if she had burned him. “If you get the urge to stick your self-imposed guilt into someone else, there are plenty at the tavern for you. First drink is on me.”

He dropped the coin to the ground and reached towards her, but the sight of him became flurry behind the veil of tears in her eyes. “Ath – “

“No!” She snapped back at him, closing her eyes while letting out a sigh to fight back the tears. During this moment she re-straightened her posture and raised her chin to him slightly. Before she could open her eyes she felt a hand on her shoulder and she quickly opened her eyes and shrugged out of their grip, but it was not who she expected. Zevran had descended the stairs from the library and jerked his head out towards the courtyard, not even bothering to glance at Solas.

“Not here, Hermosa. There are people downstairs who actually want your time.” He kept his eyes on hers the whole time, a kind distraction from the suddenly cold room, even though his tone was obviously directed at the other elf. Athena nodded and turned on her heel, resisting every urge to look over her shoulder as the muscles in her neck and back tightened from her restraint. He pressed his hand on her lower back until she cleared the door leading to Dorian and Varric, who were both standing with shock written all over their faces. She slammed the door to the rotunda and cast a silence spell with her hand over the archway so that they wouldn’t be overhead by people in the rotunda nor the library.

“He didn’t.” Varric said in a kind of disbelief, his quill sagging in his grip as he shook his head.

“The bastard – I’ll kill him myself!” Dorian spat before turning towards the door. Athena whipped her hand out and caught him, gripping his arm probably a bit too tightly with drying tears in her eyes. She shook her head once and looked into his eyes, forcing a smile.

“No need. His own hubris will do it first.” She took in a deep breath through her nose and gently squeezed Dorian’s arm, looking at Varric with a wink. “It feels like it’s going to be a good day, why not work from the garden?” There was an awkward silence between them, as if they could see a fuse leading back to an impending explosion. She blinked, looking to each of them with a shrug. “Humor me. I could use some sunshine and happy – vibes or whatever.” She waved her hand in the air and began to walk slowly towards the garden, looking over her shoulder towards them.

Varric cleared his throat. “Sure. Why not. I have some letters I could catch up on outside.”

Dorian rubbed the back of his neck. “You look like you could use some breakfast. And wine. I’ll
grab a great deal of both!” He snapped his fingers and whisked past her, quickly kissing her on the cheek with a small spring in his step.

Zevran arched a brow at her, crossing his arms over his chest as if she were going to spill everything to him. He walked at her side and finally sighed when she didn’t say any more. “I could convince Lady Syla and the rest of them to join you outside. Would you like that, hermosa?”

She smiled at the nickname, looking him up and down with a glance before nodding. He swiveled on his heel and went off down towards her office, giving her a moment to compose herself before walking to the garden with a click of her fingers to disarm the silencing spell on the door.

Thankfully it was a disgustingly beautiful day.

Her group of friends had populated the garden and slowly shooed out the visiting nobles and typical Chantry-goers with their volume. Many times Dorian, Varric, or Zevran drove Athena to tears with a charismatic retelling of some adventure. It was difficult to get work done, but she and Syla were able to get through the majority of their missives and the new recruits. They were getting higher in number as word of their work spread, but the newcomers were always shy.

The last one, Nikani, was in awe when he met her. He was a young elf of twenty with no vallaslin on his face, but he looked at her like, well, like she was Fen’Elgara.

At least the one Loranil told of in his tales. When the boy left she shot her personal Lieutenant a playful glare. He shrugged it off and winked, taking back a swig of wine as Zevran was telling his story while carefully tiptoeing through them.

“So there we were! Fort Drakon, me and this mabari named Barkspawn. Don’t ask me why we were sent to rescue the Wardens, but before I could say no we were being escorted to the front gates of the most terrifying Fort in all of Ferelden!”

Athena could barely contain her giggles. She knew the story well, but watching the charismatic and slightly tipsy Crow tell his side was just a whole new world of hilarious. He had been reviewing the plan with the mabari as they walked through Denerim and the dog would talk back as if he understood. She knew that Kain understood her, but that was because of their connection and shapeshifting magic. Barkspawn was just a smart dog. Leafy was sitting on her left giggling right along as Rathein and Bull walked up to join them.
“Well this seems like a fun party. What’s the occasion?” The Inquisitor asked with twinkling eyes.

Dorian opened his mouth and Athena knew it was going to be some smart ass answer so she quickly elbowed him in the ribs and smiled. “Just felt like working outside today, that’s all. Zevran here was in the middle of telling us stories of his time with the Hero of Ferelden.”

The Crow grinned and gestured for the Inquisitor to sit with them at the gazebo. Everything felt joyful, just for a second, but it was disrupted by a loud slamming of a door behind them. Athena glanced over and saw Morrigan with wide, panicked eyes and tears glossing over her gaze. She couldn’t help it, but she found herself standing and moving towards the other Witch, as if her fear was drawing her towards her. *Shit not now.* The Witch gestured with her head to the side, gripping the Inquisitor’s shoulder as Athena and Leafy stood and followed. “Please, Athena, I have no right to ask for help from you, I’m aware of that. But Kieran he –“

Leafy gasped and looked around. “Where is he! Is he alright!”

“He has run and disappeared through the eluvian. I do not wish to go in alone and require your help.” Rathein shot Athena a glance of uncertainty but the Witch pressed on. “Please, there isn’t much time.”

Athena gripped Morrigan’s wrist and ran towards the door with the eluvian, finding it already glowing and activated. She cursed and gestured for Rathein and Morrigan to go through, grabbing the back of Leafy’s shirt as she tried to run through. “No no, *ma’fen*, it is too dangerous for you in there. We are about to enter a dangerous place.”

The girl snarled back and ripped herself out of her mother’s grip. “I don’t care. Kieran is my friend. He would help me if I was in trouble; I’m not going to abandon him, *Fen’Mae.*”

Athena took in a deep breath, nodding at the girl’s bow and quiver on her back. “I don’t know how useful those will be, but keep them close.” She opened a hand and summoned flame for light while bringing Leafy in with her free hand on her back.

Rathein and Morrigan were frozen in their place, worried gazes glancing about. “Where are we, Morrigan?” The Inquisitor’s hand itched for her staff but she didn’t have it on her person. None of them were prepared for an attack, save for Leafy, but she only had her bow and arrows at the ready, disregarding her mother’s warning.
“This is – “ The Witch began, but fear filled her voice so Athena finished for her.

“The Fade. The eluvian led us to the Fade. Remember that broken one we saw when we were in the Fade last, Inquisitor?” Athena asked with a quick glance. Even if it was a dangerous environment, it brought her such raw energy. Her aura was dancing all over her skin like fire and it was difficult not to get caught within the euphoria of it all.

“Why would he come here? What could have drawn him here?” Morrigan asked as her pace began to pick up into a run. They all followed and Athena couldn’t help but feel bad for her. She had experienced the pain of losing a child and knew what that fear and panic was like. She could only imagine what was going through Morrigan’s head. She glanced down at her daughter and lightly touched her shoulder as they ran to get her attention.

Leafy’s head snapped up, the focus of a huntress within her eyes. The Wild was swimming within her gaze and sending electric magic all over the top of her skin. She was worried too, so Athena gestured towards her bow and pressed them both to move forward. She didn’t even hear as her expert huntress of a daughter pulled an arrow from her quiver and nocked it in the bow.

“I think I see him up here!” Morrigan’s run broke into a dash but then it slowed, realization sinking in as she recognized the second figure kneeled down in front her son. They moved closer with caution in their steps. Athena took note of the two swirling orbs above both the heads of the people in front of them, tilting her head in slight confusion.

*How are you here again? What did you do?* She heard Harmony’s intrigued yet annoyed voice in the back of her mind. She fought to keep from whipping around to look for him but it made her feel safe knowing that her friends were close by.

Kieran looked to the approaching party with a genuine smile on his face. “Mother!”

Morrigan’s lip curled into a snarl as the entire group’s collective gaze fell upon the other woman. Athena felt ice run through her veins in a moment of fear. The Witch spat in recognition towards the figure. “Mother.”

Flemeth rose from her knees with a sense of eternal grace and dignity. Her eyes went to every one of them, landing on Athena for a second longer than everyone else before the usual cat like smile curved her lips. “Now, isn’t this a surprise?”
Rathein was without her staff, but she managed to have her spirit hilt on her belt. She grabbed it and flicked it to the side with a surge of power to summon her ethereal blade. “What the hell is this, some kind of family reunion?”

Leafy pulled her bow and aimed it directly at Flemeth without any fear in her eyes. Flemeth didn’t even take notice, her gaze solely on Morrigan. “Mother, son, grandson. Doesn’t it just warm the heart?”

Morrigan shook her head and waved her hand to the side. “Kieran is not your grandson. Let him go.”

Flemeth could only smirk. “As if I were holding the boy hostage.” She then looked to the Inquisitor as if to get her on her side. “She’s always been ungrateful, you see.”

Morrigan snarled and pointed a finger towards Flemeth, shaking it with emphases in her words. “Ungrateful? I know how you plan to extend your life, you wicked crone. You will not have me, and you will not have my son!” She dropped her hand and summoned magic in her hands. Green, swirling energies surrounded her arms in preparation for a spell and Athena could smell the ammonia in the air from her choice of spells. She protectively angled her body in front of Leafy with a watchful gaze on the two other Witches of the Wild.

Flemeth rolled her eyes and cast her hand out. “That’s quite enough. You’ll endanger the boy.” There was a pulse of dismissal magic, a command that simply said Stop. Leafy and Rathein didn’t budge or react, but there was a definite urge to still within Athena and she could not deny it. Any excess magic roaming on her skin was willed back inside of her but she held her posture strong in front of her daughter. Athena’s eyes widened in fear at that command and her body turned cold.

Morrigan looked down at her hands and released a sound of anguish, her body slightly trembling with terrible realization. “What have you done to me?”

Flemeth could only nod in satisfaction, gesturing at the symbols that had appeared all over Morrigan’s face and body. Athena touched a hand to her cheek, feeling a soft yet fading pulse of energy from a line across her cheek. “I have done nothing. You drank from the well of your own volition.”

Everyone, save for Athena and Leafy gasped and Morrigan could barely whisper. “You. . . are Mythal.”
“But... Mythal was an elf!” Leafy exclaimed in shock and bitterness, her hand growing tighter on her arrow. Flemeth looked at the young girl and then slowly over to Athena, acting as if the bow and arrow were not even a threat to her.

“She was of the People, yes, child.” The Goddess said calmly.

Kieran’s face softened next to his grandmother, a slight twitch of his lips bringing the corners down to a frown. “I’m sorry, Mother. I heard her calling to me. She said now was the time.”

Morrigan shook her head as Rathein tried to catch Athena’s gaze to get what was going on. “I do not understand.”

Flemeth took in a deep breath, twitching her hand at her side before gesturing forward. “Once I was but a woman, crying out in the lonely darkness for justice.” She summoned a small flame in her hand and it floated carefree like a spirit. “And she came to me, a wisp of an ancient being. She granted me all I wanted and more. I have carried Mythal through the ages ever since, seeking the justice denied to her.” Her voice began to strengthen with resolve and twist into something that put a pit in Athena’s stomach.

Morrigan pressed on. “Then, you carry Mythal inside of you?”

Athena did her best not to nod along and show that she knew everything. She reached to the side and put her hand on her daughter’s shoulder, squeezing it to give the cue to relax her hunter’s posture as Flemeth continued. “She is a part of me. No separate from your heart from your chest. You hear the voices of the well, girl, what do they say?

Morrigan took a deep breath in and closed her eyes. There was a faint change in her aura, additional hums adding and thickening the magic that wrapped around her in the air. She opened her eyes and released a sigh of finality. “They say... you speak the truth”

Flemeth smirked once more, crossing her arms over her chest. “But what was Mythal? A legend given name and called a God? Or something more. Truth is not the end. . . but the beginning.” The Goddess flicked her gaze over to Athena with a knowing smile that made her uncomfortable. She then slid the piercing yellow gaze to Leafy and Athena couldn’t help but tighten her grip on her shoulder. “So young and vibrant. You do the People proud and have come far, child.” Athena’s eyes widened at the familiar sentence, feeling a swell of pride that it was directed towards her daughter but still feeling conflicted about the woman’s presence. Leafy snarled. “As for me. I have had many names. But you, may call me Flemeth.”
The young huntress spoke up yet again, caution and disbelief filling her voice. “I know that name. My People used to call you asha’bellanar. The woman of many years.”

Athena finally felt it was appropriate to add in her own knowledge so she took her hand from Leafy’s shoulders. She looked over at the Inquisitor and gestured to the older Witch of the Wilds. “She also appears in other legends throughout time. Helping heroes for unknown reasons of her own.”

Flemeth smiled with half of a shrug. “I nudge history when it’s required. As it turns out... sometimes a shove is needed.”

Leafy couldn’t help herself. She stepped forward with her bow still up and hurt in her voice. “Why haven’t you helped us?”

There was a glimmer of regret in the old woman’s eyes as she shook her head in remorse. “What was, could not be changed. I am truly sorry, child.”

Rathein ran a hand through her locks, the remaining static from her aura putting a volume through it as she twisted her lips to the side in confusion. “So why did Mythal choose you? What drew her to you in the first place?”

“For a reckoning that would shake the very heavens!” The statement had enough power in it to send a chill through Athena’s body, Leafy’s too since she lowered her bow and sheathed the arrow in her quiver.

Morrigan glanced at Kieran and shook her head. “But – “

Flemeth stiffened her posture and pointed forward at her daughter, her volume rising. “You seek to preserve the powers that were, but to what end? It is because I taught you girl. It is because things happened that were not meant to happen.” She cast her hand across them in a sweeping gesture, anger etching into her features as she called into the clouds of the Fade. Athena was certain she could be heard in the Black City. “She was betrayed as I was betrayed, as the world was betrayed! Mythal clawed and crawled her way through the ages to me. And I will see her avenged!” The Goddess took a deep breath, her body shaking with anger until she brought it back to that eerie calm resolve that she was known for. “Alas, so long as the music plays, we dance. “
Rathein asked, “Did you come here to make Morrigan serve you?”

Athena couldn’t help but choke out a laugh, looking apologetic when Morrigan glared in return. Flemeth mimicked the chuckle. “Oh ho. What a servant she would make.”

The Inquisitor pressed on, staying on their ally’s side the entire time. “Then what is it that you want?”

Flemeth’s lips thinned into a tight line. “One thing, and one thing only.”

Kieran made a noise of acceptance, glancing over to Morrigan with no trace of a smile on his face. “I have to go now, Mother.”

Morrigan snapped and took a step forward, fear and sadness lacing through her words. “No. I will not allow it.”

Flemeth gestured to her grandson and clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth. “He carries a piece of what once was, snatched from the jaws of darkness. You know this.”

Rathein looked over to Athena and she did her best to mouth the words Old god soul but the message was lost in the conversation between the two women. Morrigan screamed at her mother, pleading with rage. “He is not your pawn, Mother. I will not let you use him!”

Mythal arched a brow. “Have you not used him? Was that not your purpose, the reason you agreed to his creation?”

Morrigan’s voice broke and she shook her head. “That was then. Now he...he is my son!”

Flemeth’s eyes widened, looking between her grandson and her daughter with confusion written on her features. Athena kept her body angled but wrapped her arm around Leafy protectively and affectionately, wanting the touch of her family.

Morrigan looked to Rathein and Athena, pointing towards her own mother accusingly. “Flemeth extends her life by using the bodies of her daughters. That was the fate she intended for me. I
thwarted her with the help of the Wardens. Now she intends to have Kieran in my stead.”

Flemeth shook her head. “I am not the only one carrying the soul of a being long lost.”

Her daughter would not stop, every bit of her posture screaming that she was ready to snap and run for her son if Mythal’s magic wasn’t keeping her back. Athena pitied her, but she’d tried to warn her of the Well. This was what she was trying to avoid, but the Well apparently had other plans. “He is more than that, Mother.”

“As am I, yet do you hear me complain? Our destinies are not so easily avoided, dear girl,” Flemeth laughed with her usual cat-like chuckle.

Kieran tilted his head in confusion and stepped towards Flemeth, “But Mama, I have to.”

There was a moment of hesitation, Morrigan’s shoulder slumping in defeat as she met Flemeth’s gaze. Her voice sounded hollow but resolute. “Take over my body if you must. Just let Kieran go. He will be better off without me. Just as I was better off without you.”

Flemeth gasped softly, her expression sagging into sadness as she looked at Kieran while considering her options. She extended her hand forward and Athena could feel her power, just a sliver of it, but it was enough to coax the Old God soul from her grandson so that she could bring it into herself. Athena and Leafy both let out a sigh of relief, and Kieran smiled.

The boy asked, “No more dreams?”

Flemeth smiled and squeezed his shoulders with both of her hands. “No more dreams.”

Kieran ran into Morrigan’s open arms and Athena swore she saw a tear fall from the Witch’s eyes. Rathein smiled but never let Flemeth leave her line of sight. The Inquisitor was smart, she knew a threat when she saw one and Mythal was not a Goddess to be trusted. “A soul is not forced upon the unwilling, Morrigan. You were never in danger from me. Listen to the voices. They will teach you, as I never did. Now you begone from this place. It is not safe for the likes of you.”

Athena arched her brow, remembering that it ended differently but she gestured for Leafy to go towards Kieran as the Inquisitor ushered Morrigan back towards the eluvian before darker things of the Fade realized they were there. The group began to depart when Athena felt a instinctual urge
not to move. There was a force, something indescribable that halted her body and stole the voice from her throat.

“Not you. Not yet. I would like a word.” Mythal commanded.

Leafy turned around to check but Athena pressed her on with a forced smile. “You go take care of Kieran. I have a couple of questions for the All-Mother, da’fen.”

The young girl furrowed her brows and looked over her mother’s shoulder towards the Witch of the Wilds behind her. She then nodded, re-adjusting her bow on her shoulder. “Be careful, Fen’Mae... Fen’Elgara."

Athena smiled and felt that familiar sense of pride fill her chest, which felt tight as she kept the tears down. The commanding presence in her in her spirit remained until the three were through the eluvian and then it deactivated so that demons could not follow them through. She slowly turned towards Flemeth as the woman spoke. “This place makes you feel invincible, does it not? So much raw power.”

She shook her head and was at a complete loss for words, walking back towards Flemeth while shrugging and gesturing with her hands forward. “I do not understand, what was that, and before when you stopped Morrigan.” She put her hand to her head and closed her eyes while trying to make sense of it all. Flemeth then spoke again and Athena’s eyes flew open, pupils completely dilating as panic set into her veins.

“I will explain.” There was a warm, motherly tone to her voice but at the same time it felt sinister. “It has been a long time, Victoria. And my how you have grown.”
So Long as the Music Plays

The name sounded foreign in her ears. It had been, what, at least two years since she had referred to herself in that way? It was the name she had been born with, it was the name her parents had chosen for her since before birth. It was the name she had kept all throughout school until the day when a black wolf with red eyes happened upon her driveway.

But ever since her arrival in Thedas, she had gone by another name. It was something she chose for herself. A name that had always been in the back of her head as something she liked. It was a name that carried strength and confidence. It was a name that Athena had grown in to during her time in Thedas and hearing her former name again almost felt like an insult. They were two entirely different people.

But how did Flemeth know?

“Surely you felt the potential for power in this place when you first passed through.” The Goddess walked with a slow saunter, each movement calculated and timed perfectly with her words. “For a foreigner, you were quick to make friends here.”

Athena wanted to speak but there was not enough moisture in her mouth to produce words. She felt frozen in place, hands twitching as they tensed up into fists at her side. Flemeth always acted the omnipotent immortal, but Athena didn’t think this to be true. It was annoying and Flemeth’s words grated against her mind like nails on a chalkboard. She took in a deep breath through her nose and gave herself a moment to collect her thoughts. Instead of vomiting out all of the obvious questions, she slowed her mind and played Flemeth’s game, danced the Witch’s dance that she loved to waltz.

“I was lucky. I do not think that I would have made it out of here if it weren’t for that initial spirit.” There was a warm feeling in her heart at the mention of her friend Inspiration, who had been a demon of Desire at the time. The demon’s obvious want for more knowledge paired well with her need for magical training at the time. She had never anticipated making the spirit change, but she was thankful for the friendship she had created from it. There was an itching sensation at the back of her mind that told her that her friends were close by. Their energies prickled along her skin and gave her confidence when speaking to the ageless Goddess in front of her.

“Luck has nothing to do with it. There are not many from your world that would have survived the crossover from one world to another, let alone a realm such as this. The demons of this place are attracted to the strange and unusual. Your strength alone allowed you to survive, Victoria.”
was a chaotic gleam in the Witch’s eyes, something knowing and prodding that did not sit well within her stomach.

“Athena, if you please. I left that name behind when I was dragged into this world. It does not fit me anymore.” She clenched her jaw in an attempt to put strength behind her words but was immediately cut off by the Goddess’s scoff.

“Dragged? Hardly. You were offered an invitation and came of your own free will. As I said, spirits are not forced upon the willing. Destiny waits for no one. You saw the opportunity for something new and chased after it like the animal you have chosen to shift into.” Flemeth walked towards her with a smirk on her lips, arms crossed over her chest as impatience began to set into her posture.

Athena’s eyes went wide with fear, a hardened lump of panic sitting in her throat which prevented words from coming out. The omniscience went too far. She had only shown the nature of her coming to this world to Solas and he outright refused that he had anything to do with it. Even in the form of the Dread Wolf, he refused. How did the Witch know? Almost as if Flemeth could read her mind, the Goddess chuckled and shook her head. “You think the Dread Wolf is the only shapeshifter of the elvhenan? Come now, Athena, you know better.” There was a beat of silence between them and Mythal rolled her eyes. “Fine. Allow me to show you.”

Within an instant, her body was enveloped in light and before Athena stood a large black wolf with six red eyes glowing with power from within. When she had first seen that form, she thought immediately that it was the Dread Wolf himself standing at her door. For that kind of thing to happen was impossible by Earth terms. Of course, she wanted to go into that world, the world she used to run into whenever her own life was making her suffer. It had always provided her with comfort, and she supposed it still did.

Now that she knew the Dread Wolf intimately, she could see the differences. Mythal had the eyes wrong and there wasn’t the same aura that came with it. Solas’s was pressure, a gravity that wrapped around her body like a giant fist as a constant reminder of his potential. Mythal’s was more ever-present. It was the air itself around her. There was no point in hiding it and she felt like she was breathing in her magic with every breath. She tilted her head to the side, hands shaking from the amount of restraint she was holding over her body. “It has been a long time since you have seen your friend in this form, hasn’t it? I feel foolish, but I can tell the difference between you as if you were standing in front of me as a kitten.”

There was a garbled laugh from the wolf’s form that turned into something of a happier tone as she shifted back into her human form. Mythal had a smile on her face with a glimmer of pride in her eyes. “How much you have grown, Athena. I do not see the same fear in your spirit as I did back then.”
Athena raised and dropped her shoulders in a shaky shrug. Trauma, war, and battle had changed her, matured her past anything she might have been at home. The dread of realization paralyzed her, setting all of her muscles to stone as she closed her eyes and shook her head. “It was you.”

Flemeth hummed and tapped her armored finger against her forearm in a gesture of impatience. The echoing tick tick sound felt like a hand of a clock triggering inside of her. It made everything slow, made everything seem so clear. It was not her vhenan who had come to her that night in the other world, it was Flemeth under a guise. “You said...spirits are not forced upon the unwilling... What did you do to me?” Her words echoed Morrigan’s panic from earlier in the conversation, a desperate tone hollowing out her voice as her hands began to shake.

There was the sound of a sigh. “Must I spell everything out for you? You are a smart girl, Athena. Your world was devoid of magic. The only glimpses you had were in the stories that your people came up with through dreams and imagination. Your spirit alone would not have survived here. Your world left gaps within your spirit, holes that needed to be filled if you were to live. I plucked a spirit from my Well, a servant whose name has long since been forgotten in the passage of time. The spirit was weakening at the bottom of my well, so I gave it new purpose. That was what allowed you to come here –“ The Goddess smirked with a huff of pride. “And the will to survive. The latter you already had, whether you knew it or not.”

The wounds that she had once pressed closed were ripped wide open, the blood of her emotions flowing through her aura like chaotic wildfire. She could feel her pulse throbbing in her neck as she bit back lashing out at the woman in front of her. She had found a family in Thedas, a lover, a daughter, things she probably wouldn’t have as deeply in her home. Home – her parents – they were things she had honestly not thought about in a long time. The memories only brought pain, feelings of abandonment, of regret. For the first few months, she always imagined the pain they went through when she supposedly went missing.

There was no trace, no murderer to charge, no trail to follow. She vanished. She left her sister behind, her mother, her father, her roommate, her fucking cat. Foreign claws ripped through the Fade to bring her to an unknown world that threatened her life at every turn. Years of unshed anger began to leak through her pores, as tears of hatred fell down her face. Her hands shook until they formed tight fists, her gaze slowly lifting towards the smug Goddess in front of her. “You took everything away!”

“And were you left with nothing? The Breach tearing open the Fade sent a remarkable amount of power through the Veil, powering eluvians long closed, forgotten, and shattered.” She paused, tapping the side of her temple with an armored claw. “I saw your dreams, girl. Time in Thedas stretched on when the Breach was open while your world sped ahead. For days I watched your world and saw the weakness of its people. They were like cattle being herded through life by powers better than them. Each moving along until they found their complacency. But you – you had compassion, you had hope while walking through a world of grey.” She snapped her fingers and then pointed at the center of her chest. “I saw it here, in your spirit.”
“And to what end! You destroyed an entire family, you destroyed my life, made me an abomination!” Athena cried out, swiping away the Goddess’s words in the air with a clawed hand.

“And saved a world,” Flemeth stated in a sentence of power, her aura becoming obvious like electricity through the air. “As I was chosen by Mythal, you have now been chosen. I borrowed from my Well of Sorrows to give your spirit the power to survive in this world. Had I not, yours would have disintegrated upon entry, ceased to exist. You are no abomination, your spirit is yours and yours alone. Think of what I did as a fortification.”

“That’s how.” Athena cursed underneath her breath, each word of Flemeth’s turning to bile within her body. She felt sick. Her heart pounded within her body and every instinct told her to turn and run. She felt not frightened, but overwhelmed, sick of being a puppet in somebody else’s game. She had thought to be free of that burden since she was not the Inquisitor, but even still her life was in the palm of some greater power. She let out a wordless cry and ripped her gaze towards the woman in front of her, screaming with burning vitriol in her words. “You meddle! Throughout history, all you have done is meddle in the lives of others! To what end! Perhaps that is the reason your brethren banded against you to end your life because you refused to quit your petulant meddling and leave people be!”

Crunch. There was an echoing punch of a powered hand against her cheek. Her body twitched and moved to fall but she stood strong, only turning her head to the side from the force of the punch. Her hair swept to hide her face as Athena slowly licked to the side to taste blood at the edge of her lips. Warmth crept down from her cheek but she looked back to Flemeth with defiance in her eyes. Flemeth sneered, her gaze hardened and cold with a silent fury. “Watch your words, child. You know not of what you speak.”

Athena knew she had spoken out of fury, but she stood by what she said. “You do not own me, Flemeth. I refuse to play your games and be your puppet in this world! I am no daughter of Flemeth – I will not allow you to take credit for my work, for the suffering that I had to endure to survive.” She pointed to her heart and snarled, using the speed of a fade-step to step forward and pay the woman back in kind with a punch of her own.

It struck and the Goddess was quick to react. Her hand shot out and grabbed Athena by the throat, lifting her off of the ground until Athena was looking down at the woman. “Enough. You have purpose here, and destiny is calling for you to rise.” Flemeth took a deep breath in through her nose, a wicked smirk curving her lips. “I smell the magic of a Forgotten One on you, child. Have you not yet learned to stop meddling in the affairs of your betters?”

She furrowed her brows and tested the limits of her restraint against the woman. She gripped the hand that was holding her, suddenly getting a malevolent idea. She took in a deep breath through
her nose, summoning her mana to the back of her throat, before breathing out a stream of flame down upon the fabled Witch of the Wilds. Flemeth immediately dropped her and cursed as Athena pushed back and clapped her hands together, summoning a fiery lance. “My betters? You were the ones who ruined the world. If it weren’t for you and your kind, your People wouldn’t need saving in the first place!” She spat out, striking forward with her staff into the cloud of smoke that she left Flemeth in. “You say I was chosen for a purpose? That destiny waits for no one? He left! I am no closer to stopping the Dread Wolf than all of the other possibilities I witnessed from my world!”

A wave of power struck her in the center of the chest and pushed her back half a dozen paces. She clutched her chest and wheezed, looking up just in time to see Flemeth emerge from the smoke, unscathed, with a look of angered disapproval on her face. “You think I traversed across the planes of many worlds for you to warm the bed of a man?” She flicked her wrist out and sent another wave of power through the Fade, causing Athena to toughen her stance to keep from falling to her knees. Still, she slid backward as her feet scraped against the jagged earth below. “The People need someone to lift them up, to guide their path into the future. You have already done so with your daughter.” There was a flicker of happiness amidst the rage in her eyes. “The rest need the same treatment.”

Athena spun her staff in her hand and summoned a barrier between her and the Goddess. “But why me! I am not one of them, I do not have the right to tell them how to live their lives!”

Flemeth turned her head to the side and gestured to her ears. “And do you see a point to my ears, child? Mythal chose me, as I have chosen you. You are not dictating their lives. You are giving them the opportunity to do with them as they please, which is a power they have not had for some time.” She turned her head back and gestured Athena forward with an extension of her hand. “It is something you will need to do... when I am gone.”

Athena gasped, her grip loosening around the staff until it fell from her hands and shattered against the floor of the Fade. Flemeth’s face began to soften into sadness, something that dulled Athena’s rage. “Fen’Elgara, the Sun Wolf, the one who fought back against those who would hurt the people, who has used her power to defend those unable to defend themselves, the one who has walked two worlds, this is what I ask of you. Continue to help them, for I’m sure you learned, you cannot change what fate has already sealed – “ And then the all-knowing smirk she was known for returned. “And theirs has not been.”

She shook her head, chasing away the titles and the hope of thousands of people on her shoulders. It felt like too much, it was suffocating, their expectations clamped around her throat like a vice. It was too much – it was too much to ask. There was a touch on her shoulder and she jerked away but Harmony was there, his own lance in hand, with a confident and cocky smirk on his face. He gestured his head towards her, asking her silently, Wanna take her on?

The thought made her scoff out a laugh.
Flemeth hummed. “You have been chosen by the spirits, who have been granted the power of a thousand of their kind.” She opened her hands and summoned an ironwood staff with a half crescent moon on the top. Vines cascaded down its base to hold an obsidian stave that glimmered from the light of an object floating in the open space of the moon. Her orb. Athena’s orb, radiant as the sun, bobbed in the staff and she could immediately feel its pull. It was hers. Command had used her blood to activate it and bind her to it.

“How did you – “ She started to ask, her words completely hollow in awe.

The Goddess smiled. “You are not the only one with friends in the Fade. Did one of your allies not remind you of someone?”

Command. “Did she work for you the entire time?”

Flemeth shook her head and extended her arm so that the staff was closer to Athena, tempting her, asking her to come forward and drop her guard. “No, do you think one such as she would take orders? She was drawn to you, as I was, but I asked her to watch over you in the Fade.” Athena found herself walking forward with Harmony at her side. She reached forward and took the staff, amazed at how light it felt in her grasp. It just felt right. Her power resonated within it and came to a point, as if the universe’s focus was held within it.

“The vir'abelasan binds you to me and those before you, but you did not take its responsibilities as my daughter did fully of her own will. I promise I will not call on you through it – “ Athena let out a sigh of relief. “Except for this one time.” The Goddess extended her hand and a flow of magic began to flow through her mind. They were memories, abilities, strengthening things she already knew through shapeshifting. They all clicked into place in her mind as if she had had the knowledge for her entire life. It still felt like an invasion of her mind and she gripped her hand into a fist around her staff.

“Protect my daughter in the coming battle. I have seen that harm comes to her and you will prevent this, however you can.” Athena felt the hum of the command within her body and she grit her teeth as it sent an electrical sensation throughout her. However, she nodded and gripped both hands around her staff with a gesture of finality.

“I will do as you say. I . . . do not know whether to thank you or curse you, Flemeth.” Although there wasn’t any sarcasm or humor in her words, the Witch of the Wilds laughed.

“I will accept both, Athena. I will allow you to leave this place, return to your life. As for me, I am finished with my meddling.” Flemeth had a look of acceptance in her features, something final and
unwavering.

Athena shook her head, moving her staff to rest at her side as she reached forward to shake the woman’s hand. She found herself kneeling while raising her hand up, a sad smile on her mouth as she realized what was about to happen to the woman of many ages. “Thank you... for your meddling, Flemeth.” She looked up and met the Goddess’s soft gaze as she took her hand. “Is there nothing I can do for you to avoid your fate?”

Flemeth smiled and patted the top of her hand, gesturing for her to stand with a shake of her head. “The fates you know are set in stone, and mine has been coming for a long time. Mythal’s spirit yearns for vengeance, but I also know of a better way.” She gripped her hand with both of hers, closing her eyes with a deep sigh. “The People are strong, Athena. They have endured so much. I would see them rise into the sunlight and claim back some of what is theirs.”

At the end of her words, a familiar black smoke surrounded her body and took the Goddess away into the Fade, leaving Athena and Harmony standing there by themselves. She took in a deep breath and let it out, smiling at a warm sensation that squeezed around her aura. “It’s safe, Inspiration, you can come out now.”

The spirit flitted into existence with a shimmer of light where Flemeth was standing. She waved the black smoke away with an annoyed look on her face. “Good riddance! I was going to come here and give her a piece of my mind if she didn’t stop.”

Harmony snorted a scoff. “What were you going to do, hug her to death?” His grip on his lance tightened and the other spirit rolled her eyes.

“Like you were doing anything! Athena, are you okay?” The spirit asked, reaching out and touching the woman’s shoulder with a nervous smile.

Athena’s gaze was glued to the staff and the orb that hung within it. It was hers, it was complete and she knew it had been since she felled the dragon of Crestwood by herself. The scar tightened at the memory, but she shook the sensation off with a shudder. The future was hers to shape as she willed, with the help of her friends in the Fade and out of it. “Yeah...actually I am fine. I didn’t think I would be, but, I am.” She looked to both of her spiritual companions with a hopeful smile, flipping the staff until it was upright on her dominant side. “I think we have some work to do, don’t you?”

Harmony grinned and Inspiration smiled with a small sing-song like hum of positivity. Athena walked back towards the eluvian and Inspiration disappeared into the Fade’s energy, but Harmony
followed until she was at the door. She could tell he wanted to ask something, request something of her from the way his posture suddenly tensed and he began biting his lip – a habit he must have picked up from her. *A spirit that dreams of other worlds.* “Not today, my friend. One day soon... I promise.”

“Is... that a promise you can keep?” His voice was soft and almost scared. She turned around to him and gripped his shoulder, the hope never leaving her eyes.

“I think I can. That Witch back there used to do it, why can’t I with my supposed imagination and youthful vigor?” She winked and spun her staff within her hand for emphasis, the orb staying within its mana containment within the crescent moon. The spirit laughed and ran a hand through his hair behind his horns, giving her one last glittering smile before pushing her through the eluvian. It shut behind her with a resounding hum of power, its shining blue turning into an inky black. Rathein and Morrigan were not in the room waiting for her. The Witch probably went to tend to her son while the Inquisitor railed her on the details of her family heritage.

Athena flicked her staff to the other hand, still being amazed by its lightness and how it fit perfectly within her hand. It seemed to sync its magical pulses with the beat of her heart, the breath in her lungs, and it as a synchronicity she could not deny. The new power within her was overwhelming, and she found that it was surging out with every new footstep, analyzing the world around her. The story circle had broken up outside, that much she could tell before she even opened the door. Perhaps there was a way for her to get out with her new addition without being seen?

But there was one person she wanted to show it to, the man who had been there since she began training with it in the first place.

Hopefully, the Tevinter had returned to his little reading nook, and thankfully there was a back way entrance to the library that did not include walking through the rotunda. With a deep breath, Athena gathered her courage and took off to find her brother in arms and blood.
Her suspicion about her brother was correct. The storytelling group had been disbanded due to the Inquisitor and Morrigan’s pressing adventure. Dorian returned with his extra bottles of wine to his corner of the world in the library. Athena kept her head down and tried not to attract any attention. She tried to succeed by casting a mind-fuddling barrier so that people would get a headache when looking at her. She dropped it once she spun and sank into Dorian’s plush armchair.

He stood in front of her, ignoring the staff or her physical state. “Now where have you been, little wolf? Ran away with the Witch and the Inquisitor and never returned from that magic mirror. People talk.”

Athena rolled her eyes and picked up his wineglass, emptying it before sighing. “Oh you know, punched an elven Goddess in the face, debated killing her, the usual mid-day activities.” Apparently her voice carried because there was the sound of a book slamming below them in the rotunda. She grinned, especially when coupled with Dorian’s follow-up quip.

“Sure, and I’m the Queen of Arlathan.” Dorian turned and she felt his gaze travel over her with a judgmental expression. He noted the abrasion on her cheek and the lesions on her arms from defending against Mythal’s attacks. He noted her tattered and Fade-worn clothes. The warmth on her cheek had disappeared which meant that the blood had dried and crusted. When he looked at her, she smiled at him while pouring herself another glass of wine as his expression went from entertained to shock.

Dorian’s expression flicked from her face to the staff, back to her face then to the orb. He held himself up on the bookcase while running a hand through his hair. “What in the blazes did you run into, Athena? Is that...” He pointed at the orb with disbelief and the curiosity of a mad scientist in his eyes. “Is that your orb? How did you get it? This is fantastic news!” He did a small jump of excitement and gripped both of her shoulders, stepping back and putting his hands up in surrender when she winced.

“It’s quite a long story, do you have the time for it? I kind of want to decompress from this before I talk to anyone else about it. It’s... something that’s been a long time coming.” Dorian’s expression softened as he picked up the book and put it back on the shelf.
“Of course, Mata, anything. Where would you like to talk?” He reached forward and tucked a bloodied strand of hair out of her face before bringing forth his kerchief to wipe away some of the wet blood that remained. She touched his hand and held him there, looking up into his caring eyes with a soft smile.

“My tower has a lovely view of the mountains if you don’t mind a small climb.” Dorian nodded before recorking the wine bottle. He placed it in the basket he had grabbed for their day outside and swung it by his side, offering a hand for her to go down the stairs with him. She tensed, knowing where the path led, but she took his hand regardless and walked down the stairs.

There was a chill in the air and she didn’t have to guess why. Dorian, ever dramatic, gestured and projected his voice. “Apologies, dear Solas, you will have to be without my charming company for the rest of the day. Perhaps you can get yourself educated on proper magical history elsewhere.”

Athena bit her tongue so hard she thought it would bleed to keep from smirking but froze when she felt his gaze pierce her. Dorian kept walking yet Athena paused. She gripped her friend’s hand to give her a second and made the mistake of turning to face the source of the frigid chill in the air.

Solas was standing behind his desk with a closed book in his hand, his bottomless empty gaze glossing over her once. She saw his eyes pause on each wound until he looked at her orb. There, at the corner of his lips, there was a flicker of recognition and pride. She did not speak to him, instead she clenched her jaw in anger. He had lost the ability to stand by her side when she rose and helped the people he wanted to leave behind. He did not have the right to be proud.

She turned on her heel without a word, grabbing Dorian’s hand and leading him through the door.

The disgustingly beautiful day remained as she explained what she could on the roof. She omitted the details of Solas and his identity as Fen’Harel, but she knew that speaking of Mythal wouldn’t draw any connections back to him. The talk went on for over an hour and roughly a bottle’s worth of wine until Dorian leaned back against the fragment of wall at his back with a look of awe.

“So what does this all mean? That this old, elvhen witch chose you to do something she couldn’t? To be honest, Athena, I thought you would have tried harder to kill her.” The Tevinter grinned and she opened her mouth wide so he could pop a grape into it easier. She spoke between chews.
“I was tempted. She is not one of my favorite people, but she made a point for me not to change the already known. There is no point in trying to un-paint what fate has already created for us. I’m meant to fill in the lines with my own color, so to speak.” She smirked at him and refilled their wine glasses while the mage considered her words.

“So, don’t try to change what you have seen? Well how much of that is left, really?” Athena gave him a somewhat anxious look.

“Not as much as when I first fell, that is for sure. But there are still some details. Events in the Deep Roads, the Frostback Basin...and an event a few years after this is all over. I might just stay out of them though unless my help is absolutely required.” She took a long drink of wine, sighing as the taste rolled over her tongue. The warm feeling it brought her was similar to when Kain snuggled by her in bed. “Oh. And I might be able to turn into a dragon now.”

Dorian knocked her legs out of his lap and moved to a standing position. He ran his hand through his hair, shock manifesting in every bit of his expression as she scrambled to keep their wine glasses up right. “You can do what now?! How in the blessed bosom of Andraste can you manage that?”

She couldn’t help but laugh at his question, pink flowering from her chest up to her cheeks. “I always knew it was possible, but she did something, gave me the knowledge to do it. I am too terrified to try it out before it’s needed, but the thought is amusing.”

“What in the blasts do you mean ‘before it’s needed?’ Come on, you and I need to go figure this out now.” He began to wrap everything they were eating and drinking in magic, levitating it to the window that led to her loft. Before she had time to argue he wrapped himself in magic and used it to skip the climb and flame-step directly into her tower. “Come now, dragon lady, let’s put some merit to your words!” He called from below.

She rolled her eyes and looked over the wall into the courtyard. Everything seemed normal as it could be through the tint of her tipsiness. At the bottom of the stairs leading to the main hall of Skyhold, she saw the new recruit Nikani walking towards them with a scowl on his face. She furrowed her brows and quickly, and nimbly, climbed down the tower and swung into the loft where Dorian was waiting expectantly. Kain bounced around his feet looking for attention or whatever was in their basket, but the Tevinter shooed him off with a small flick to his head. “Later, you big fur ball. I haven’t had dinner yet, scraps come later.”

Athena wheeled around and looked him mouth agape. “To hell with you and Cullen, both! You’re turning him into a Ferelden lapdog with your table scraps!” She ran down the stairs and plucked a pillow from the bed to throw it at him as he descended. Just as they were about to leave the tower there was a hesitant knock that echoed through the room.
She opened the door to see Nikani standing there, his long brown hair swept in front of half of his face. He tucked it behind his ear and bowed his head. “Fen’Elgara, there is a woman summoning you to the main hall. She has two guests with her wearing masks.”

Athena arched a brow. “Who was it, Nikani? Did she wear a mask too?”

The elf nodded and mimed two horns coming from his head. She knew the person immediately. Vivienne. Her mind raced through the different possibilities before they landed on the most likely one. Madame de Fer’s former lover’s family had come to Skyhold to visit. She was trying to introduce them to the powerful people of the Inquisition to show her own worth in connections. “I will come to her. Was there anything else?

Nikani looked to the sky as he rubbed the back of his neck. “She – uh – I don’t know how to say this without offending, serah. She said to dress appropriately, please.”

Athena clenched her jaw. “Did she actually say please or was that your way of softening?”

This made the messenger smile and relax. “She did. They were waiting near where the dwarf sits by the fire.”

Before he turned to leave, she grabbed his shoulder and kept his gaze on her. “In the future, Nikani. Pay her no heed. If she asks for something, continue to walk on by. You came here to help your People, correct?” The elf nodded quietly with confusion in his features. “She assumed you to be a servant based on the point to your ears. She is one of those who wishes to feel superior to others, including myself, which is why I suspect she sent one of my people. Do not return to her – alright?” She squeezed his shoulder with a small smile and then saw a confident look flash across his face.

“That I can do.” He then took his leave and shut the door behind him. Athena let out a soft groan and gestured to her wardrobe.

“Dorian. . .can you pick something out from the left side? That is where I hid Vivienne’s god awful, boob-exposing outfits she picked out for me before Halamshiral. Something with black in it? I think this is a mourning occasion.” He fought to hide a laugh, throwing open the doors and closing the drawer in the bottom left she had failed to shut that morning.
He filed through the different outfits until he pulled something out that was dark green with accents of black. It wasn’t one of the worse things she had in there, but she knew the heels that went with it would hurt her feet. He arched a brow and presented it to her, looking over her quickly. “We should put your hair up with this one. Want me to help?”

Athena sighed as she ran the tips of her fingers over the soft fabric. “Mata, you are a lifesaver.”

Within fifteen minutes she was in the Orlesian garb, wound into a corset, with her hair braided and twisted high into a sleek bun. The outfit had a high collar that rested at her jaw line but then opened to make a window above her breasts. It had long, ornate sleeves that went down to her hand. It extended to with a loop over her middle finger that pulled the fabric up. It hugged and then flared out where the top of her thigh-high boots started, just barely giving a glance of flesh. Had it been any other day, she probably would have loved this kind of outfit.

But starting with the emptiness of her bed, then seeing Flemeth, all she wanted to do was drink and fall asleep in Dorian’s bed that night. Hers still probably smelled of Solas. Her heels clicked as she descended her stairs and walked across the courtyard with her new staff in hand. The way it fit... she could foresee it becoming a kind of security blanket. Blackwall gave her a nod of greeting as she walked past him and she could only return the same. She felt if she moved too much the window in the fabric above her chest would tear and then everyone would get to know her a little too well. By the time she had made it to the hall many people had already retired after dinner.

It was only the stragglers that spent their evenings on the couches and chairs that lined the main carpet which led up to the throne. Vivienne and her visitors were standing near Varric, who looked somewhat annoyed as he tried to go through his letters. She turned and greeted Athena with a smile. “Darling, you look splendid.” She bent down and Athena went through the custom of kissing both cheeks with a smile as sincere as she could make it curving her lips. “Thank you for coming. I wasn’t sure if that boy would know where to find you. He is one of your new ones, is he not?”

Athena could only smile with pride. “Nikani? Yes he came to us while I was in recovery, you see. You have visitors?” The two masked Orlesians bowed their heads with a smile while Vivienne presented her.

“My dears, this is our dear Sorcière Athena Wolfsbane, Hand of the Inquisitor. This is some of Bastien’s family. They have already met with the Inquisitor and she showed them the Keep and some of the paintings in the rotunda.” If she suspected a reaction, she did not get it, for Athena could only gesture towards the area with a smile. She noticed that Varric had stopped writing and looked up over the top of his glasses to see what she was going to say.
“Yes, our Fade advisor has worked diligently on them and it shows.” She then smoothed out the front of her gown with a coy smile. “But I do not suspect you summoned me to talk about Skyhold’s beautiful works, the artist himself could give you more insight. What can I offer you today?”

Vivienne smirked and gestured over to the piano. “They have heard of your stories and your performance in the Winter Palace of Halamshiral. I did not want to presume, but would you be able to give them something as we finish our meeting? That is if you do not mind.” There was something pleading in her words, Athena saw it as a flicker in the back of her normally reserved gaze. She nodded and flexed her hands to warm them up.

“Something wordless, I assume, Madame Vivienne? I do not wish to distract from your conversation.” The mage nodded as Athena walked to her piano. She ran her hands over the keys with a smile as she set her staff to lean against the side. The orb had gone dormant since she was not channeling any power to it. It levitated between the two points of her staff and turned a deep maroon since power was not lighting its surface. But as she ran her hands over the keys, life flickered to its surface. Athena then moved it towards the other side near the wall so it wouldn’t draw too much attention.

Vivienne and her guests sat in chairs at the edge of the piano and talked as Athena began to play. The first was a playful, airy song from the soundtrack of one of her favorite movies. It held a nostalgic and loving tone, she could not help but sway into the notes as she played. Varric picked up his quill, and she shot a glance over to him, shaking her head while mouthing ‘no words’. He winked back at her, snapping his gloved fingers before returning to his work.

One song bled into another and after the first half hour Varric returned the requests jar to the top of the piano. The theme was still wordless songs, so she spent the next few hours of her evening playing through them, smiling at each gold, silver, or copper coin dropped into the next empty jar meant for tips. The orphans had plenty to give them a new space, so she had to think of a cause for this round. Perhaps funding for the elves’ new home? Skyhold would not be theirs forever, soon they would need a haven for them to sink their roots into.

That cause seemed good enough.

During her playing, Dorian sat down on the armchair opposite Varric and opened the book she had stolen him away from. It looked Tevene, but the two men went about their business without exchanging more than pleasantries. From what she could see, both parties appreciated the shared company.
At the end of every song, Vivienne would make some gesture of appreciation towards her, whether it be a raise of her wine glass or a subtle nod. There was something tender in that moment, like she was asking for something to distract her from the mourning of her lover in front of his family. They both had appearances to maintain, and for a moment Athena caught herself knowing exactly what she had meant all of those months ago in Halamshiral.

Women like us.

The statement had initially brought her such anger, it drove her into a crisis of self identity. She did not want to be a powerful woman who had to monitor every action she made or watch every word she said. That kind of life seemed exhausting to her, especially when it was all for appearances. She had learned to put sincerity into her actions and words, and whatever happened afterwards was out of her control. Athena strove to live as genuinely as possible within the world of Thedas and the middle of the Game. Each had a song and dance, and at times she was forced to dance.

This time, however, she would play.

The night dragged on and soon it was only curious Inner Party members who filled the main hall besides Vivienne and her family. Bull and the Inquisitor were playing a chess game lit by mage light towards the throne with Sera watching. Cole was sitting next to Athena listening to her play the piano. He knew the correct time to ask questions, most of which were aimed at what the song was or what it meant. Cassandra and Josephine were reading over the newest chapter of Swords and Shields that Rathein had apparently urged their resident author to write. The women were in such a state of utter focus, they didn’t notice when Sera began throwing crumpled up pieces of paper at them from across the hall. Blackwall sat at Josephine’s side and whittled away at a small object in his hand. It looked like a wolf marker, and she suddenly wondered if he was the craftsman behind all the War Tables pieces. Even Cullen and Zevran had found their way into the main hall. They occupied two of the plush chairs near the entrance and she overheard them talking of the Crows and the Blight. Varric and Dorian moved from their silent companionship to card games but they remained quiet. It was if the entire Inquisition enjoyed the moment of peace that the music within the hall brought and cherished every second they could be distracted from the imminent chaos that surrounded all of them.

The only one not present in the main hall was Solas, but when her music soared through the air her aura had a terrible habit of following. He was within the rotunda finishing up the piece depicting the Temple of Mythal. It was the final completed fresco, save for the dragon and wolf outline found after the events of Corypheus. When would he start working on that, Athena wondered?

At the conclusion of her next song Vivienne stood and walked her company out the doors of the main hall. The Iron Lady rested her hand on the piano with a polite smile on her face. The two masked nobles made their way through the side door and out to the section where Josephine had set up guest rooms for them. The moment they were out of sight, the mage visibly sagged.
Vivienne removed her mask, and she rubbed the bridge of her nose.

Athena was stunned, her fingers hesitating over the keys, eyebrows arched to ask the silent question of what had changed.

Vivienne looked over, the grief of the day weighing on her features. “Are you still taking requests, Lady Wolfsbane?” It sounded as if there was a struggle to keep the strength in her words, but Vivienne still sounded as poised as ever.

Athena could only nod. The mage cleared her throat and returned to her chair, her request ringing out through the hall. “Something to match the day then.”

The request felt loaded, heavy with grief and strife. What a day. Had it been the same for them all? Was there something in the air that them on edge? Or could they feel the strain of their comrades and shared it in a gesture of solidarity? Cole put his hand on her thigh, so it must have been the latter. Athena cleared her throat and glanced over towards Varric to catch his gaze. He slowly looked up from his card game, recognizing the expression on her face immediately. She nodded and gestured to his quill and paper before turning back to the piano.

This was a song she knew well and one that went through her mind during passing moments. Her heart was heavy like iron and she could feel it growing cold from rejection. The Iron Lady, the name seemed suddenly fitting if Vivienne had gone through the kind of life Athena could only assumed she had. It was a way to survive, she supposed. Her fingers twitched over the keys and she took a deep breath, drawing on the power of her orb to surge the music through the Keep. The gardens, the library, the rotunda, she hoped that everyone who shared their emotions could absorb the song.

The beginning notes were solemn and slow as Athena summoned her confidence. The melody repeated until she gained the bravery to begin singing. “I heard there was a secret chord, that David played and it pleased the Lord. . . But you don’t really care for music do you?”

She thought she heard a faint gasp from behind her, but she shook it off and swayed to the slow rhythm of the song. At first the words came in a slow speaking voice, the emotions breaking through when memories flashed across her mind with the lyrics. But after a phrase or two, she found her singing voice and was truly able to communicate the song. Her orb flared with her change in emotion, coursing the music through the very foundation of the Keep.

“Well it goes like this - the fourth the fifth - the minor fall the major lift. The baffled king composing hallelujah.” The words stretched on as she went through the chorus, each one carrying a
different tone or meaning. Hallelujah was initially made to be spiritual, which she realized she had never explained to her Thedosian companions. It wouldn’t have quite the same flow if she had been singing “Thank the Maker” repeatedly. There was something about the foreign word, something whose true meaning was probably lost to time, that tugged at everyone differently.

“Well your faith was strong, but you needed proof. You saw her bathing on the roof. Her beauty and the moonlight overthrew you.” Tears pricked the edges of her eyes when the memory of their first night together went through her mind. They had been bathing in the abandoned ruins in the Exalted Plains. He had been setting wards near the entrance while she was scraping their days travels off in the water. The moonlight reflected off of the golden tiles in the well preserved bath, ancient enchantments keeping the water pure and perfect for them. That memory felt like it was a lifetime ago, a lifetime full of pain.

“She tied you to a kitchen chair, she broke your throne and cut your hair. And from her lips she drew a hallelujah – “ Vivienne made a hum of sorrow as she listened, her head resting against the armchair with her arms draped over the side. Her eyes were closed, but Athena knew if she looked closely, there would probably be a sign of tears. Cole’s hand felt warm on her thigh and she could feel his magic trying to comfort her, but she shrugged it off.

There was no comfort to be found in this song. That wasn’t what it was meant for.

“Baby, I’ve been here before, I’ve seen this move and I’ve walked the floor. I used to live alone before I knew you.” She closed her eyes and shook her head, fingers dancing over the keys as the piano hummed beneath her touch. It thrived off of her new magic and it created a fuller sound that spread through the air of the Keep. “But I’ve seen your flag on the marble arch, our love is not a victory march! It’s a cold. . . and it’s a broken hallelujah!”

The singing stopped as she became breathless, the weight of the words sitting like a rock in her chest. The melody continued beneath her fingers but she could not form the words to sing that blessed word. It flowed silently within the melody, raising itself to the top of the hall as it resonated within them all. The magic within the piano intertwined with her spirit and allowed it to soar, bringing all of her emotions through the day with it.

She had hoped to be stronger, but tears stung at the edges of her eyes. Even though she was at peace with everything that had happened, it was all too much. Too many losses, too many expectations, too many memories edged with pain.

“Maybe there is a God above, but all I’ve ever learned from love, is how to shoot at somebody who outdrew you.” She swallowed down her nerves, her lips twitching into a smirk as Cole rubbed her back with a concerned look on his face. He seemed to be at a loss for how to help her. She wanted to be held, she wanted to run in the woods, she wanted to drink with her friends and forget
about the day, and she wanted to take a breath for herself. “It’s not a cry that you can hear at night, it’s not someone who has seen the light, it’s a cold and broken hallelujah!”

The key changed within the song and the mood in the hall shifted. The new notes were like a breath of fresh air as she repeated the word within the swell of the music. She drew all of her magic and music back from the edges of the Keep into the safety of her heart. Like vines they crept back from where they had surged until she spoke the final Hallelujah into existence, the note floating into the air until she let out a sigh heavy with burden and smoothed her fingers over the keys as a gesture of finality. The Iron Lady took a deep breath and sighed, nodding from her relaxed position in the chair. “Yes. That will do.”

Athena caught her gaze and fought to put the emotions back into her heart so they would stay off her face. Her hands trembled, but she fisted them into the fabric of her gown and nodded back at the mage. She wrapped her magic around her staff and summoned it to her hand. She wheeled on her heel and turned towards the door so she could escape the stares of her family and comrades and all the questions that would follow.

Kain followed at her heel, summoned by the sudden urge to run within her heart that resonated in their shared connection. Hunt. Run. He pressed through her mind, knowing it was exactly what she needed. She wanted to be stripped of her skin, of her titles, and just meld into the trees for the night. It had been so long, would her body even remember how to do it? The thrill of the wild surged through her and she relinquished herself to do it, her feet taking off into a sprint once they reached the bottom of the stairs.

The drum of her heart was so loud. It was being beaten into her head by the Call of the Wild. It distracted her, deafened her, and she was unable to hear the door of the rotunda opening and then slamming. She was unable to hear the desperate cry of her name being called out into the night air by the God who had been listening to her song the entire time.

Chapter End Notes

Song:

Hallelujah- KD Lang
Betad by morgalahan.

Sorry it has been so long, folks. I was finishing up a chaotic travel work assignment and then helped my friend move by driving a moving truck 24 hours by myself over 2 days. I'm at home and settled, but am still starting a new job so maybe a few more tumultuous weeks and we'll be back to normal. <3

The forest was home. The forest was longing.

The longing to lose herself within her fur and the scent of her family around her. They didn’t need to hear her howl, they could feel the drumming of her heart and the call through the Wild. Claw had been near the Keep so he brought half a dozen of his pack. The others were still protecting the Halani Clan at the base of the mountain. Some of the wolves had even begun to train with the warriors of the Dalish under Keeper Hamel like the Emerald Knights of old. That thought brought her pride. It was yet another thing of the past they were reclaiming for themselves.

The first shift back was painful, but only for a second. The magic caught on something in her lower belly, like a claw on cloth. She pushed past it and felt the power of her staff and orb absorb into her body. Her aura lifted in little wisps of ethereal flame from her fur as she ran. There was a blur of blonde next to her, and she could tell that a teenaged wolf had caught the urge to hunt as well. Leafy shifted and had a wicked grin on her maw, eyes lit ablaze with excitement as she, her mother, and Kain ran through the woods as one.

It felt nostalgic hunting with them together. She had been denying herself the pleasure of being with them, as if she didn’t deserve it for what had happened to all of them. Her soul cried out; it had needed this, more than she realized. In a moment of joy and triumph, Athena paused on the crest of a hill and let out a howl that shook the bark of every tree. Leafy, Kain, and the rest of the pack joined in, the combination of their howls sending a shudder of delight down her spine.

But, in the distance, she heard the running of another wolf, one who did not join in the hunting cry. Athena turned her gaze back towards the path behind her. The power of her orb swirled within her, and she felt a warm sensation above her eyes where it originated. There was a familiar kind of gravity, one that created a vacuum tunnel that led directly back to the source. The presence of the Dread Wolf was distracting in their night of freedom. He thought he could chase after her and instantly hope to gain her forgiveness? Did he think that the song had been for him? Her heart
longed to meet him, but she was not so weak. She barked an order to the pack to keep moving so she could deal with their intruder alone. Leafy and Kain corralled the others and kept moving forward. Athena’s lips pulled back in a snarl as she jumped over the wolves to stand at the entrance to their clearing, nothing but vitriol and rage in her gaze.

“You do not have the right!” She screamed in the language of the Wild, a garbled snarl echoing down the tunnel until it hit The Dread Wolf as he stopped paces in front of her. He was panting heavily, as if he had sped after her from the Keep, but she did not care. She would not comfort him in his self-inflicted grief. Her song was not a cry for his return, it was a piece for all of them, and for her to express her feelings so that she could move on and leave him to his self pity.

The Dread Wolf took a step forward but she did it in turn, waves of power coming from her as if she were the sun itself. “You. Have. No. Right.” She uttered again, stepping towards him with such aggressive intent that he began to back away from her. She could see the sadness on his features, the regret, but she supposed it would have to be another chip he decided to carry on his shoulders. This was not a moment where he could run back to her arms and apologize for hurting her. Not yet. Her magic moved from her like fire, creeping up the trees and wrapping around them like vines. Her intent to refuse must have been so strong, for one of the trees lifted its root and slammed them down in front of the Dread Wolf.

He blinked at it, confused, as if they were both seeing a vision. Athena did the same, but then a wicked smile curved her lips as the tree bent down and swung towards him with one of its branches, its bark contorting until there were two very prominent looking eye lines staring down at the would-be God. As it swung the wolf jumped back, a shimmer of magic wrapping around his body until Solas stood before it with his hands outstretched in surrender. There was nothing but shock on his face as the Sylvan moved its branches to fend him away from its master.

Leafy came to Athena’s side with worry and awe on her face. She nudged her nose into her mother’s neck and let out a soft whine. Athena shook her head and held her posture high, nudging Leafy away so she would not see Solas. The young wolf went back to her pack but she turned back to her former mate, scoffing at the pleading glance he gave her from the shadows. Their eyes met and she could see the fight within his spirit. He wished to stay, but the hurt between them was clear. He clenched his fists then let out a sigh and melded back into the shadows at his back. The Sylvan then let out a roar of warning before turning back towards its summoner to await her next order. Athena blinked and walked to it, unsure of what to do with it next. She was aware that Flemeth had used Sylvans in the past when dealing with Loghain and Maric when they had stumbled into her camp. They were typically spirits that crossed over through the Veil when summoned by a mage.

Had she done that by accident? Knowing her unruly emotions...
could draw on her emotions and project them through the spiritual world when she tapped into that power. She rolled her eyes and let out a sigh, itching the bridge of her nose with both of her paws before glancing up towards the Sylvan. It was swaying in the night breeze, and for a second she thought it looked happy. “What was your name before you crossed?”

The tree took in a deep breath and answered simply with a deep, gravelly voice that set the pack on edge. “Rage.”

Ah. She had a tendency to draw those in. It came with her quick-fire personality and temper. Leafy glared at the being but Athena looked up at the tree, tilting her head with a wicked smirk on her face. “There is a place within the Dales, called the Emerald Graves. Have you seen this before in your travels of the Fade?”

The Sylvan hummed and then nodded, turning to face down the mountain with a sigh. “Many of my kind are drawn to that place. It was a site of carnage at the hands of men.”

“Yes – but I strive to take it back. There is a great bear there named Old Scarred Paw. Travel to him, find him, and tell him you came from me. I wish for you to seek out elven ruins or a place where we could rebuild again. I trust this in you, Sylvan. Travel by night, do not be seen. You are a rarity in these parts and I would not see you harmed.”

The tree began to move as silently as it could through its other barked kin. The way it moved, it almost appeared as a shadow of the forest guided by the wind. She took a deep breath and felt the wind run through her fur. It carried the scents of the Keep and the creatures within the woods. It felt like she could sense everything around her, as if her magic were coursing through the roots of the plants themselves.

It made her feel closer than ever to the forest, and it helped fill all of the cracks of her heart and soul that had been left by recent events. Leafy pressed her nose into her ear and nibbled along her jaw in an attempt to get her attention. Athena playfully snapped back, licking the tip of her daughter’s nose before breaking off into a run. Kain and Leafy followed, then Claw and his part of the pack that he had brought.

They hunted until dawn. There were cries, howls, and cheers from the wolves with each victory that echoed throughout the night. They feasted on rabbit and ram, and played in a creek that was clear as crystal. It was a night of spiritual release, and Athena was glad to be able to reconnect with
her family that had been there since Haven. As the sun rose over Skyhold, the wolves had found a small glen to sleep in as the exhausted, scratched up, and smiling pair of Athena and Leafy staggered back to Skyhold with Kain at their heels.

Illrith was on guard duty and saw them approaching with a wicked smile curving his lips. The dark-haired elf bent down and caught Leafy as she nearly fell to her knees from a long night’s hunt. He readjusted her in his arms and looked at her with a kind of fatherly tenderness in his eyes. “A good night, I’m assuming then, Fen’Elgara?” He smiled and glanced back at Athena who was assessing all of the healing scrapes on her arms and legs.

The outfit she had worn to play for Vivienne was ripped to shreds. What remained was tattered remains that barely covered her torso and legs. The heels had been torn apart by the wolves as part of a game somewhere in the woods. She walked across the bridge barefoot while braiding Leafy’s hair so that it wouldn’t be blowing in her face with the morning winds. They arrived at the courtyard and she walked her own master of secrets to their quarters. Illrith laid Leafy in the same bed as Loranil and the red-headed elf lazily threw an arm over her to bring her in close before falling back asleep.

“We all sleep better together. Alienages, the Dalish, many of us just had to stick together and lonely nights did not help the nerves.” Illrith whispered while looking over a room full of his people, a nostalgic smile on his face.

“I can appreciate that. Ever since I’ve had Kain, it’s also really hard to sleep alone.” There must have been a surge of want on her face, because Illrith nudged her towards an empty space at Lithari’s back with Nikani on the other side.

“You are exhausted. Lay your staff under the bed and rest with us. Kain can keep watch with me at the front of the bridge.” Athena barely had the energy to argue. Instead she rubbed the back of her neck and surrendered to her exhaustion and the welcoming scent of the group. They were her family, and damn but that bed looked comfortable. She crawled in next to Nikani and let out a sigh at how warm everything felt. The young recruit rolled over and furrowed his brows, waking up momentarily to look at her through a sleep-clouded haze. His eyes widened, he assessed her up and down, but then smiled and accepted her presence while grabbing her arm and bringing it closer to his chest before falling back asleep.

That combined with Lithari’s back at her side, was all she needed. Athena quickly wrapped herself into a veil of sleep and entered the Fade willingly. She found herself in a new corner of the dreamscape. Perhaps it was due to the dreams of those that surrounded her or from her hunt the night prior, but everything felt so alive and green. Hanging willow trees created a canopy above her and she lifted and did a full spin on her heel to take it all in. She felt someone enter her dream and so she turned with a wistful smile on her face, eyebrows instantly raising when she saw who had found her.
Abelas walked in and immediately removed his hood, a knowing smirk on his face. Did he ever truly smile? “I presume that you spoke with the All-Mother. Your aura filled the Fade tonight.” Athena scoffed and gestured around her. “I see the connection you spoke of. Is that why the well rejected me? Because I already had a piece inside of me?”

The elf nodded slowly, gesturing to a bench that he summoned between them. She walked over and plopped herself down on one side while he gracefully lowered himself next to her. “Precisely so. We were instructed to not speak of it if we were to come across you. Now that is no longer relevant since you are aware the condition of your entry to this world.”

She relaxed into her side of the bench and leaned back to take in a deep breath of the Fade. “Yeah. It clarifies a lot of things. I feel this pull when I’m in the in between of the eluvians, like I know where I’m going even though I’ve never been there. It’s an annoying itch, but helpful.”

Abelas nodded and looked at the Fade, running his hands through a wisp as it passed by in front of them as if it were cascading water. “Use this time to learn your power, expand it until you can master it as your own. I would do it fast, considering your emotions already drew a spirit over into a tree.”

She winced playfully, rubbing the back of her neck with a childish smirk. “You noticed, huh? That was an accident, but, a useful one. The Sylvan is going to scout out a place for the People in a segment of the Dales.”

The elf slowly turned and narrow his gaze at her with an arched brow. “You would do such a thing?”

Athena nodded before clapping her hands on the top of her knees to push herself to stand. “Of course. They can’t grow within the walls of Skyhold, it is no longer a place of their own. They need some land protected where they are free. Free to worship who they choose, free to grow, and free to simply live.” There was a bright light in front of her in the Fade, and she instantly knew it was coming from the physical world. Before she could even say goodbye to her dream partner, there was a curse in Common to her right and a protective squeeze around her abdomen.
“She’s still sleeping? It is almost noon and if we are going to Redcliffe we need to – “ The voice of the Inquisitor broke through the few that were still sleeping and ripped them all from their dreams. Nikani protectively flexed his arm over Athena and looked over his shoulder at the party that was trying to get a peek through the door frame.

Lithari, the bald mage advisor, had a hold of Athena’s other arm and her head nestled into the crook of Athena’s neck. The trio glanced up at Rathein, Varric, and Solas in the doorway with a mixture of emotions. She could tell Nikani’s was angry so she flattered her hand against his belly and made a noise of ease while sitting up in the bed. The Inquisitor arched a single brow, crossing her arms over her chest with an entertained expression on her face.

“Now what is this? Stay out late last night, sister?” There was a knowing smirk on her lips and Athena simply shrugged while pushing her hair out of her face.

“I’m positive you heard us. It felt really good to be out there again. I hadn’t been hunting since before. . . “ She saw Solas glance away with a look of shame and Varric filled in the silence with his usual chuckle.

“Since you got a taste for dragon? I’m sure ram is boring compared to that. I don’t blame you, Walker.” Athena gave the dwarf a glance of gratitude before addressing the group.

“Well let’s see here: The Inquisitor, Solas, and Varric. Let me guess, where is Cole?” As if summoned by his name alone the spirit appeared at the edge of the bed. Lithari and Nikani didn’t even flinch at his presence, which filled her chest with a warm sense of pride. They were not afraid of the unknown. They embraced it, used it to make themselves stronger. Even the new recruit could do that. The spirit tilted his head and then pointed to his chest, to the amulet he was wearing.

“This. . . hurts, doesn’t fit right. But, you knew that already.” He paused a beat and she saw a flash of sadness go over his face. “Will you come with me?”

She appreciated the fact that he said me instead of us. Athena nodded with a smile, wrenching her way out of the pile of bodies. “Without a doubt, Cole. Do we have time for me to change first?”

Rathein and Varric both chuckled under their breath but Solas gave a curt nod, still looking away from her and the pile of other elves she was in. Was he jealous? Even if it wasn’t romantic? Athena furrowed her brows and smiled back at her two sleeping companions. “Thank you. This was the. . . best sleep I’ve gotten in over a month.”
There was a bristle from one of the four in front of her as the two elves smiled at her, squeezing a hand or thigh before she got up and pushed her way through the group. “I’ll meet you at the gate in ten. Cole – “ She reached out her hand and summoned her staff. It whipped to it from the front of the bed and sounded with a clap when it hit her hand. “Want to help me pack? You look like you need something to distract you and I’m sure your two dads aren’t helping anything.”

The two men glanced at one another. Solas scoffed softly as Varric laughed. Athena held Cole’s hand and walked through the courtyard, ignoring the glances of everyone that saw her in her tattered gear. She paid them no mind. Instead she gave a sharp whistle and summoned Kain from his spot on the bridge so Cole would have something to pet while she packed. The wolf came at a running speed and nearly knocked them over as they approached the door of her tower. Cole sat on the bed and scratched him behind the ears, idly bringing a scrap of food from his pocket and tossing it to the begging animal.

_Gods damn you, Cullen._ She murmured in her mind at the sight. He was the one that started that trick, probably. Cole glanced up from beneath the brim of his hat. “Would you bind me, Athena? You like spirits too – and have turned demons into spirits! You wouldn’t hurt me.”

Athena quickly changed in front of him into a pair of plain pants and a sleeveless shirt that would match her sister’s. This wasn’t an Inquisition trip; there was no need to put on airs. She pulled her hair up into a ponytail and tied it tight with a piece of string. “Cole. You know I can’t, well, won’t. Plus you don’t want me to bind you, I might accidentally put you in a tree.”

He tilted his head. “You can do that?”

She stopped to laugh, rolling a spare change of clothes into her traveling bag. She looked over to the lute resting near her door and then glanced at Cole. _Want me to bring it?_ She asked inside her head, knowing full well he could hear her. He nodded and she grabbed it without more probing. “Apparently I can. It happened last night by accident, but he is doing some good now.”

“You bound a demon. . . but it does good?” Athena was at a loss for words, tapping the tip of her big toe against the ground. It didn’t feel right to shove them into boots against after a night of hunting, so she dug out the old foot wrappings that the Halani clan had given her when she stayed with them.

“I guess, because it is what I told it to do. It could turn around and do something bad, if that was my wish. I did not intend to bind it, but I have seen similar ones of its kind in the past and they weren’t all inherently bad.” She smiled. “One even spoke in rhymes.” She fastened her staff to her back and walked with her bag and lute in one arm. Kain whined and she shook her head. “Not today, buddy. Stay and watch out for Leafy for me, okay? She outdid herself last night.”
The wolf barked back his understanding before running off towards the sleeping quarters of her people. Cole and Athena approached the main gate where Varric, Rathein, and Solas were already mounted. Rathein grinned and gave her sister a thumbs up. Athena tried to position her things so that Cole could ride with her on the way down. She pushed herself up onto Prince’s back and scooted forward so that Cole could appear behind her if he wished. She tucked a stray hair and looked to the Inquisitor, trying not to react with Solas being so close on his mount at her side. “Shall we then?”

The journey to Redcliffe was short but quiet. The conversation was difficult to keep up and most of the time Athena would just hum different songs to make Cole feel better. Varric asked for verification of lyrics that he had written down over the months of listening to her and that took up a large chunk of her time. He had been listening more than she thought. There were over two dozen songs included in this book, accompanied by the stories or situations that he felt were influenced by them. He was quite a marvelous writer.

They retired in a tavern in Redcliffe, the same one that they had stayed in when Dorian met his father. Cole felt like the “catch” in his chest he was searching for would be found the next day. Athena sat on the couch with Cole resting between her legs. Her hands absent mindedly stroked through his hair. He said it helped, that it felt like “soft pulls away from the pain.” Solas and Varric were continuing their debate over the boy’s fate in front of a very unamused Rathein.

“I get that you like spirits, Chuckles, but he came into this world to be a person. Let him be one.” Varric plead to the stiff elf sitting across from him.

Rathein leaned forward from her position at the end of the couch where Athena and Cole’s feet were resting. “If I see a way to protect Cole without taking away... whatever he is. I’ll use it. But he needs our help, Solas.”

Solas furrowed his brow and shook his head, glaring at Varric. “This is not some fanciful story, Child of the Stone. We cannot simply change our nature by wishing.”

Varric huffed under his breath. “You don’t think?”

Athena couldn’t help it. She groaned softly and sat up more while trying not to snap at Solas.
He stilled and slowly looked over at her, a slight bit of surprise in his gaze. She couldn’t tell if he was surprised at her addition to the conversation or that she was even speaking to him directly. Varric silently asked for clarification with a gesture and she continued. “When I first met my spiritual friends, they were demons of Desire and Rage.” She tore her gaze away from Solas and focused on the dwarf. “After a time, they changed. Desire became Inspiration and Rage became Harmony. From what I understand, spirits are reflections of what we can feel in the Fade. Is that incorrect, Solas?”

He curtly shook his head, his gaze focused now on the fire with an expression of sadness in his eyes. “Essentially.”

Rathein smirked and patted the top of Athena’s legs in a gesture of comfort. “Well. We should probably get some rest before whatever happens tomorrow.” The Inquisitor nudged Varric. “Ready to head to bed?” Athena stilled and tried to hide her subtle glare at her sister.

The dwarf couldn’t help but grin, clapping his hands together. “Sure. You know I like the bed by the window.” The two escaped upstairs and Athena shot them a glare. Rathein looked back from over the stair rail and gestured towards Solas while mouthing Talk. It. Out. Athena responded with a flick of her wrist and a pulse of magic that would smack her sister on the behind as she walked up the stairs. She then sat back on the couch and sighed, continuing to run her hands through Cole’s hair as the boy fought to not ring his hands in a gesture of nerves. Who had he picked that up from?

“You met Mythal.” Solas stated matter of factly, his gaze never leaving the fire at his side.

“Yes, I did.” Athena answered between clenched teeth. She fought not to meet his eye, but she let out a hiss with a shake of her head. “I’m not exactly sure where I stand with her.”

There was a flicker of a smirk on the corner of his lips. “You tried to fight her, from what I heard.”

She rolled her eyes, finally looking over at him. “And she fought back. I had just cause, Solas. Give me some credit.” Cole moved his head to look up at her, knitting his brows and it didn’t take long for her to feel the pressure of his influence in her mind. He was getting better at doing it slowly as an odd way to ask permission first, so she let him. He read the thoughts and memories at the front of her thoughts. She saw them playing across Cole’s gaze.
“The Breach... was bright, so bright. She watched through a window and then reached through. She reached through looking like something she was not and came back with you.” Cole finished with wide eyes, tilting his head to an angle in her lap. “She brought you.”

Solas gasped, his hands gripping against the chair as he closed his eyes in a calm moment of concentration. Athena blinked away tears and nodded in response to Cole’s question, moving her hands from his hair to his shoulders. “She has always meddled in the affairs of history. It makes sense that my life was no different.” To keep from rambling she pressed her tongue into the roof of her mouth as hard as she could. Athena looked up towards the stairs and felt the day’s exhaustion settle into her bones. “You were not hurt the other night, were you?”

He flicked his gaze over at her and shook his head. “No. Merely startled. It had been many years since I had seen a creature of its kind. Where did you send it?”

Athena tapped Cole’s shoulder and began to sit up, wiping her hands down her pants to smooth out all of the wrinkles. “The Dales.” Solas arched a brow, silently pressing for more information but she shook her head. What she wanted to create, a haven for her people, meant it was a haven even from him. The Inquisition was already riddled with his spies but she did not want to open the door to the Dread Wolf’s army. “I am going to retire for the night. Cole, you should get some rest too.”

Cole readjusted on the couch and had an expression of confusion. “I don’t know if I can.”

She turned and offered her hand to him, a soft smile on her face. “Then I’ll play a story in the Fade that you can watch while I sleep. You shouldn’t be alone tonight.” The boy looked to Solas in an odd fatherly exchange of permission before the elf nodded. Cole got up from the couch and grabbed Athena’s hand. They silently moved up the stairs and walked by the room where Varric was already snoring and Rathein was rummaging through her bag. They moved past until they were in the next room which thankfully had two beds in it.

“Well they aren’t that cruel at least...” She whispered to herself. She took the bed by the wall and left Solas the one with the window. He sometimes liked to wake up to natural sunlight. She remembered that it reminded him of when he was living in the woods before he came to Haven. She shrugged off her jacket and threw it over the edge of the bed before getting as close to the wall as possible, patting the bed next to her for Cole to sit down.

He sat upright with his back against the headboard and with her back facing him. Just as she was about to fall asleep, he touched his knuckles against her back. “Athena... do you know what is going to happen tomorrow?”
She grumbled into her pillow but then eventually nodded, turning over with her forearm resting on her head. “Yeah, buddy. I do. What do you want to know?”

He brought his knees to his chest and rested his chin on top of them. “Will you help me tomorrow? I do not know what is going to happen. . . but I do not want to be taken.”

Athena rolled towards him and put her hand on his knee, shaking her head with a soft smile. “You won’t. Everyone is here for you, Cole. We’re all here to help you.”

“Here. . . for me?” He asked softly and she reaffirmed it with a smile.

“Yes Cole. For you.”
A Choice

The night was still.

Athena didn’t even hear when Solas came into the room, but Cole hesitated in the Fade and she assumed that had to be the reason. They spent the night watching movies from her world and talking with Inspiration and Harmony. Cole tended to gravitate towards the happier spirit most of the time, but Harmony was able to help with the conflict he was feeling that night. Movies melted down to music and it ended up being a quiet series of dreams for her. She sat back on a grassy hill and watched the memories float by as the spirits talked at the bottom of the glen.

She could feel others walking along the edge of her dreamscape. Abelas. Solas. Command.

But none of them entered.

She woke to a nervous Cole flitting in and out of existence between her bed and Solas’s. They both groaned in unison and Athena was the first to snap and grab Cole’s arm to get him to stop. He was standing between their two beds, hands nearly shaking at his side.

“The wrong feeling – it is getting closer. We need to leave.” The spirit then popped out of visibility and she heard the same pop next door, followed by a string of curses from Varric and Rathein both. Athena and Solas sat up in bed and went through their series of stretches and groans. She couldn’t help but still feel oddly domestic watching him go through his movements and morning ritual. It hadn’t changed. There were some days where he was not a morning person and apparently this was one of them. He reached towards the ceiling and tilted his neck from side to side before rolling his wrists a few times until things he looked satisfied.

Athena had to quickly look away so he didn’t see her gaze on him, even though he probably knew. He was more observant than anybody gave him credit for. She patted around in the bed for her hair tie and pulled her hair up from her face into a swirled updo that Josephine had taught her how to do. “Sleep well?” Solas asked her from the other bed as he got up and began to get dressed. His tone was polite yet cautious, as if he were testing the waters and boundaries of her tolerance.

She shrugged and looked from him to the new shirt she had just pulled from her bag, unsure if she should just raise a sheet between them or leave the room to change. Before they were together, the lot of them had bathed in the rivers in front of one another and seen each other in various phases of nudity. But it was different after being intimate with him. She knew even if she turned her back he would be able to remember every curve and freckle on her skin. He must have seen the hesitation in her face because a flash of understanding went through his expression and he turned around.
“I was doing my best to cheer Cole up, but he seemed odd, more than usual. Inspiration couldn’t even get him to smile.”

They both changed quickly and waited for the other to make a noise indicating they were done. Athena rubbed the back of her neck and then cleared her throat, turning slowly and seeing him do the same. He straightened his posture and looked towards the window. “His very nature is conflicted. Even though your companions have changed, he passed through the Veil as a spirit of Compassion to help an afflicted mage. I believe that is how his nature remains, contrary to what our Master Tethras thinks.”

Athena clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth in disapproval and put her backpack over her shoulder before opening the door for him. “This is a difficult situation and I think unique for this world. He doesn’t know what he is, and frankly, neither do any of us no matter how much our stubbornness fuels our ideas.” She gave him a level look and he bristled, jaw clenching momentarily before giving her a slight nod. “This is new territory for all of us, so I think some flexibility is necessary before going forward.”

“Do you not know the outcomes, Athena?” Hearing her name on his lips brought a swell of emotion to her throat, but she pushed it down to answer him without there being a break in her words.

“Yes. Frankly I’m not a fan of either. I’m going to follow what an old woman told me to do: focus on what isn’t known.” He looked at her with furrowed brows and then his eyes widened when he realized who she was talking of.

“Wise yet difficult advice. It must be frustrating to sit on your hands when you know the outcomes for so many things.” There was an edge of sympathy to his voice and she wasn’t ready to hear it yet. She wasn’t ready to hear his seductively soft tones that encouraged her to climb into his arms and feel safe and at home. That home had been broken. The closest thing she had felt to that previous comfort was when she fell asleep amongst her people.

“Yes. It is.” Athena managed, walking into the hallway and running down the stairs. She was the first one ready so she went behind the bar and made their morning drinks. Rathein typically liked tea with an inordinate amount of honey. Varric preferred the stiffer stuff, coffee with a spike of something special. Solas’s blend took a bit of figuring out since the tavern wasn’t as well stocked as it was the stay before when they were there for Dorian’s father. She had to open nearly every cabinet in the kitchen before she found the kind of herb that smelled right. By the time all of the drinks were done the party was standing around in the area in front of the fireplace.
Athena carried them out on a tray and handed them out, saving a special cup of cocoa that she mixed together for Cole. Iron Bull had taught her how to make it on a night that she was helping Syla in the kitchens and Cole liked how it made people feel warm and happy. Everyone made sounds of recognition and appreciation at their drinks as she went to the back of the bar to make a cup of the leftover cocoa. Solas had paused to take in a deep breath of the warm drink in his hands. He smiled and took his first sip and Athena caught sight of it from the bar.

Of course I remembered what you like, you ass. She thought lovingly, gripping the cup of cocoa in her hands. She sipped her own drink and let out a hum of happiness. Cocoa reminded her of camping as a child with her sister and her mom by a lake out in the woods. If there wasn’t a marshmallow in every sip, the child version of her was not happy. It still remained somewhat true but that was a delicacy so she took the sips of the rich chocolate drink with a smile on her face.

Cole was trying to enjoy his drink, but in between very sip he scowled and clutched his chest where the amulet was. She could feel Solas’s energy still swirling around it from before when he had tried to bond it to the boy. With her staff and orb on her back, things were easier to see. The orb had honed her magic that it made things connect in a way she hadn’t seen before.

“We have to go. It’s close.” Cole stated curly, dropping his cup to the ground with a wide-eyed expression. Athena expected something like that to happen. She stepped forward and reached out with her hand, her aura wrapping around the cup and its liquid before bringing it to the sink next to her.

“Alright, Cole. It’s going to be okay.” She said calmly and slowly, making sure that he was looking in her eyes when she said it. The rest of the group abandoned their drinks and left the doors of the tavern. Redcliffe’s morning was beautiful before them, but their conflicted spiritual friend was on a mission. He flitted in and out of the crowds until they walked up a set of stairs that begun to look eerily familiar. The hair on the back of her neck stood on edge and she glanced over at Varric and Solas, giving them a quick nod to show/indicate that something was about to happen.

“Yes, this should get me through the month.” Lyrium smuggler. Athena thought to herself as they approached the pair. There was a dwarf in armor, heavier than expected for somebody simply walking through the streets of Redcliffe. Next to him was a man dressed in Ferelden garb but with an poorly hidden Orlesian accent. Had he been in hiding since the Fall of the Spire and the vote for mage independence? The man lifted a hand to the dwarf and then walked over to the group, completely unaware of what was about to happen.

Athena shouted out: “Cole!”

But the boy was too fast. “You!” He disappeared then reappeared in a cloud of smoke snarling at the man. “You killed me!” He held the former templar’s head in one hand while holding up his
dagger with the other. His victim instantly raised his hands in surrender, fear plain on his face.

“What – I don’t . . . I don’t even know you!” He didn’t fight against Cole’s grip but tried to shrink away out of striking range.

Varric made a motion to calm the kid down but Athena gently brought him back with a touch on his shoulder. Cole’s voice grew and Athena glanced around to make sure they weren’t drawing any attention to themselves. “You forgot. You locked me in the dungeon in the Spire, and you forgot! And I died in the dark!”

The man’s voice fell to a whisper. “The Spire?”

Solas cut through the group and approached the boy from his side, allowing the man to scramble away from them and begin to run towards the docks. “Cole, stop.”

Cole moved to follow him but Varric stood in his path, a friendly and caring smile on his face. “Just take it easy, kid.”

The boy shook his head, grabbing his hat while he did it with a pained and angry expression on his face. “He killed me! He killed me! That’s why it didn’t work. He killed me – “ His face then lit up in a dark realization. “And I have to kill him back!”

Rathein held her hands up and stood next to Varric. “Before anyone gets killed, I want to know what’s going on.”

Athena pointed to the guy running away with a cold expression on her face. “Former Templar of the Spire. As I’m sure you’re aware, the Spire was not the safest place for mages.”

Solas came to Cole’s side and tried to put his hand on his shoulder but Cole stepped away. Still, he persisted. “Cole, this man cannot have killed you. You are a spirit. You have not even possessed a body.”

Neither did you until Mythal asked you to. Athena thought bitterly.
Cole’s gaze went wide as his hands shook at his side. “A broken body, bloody, banged on the stone cell. Guts gripping in the dank dark. A captured apostate. They threw him into the dungeon at the Spire at Val Royeaux. They forgot about him. He starved to death.” Everyone took a pause and processed the information in their own way. Rathein cursed, Varric let out a sigh, and Solas clenched his jaw. Athena simply listened, her own rage towards the Templar burning beneath her skin. “I came through to help . . . and I couldn’t. So I became him . . . Cole.”

Varic rubbed the back of his neck and then looked in the direction Cole’s victim ran. “If Cole was an apostate, that’d make the guy we just saw a templar. Must’ve been buying lyrium.”

Cole began to visibly shake in front of them, his voice quivering with fear and rage. “Let me kill him. I need to . . . I need to.” He then began to staggering towards the former templar.

Rathein followed the boy with a piercing blue gaze before turning towards the elf of the group. “Solas, what do you think of all of this?”

He put his hands behind his back and straightened his posture, which for some reason irked Athena. She did not stop watching Cole as he walked away and she opened her eyes and her mind to the magical links around them. The spirit boy’s was swirling with chaos, being torn in different directions.

“I do not think we should let Cole kill the man.” Solas stated simply.

Varric huffed underneath his breath. “I don’t think anyone was going to suggest that, Chuckles.”

Athena clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth. “Says you.”

The group snapped their collective gaze to her but she did not respond, instead she took in a deep breath and sighed. “This is not a choice he needs to make. The man let countless mages die as the Templars lived in the Spire. The Templars punished people for how they were born and left them to rot in the prisons as if they were less than human.”

“Your third option is murder? To end an innocent life? That man may have been innocent or in a desperate situation based on the chaos of his employ.” Solas pled with her, his brows furrowed in anger at her suggestion of bloodshed.
Athena felt something cold slide through her blood and she gripped her hands into fists. “Were the mages of Kirkwall in the Exalted Plains not innocent for using what they had been taught to defend themselves against bandits, demons, and wolves?”

The color drained him from his face and he clenched his jaw so tight she thought his teeth would shatter. He nearly snarled at her and extended his hand towards Cole. “I am not a spirit of Compassion! It is a moot point. He must learn to forgive.”

Varric rolled his eyes. “Come on. You don’t just forgive someone killing you.” Athena gestured to the dwarf with an incredulous expression on her face. Solas looked at her and she did her best to silently communicate *Neither did you!!*

“You don’t. A spirit can.” Athena did her best to keep from rolling her eyes so she turned her back on the conversation and moved to where she could keep Cole within her sights.

Varric shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest. “He’s just angry! He needs to work through this!”

“A spirit does not work through emotions. It embodies them.” Rathein walked over to where Athena was standing and let out a sigh. She slowly reached out and grabbed her sisters hand as the two listened to the others argue.

“But he isn’t a spirit, is he? He made himself human, and humans change. They get hurt, and they heal. He needs to work it out like a person.” Varric said softly, trying to keep his voice low and the conversation at a point where it wouldn’t draw attention to the fact that they were trying to avoid a murder.

“You would change the essence of what he is.” Solas pled for the final time and Athena had to wonder if this was also why he wanted the Veil to fall. Perhaps spirits used to be different before the Veil and he was forced to see how they changed over the thousands of years he was in sleep. There was a moment where she felt sorry for him and his changing world, but it soon passed.

“He did that to himself when he left the Fade. I’m just helping him survive it.” Rathein squeezed Athena’s hand and leaned in closer so that the other two wouldn’t over hear them.

“Explain it to me not in fragments?” The Inquisitor asked shyly as Cole paced nervously ahead of them. Athena nodded in return, took in a deep breath, then began.
“Spire was shit. Mages starved to death, Veil was thin. A spirit of Compassion came through to help a starving mage named Cole and became him instead. Forgiveness makes him more spirit-y and killing the guy makes him more human.” She nibbled on a piece of dead skin on the inside of her cheek as Rathein considered the options.

“And what do you think? This isn’t exactly something they taught in the Circle, you know.” Rathein whispered, looking over her shoulder at the elf and the dwarf.

“I don’t like either of them. I would rather kill the guy dead for what he did. He caused senseless, innocent deaths but – “ There was a lightning strike within her core and she gasped, grasping her sister’s hands as her own memories flashed before her eyes.

"Our Prince would want us to be merciful."

“Fuck.” She cursed under her breath, and let go of Rathein’s hand so she could wipe the tears from her eyes. They wouldn’t stop so she took a minute to compose herself. She closed her gaze and looked up towards the sky while whispering to Rathein. “I have an idea. It kind of goes along with what Varric wants to do, but I think it will put Cole in a better place. Will you let me take the lead on this, Inquisitor?”

Rathein stilled and then put her hand on her shoulder. “Of course, Athena. There’s a reason why I made you my right hand. I trust you, even without what you already know.”

Athena nodded and wiped her tears on her sleeve and let out a shaky sigh. A shudder gripped her spine but she felt better afterwards and she knew her eyes weren’t puffy. She clapped her hands together and turned to the group with a pleasant yet determined look on her face. “Allow me.”

Solas broke his stiff posture and dropped his hands to his sides. “You stated you wished to end his life?”

Athena waved him off and turned her back to him, calling out over her shoulder. “I’m not always so reckless, Solas. Have a little faith.” She walked until she was at Cole’s side. He appeared to be waiting for her and there was hesitation in his actions. She arched a brow at him but he answered her question before she could form it.

“How?” He asked, confusion shaking his voice.
“How what, Cole?” She responded while keeping the Templar within her line of sight.

“How did you forgive the man who killed your son? You were so angry, it boiled out of you. Your daughter was so angry she changed. How did you move past that?” They began walking down the path where the templar had run off to slowly. Athena could feel that Rathein and the rest were following them a few paces back so she kept her voice at a level where they could hear.

“He had died saving that man’s life. I think. . . there’s a part of him that stays in me, quells my rage. Rage is easy for me to summon. You saw I accidentally put one into a tree. But Tobi – he was innocence. He was courage, strength, bravery. He was strong enough, even after death – “ Her voice choked up but she continued, swallowing the emotions down with a sad smile. “To show me that there were other ways. He helped me see that, even here.”

The Templar ran to the end of the path and was soon looking down at the water of Lake Calenhad below them. He turned with his hands raised, tears of panic in his eyes. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

“Cole. You can feel when people need help. Do you feel his pain?” She pulled on the words that Solas would have used but morphed them to what she felt was best. The spirit nodded silently.

“Forgetting won’t help him. Humanity, we cannot erase what has already happened. It does not allow us to learn, it does not allow us to grow. Now compassion and empathy can. I allowed the man that killed my son to live so he could use what life he had left to make things right, not for me, but for himself. This man is addicted to lyrium.” She then raised her voice and met the eyes of the Templar. “Isn’t that right, ser?”

He looked from Cole to her, his hands trembling at the sight of them. “Yes, my lady. It’s been. . . hard to get a supply since the order fell apart.”

“Headaches? Nightmares? Days where you can’t even get out of bed sometimes?” The Templar nodded to all of her symptoms and she gestured to him.

“What do you want to do, Cole? He needs help, and you can’t just make this all go away. Things don’t happen like that in the real world. You both need to remember and you both need to move on.” She reached over and touched Cole’s shoulder gently, squeezing it while looking at the Templar. He was bent over, defensive, frightened. He knew that they held his life in their hands, but she left it to Cole to decide. His life was not theirs to choose.
“Come with us.” The spirit stated through gritted teeth, leaving everyone in the group surprised. He looked to Athena then to the Templar, pointing to a satchel on his waist that more than likely held lyrium. “You’ll die on that, but you won’t die without it. It will hurt, but, you’ll be free. We’ll both be free. We can help.” He gestured to the group now standing at his back.

The Templar let out a nervous sound, his eyes flicking back and forth between all of the people. “You would... let me live? You would... help me?”

Varric let out a chuckle. “I would listen to the kid before he changes his mind.”

Rathein stepped to the side and the man bowed in recognition of her authority. He dropped to his knees before her and she looked to Athena with a surprised and smug kind of look. Let him kneel, her expression said. “There is an Inquisition camp on the way outside of Redcliffe. They have scheduled shipments every other day to our keep. Make sure you’re on the next one out and report to me or the Lady Hand when you arrive. What is your name, former Templar?”

The man stuttered, his eyes slowly rising from the ground to the Inquisitor. “William, your Excellency, William Marques.”

The Inquisitor gestured for him to get up and then turned her back on him. “See you in a few days, William. Welcome to the Inquisition.”

It was the general, silent consensus that they wanted to get back to Skyhold as soon as possible. After their meeting with the Templar they returned to the inn, packed their things, and then got on their horses and left for Skyhold. Whether it be the stress of the encounter of the strained conversation between the group, but they made better time getting home than on the way down. By the time they made camp, they were all exhausted.

Rathein was already passed out in her own tent that was haphazardly put together so that she could sleep as soon as she could. The moment she fell asleep, Athena constructed the rest of it to its completion with a smile of adoration on her face. The rest of them sat around the dwindling campfire with various alcohols in their hands. Athena sipped on the sweet wine that Dorian had packed in her flask. She could smell the whiskey coming from Varric and, surprisingly, Solas. “For all we know, he is still vulnerable to binding.” The elf said under his breath to the two with a sigh
“No, he isn’t. The amulet didn’t work because he’s too human, right? Maybe now the kid’s also too human for the binding magic to work on him.” Varric quipped right back. Athena smiled, running her hands through Cole’s hair as he rested between her legs beside the fire. As the two men spoke, Athena looked down at the boy in her lap. His breaths were soft, even, and unlabored. There were small winces of pain on his face as he got used to the movements of having to breathe, but she was shocked because it appeared that he was sleeping.

“I hope you’re right.” Solas stated and Athena tried to shut him off with a quick wave of her free hand.

“Both of you quiet!” She said with a small amount of excitement in her voice. Perhaps it was because she was the one to typically volunteer sharing a tent or a bed with Cole, but this was completely new. Before they could ask why she was snapping at them, she put a finger to her smiling lips. “When. . .in the years that we have known him. . .have you ever seen him actually sleep? I think Varric is right, Solas.” She could feel the smile reach up to her eyes as Varric grinned at her, looking at Cole as he suddenly became restless.

He turned on his side within her lap and gripped at her calf, nuzzling his head while wincing. “Left hand misses someone with two names – she hurts – how will I sneak honey into Leliana’s wine now if I don’t make them forget?” It sounded like sleep talk, but she knew it was a genuine concern.

Varric chuckled and clapped his hands on his knees. “Don’t worry kid, I can help with that.”

Solas smirked, adjusting his hold on his cup of whiskey. “It pleases me that he has not changed much, no matter how human he may be.”

Athena nodded and went back to stroking Cole’s hair. Being this close to him, she could feel the small bit of spirit within him, the small bit of magical influence that allowed her to reach out and see how he felt. He was scared, he was hurting, but there was a warmth being in her embrace. She took in a deep breath and leaned back against her log, suddenly thinking back to when she was sitting outside of the campfire in Crestwood singing. Cole always liked her songs; he had said that they helped others and healed their pain.

She hummed beneath her breath, barely loud enough to disturb the conversation on the varieties of spirits that Varric and Solas had fallen into. Cole heard, however, as his position relaxed and he released the fabric covering her leg with a soft sigh. “Nothing’s going to harm you, not while I’m
around. Nothing’s going to harm you, no sir, not while I’m around.”

There was movement across the fire, a perking of Solas’s posture, but it was minimal and she couldn’t help but notice. Varric looked to the side and she knew he was half expecting a quill to be there. When it wasn’t, he simply winked at Athena as if saying this one was a waste between them. “Demons are prowling everywhere, nowadays. I’ll send ‘em howling, I don’t care. I have ways.”

Cole began to breathe more deeply and she could feel that he had slipped into the Fade. What would it be like dreaming as a human instead of a spirit? Inspiration would greet him and influence his dreams openly, echoing whatever happy thoughts she could for him. Harmony would assist in the transition between spirit and human; he had been there when Athena was adjusting to her own place within the life of Haven and the Inquisition. Command had not been seen much since the orb was created, but if she decided to make herself known, she would probably tell Cole to get over the pain and do something with it instead.

“No one’s gonna hurt you, no one’s gonna dare. Others can desert you, not to worry, whistle, I’ll be there.” Varric leaned forward and dumped the rest of his whiskey over the embers, smiling at how they temporarily flared for a moment before the moisture of the drink sucked the fire dry. All they were left with was moonlight in the middle of the Inquisition camp at the base of the mountain that led to Skyhold. Athena took in a deep breath and rested her back against the log, her hands continually working out the knots in Cole’s hair.

She knew it would be so easy to fall asleep like that with the woods around her and fresh air in her lungs. “Demons will charm you with a smile, for a while, but in time. . . “ Varric got up from his log, nodded to Solas good night, and then disappeared into the final tent. Solas quickly did the math since there was not another assembled tent and looked at Athena with an arched brow. “Nothing can harm you, not while I’m around. . . “ She whispered to Cole, looking over to Solas and reading his gesture immediately. There was a touch of pink on his ears, and she wasn’t sure if it was from them being alone by the campfire or the liquor he had just consumed. She counted on the latter. She looked down to Cole and shrugged helplessly before waving him off, her lips curved into an off-center smile. They would be fine.

“There was the pressure of something new being laid on top of them. It started with Cole and tickled her arms and then there was a light tapping on her shoulder. She opened one eye and saw Solas standing over her with another blanket. He gestured for her to sit up and when she did he draped it over her shoulders before turning back towards the tent he shared with Varric.”
“Th- thank you, Solas. You didn’t need to do that.” He paused at the tent and looked into the woods around them, a sad and distant smile on his face.

“It tends to get cold in the nights. Sleep well, Athena.” He then disappeared into the tent without another word, leaving her to the melody of the forest, the creatures within it, and the wind.
That night she dreamed of family, of Lev’adin.

The dream consisted of memories from Leafy’s mind, like when Athena first came to the Dalish clan, Leafy’s viewpoint when Athena summoned the giant flame wolf in front of the chevaliers, and when Athena braved the chaotic magic of a new mage to quell the young elf’s fears. The visions filled Athena with a sense of pride, but she did not know where they were coming from. She followed a wisp to the edge of a dreamer’s, she assumed her daughter’s, barrier.

Harmony was the one to stop her. He put his hand on her shoulder and kept her from entering with a quick shake of his head. Before she could even ask, he pushed Athena back. “Not tonight, Mama Wolf. This is something you said you didn’t want to be present for.”

Athena playfully snapped at his touch with her teeth and then with words. “She’s my daughter, I want to be a part of everything, for as long as she lets me.”

He quickly brought his hand away from her mouth and leveled his gaze. “Not this. Trust me. She’s fine, she’s safe, and she’s surrounded by your people. This is a good thing. She is taking a leap on her own and you will be there to celebrate with her, but after, Fen’Mae.” He spoke using Leafy’s words, and it made her hesitate and take a step back. Pain began emanating from Leafy’s dreams, and she reached out to touch them a final time before shaking her head.

“I trust you, friend. Will you walk with me tonight?”

The spirit agreed with a friendly smirk and nod. He linked hands with her and walked out of her daughter’s memories into the past events of Redcliffe. Being in the center of the city brought about a great deal of memories from its survivors. They watched the mage rebellion start and end. They watched snippets from the Blight from the perspective of those that had endured it. They watched the transformation of a city over the ages from the windmill on top of town. For sleeping outside in the cold with Cole in her arms, it was a restful night.
“I can feel your anger decreasing, Athena.” The spirit said into her back. They were sitting opposite of how she was in the real world, she in between Harmony’s legs with her head against his chest. Being a former demon of Rage, the spirit had a comforting warmth about him. His knees were bent with his hands resting atop them as they spoke.

“Why do you sound so surprised?” She asked with a slow raise of her brows.

He huffed a breath of hot hair into her hair. “You have always been one that acts with heart. You are unguarded, and that is freeing and beautifully vulnerable. But it also leaves you open for hurt, and quick reactions. I think you are growing, Athena. You are using these traumatic experiences that seem to follow you to change, and grow.” He brought her into a close embrace. “I don’t know how else to say it, but I am proud.”

Athena let out a soft laugh and sat up a little more to get a better view of the dreams below them. There were muddled dreams from the former blacksmith of Redcliffe floating in front of them. The man was a known drunk, but his daughter weighed heavily on his mind. “I am proud as well, friend. You were a spitfire literal demon when we met. But you... you help people. Inspiration and Cole tell me of what you do, and how you lead others to find peace. I’m sure my daughter’s fierce nature has drawn you multiple times.”

He snorted a laugh into her hair and nodded. Harmony then snapped his head up and looked over to the side with a concerned expression on his face. It piqued Athena’s interest. “What? What is it?”

Their dream was interrupted by an elvhen. Abelas strolled into their realm and lazily glanced over at the memories of Redcliffe like a cat inspecting a saucer of milk. He took a deep breath and met the gaze of her friend behind her. “We must talk, spirit.”

Athena stiffened protectively in front of him but Abelas raised a single hand in surrender and to stop her. “It is nothing negative, I assure you. He has been asking questions I have the experience to answer.”

She blinked and flicked her gaze between her friend and the elf who was becoming an odd ally. She squeezed Harmony’s knees and used them to push into a standing position. She then turned around and offered her hands for support to pull him up from the ground. It was the perfect timing, for as the Sentinel and the spirit began to turn towards one another Athena felt movement on her body in the physical realm. She smiled, hoping Cole had slept the whole night through.

He didn’t appear near them as he normally did within the Fade, so perhaps Solas had protected him in the middle of the night. She waved to her sleeping companions, giving one last glance toward
“Pain, but freedom. It hurts but there isn’t movement. The pain isn’t fully real. It is all temporary.” Cole murmured while still in his sleepy haze. Athena looked down and swept some of the hair from his face.

“How did you sleep, Cole?” Athena arched her back and was greeted with the pain of sleeping against a log shoot like fire down her legs. He moved slowly as well but rolled to his side, sitting on the balls of his feet. He furrowed his brow and relaxed, repeating the movement a few times before deciding on an answer.

“I slept. It... hurt... I don’t know if it happened yet. I can still see them.” A tent flap shut behind him and Varric immediately went to the campfire as the sun was just beginning to rise.

“Do ya mean demons, kid?” He asked with a slight tinge of fear in his voice.

Cole shook his head. “Their wants, their needs. I think I still have a bit of me in here.” He pointed a skinny finger to his chest with a confused expression on his face.

Athena turned to Varric with a helpless shrug. “I don’t think it will go away completely. You were a spirit for a long time, right, Cole? Years. Some habits and abilities don’t disappear just like that.”

Varric walked over to her and offered his gloved hand to help her get off of the ground. She still had the blanket that Solas has given her draped over her shoulders but she got up with it anyway. For a moment, it smelled like him, and that gave her as much comfort as it did hurt. As if he could smell the pain, Cole turned around and met her gaze.

“You are worried about her. Do not worry. She is free.” He said simply, as if speaking words known for thousands of years. She stretched to the sky until she heard a pop in the center of her back before letting out a satisfied sigh.

“You could still feel that? I dreamed of my daughter last night.” Her eyes then widened. “Wait–is that who you were talking about, Cole? The one who is free?”

The newly changed man nodded, like it was obvious. “Pain, but freedom. It hurt, but she couldn’t scream.”
Varric made a noise of unease while Athena turned to Prince with a new purpose in her step. She threw the blanket onto his back and was getting ready to ride him without a saddle when Rathein and Solas emerged from their tents. The Inquisitor rubbed her tired eyes and smudged the light make up that was there. “What’s the matter, Athena?”

She moved quickly and bit her bottom lip. “I had a dream about Leafy last night, and Cole could feel her too. He says she is hurting—but my friends in the Fade said she was fine. I... just want to get home.” She then stopped and met the collective gaze of the rest of the group. “If that is alright with you all. I do not wish to rush us unnecessarily.”

There was a mixture of head shaking and groans of contemplation but Solas spoke up first. “No, let us leave. Unless the Inquisitor desires to stay on the road?”

Rathein jerked her chin once and waved an arm of her magic to dismantle her tent. “Not at all.” She turned to Athena with a supportive smile. “Ready whenever you are, Sister.”

To say that they made good time was an understatement.

Prince led the horses in a trot that was as close to a run as possible with Athena sneaking in spells to accelerate them when she could. They were crossing the bridge of Skyhold by sunset and she dismounted just as they reached the stables. Prince knew what to do, so she grabbed her staff and walked with purpose through the courtyard and the main hall. She pushed on the door to the gardens with her shoulder and stormed over towards the quarters of her people when Loranil met her, his hand full of bread as he chewed on a piece.

His eyes widened in shock and he tried to speak: “Fen’Elg - “The surprise of her presence caused him to choke and Athena stood impatiently in front of him, leveling her gaze at his suddenly clumsy and surprised demeanor.

“Loranil. What’s going on. Where is Leafy?” He dropped his bread as he coughed and rubbed the back of his neck when he stood up.

“She’s fine, they’re all fine! They are just... resting right now.” He idly traced the vallaslin on his cheek with his finger, a nervous habit that Athena had noticed before.

“Sleeping? It is only sunset. Just, please, my friend, tell me that Leafy is okay. I had this weird
dream last night and then Cole acted odd and—“Her words were cut off when Loranil pulled her into a hug, a chuckle rumbling in his chest.

“*Fen’Mae* is right. You are a fiercely protective *mamae* and she is lucky to have you. Creators, we all are, Athena.” She could hear the happiness in his tone and that made her relax in his grip, if only slightly. “They need rest. Let... let her come to you in the morning, okay? I promise it is nothing bad. Syla set out your letters on the desk downstairs and Dorian has been waiting for you to get back.”

It was obvious she still did not believe him because he stepped back and grabbed her shoulders until his eyes were level with hers. “Trust me, *Fen’Elgara*.

Athena couldn’t fight him so she put her hands up in surrender and spun on her heel. It didn’t take long to descend towards her office and when she arrived it was eerily empty. Normally it was bustling with people and Syla corralled them all. They were all gone. Just as Loranil said, there was a pile of letters waiting for her to read with a fresh bottle of wine on the desk. She couldn’t help but smile. Even when her people were off doing their own thing, they still managed to think of her.

She popped the cork and poured herself a glass and went through the papers. One by one until the candles were at the base of their wick. Dorian came in and she took a break to tell him about Cole’s adventure. The conversation melted into talking of his recent dreams, which apparently included multiple scarves since he was thinking of home.

"This spirit thing is kind of convenient. I don't have to talk about it, and to some people it doesn't even exist! The perfect Tevinter situation." He emptied his glass and she could tell he was in three too many.

"You are a glutton for punishment, darling. Do you think your feelings are genuine?" The question must have caught him off guard. His cheeks flushed, and he put his glass down on the edge of her desk.

"Feelings. Huh. I've been toying with spirits since I was a child mage; this is nothing different.” There was a guarded bitterness to his words, and she raised her brows in response. With that kind of defense, the emotions had to be real. But it wasn't the night to press him on it. Athena stood up and began to put things away when he looked over to her large chaise lounge close to the door.

She understood almost immediately. Returning to her room knowing there was something potentially wrong with Leafy... it didn't feel right. Her office was a great place in limbo because it wasn’t the commitment of going home alone for a night and yet her own things still surrounded her. Even if it was difficult falling asleep with candles flickering in the empty sockets of the dragon...
Athena walked over and grabbed Dorian's hand and led him to the couch with a calm expression on her face. He followed obediently while quickly grabbing a blanket off one of the nearby chairs. It was heavy enough to help her sleep and the breeze from the cave would keep them cool.

Athena kicked off her boots and took off the shirt, leaving only her bra and her pants. Dorian did the same but had a pair of knee-length shorts on. He laid down with his arm open and she snuggled into the crook of his embrace as she had done many times before in camps, taverns, or late nights after drinking in her bed. There was a moment where they simply rested, breathed, and enjoyed one another’s presence. She cherished being vulnerable with him and being comfortable enough to be touchy with him. Wolf wasn't her animal of choice by happenstance. She considered herself to be a touch-starved puppy. If she went more than a day without hugging someone she would get itchy.

The Fade was threatening to fog her mind when Dorian let out a heavy sigh and muttered, "When do we get to be happy, Athena?"

She opened her eyes and turned her head towards him. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged and rolled flat onto his back, pushing the blanket down so he could itch at the center of his chest. "I mean–where are our moments? How long must we wait until we finally feel like the world isn't about to crumble around us?" He closed his eyes briefly before opening them again. "Even you. You pour your heart and soul out to people and are still left for no discernable reason. I - ," He cut off and winced, giving her an apologetic glance. "Sorry. That was insensitive of me."

Athena couldn't help but snort a laugh. "After four glasses of wine, Dorian, I expect nothing less. But I have asked those same questions and... I don't know. It's hard to say. You? I think there is hope. What you have is real, whether or not you acknowledge it."

"It's not something that can last, Athena. Spirits don't just come over into the - ," There must have been an expression on her face because he stopped and groaned. "Cole is an exception, is that is what you are about to say?"

The wine melted down her filter and she shook her head. "More than that. There are rumors that the Elven Gods could call spirits over from the Fade and give them physical form. I think it is still possible if the will of the spirit is strong enough and if the mage attempting the ritual is decent."

Dorian's eyes widened. "Wait. Are you serious? Someone has done this?" He poked her in the stomach with his free hand until she laughed with her hands cupped around her mouth.
"Yes, I'm sincere but this happened...a long time ago. I don't know if it could happen now. But there is still hope, Dorian. For you at least." She said with a soft smile.

He twirled the end of his mustache and groaned in frustration. "But what about you? You said Solas was being close to normal again. Do you not see potential there?"

She moved her lips from side to side in thought. Could she tell Dorian that Solas would probably leave to begin his work after the Inquisition? Could she tell him she didn't want to stop him? Could she tell Solas she still loved him deeply even after everything that had happened since Crestwood? The words tasted bitter on the back of her tongue. "I have hope. But, I cannot force his hand. He is one of those men where...once I show my feelings, it is up to him on what happens next."

Dorian rested his head back and frowned. "The gesture with the blanket at the campsite was hopeful though, right? It was sweet, even for him. The cold pissy thing he is." He muttered to himself at the end.

She covered her eyes with her forearm and took in a deep breath. "Yeah. I guess it was."

Sunlight woke them the next morning as it filled the cave from behind the dragon's skull. It was a gradual wakening, which she appreciated after a night of light drinking. Dorian had turned and thrown his other arm over her stomach in the middle of the night and she couldn't help but smile. Big softie. She tapped him on the cheek before sliding out from his grip.

He twitched his mustache back and forth before squeezing his eyes shut with a groan. "Morning already?"

"Uh-hm." Athena responded with a hum. She threw her shirt on from the day before and padded across the room to her desk. It didn't seem like anybody had slipped in during the night and Syla still had to be recovering...from whatever they had gone through. There was a nervous pit in her stomach that felt like it was filled with ice. It sent shivers down her spine as she tapped her fingernails against the surface of her wooden desk.

"Something bothering you?" Dorian asked from the edge of the bed. He was resting his forearms
on top of his knees while processing the day ahead of them.

"I don't know what happened to Leafy and the others. I have a hunch, but it makes me nervous." She chewed on the inside of her cheek as Dorian followed up.

"What is your hunch?" The door swung open and there was a fresh-faced red-haired Syla standing in the doorway with a handful of scrolls clutched to her chest. She gave a small yelp and dropped everything while keeping her body flush with the door.

Athena's eyes widened and her shoulders dropped. She wasn't only fresh-faced. There were new designs on the pale, freckled skin. Lines of blue that went in an arch across her forehead, down her cheekbones, and with small toothlike designs on her chin. The skin was slightly irritated because the markings appeared new. The *vallaslin* appeared to be new. "Oh! Lady Wolfsbane! I did not realize you had slept in here." She dropped to her knees and picked up her papers as Athena walked over to help.

"I... I couldn't sleep at home last night." She paused a beat and held her hand over Syla's on the last scroll. "This is what you all were recovering from last night?"

Syla nodded with a smile. There was an edge of fear in her gaze, as if she feared Athena's reaction. Instead of ice in her belly there was now a swarm of bees flitting around in her abdomen. "Yes. The ritual takes a lot out on you. Lithari still has not woken this morning." There was a soft blush on her cheeks and Athena stood with her. She hovered her hand over her friend's face, nodding towards her with kindness in her gaze.

"May I see your new markings, Syla? They are beautiful." The elf nodded enthusiastically, running over to the desk and depositing her papers before turning around with her thighs pressed up against it. Athena stood in front of her and tried to keep her hands from shaking. She stroked her thumb over the arch across her forehead, noting the small lines that went up towards her hairline.

"This looks like a sun, is this for *Elgar'nan*?" Syla shook her head as Athena continued her assessment. She brought both hands up and traced down the V underneath the arch that went down the bridge of her nose. There were two small check-mark shaped designs underneath both eyes. The next unique markings were vertical lines with three curved ones branching from it. She tilted her head to the side. "These are almost like whiskers, like from an animal? Are these for *June* or for Sylaise? Perhaps Andruil, is one of her creatures not a hare?"

Syla laughed and shook her head. "Do you think me to be a follower of Andruil, Athena? I am not even Dalish. I was not raised on the teachings of the old Gods."
"Which... marks my confusion, Syla. Now these last bits." She traced her thumb down Syla's chin and grasped it gently to see them better. They looked like—no—they were two small fangs underneath her bottom lip. "These are fangs. Fen'Harel has no vallaslin."

Syla grabbed both of Athena's hands and squeezed them. "As I said, I do not know the teachings of the old Gods. They have done nothing for me or my people in this time." Athena swallowed a lump of nerves and waited patiently for her to continue. The bees were swarming and now enveloping her pounding heart. "Lev'adin spoke to all of us around the campfire one night, telling us of how she was raised by the Dalish. She told us how they had never inspired her and how she felt betrayed by them when her clan forced her to leave even as a young da'len. But..." Syla squeezed her hands again as tears formed in her eyes.

"There were talks of a different kind of person. One who rescued the young mage who had been cast aside. One who broke the chains of bondage for those who were suffering. One who defied all odds to defeat Orlesian warriors filled with hate against our people. One who defeated Fear itself in the throes of the Fade. One who has walked between worlds. One who promises nothing but freedom and delivers." At this point Athena was crying, head dropped low as her heart threatened to burst from her chest.

Dorian whispered a light "fuck," under his breath behind her. The gravity of it all was soul-crushing.

"You, Fen'Elgara. I wear these markings proudly for you." Syla said with matching tears in her eyes, never letting go of Athena's hands even as her legs shook and she fell to her knees before her friend.

"This is an honor. . . I am not sure if I deserve, 'ma'halla." Her second in command followed her to her knees and dropped her hands, instantly wrapping her in an embrace.

"You deserve this and more. Stand, Fen'Elgara. You need never kneel in front of me." Athena followed her directions and wiped her eyes on the backs of her hands.

"Let it be known, you don't need to kneel in front of me either. I'll probably smack whoever does it or flick their ears." They both laughed until Athena’s eyes weren't as red and swollen. Their gazes met and Syla nodded with so much pride it almost made her skin glow. "I am beyond honored. How many took part?"
"Most of those who were unmarked. Your daughter is searching for you upstairs. I don't think I have ever seen her so happy." Athena nodded and turned towards Dorian. He was putting his shirt on and already had the door open for her. She pecked him on the cheek before running up the stairs in a partial fade-step. Leafy was talking to Varric in a very excited tone that seemed to bounce off the ceiling of the entrance hall. The dwarf was sketching the new facial markings with an interested grin on his face. He looked over and summoned Athena with a gesture.

"Good morning, Walker. Your daughter here was just telling me about these new markings she got. They kind of remind me of Fenris's--here." He waved at his chin and she wrapped her arm around Leafy with an appreciative nod.

"I think his were a lot different and a lot more painful. I'm sure he could tell you that, wait - are they still here?" He shrugged with a charismatic wink.

"I don't keep tabs on them at all times, but I think they popped down to Redcliffe for a while to help with the refugee situation at the crossroads." She clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth before bringing Leafy in a small alcove between Varric's chair and the rotunda. Thankfully it was empty so Athena tipped her daughter's chin up and let out a soft sigh.

"Look at my little leaf, sprouting into a tree right before my eyes." Leafy spread her lips into a wolfish grin.

The young elf crossed her arms over her chest. "Do you like them? Loranil and Lithari helped me design them and then She knew how to do the ritual! Did you know she was almost a Keeper in her previous clan? I told Loranil, Lithari, Syla, and Illrith what you told me about the vallaslin."

Athena's eyes widened in worry and Leafy put her hands up in surrender while shushing her to a whisper. "That was all I told them, not where that information came from." As her daughter was speaking Athena cast a barrier with a silencing rune at its peak to keep her words to herself. "I told them you wanted freedom for us, but the Dalish and their practices are still what I was raised on. Even if the Gods weren't really Gods, the vallaslin aren't slave markings anymore. I will wear these with pride and honor because I chose them for the person who has saved my people in my lifetime."

Leafy emphatically pointed at her face with endless determination, and Athena could not stop smiling at her. "You made these?" she asked, cupping her cheek and brushing her thumb over the maroon of her daughter's tattoos. The young girl nodded into her mother's hand.

"They're for me--and they're for you. You have people now too, Fen'Mae. It's not only about you
looking out for us, we have your back too." She gave a small little laugh. "They say the word 'Goddess.' I do not know how that works from where you're from. . . but you are still ma'mae."

Athena put a hand to her heart and nodded as she fought the tears in her eyes. It felt like the conversation was dwindling so she popped the barrier around them. Leafy must have felt it because suddenly a mischievous smile spread across her lips as she turned towards the left. "I'm going to show Solas!"

The color drained from her face as she reached out for her. Her fingers brushed against the fabric of Leafy's flowy shirt but the young girl was too fast. She burst through the door with Athena at her heels panting while trying to look composed and not stressed. Solas was leaning against his desk reading a book with a cup of his morning drink at his side. He looked up from his book with a sly smile. "Show Solas what, da'len?" He closed the book with one hand and placed it behind him as she marched up to him.

She stopped her speed with a quick stomp on the ground and her hands straight at her sides. Solas looked her over for a minute before he clenched his jaw and leaned back against the desk. Leafy, the young daring wolf that she was, met his eyes with a confident and knowing expression. He, on the other hand, was mortified and trying to hide it. Athena could see it in how his body language became tight and his aura snapped against his skin like a rubber band. Before they had come in it was flowing like water in wisps and tendrils around his body. He must have been enjoying the book.

He took in a deep, controlled breath through his nose before forcing a polite smile onto his face. "I see these markings of the sun. I did not think you were so inspired by Elgar'nan, da'fen. I had thought you would have chosen Andruil due to your hunter's nature." He was trying, oh fuck he was trying. Athena clenched her hands into fists so hard she nearly drew blood but she hid it by crossing her arms over her chest. She leaned against the wall and steadied her breathing. In through the nose, out through the mouth.

"No. They don't seem to help me much. Keeper Hamel always told me to choose who has guided my path the most. The one I turn to in times of need. The one I count on for my future." She gestured to her face once more, expression full of innocence but with the spite only a teenager could hide. "So, I did."

Solas gasped through a quick breath up his nose, tilting his head to the side. His forced smile turned dark, his gaze flicking over to Athena who suddenly felt two inches tall against the wall. Instead of showing it, however, she tilted his chin up and met his gaze with the confidence of a protective mother. "So, you did. That was a brave decision to make, Lev'adin. Your people must be proud." There was a slight condescension in the word 'your' and Athena had to fight the growl in her throat. The shift in the room was almost electric when he saw the vallaslin. Athena was no longer afraid of what he would say to her.
She was afraid of what he would say to her daughter. She hoped he knew better.

"There are many who made the same decision with me. I imagine and am hoping this vallaslin will spread as its influence does." She traced her index and middle finger over the fang lines below her lip and Athena couldn't help but smile behind her. "But since you have mentored me in so much, hahren, I wanted you to be one of the first to see."

He nodded his appreciation before she turned and left the rotunda, leaving the two of them in the room alone. His true emotions started with a spark in his aura, almost like a fire that was so hot it felt cold against her face. She adjusted her posture and stared him down from her position before he turned towards a door to the side, jerking his head in a silent summons.

She followed and felt infected by Leafy's contagious rebellious nature. There was no shame in her mind. She was immensely proud of what they did for themselves and for her. It was a choice of freedom, defying everything they had been taught. It was what she wanted for them, for their future. Dorian made a noise to keep her held back from his corner upstairs but she ignored it and followed Solas through the garden into a room on the side.

The moment they entered she knew it was his room. It just smelled of him and old books. It was neat and tidy with a wolf's fur on top of the bed. He walked in and threw his hands in the air before gripping the back of his neck, letting out a snarl before turning towards her. "How does it feel?"

Oh fuck. The words sounded familiar. They scratched at the back of her memories and irritated her further. "What?"

He gestured towards her then past the closed door. "Being you now. Are you blissfully unaware, or is some part of the old you banging on the walls, screaming?"

She dropped her arms and took a step forward. "Fuck. You."

He laughed with such a dark tone it gave her shivers, but that only fueled the flame building at the back of her tongue. "Do you enjoy the worship, Fen'Elgara?"

Before he could continue any further Athena gripped the nearest book and threw it at him. It missed, barely, but it still clipped the tip of his ear and collided with the wall behind him. He spun towards her as she screamed at him. "How dare you, Solas! You think I encouraged this? You
think I spawned this idea out of some need for an ego stroke?"

He remained silent but there was a wild defiance in his eyes that said yes. She scoffed at him and shook her head, running her hand through her hair to calm herself. "Are you really so mad about the vallaslin? Or are you more upset that they are throwing their worship for a shemlen instead of the mighty rebellious freer of slaves, Fen'Harel?" She gestured to herself with a wide sweep of her hand, which was slightly trembling from the anger pulsing through her veins.

His nostrils flared, and he turned to the side away from her. He paced, like a wild animal trapped within a cage. He went from flexing his hands to trying to keep them open with his fingers splayed in a grasp for control. It failed. "They are slave markings, Athena. You knew that and still allowed this to happen."

"Were." She spat. He paused in his stride.

"What?"

"They were slave markings. Now, the Dalish and all who wear them choose them as a point of strength for themselves. It is a choice they made based on how they want to be represented for the rest of their lives. It is something I am deeply honored for." She couldn't help the tears in her eyes but they weren't of sadness, they were of pride.

"You fed their ignorance -" He appeared as if he would say something worse. There was a dark cloud over his gaze and the hairs on the back of her neck were standing on edge. Athena took a step towards him and twitched to grab another book.

"Leafy knew." He tilted his head at her with a twitch of his lips into a scowl. "She knew everything." She emphasized, her entire body hardening into a statue of determination. "You think I would have pushed that onto my daughter, onto my people? She had been giving me hints that she wanted to get her vallaslin. So, we had a talk. She went into this knowing everything and made her own choice. They all did."

His eyes widened, and he whispered, almost in disbelief. "They all know?"

She shook her head. "No—not that. Only her and she knows better. Well–I would hope so, but unfortunately I cannot pass along an apology from her for shooting an arrow at you so long ago." It was an attempt to lighten the conversation, and it almost worked. There was a twitch at the corner
of his lips that almost looked like a smirk. He ended up shaking his head while leaning against the mantle of his small fireplace on the other side of the modest room.

"They knew... yet still went forward? To brand themselves in the name of another?" She chose to keep her mouth shut, her features and rage softening as she watched him go through his phases of processing. He held his head in his hands for a moment, squeezing his temples before letting out a sigh. "At least I know that I was right." She heard him mutter under his breath in a defeated tone. Without even thinking, she reached over, grabbed another book, and threw it past his head. Not to hurt him, just to make a point. He didn't even fully look up. There was an eyebrow raise of curiosity and annoyance.

"You cannot be mad at them for what they do not know. I know how hard you as a single person have tried to teach some of them, being called a madman and whatnot." She bit on her bottom lip before walking towards him, poking him in between his hands. "But can you say what they have chosen to believe is wrong? Just because it is not what you come from does not make it wrong. They are better than you believe. They are so much stronger and have endured through so much, vhenan. Haven't we all?"

The word slipped from her lips like a bad habit, her eyes widening as a million curses flew through her mind. He winced at it as if it were a weapon, standing up and somehow being more pressed against the wall behind them. She stepped back to give him distance, suddenly more embarrassed about letting the name slip than throwing two books in his direction. "Perhaps I reacted too harshly." Solas shook his head, as if he were doubting himself.

She flared her nostrils and curled her lips into a half snarl. "Perhaps?" She turned on her heel, feeling like he needed time to process it. As she nearly tore the door from its hinges opening it, she looked over her shoulder at him. "When you can find a proper apology in the caverns of your wounded ego, come seek me out."

He didn't react, but she swore she saw a subtle nod as she shut the door behind him.
By the Cliffside

Chapter Notes

Beta'd by the amazing morgalahan! <3

It was getting exhausting. It had been like that since the start.

The pushing, the pulling, the kindness, the spite, it was literally hot and cold between them and she didn't mean in magic. He must have flipped a coin that wakening and decided to be angry about the things she did instead of proud, like the looks she caught from him in the beginning when she obtained a new ability. It felt like it had been eons since she first fell. That day, she desired to taste the sky instead of whatever breakfast was downstairs. The drum of the wild was fueling the pulse of her heart and the monotony of her office would not do, especially after the revelations of the morning. Athena weaved back through the rotunda without Solas on her tail. Dorian whistled down at her, asking wordlessly what had happened, his body partially hanging over the rail. She responded by flipping him the middle finger which he had quickly learned was a gesture of disapproval from her world.

"That well, huh?" He asked before skipping down the stairs to meet her accelerated stride.

She was heading towards a place where she could get into the sky without drawing too much attention to herself. The office had the large open cave mouth at the back behind the dragon’s head which was a sheer drop to the mountain side. She had to put up a type of rubber barrier to push back any curious people who wanted to see the view a little too well. A few recruits had almost fallen and had only been caught by a very attentive Illrith.

“What did he say?” Dorian pressed, not even being phased that she was beginning to strip out of her outer layers.

“Oh, you know. The usual. Large initial reaction which ended with a bullshit apology.” She threw her jacket at him and began rolling up her leggings while marching to the back of her office. So far only Syla was there, but she remained quiet as Athena vented her rage.

“"Athena - how are *you* feeling?” Dorian asked softly, glancing over at Syla to see if she was listening. “Those tattoos, they’re for the *Gods*, right? That is a lot of pressure. I’m barely Andrastrian myself, but you have people that. You know.” He raised his hands high like a gesture she had seen in the Chantry.
Athena only gaped at him, her mind running a thousand miles a minute in response to what Syla, Leafy, and Solas had thrown at her in the last ten minutes.

“Athena. These are more than tattoos like you and I would get.” He grabbed her by the shoulders. “They think you’re a God, or whatever is closest to that.”

Hearing him say it was like having a heavy sword lodged in her stomach. It was the dragon of Crestwood all over again. Her eyes dilated, and she leaned against the stone wall behind her, gaze far-off past him in front of her. Dorian saying it meant it was real. It was different than seeing the lines on Syla and Lev’adin’s face; it was separate from Solas’s rage. The word “God” put a weight in her belly that she couldn’t possibly get rid of.

Her brother cleared his throat and looked over to the elf with his usual charismatic charm. “Syla, dear, could you do us a favor? Athena is going to go for a little flight and it would be great if she had a fresh set of clothes when she gets back. Spitfire this one, she tends to burn what she’s wearing when she’s had an off morning.”

Normally, she would laugh. He was right. Josephine lamented how many shirts Athena had gone through when she got back from learning how to sprout her wings. Syla nodded and went off without a question. The moment the door shut Athena almost slid down the wall but Dorian caught her in an embrace. “When you think about it, ‘Mata. It is kind of unbelievable. You’re from another world. You fell from the Fade. You’re able to experiment with magic in a way that Circle mages can’t dream of. You are a pariah with your shape-shifting. It is all incredible.”

“I...can’t, Dorian. I’m not a – how can I go forward knowing that is what they think of me?” Her voice sounded hollow and detached as if she were speaking from a thousand miles away. Her skin went cold as the weight in her body dragged her emotions and spirits farther down into the abyss. “I barely just became a whole person again, but a God? I didn’t sign up for this. I’m not right for this.” His lips brushed over her hair before tightening his squeeze on her.

“I don’t think any great person in history did. The weight of the people is somehow forced on the ones who deserve it, not who wants it. Go.” He gestured his head towards the mountains on the left. “I will cover for you today. Touch the clouds, scream it out, do whatever you normally do to get through this and I’ll be here when you get back.” He held her at arm’s length with a look of sympathy and love. “Go - before I push you out and make you go.”

Athena quickly kissed him on the cheek before stepping to the side, leaning outwards through her barrier until gravity tore her down the mountainside. The wind pushed violently through her hair and she raised her arms above her head to relish in the feeling.
God. Well, *Goddess.*

They were beings of legend where she had come from. Athena, Hera, Aphrodite, Demeter – they were women of fable possessing unbelievable strengths. The Greeks had looked up to them and painted them on every wall and vase they could find. There were multiple seemingly impossible stories of their feats and adventures. Is that what was happening to her? Later in her years, would she come across a mural drawn by a former Keeper about the wolf of fire she had conjured in the Plains? Would she overhear tales of how *Fen’Elgara* befriended a hoard of bears and used them to attack Corypheus’s forces in defense of an elven temple? The more thoughts that went through her head, the tighter her throat got. She felt like she needed to crawl out of her skin. The urge to escape caused her skin to itch. For a moment, she wanted to go home.

A voice from the depths of her spirit called to her, and she felt the word more than heard it in her mind.

*Change.*

Flashes of large, scaled wings came from that source and she grasped it and thrust everything her magic had into it. Instead of flames, her body was enveloped in light and burst. It grew, going farther than she had before as a wolf or phoenix. She lost herself within the magic and released a roar that shook the core of the mountains. Powerful gusts from her appendages expanded and pushed against the wind before she reached the ground. The weight and power in them was so strong their efforts moved her to hide amidst clouds. Skyhold was beneath her as she flew through the currents of the wind. Her mind was lost in the fog of whatever creature she had been compelled to shift into, wrestling with itself to process everything that had happened.

*’They are slave markings, Athena!’*

Solas’s voice echoed within her mind.

*’I choose these markings for you, Fen’mae.’*

Her daughter’s voice followed.

*’When they battle, do they call for Andraste? Or does a closer name come across their lips?’*
The purr of the Witch sent her energy into a furious spiral. Perhaps if she had remained selfish like Morigan, she wouldn't be in this scenario. Keep to herself, take care of Leafy. But that was never her nature, even on Earth. Athena felt the urge to land in a nearby valley and she touched down heavily into the soil, the ground shaking beneath her from the weight of her form. She dipped her head over a lake and let out a sound of shock.

Looking back up at her...was the head of a dragon. Scales of brilliant orange and red glittered in the sunlight like fresh autumn leaves. Two horns raised from the back of her crown. Her scales were jagged, sharp things that created an illusion of fire as she moved in the sun’s rays. Was the voice that had urged her to change Flemeth? Or perhaps the spirit from the Well? Something had pushed to find this form, and it did not help her deny that she was slowly becoming something more than the Hand of the Inquisitor.

It was odd staring down into the eyes of a dragon. Slowly her mind began to come back from the fog of panic and the thrill of the change. She gained control of her claws and her appendages and became aware of the weight of her tail behind her. It felt...powerful. Obscenely so. The pressure of her orb was between her eyes and surged magic through her veins. It was pure electricity bringing life to every scale on her body. No wonder Flemeth and the Gods of old chose to fly around in this form. It was empowering. She could take on the sky and the earth with the power surging through her.

That thought stilled her as she looked down at her reflection. This was her future. This was how people saw her.

She took large breaths that vibrated her entire chest as a small growl echoed in her throat. No longer could she walk the halls of Skyhold as a regular person. People were marking their faces for her. They were pledging their allegiance to her. They were putting their faith in her. It was more than just an enemy to defeat like Corypheus. He was a single target at the peak of the mage and templar war. The after effects of the Inquisition would change the future for those factions depending on who was Divine. All over the face of Thedas, the elves, her people, wishes for their lives to change.

What they didn’t know was that she was trying to save them from the fate that Solas had in store by tearing the Veil apart. But by granting them their freedom, she had lost hers. She shook off the thought and pushed up from the ground again, seeking a place to find solace. She soared between the mountains until she found a cliff side that overlooked what was left of Haven. The snow had melted and the ruins of the buildings sat far below her. There were the small specks of people against the grass patrolling, probably some of Cullen’s men. He had been paranoid ever since the Charger’s mission to clean out the village. She stretched out along the cliff and rested her head on top of her claws, allowing her tail to curl around her and tap against the stone.
What was she going to do? How could she go back knowing she would see a sea of *vallaslin* that represented her?

Hours passed as she stared down at upon the fallen village of Haven, the site of one of her first responsibilities as the “knowing other-worlder”. If she could turn back the clock and tell herself what was going to happen... she probably would have run to Antiva or Denerim never to return.

She took a deep breath and sighed, a jet of flame shooting lazily from her nostrils.

There was a swirl of wind behind her. It felt unnatural compared to the wind current blowing over the mountain. She raised her gaze and looked at its source, lips pulled back over her fangs, a growl of warning vibrating from her throat. It appeared as a trick of the light, but the swirl of the fade-energy gave her a hint as to who was coming. She rolled her eyes and rested her head back on her claws, swaying her tail at the haze to try to dismiss it.

It didn’t work and a familiar pressure of magical gravity appeared at her side. But with her or b sitting between her eyes, it didn’t feel as intimidating as it previously had. She had never felt anything that strong that night she was in the forest and the Dread Wolf showed her his true power. It had frightened her to her core then. Now? That same power was beside her as he walked up to where she could see him but there was no fear. Only a slight disdain and annoyance.

Solas huffed a breath. “This form is new.”

Athena groaned, which ended up sounding akin to a snarl but he definitely picked up on her mood. He walked to the cliff’s edge and looked down upon Haven. She was able to see that he had changed from what he was wearing earlier into something more fitting for their meeting. Her eyes moved from his golden armored legs to the wolf sash that draped over his shoulder and across his chest. He had his hands clasped behind his back in his usual fashion, which didn’t help her current state of mind at all.

“Fitting, that you would return to where it started.” He let out a sigh. “How far we have come.”

She looked over at him, glowing honey-colored eyes taking in the sadness in his expression. “*You can say that again.*” She grumbled, the words turning into a cacophony of different growl sounds that made him chuckle under his breath.

“Wolf - I can understand. Dragon is a much harder dialect. Would you consider shifting into a
form that would allow us speak?” He mused while obviously trying to hide a smirk.

*Can I shift back?* Athena made a few noises of consideration before closing her eyes. The magic from her orb pounded in the middle of her head. She had to wonder if her clothing had survived the chaotic shift. This seemed to be more than a meeting between just Athena and Solas. As he had said before, sometimes posturing was necessary. She covered her body in a layer of thin magic and began to bring her shape back in. Light emanated from each scale and then her form started to shrink down. It went all the way until she stood standing beside him in a familiar gown of gold and lace. It was the one she had designed for Wintersend, to be in the likeness of the previous *elvhen*, of his world. It felt fitting in that moment with the sunset beating down on both of them as they looked down over Haven.

Two Gods, she guessed.

“Did anybody see me?” She asked bluntly, more interested than concerned.

He shook his head, a flash of nostalgia coming over his face as he looked at her in the dress. The subtle curls in her hair were accentuated from being wind-blown and she could feel a faint glow of magic to her skin. It made her warm, comforted, even if it was by her own power. “More heard if anything. Morrigan was quick to eliminate any fears that it was Corypheus’s beast and Dorian helped to move the attention away from the worry.”

She let out a soft sigh she didn’t realize she had been holding in. He looked over at her with a softer expression than he had given her earlier in the day. “What inspired you to attempt that change?”

Athena couldn’t help but laugh, but the sound was not a happy one. “Fear. Absolute heart-gripping fear and the realization of what is happening.”

He nodded in response before moving to the cliff’s edge and sitting down so that his feet hung over the edge. “That was less time than I anticipated. When it happened to me, I was so full of disbelief it took years for me to fully comprehend the trust my people had placed in me. One day I turned around and my friends and comrades had grown into an army.” He squeezed the edge of the cliff beneath his hands, shaking his head slowly. “I never thought this kind of burden would fall upon you.”

She looked down at Haven, a nostalgic smile coming to her lips. “When I first found my way down there, when the Inquisition was just starting and I barely knew how to create fire. . . I was more worried about everyone knowing my origins than actually being somebody important. I was terrified to ride a horse, be in actual battle. Before that. . . I was freaking out about going back to
school or my unhappiness with my job.” She huffed under her breath. “Those problems seem so small now. When did the world or my future get so impossibly big?”

Solas’s back straightened as he looked off to the horizon. “Unfortunately, the moment you thought about a people other than your own. It truly is a rare thing in this world, in this time. But I suppose it has always been that way.”

"I just...feel like an imposter here. All the facts coming together don't feel real. Mythal choosing me, a fucking human, to come through the eluvian into this world, fusing a spirit of the Well with mine? Is it even me that is doing all of these things or is it the spirit? Am I an abomination leading these people to a better future, not even in control of my own mind?” Her words became slightly panicked, losing their steadied and calm pace until she had to close her eyes and take a breath. “I still feel like I am in a dream. I am waiting to wake up in Skyhold. Dorian was asking me last night something that I can't shake. When do we just get a break for once?”

Solas looked to the side, at her staff between them. He placed his hand a little lower on the staff than hers, but not far enough that she didn't feel his skin brush against hers. A spark bloomed in that brief shared touch, causing her heart to flutter. "You...are a unique case, Athena. Do not discredit yourself and your battles. Mythal has always been one to see the good, the beauty in people. She even saw it in those that betrayed her before they struck her down. It was her faith in me that drew me across the Fade to become what I am now. But now you truly have the power to help those in need, to shape the future for your people.”

Athena leaned slightly towards him. “Not yours as well? Our goals are not so different, Solas.”

A mournful look crossed over his face. “I must help my own people, Athena. They have been pushed to all corners of these lands and are on the brink of extinction. The very ones who shaped this world were cast aside by history and man. I am the only one who can change that.”

She moved her hand ever so slightly to where her touch was over his. “Why do you keep isolating yourself, Solas? You do not need to continue to be this wolf that walks alone. The help is there, you just have to be willing to see it.”

His hand twitched under her touch. He still for a second but did not retract it. That small gesture gave her hope, but it was buried beneath all the worry from the conversation. He looked up at the orb floating within the crescent moon of her staff. “Once my foci is returned to me, it will be unnecessary. That artifact is how I crafted the Veil in the first place.” He furrowed his brow and clenched his jaw before speaking again. “And it is how I will tear it down.”
She sighed softly. “Remember what I said before about your artifact? There is the possibility that you will not have it – that the final battle with Corypheus could - “

“No.” He shut her off with the denial, voice cold not from confidence, but from fear. “That is impossible. Never before has an item like that been destroyed. Lost to time, trapped – yes. It would take too much to accomplish such a feat.”

“Solas -” She pled, squeezing his hand.

“Athena, please.” His voice broke into a whisper, eyes closing to regain focus.

She withdrew her hand into her lap, smoothing out the fabric of the dress. The wind blew softly through the valley, filling the silence between them with the song of the mountains. She looked out to the setting sun and shrugged. “Where do we go from here, Fen’Harel?”

He straightened his posture at the title as if they were suddenly discussing business. “If Corypheus is defeated, I will seek out the eluvians to rebuild the elven empire in the in-between planes. There is so much to reclaim.” He paused and then turned to meet her gaze. “But you – I would advise that you find your own place outside of the Inquisition. Bring your people there and create a base where you can work. Set clear goals – freeing them is a wonderful ambition, but how? Disassembling slavery? Liberating the alienages? Responding to the cry of every impoverished elf? What you are beginning is a large venture that cannot be conquered in a single night.”

Athena looked away from Haven, through the mountains and closed her eyes and surged her power through the creatures that she had connections with. She saw through the minds of the wolves in the Emerald Graves and the bears that resided there. They had heard her call through the Sylvan to find a place suitable for the elves. They had group around a cliff at the edge, close to where the dragon of the area resided. Old Scarred Paw had attempted to move the creature away, but it was firm in its home. It was settled next to a tree that had a bloody past where Dalish of the past hung intruders from the branches as a warning to others. The entire forest was rich with history and hidden valleys where they could start. Ideally, she would like to settle it near the eluvian that the great bears had first showed her. It was a land untouched by man for years. That was the end goal for the Sylvan, who was trying to remain discreet while passing through the forests.

“I am already using my resources to find a place to settle. I’m hoping to rebuild a home in the Emerald Graves.” Could she trust him with this information? At worst, he was an enemy to her plans. For now, he was a peer, an equal, who had thousands of years of experience in what she was planning to begin. "I am really in over my head here, aren't I?"
“A fitting place. I have no doubt you will thrive there.” He dropped his gaze back down to the orb, his expression shifting into one of concern. “This... power you have, this future that your people have planned for you. It can be difficult attempting to hold on to your mortality, but they see you as something more now. Every action is no longer your own for someone is watching. That much praise, lip-service, worship can change a person.” He hovered his hand over the foci and it reacted with a small flash of electric red energy that caused him to retract his grasp. “That praise is what twisted my brethren; It would hurt me to see you fall to that same fate.” He said solemnly as he looked at his palm to assess if the spark had harmed him.

Athena closed her eyes, relishing in the warmth of the setting sun on her face. Could she get that wrapped up in the power, the glory, that fact that people might see her as a God? Even if those closest to her didn’t like Leafy or Dorian, it could be a large ego boost to some. An orb and an army- those were two ingredients that could twist a person. She didn’t think it would ever happen, but thanks to Imshael she now had lifetimes to figure that out. There was no way it could be allowed to occur. "If I ever get close, I would ask that you end me.” She said it calmly, almost happily as she leaned back onto her hands and let her curls fall over her shoulders.

He audibly gasped, his aura flaring out in a wave of cold pressure before he regained control of it. The wind stilled as if to give him time to whisper. “I would rather put a knife through my own heart.”

The world stopped.

Tears burned in her gaze, but unlike earlier in the day, they were not of anger or sadness. She wished to smile, but speaking of her potential future death was not something to be happy about. Knowing that he still cared deeply for her? Knowing that he cared so deeply he could not harm her even if she grew crazed with power? It began to knit together the hole that had been created when he left. A brush of heat on her arm brought her eyes open. She looked down to see him placing his hand over hers gently, his gaze fixed on their shared touch. It was such a little gesture, but it made her heart nearly burst with emotion. A chill ran down her spine, sending small bumps of excitement along her skin.

“So, these plans of yours, you must leave?” He removed his hand from hers and nodded with regret. The cold of the absence of his touch was painstakingly obvious.

“Yes. The Inquisition will no longer require my aid if Corypheus is defeated.” He looked up to meet her gaze, eyes crinkling in a somber smile. “I would hope that you do not remain there long, although I would imagine it will be hard to part from your sister and companions."

She turned to the side and wiped the tears that had formed, small reminders that he was still keeping a wall up between them. “I do not plan to leave yet. Well. Not for a few years anyway.”
He tilted his head slowly with a curious expression on his face but she looked back with a somewhat forced smile and a playful wink. “Oh come now, ma’fen. I cannot spill all of my secrets to you. I still have to leave some surprises for you.” She pushed herself from the ground and stood at the very edge of the cliff, unafraid of the steep drop below her. With the orb at her side, her mana felt restored but she could feel the physical exhaustion at the edges of her mind. If she closed her eyes for too long, she would surely fall into the abyss of sleep.

He pushed up in a smooth motion and stood close enough to her that his side brushed against hers. Was he afraid to commit fully? Yet he still longed for her touch. Stubborn old wolf. She took a deep breath through her nose and rolled her eyes, deciding to say ‘fuck it’. In a quick rush, she turned and put her hand on his shoulder, bending in to place a kiss on his cheek. A shudder ran through his body as he moved towards her, a blush on his cheeks and the tips of his ears betraying his forced cold demeanor.

“Fen’harel enansal.”

He arched a brow at her out of curiosity as she lowered herself back to her normal posture. “Funny to say that to the Wolf himself.”

Athena laughed with a small scoff. “I’m saving you time. That is the code Briala chose for the eluvians. That’s how I have been using them since shortly after Halamshiral.” His eyes widened, and he reached for her - but she began to let the wind take her off the face of the cliff, a new playful smile and laugh passing from her lips. “My only conditions: do not harm Briala and... do not use it against me, Fen’Harel.”

The image of her former lover became smaller and smaller as she fell backwards, but she swore that she saw him smirk as he gave her a subtle wave goodbye. It would take too much out of her to turn into a dragon again. So, she quickly spun and delicately summoned a pair of fiery wings to delicately come from the back of her dress. The orange and reds of the sunset against the valley was a breathtaking sight as she swept up the mountain. With her speed and desire to get home, it didn’t take long for Skyhold to come into view as night settled over the keep.

Athena pushed her wings to take her around the back of the castle. From her view in the air she could see Blackwall and Cullen joining efforts to train the soldiers who were slowly returning from the Arbor Wilds. The siege equipment took the longest to move, and that still was at least a week out. By the time she swung around to her cave and placed her feet on the cold office ground, her body sagged against the wall in exhaustion. Typically, she would have been smiling after a friendly encounter with Solas, elated actually. But the pressure of the day was still draining her happiness, and it left her feeling shaky.
A roar in her stomach reminded her that she had not eaten the entire day and turning into a dragon had taken a lot of energy out of her. The exhaustion was soaked into every muscle and she felt like she was walking through water just getting to the usual basket of loaves and fruit on her desk. The people in her office liked to graze, and she was no different. The taste of bread against her tongue brought a noise of delight from her lips, eyes closing temporarily to savor the simple meal. Dorian said he would be waiting for her, so she slowly worked her way out of the office and up to the great hall.

The evening rituals were beginning to kick into place and the hall was emptying out. Varric was absent from his usual spot, probably grabbing an ale in the tavern. She looked around and happened to see the door leading up to Rathein's room close with a person sliding along the walls behind the throne in an attempt to not be seen. She squinted and pulsed her magic out, her hand clutching her staff so her gaze could pierce through the rogue's illusion tricks.

She moved to intercept the person and had to stifle a laugh when she prodded through the stealth trick into Zevran's chest. He jumped with a startled expression, hands instantly drawing blades and putting one beneath her chin. "Athena!" He winced in pain at the quick movement, causing Athena to arch a brow in curiosity while flicking her gaze down to the very sharp blade at her neck. "Why the subterfuge, Zevran? Especially coming from the Inquisitor's quarters?"

He withdrew his blades slowly and sheathed them into two flat scabbards on his back. His expression was slightly pained, but he pushed through and gave an awkward yet charming laugh. "Oh – well – you see. That is easily explainable." He rubbed his wrists nonchalantly and Athena noticed fresh irritations on his skin. The bright red patterns just around his joints reminded her of the rope burns that Rathein sometimes had after a night with -

"Oh. " She whispered in near disbelief, her lips spreading into a knowing grin.

He chuckled under his breath and met her gaze. "So, you are familiar with such marks, eh, loba?"

Athena pushed against his chest and gestured for him to follow her. "Not personally, but I've helped my sister through some of them. I have a salve for it back in my room if you wish to come with me."

He moved to her side and walked with her silently. They both wore child-like smiles. She was too curious. "Do I have a reason to go and pummel The Iron Bull for being unfaithful to the Inquisitor?"

Zevran's insolent grin turned into something darker and he winked at her. "Oh no. She was there
too.”
Athena couldn't say she was surprised.

Her sister was the flirtatious type but many people were too intimidated to respond with her being the Inquisitor. Bull always saw past that. Ever since Haven, he wasn't bothered by her status and was one of the few people she could be comfortable around. When she would get too distracted by Inquisition matters or started to act holier than thou, he and Athena would help her remember who she was. It was nice to have those safety nets, and for a moment, she was sad that they probably wouldn't be there for her if that happened in the future.

She didn't even know if Solas would be.

Zevran made himself at home in her tower while she searched for the proper salve and wrappings that would suit his wrists, ankles, and light markings around his neck. Before she could object the elf removed his upper armor and shirt and she saw the strike marks on his back. They didn't break the skin, but the sight of how many there were made her eyes go wide. He noticed, a coy smile curling his lips as she folded his shirt. "That Qunari knows what he is doing, Athena. I cannot even feel them now." He bent down to put his clothes on the edge of her bed and he winced with a laugh. "Oh – except when I do that."

There was a soft blush on her cheeks as she gathered her supplies and turned around. "Well then don't do that. Let's do your back first since it has the most area. I might do this bit with magic so you can at least move around normally as the salve starts to work."

He paused, looking her up and down. She couldn't help it, but her eyes were drawn to the tattoos that accentuated the curve of his body. They started at the sides of his chest and arched down until they trailed past his hips where his pants covered. "If you are so nervous with my shirt being off, you could remove yours so we are equal."

Athena narrowed her eyes at him even over the blush spreading to her neck. He put his hands up in surrender with a laugh and followed her instructions, laying on his stomach and keeping his head tilted to the side to they could speak. She created two small orbs of mage light to hover over his back, providing a pure white light that was similar to an examination room from back home. It allowed her to see every little new raised mark and she let out a sigh when she saw small teeth marks up around his neck. "Jesus Christ – I hope you liked it, Zevran."
"Every second of it. I could show you if you like?" Athena flicked one of the raised cuts and he winced, gripping the sheets underneath him before looking back up to her. He then made a face of confusion. "Jesus Christ?"

She clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth. "Consider it the Maker from my world. It still slips out now and then. Old habits and all. Sit still, I'm going to use water to coat your wound and then surge it with magic to heal it." He was positioned directly in the middle of her bed and she made a few sounds of consideration of where to sit to do it best. She ended up straddling the backs of his thighs to look down on his back. He made a noise of curiosity.

"Ooh – I do like where this is going. Go lower and slower - " Zevran purred and she created a small spark from her index finger to get her point across.

"Behave, Crow. This gives me the best vantage point to see things." She manipulated water from a basin on her night stand to wrap around her hands. It was a technique she had seen from a show from home, and the logic seemed applicable to Thedas magic. She surged her healing spell into the water and manipulated the water over his back in sections. As the wound healed, the impurities and result of the healing would taint the water. If it got too murky, she would change it out, but the first ten minutes was filled with silence with Zevran making different sounds as she touched the markings.

"I assume you have seen your daughter since your return?" He asked with his face in the pillow, one eye opening to look up at her. "She is a sweet girl, has a bit of a rebellious streak that reminds me of myself when I was younger."

Athena nodded, pausing with her hands above his lower back to some of the final smaller lashes. "Yes. She... made a decision for herself and I will support it. It took me by surprise and honestly I am still processing the whole thing."

He laughed softly with a genuine smile. "Vallaslin, that is what the Dalish call them, right? The blood-writing of the old Gods." Zevran shifted underneath her touch and sighed. "It's a good thing they let go of the whole blood thing this time. That part of the tradition seemed too much like Tevinter."

Athena dropped the water unceremoniously on his back in shock as the last wound healed, eyes widening as her voice came sharp and fast. "What?!

The sudden water splash made him squirm and shift underneath her. She moved from her position on his back to the side of the bed. He propped himself up to look at her, laughter crinkling the
corners of his eyes. "Your wolf of a daughter insisted. She was going on about how they were misled about the past, how they needed to make their own future. It was quite inspiring coming from a small pup of her age, especially with how she took the pain." He shrugged and ran a hand through his now wet locks.

Athena sagged back into her posture with a look of comedic disbelief on her face. Zevran stretched and arched his back into the light, knowingly drawing attention to the curve of his hips and abdomen. The tattoos on his body were almost designed to catch the eye but she was too stunned from his words to appreciate it. "You were there with them?"

He nodded and laid on his back, raising his arms to look more at the inflamed marks on his wrists in the light. "The bald one – Lithari - she used her magic to do the large pieces on the little wolf and the red head that works in your office. They have the largest pieces – it isn't just contained to the face. The magic was more to help the ink set in quicker to reduce the pain. The only blood spilled was from my needle as I worked on the smaller pieces on the others."

She moved to sit next to him, her waist at his head level as she brought one of his wrists into her lap. She cleansed it with water first before adding a light layer of the soothing blue salve. She suspected it had an element of Thedas's version of aloe in it because it was naturally cool to the touch. He made a noise of appreciation at the gesture and closed his eyes in relaxation. "I have to say I'm relieved. I had quite the panic after I left this morning."

"Give them some credit, Athena. They are using the freedom you give them well. You knew my mother was Dalish, did you not?" He opened his eyes just to wink at her before letting them close again.

"Yes, I remembered that much. Does this feel okay?" He nodded as she finished the wrapping of one and awkwardly grabbed his hand from the other side and stretched it across to where she could reach.

"I had always been interested in them. They are such a proud, strong, resilient people. The ones in Antiva are known to be fierce hunters that are merciless to trespassers. In my youth, I had hoped to learn about their culture but the women who raised me wouldn't allow me to leave. I think it was probably safer that way." He sighed in a way that felt nostalgic, like he was thinking of past memories. She looked over at him, taking advantage of his eyes being closed so she could fully look at him. He was a vision and she had no doubt in his success as an assassin if he was able to charm a target. There were a few light somewhat healed scars on his chest and stomach, which she hoped were from previous battles but with what she was currently healing she couldn't be certain.

He had been there when she first woke from her rest after Crestwood. Even when she was feeling broken, he was the random occurrence at Skyhold that helped her find her resolve. He trained with
her, entertained her daughter, and helped her morale stay high with his joking and flirting. She was extremely lucky that he showed up in the Inquisition when he did.

"Thank you, Zevran." He made a noise of questioning and opened his eyes, sitting up to meet her with an arched brow. She was doing the final wraps of bandage around the wrist, tears coating her gaze even as she smiled. "I was in a really bad place when you showed up. A lot of people helped put my pieces back together again, and you were one of them. Plus, you've made such an impact on my daughter and my people." She tucked the edge of the wrapping into the bulk of the bandage and held his hand in both of hers. "So – thank you."

There was a moment where the face of Zevran the Crow melted away. The usual mask of charm and charisma faded and there was just an expression of embarrassment, perhaps humility? He rubbed the back of his neck and shrugged, looking to his wrist with a smile. "It was nothing, loba. I have a weakness for beautiful, powerful women and I can't stand when they're hurt."

He quickly leaned forward and cupped her cheek with one hand. He paused, catching her gaze and hesitating inches away from her face before placing his lips on the opposite cheek. Athena twitched under his touch and her blush deepened, her hands immediately pressing to his chest to push him off if he tried to go further. Damnit his skin was so warm. There was a dark yet playful chuckle against the skin of her cheek and she twisted her lips to the side with a furrowed brow. "Do not worry, I know my place and where your heart lies. Consider this how Antivans say you're welcome."

She rolled her eyes and went with her instinct, pulling him into a hug with a chuckle. "And this is how wolves say thank you."

He patted her on the back, fully committing to the hug in a single squeeze before relaxing. "Now, my dear Athena, can we get to my ankles? They are starting to itch."

They chatted for a few hours more after that and he ended up sleeping in her loft area amongst a large pile of pillows and quilts. She decided to sleep in her tower that night and it was comforting resting in her own sheets with Kain at her side. The three glasses of wine didn't hurt either. She woke when Zevran began rousing from his sleep upstairs. She brought her blanket up to her chin and rolled over to face the stairs. She could feel that her hair was messy and there were bags under her eyes, but she chocked that up to the exhaustion that carried over from the day before.
He briskly skipped down the steps with his shirt in hand, catching her eyes with a smile. "Buenos dias, loba. Sleep well?"

Athena let out a groan and pulled the blanket up over her head. "I did – but changing into a dragon took a lot out of me. I wish I could spend all day in bed."

He lifted the blanket back with his usual grin. "Was that an invitation?"

She batted him away before sitting up in bed with the blanket clutched to her chest. "Fuck off, I'm getting up. Grab me a shirt from the wardrobe, won't you?"

As he moved out of her vision she levitated the sheet to provide her a barrier so she could slip on a basic pair of pants and a basic pair of flats to walk around in. He tossed a – not surprising – low plunging tank top over the blanket followed by a blue colored scarf. She looked to them both and made a small sound of approval before sliding them over her head. The moment her bandings were covered by shirt she dropped the sheet. He was looking her up and down, walking over before she could pull her shirt down.

He gently reached forward and held the fabric up, his eyes drawn to the obvious scar going across the top of her pants line. "Shit – bonita - that's a hell of a wound."

She looked down at it and was suddenly aware of the lingering tightness when she stretched the skin of her belly. But then she shrugged and pulled it down. "I try not to think about it. It doesn't hurt as much anymore."

"Still – you survived. It is something to be proud of. We took on a dragon. Twice. One of them was Morrigan's mother." He said with a wistful smile as she pulled her shirt down and put the scarf over her neck. She messed with her hair and ran her fingers through some of the waves.

"How would you feel if you knew that it didn't work? She yet lives." His eyes immediately went wide and his smile turned wicked and chaotic.

"Truly?" She put her arm around him and led him out of the room and kicked the door shut behind her.

"Let me tell you over breakfast. I'm famished."
They made it to the great hall and were able to sneak their plates back to the office where she filled him in on everything on the couch. He soon left after the meal and disappeared from the crowd of people coming in for the morning. The office was back to business as usual and she was able to see the different variety of tattoos on her followers. Illrith had opted for the two black fangs underneath his lips. He traced them with his middle and index finger with a wink. Athena thought they fit him perfectly.

Lithari's were on the back of her neck and went into a design on her back in a beautiful golden ink that glittered in the sunlight of the cave. It fit the woman's natural born grace and elegance that came with her.

Syla's ended up being a more thorough design that led partially down her chest and on her back. There were licks of flames that played in a complex pattern down her back in a green ink that brought out the gorgeous color of her eyes.

The other elves that chose to participate had some variety of their leader's designs. The fangs were a popular choice, whether it be under their lips, the back of their neck, or below their collarbones. Each small dedication brought Athena a flourish of pride accompanied with a bit of nerves. She thought she was keeping it to herself as she answered letters on the couch with a wooden board in her lap with a candle on the edge. This particular letter was to Keeper Hamel who had written an update on the wolves that were lingering on the edge of their clan.

Apparently, the wolves had allowed some of the hunters to take them on trips and were bonding.

Like the Emerald Knights of old. He wrote in a way that let her feel the enthusiasm in his small cursive script. What would he think when he potentially saw her people with their markings? He and Lev'adin's brother would probably be appalled if they saw their young daughter of the clan wearing the new markings of another. The Dalish were an old, proud people. There were no written histories because they kept the knowledge sacred and passed it from Keeper to Keeper.

Would what her people did drive the Dalish away? Would it drive them away into Solas's hands after the Inquisition ended? She knew it would be seen as an insult, a potential attack on their culture and their old ways. She smirked. That was probably what Leafy intended, the stubborn wolf. She paused in her response to the Keeper, her head so full of fleeting thoughts it was difficult to concentrate. She was so entrenched in her letter that she didn't feel Loranil come and sit at her side, leaning over to where he could read what she was writing.
"The Keeper, huh? Are you telling him about our young wolf's new markings?" He asked with sarcastic interest. Athena put the entire wooden board to the side before rubbing her temples with one hand.

"I don't think I should. I'm not exactly the person to tell him." She leaned back against the wall and looked up to the ceiling. "What exactly do I say? Oh – hey Keeper Hamel – the elf I adopted from your clan decided to spit on your traditions and make something new?"

The red-haired elf laughed into his hands, the side of his body pressing up against hers. It wasn't romantic, she was just discovering exactly how touchy her people were. There was nothing wrong with it. If anything, it gave her a physical validation and comfort in the little things. "It wasn't a decision that was made lightly. Leafy kept waiting until you were gone for something to bring us all together. When she told us the meaning of the *vallaslin*... I had to leave." He swallowed down a lump of nerves and rested his hands in his lap, playing with a leather strap from his armor. "I couldn't believe... something that had been happening for *centuries*. Slave markings? From Gods that weren't even Gods? We are so proud of these markings. They count us as the true elves – the original ones that led back to the elvhen of old."

He let out a sigh and sagged next to her. "I didn't know how to process it. I reflected and out of habit I went to the garden to the old tree in the corner. I made a silent prayer to Mythal about it all. Throughout my childhood I had always felt a strange sense of calm after a prayer. I chocked it up to her listening to me, the All Mother herself listening to the prayers of a lowly elvish hunter in the Dales. But this time – there was nothing. Only silence and the sound of my denial."

Athena turned towards him and rested her hand on his thigh, her expression softening in sympathy. He patted the top of her hand before huffing under his breath. "I do not regret my *vallaslin*. I chose them with a full belief in Mythal and her power. The idea of her helped to guide me through my youth and her stories are still ones I will tell with pride." He moved his hand from hers and then pointed to the back of his neck with a shy smile. "And yours."

She sat up on the couch and looked to where he was pointing to see two, new fang markings hidden underneath his armor below his hair line. Athena gasped softly, reaching out to brush the fresh tattoos with the tips of her fingers. "We cannot convince everyone. But we will keep and strengthen the ones we have." He said with a hopeful tone as she sat back on the balls of her feet.

"Absolutely, Loranil. My friend, can I ask you something?" Her voice dropped softly, eyes falling down to the small space between them. He made a small noise of agreement. "Do you – do you think I'm – you know?"
He chuckled. "A God?"

She nodded silently and relaxed back into her posture, slowly meeting his gaze. He looked to her and simply shrugged. "I think... you're the one we need right now. You're here, you're something reachable. You aren't just legend – there is a face to put with all of those acts. You threatened a noble in the middle of the Empress's ball for attempting to strike Syla. Do you understand how large of a thing that is?"

Athena mimicked his shrug from earlier. "It was the right thing to do."

He pressed on and shook his head. "Did you see anyone else moving to stop it? So many in this time, even in the Inquisition, allow things to happen because it is convenient and then will do something later. The People haven't had that kind her of a champion since the times of Andraste and Shartan." Loranil ran a nervous hand through his hair while looking sheepish. "I'm not saying it is going to be easy, but you have us. We believe in you, Fen'Elgara."

There was a faint blush on her cheeks and heart felt like it was threatening to race. She fought the tight feeling in her throat that normally was a precursor to tears. Instead she reached forward and put her hand on his shoulder, squeezing it as confidence lit up her features. "And for that, I am eternally grateful and blessed."

The day slowly passed and was filled with a strange sense of something in the air. It was almost like the static in the air was thicker, but she couldn't find anything that would cause it. Dorian said he felt it too. It was the sensation like somebody was looking over their shoulder and it made them uneasy. The others that were non-magical couldn't sense the exact energy, but there was a difference in moods through the Keep. Varric was writing letters in his personal room. Dorian couldn't stand being in the library. There was something off.

Athena recognized the odd energy and tried to not let it affect her, until she saw a familiar crow standing near the main gates with Leliana, Rathein, and Bull with his pack on his back. He was back in the traditional crow garb with a hood covering most of his face. Rathein had a faint blush on her cheeks that she was trying to hide but Athena could see it from where she stood next to the barn. Syla had wanted to see the Red Hart that the Inquisition had so she brought her over to meet it.

She walked over towards the group with a curious expression and open arms. "Now this looks like
Zevran chuckled under his breath and pushed his hood back. "I couldn't stay forever, loba. I'm sure you can tell – something is coming. It would be best for me not to stay and discover what that something is, especially as a man of subterfuge in hiding. The attention wouldn't be so good for me, don't you agree?"

Rathein nudged her sister on the side with a movement of her hip. "We were just finished saying our own good-bye's. We'll let you guys have a minute." The Inquisitor turned with a final wink to the Crow as Bull said under his breath just for Athena to hear:

"Good job with the bandages on that one."

Athena had to fight to snort out a laugh, rubbing the back of her neck with a smile. Her and Zevran exchanged held gazes before he cleared his throat and shrugged. "I suppose this is where we part for now, bonita. You and your group... you are good people."

She couldn't help but grin with pride. "We certainly try. You helped a lot. Where do you think you're going from here?"

He took a deep breath in and shifted his weight to the back of his heels, looking to the sky. "I was thinking of perhaps dropping a visit to my dear friend Alistair in Denerim. It has been a long time and there are quite a few job opportunities available for a person like me in his beloved kingdom."

A sort of wistful, nostalgic smile then came over his lips. "Or perhaps the Queen is in Amaranthine tending to her Wardens and the new ones from Orlais."

Athena pushed on his shoulder to bring him back into the conversation. "Be safe, wherever you go. I know you'll be missed here and there's a glass of wine ready for you if you ever decide to return."

He clapped his hands together and then pointed them both towards the stairs behind them. "And for you – my dear – you will notice a new addition to your office." When she tilted her head in question he proceeded to continue. "A single crow. He knows how to find me, wherever I am. If you ever require the assistance of Zevran Aranai the Antivan Crow - " He pointed to the sky where Leliana had just released a few ravens that flew overhead. "You know how to find me."

"What if we just miss your company?" She teased, crossing her arms over her chest.
He laughed and ran a hand through his hair. "Must it be we? If you miss me, Lady Athena, I will defy nature to get here."

She stepped forward and pulled him into a hug, letting out a sigh. He stepped forward to push their bodies together at an almost uncomfortably close level before stepping back with a wink. She rolled her eyes and pushed at him playfully to get moving. "Be safe, Zevran."

He saluted with two fingers and bid her farewell, pulling his hood up over his face before disappearing into the crowd of visitors and travelers that frequented Skyhold's bridge. The moment he left from her vision she heard the sound of boots against the ground behind her. "Evening, Athena."

Cullen's voice was all too familiar but there was an edge to it just then. As if he were in the midst of a headache or hadn't gotten enough sleep. She turned around slowly with an arched brow. "You too, huh?"

He jumped as if startled and let out a sigh. "Something is wrong, Athena. Everyone is just in a foul mood and I don't know why. Listen – I do not know how to ask this, but I have not heard from my patrols down in Haven in a few days. Could you fly down and assess their safety? There is just this – I don't know – gut feeling I can't quite shake."

"That's odd. I saw patrols when I was out flying yesterday." He didn't seem amused but she patted his shoulder and added with a smile. "But of course, I can, and when I get back we can have a meeting with the War Council. I...think it's time to discuss our next strategy." His eyes went wide as she walked over to the wall on the side of the bridge. He allowed her to push from his shoulder to get her posture before ensuring that her scarf was tied securely enough for the flight.

"Athena. When is this all going to happen?" He asked softly so that none of the passerbys would hear.

She shook her head and let out a sigh. "I don't know specifics, but I think soon. Save me a plate for dinner, will you?" She asked before jumping into the next wind current that passed. She waited until the ground was in sight before changing, allowing her entire body to become flame just to make it easier. It took focus to only make the wings appear, plus she wouldn't scare the residents of Skyhold this time with her dragon's roar.

Thankfully there were no clouds in the sky so the path down to Haven was clear. She
followed the formerly snow-covered mountain pass and tried to scour the forests with her magic. There was no sign of anyone, especially Corypheus or his tainted forces. She had been expecting a Red Templar scout or perhaps the Tevinter Magister himself skulking about the ruins of the Temple of Sacred Ashes. But there was nothing. She landed in the middle of Haven and the sense of unease was even higher there. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end and a chill ran down her spine, even though it was warm enough to make her sweat.

It was odd seeing the village again. The buildings were demolished and what was left was the wreckage of a once thriving place. It was where the Inquisition started - it was where all of their hope for peace started. She looked in the Chantry, which was the building most intact. There were signs of soldiers sleeping in there. A dozen empty cots with cleanly made beds and organized areas were scattered through the church. She snorted a laugh. Apparently, Cullen taught them self-discipline well. Not a single crease was visible in the bedrolls on the beds.

It didn’t appear as if their quarters were long abandoned. She hadn’t noticed any scene of battle or a skirmish. She made a small humming sound of concern, crossing her arms over her chest. They were sent down here to watch for any Red Templars or signs of Corypheus returning – that was a hint she had at least given Cullen just in case his return was a slow progression instead of a surprise. It appeared that it was going to be the latter.

Athena left the Chantry and walked down the path where Solas used to sit outside of the healer’s hut. Even though the hut was in shambles and barely standing, the sight made her smile. It was then she picked up the small sound of water splashing – which instantly made her head turn. She pushed from the ground and fade-stepped down towards the lake at the outside of the village. She ended at the end of the dock and let out a small growl of frustration when she saw the dozen soldiers out of their armor swimming in the lake.

The first to see her yelped, splashing water in her direction while producing a sword from underneath the water to point at her. She crossed her arms over her chest and leaned on the wooden beam at the end of the dock with her eyebrows raised. “Having fun, gentlemen?”

The respective group then turned around and she saw a familiar red-haired soldier hide his face under the water until only his eyes were peering over the water’s surface. Arthur Greystone. Cullen must have reassigned him to be the Haven scout after his failed mission with the Chargers. And Tobi. Seeing the man again made her eyes burn but she let out a sigh and pushed her hair from out of her face. The front soldier put his sword into his sheath, which apparently was on his hip as he swam in the water. She looked to the side and saw that their boots, armor, and shirts were perfectly organized and set on the side of the lake. “Lady Athena! We – were not expecting you.”

She rested her arm on the top of the beam she was leaning on with a wicked grin. “Obviously not. The Commander was worried - he hasn’t received a raven from you lot as expected. Everything alright?”
The soldier saluted and still managed to stay afloat while treading water. “No reports of enemy movement through the area. Things have been still for weeks now. Uh -” He looked at the other silent soldiers that were sending him different hand signals and shrugs as how to explain their current predicament. “The lads – we were kind of having a shit day, ma’am, to be frank. With the lack of activity, we thought it appropriate to try and enjoy ourselves. Uh. Ma’am.” There was an obvious blush on his cheeks as he tried to explain and she couldn’t help but chuckle at them.

“And the update?”

Greystone arose from the back to give his leader a break. “Something’s up with the ravens, Miss. They won’t leave. They have just been squawking these past few days without taking letters. We didn’t mean for anyone to worry.”

The two held gazes for a second before she nodded. “I can take your missives back for you. Have you been able to receive ravens?” The whole group shook their head.

Arthur pointed back towards the Chantry. “They are all near the ravens outside – you'll hear ‘em before you see ‘em, ma’am.”

Athena bit on her bottom left and looked to the sky where the Breach used to be. The place would be swarming with demons soon if Corypheus were to come and even though it would be good to have troops down here to fend them off, they would probably be slaughtered by the pure number of demons. She tapped her foot against the wood of the dock before letting out a sigh. “When you men are finished up, move your camp halfway up the mountain to where you can see Haven but you’re not too close. Do you understand?”

The soldiers all nodded and some of them saluted. The leader climbed out of the lake and shook the water from his hair. Ferelden. “Are we expecting something, Lady Athena? The men, they talk, they say you know some things.”

She nodded and pointed towards the Temple of Sacred Ashes. “I was telling your Commander, I do not know the time, but I do not think it is coincidence that everyone has been feeling under the weather. Nature knows things before we do and I think it is giving us a warning. Something’s a brewing, it would be best to not be close to the sight of impact. I think you will be safe to finish up your swim and then move after dinner under the cover of darkness. I will calm the ravens before I leave so that they do not draw attention to you.” She then saluted to them before turning on her heel to go back to the ravens’ cages.
They were close to the Chantry across the opening where Threnn the quartermaster used to post up. As the soldiers, said, they were going haywire. She pulled forward on her magic and reached out to touch them through the cages, ignoring the small little annoyed pecks they gave her in greeting. *Danger. Don’t like.* They spoke in short, clipped sentences. They were similar to her lizards in that regard. She shushed them and pulsed out soothing magic until they were bumping and tilting their heads into her touch.

“I told the men to watch you, okay? They shouldn’t make you send letters, but you’ll be okay if you have to. If anything, it will be better to get out of this place.” The ravens all made different noises of approval before she looked to the wooden box hanging from their cages that had all of the letters. There were five or six letters to go out that were all meant for Skyhold. “Damn, only wings then.” She murmured to herself as the magic from her spirit expanded from her back and crafted wings. As the sun began to set over Haven she returned back to Skyhold and landed in the window of her office with the letters intact but her energy drained.

She rubbed her temples with one hand and waved with the others to the elves that greeted her as she walked through. “Have a nice flight, *Fen’Elgara*?” Illrith asked as she passed. She nodded and continued walking out of the office and up to the War Room where everyone else was already in a deep discussion about updates around the Keep.

“The siege equipment still has a few days left to go – the hardest part is coming up the mountain and I do not know if they will make it in time for whatever Athena thinks is coming next.” Cullen said with his hands resting on the table with all of the markers spread out below them. She bumped the door closed with her hip and pulled up next to Rathein, smiling when she saw a small plate of food waiting for her.

“Probably not. The next one is supposed to catch us by surprise but that’s not my plan. Cullen – your men are fine and the ravens weren’t acting like themselves so I brought their updates back. I also ordered them to fall back halfway.” He furrowed his brows and looked down at the letters she handed over to him.

“For what reason?”

Athena let out a sigh, looking over to Rathein who only nodded back. “For the hopefully *final* return of Corypheus.”

Chapter End Notes

It's been a while since I've said it - but thank you so much for all of the comments,
kudos, and bookmarks. They mean so much to me and I appreciate everyone that has stuck around since my posting schedule has gotten chaotic recently with job changes and moving.
Chapter Notes

My beta morgalahan and I had this idea to do a silly 'anime' type episode where they sum up what happened in a story before a big plot point - so here is 'episode' one of two.

Even with everything Athena knew about the final confrontation with Corypheus, the Inner Council decided one thing: they were fucked.

There was no way to specifically prepare for a surprise attack like the kind the magister was going to bring. Leliana sent scouts down the mountain with mages to support Cullen’s soldiers. The mages were there to detect changes in the strange energy in the air, since it would potentially originate from the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Rathein was mostly silent during the briefing, probably realizing this meant that she would have to face the magister head on. It wasn’t the most joyful meeting the council had ever had.

They continued talking until the middle of the night and Athena barely made it to her bed to fall asleep. When she woke, the dissonance in the air did not get better. People were still just as snippy and there was an eerie silence over the Keep. It made her uncomfortable. She started her morning off with a bath, which was supposed to be relaxing. Instead she still felt dirty after, even though the scent of vanilla was coming from her in subtle waves. She couldn’t get her hair right. Her clothes didn’t seem to fit well. Her teeth felt grimy even after being scrubbed with a horse-hair brush she had fashioned and her mouth swished with a grainy rinse Dorian used that tasted of mint and rosemary.

It was obvious that the mood had spread through Skyhold. From Blackwall’s curt shouts at his recruits to Varric’s continued absence from his fire, something was amidst in the Inquisition.

Athena made a turn to go into her office when a small puff of black smoke appeared to her right and a pale hand grabbed her shoulder. She moved to snap at them but Cole’s worried face instantly calmed her aggravation, well, some of it. “Everyone is unhappy.”

“No shit, kid.” She said with a light sneer back at him, moving to open the door but he squeezed her shoulder.

“We have to change that. You saved me so I could help people. Teach me how you help people.”
He said with urgency in his voice. Athena blinked at him and then sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“You could see people’s minds – how do you think I helped people the most?” She asked between gritted teeth, trying to listen while pushing out the dark attitude and quips her mind was coming up with.

He pushed his lips into a thin line and sighed, removing his hand from her shoulder. He then looked over his shoulder at the side kitchen and shrugged. “Your food always made people happy. Could – could you teach me how to make that?”

She slowly followed his gaze to the kitchen and bit her bottom lip. What recipes could she teach him? There were a handful that she knew from her home world, but it would probably take all day to show him each one. He must have still been able to pick up her thoughts because he grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the room. “We have all day to help.”

He moved them into the kitchen and looked to the empty room with a growing smile on his face. “We - we can make that soup!”

She shook her head and rubbed the back of her neck. “That’s not exactly a breakfast food, buddy. Let’s try. . .you probably have it here but we called it ‘french toast’. My mother made this really sweet version that just melted in your mouth even without syrup.” Thinking of the dish brought a smile to her face and slowly washed away some of the negative energy in the air. Cole must have felt it because he started nodding along to what she was saying. She laughed with a roll of her eyes. “Alright. You win. Grab an apron and let’s get started.”

Within the hour, the kitchen began to small of vanilla and bacon. Cole had burnt the first half dozen pieces of bread but he finally made a set that Athena could eat without wincing. He was still learning how to have dexterity with his ‘real hands’ as he called them. As they were cooking, there was a knock on the door and Blackwall entered from the entrance from the opening that faced the courtyard and barn. He took in a deep breath from his nose and let out a sound of appreciation. “What is that smell? I was working on something in the shop when it started to smell like Orlais.”

He walked passed the pile of failures in the garbage until he approached a fresh slice that Athena moved from the pan onto a plate with a coy smile. He smelled over it and stroked his beard as he did it. “Is that Orlesian toast? Maker. I haven’t had that since I was a boy.”
Cole flipped his piece delicately, following her instructions and doing it before it got burnt. “Just as it turns brown. Not too soggy and not too hard.”

The warrior narrowed his gaze and took a step back from Cole. "Right. Do you mind if I have some? I’m starving after training this morning.” He pulled up a barstool to the edge of the counter and smiled at Athena put a plate in front of him, dusting his plate with powdered sugar.

“Go for it. Cole was saying the place could use some cheering up today so I’m teaching him how to help through cooking.” Blackwall nodded before digging into his meal between the two.

Cole mumbled under his breath. “Singing also helps but she won’t do it.”

Athena snapped back at him with a matronly tone. “I will be murdered on the spot with the mood this Keep is in today. Leliana herself would probably come down here if I was performing. Plus, I need these hands to cook. Take your toast off the pan, Cole. We’re almost done with this one.”

He dutifully removed the last piece of toast from the pan. Blackwall twitched his mustache and looked to Athena with a grateful expression. “Rumor has it we might be facing the Tevinter soon.” She popped a small piece of bacon into her mouth with a silent nod. He sighed and looked her up and down, chuckling before eating another piece of toast. He finished chewing before speaking, ever the polite Orlesian. “Shit it’s been a long time. To think – when I first met you – we had to pry a bear from eating off your arm.”

She nearly choked on her mouthful and playfully glared at him. She waited until she could swallow before kicking him lightly on the high. The scars were still visible on her arm and the warrior looked to them while huffing under his breath. “Why did you venture off that day? It seemed foolish at the time.”

Athena contemplated her words first, taking in a deep sip of tea to give herself a few extra seconds. “I already knew who you were, so it was honestly hard for me to listen to the stuff about Wardens. I do not have a good poker face so I tried to remove myself from the situation so I wouldn’t give you away.”

He instantly laughed, a hand going to his belly as he leaned backwards. Cole looked over with an interested look before clearing the dishes from the stove and gathering the ingredients for their next meal. “I suppose I should thank you then, shouldn’t I? That would have been awkward.” He cleared his throat and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He then turned and met her gaze with a smile. “I suppose if we are fighting Corypheus soon I am to go and join the Wardens. That was your decree, was it not?”
She suddenly felt embarrassed to be facing him after that decision, so she avoided his gaze with a slight blush on her cheeks. “Yes. I don’t think you would have allowed the Inquisition to just forgive you and I couldn’t bear it to bring a sword against you.” She itched the side of her nose and turned to look him in the eye. “Final piece of advice? Don’t go to Weisshaupt. From what I know, that place doesn’t have the brightest future so I would try going to Amaranthine. I can get Hawke and Fenris to accompany you there if you want.”

He finished off his plate and hummed, kicking back from the barstool. “What is my fate if I choose to go there?”

Athena felt herself smile. “Honestly? I don’t know. But it has to be better than the alternative, right?”

He nodded with a genuine smile, eyes crinkling before he gestured back to the door. “Probably. Well. Thank you for the breakfast, Athena.” He paused and glanced over his shoulder. “And Cole. I guess. Mind if I spread the word of what you two are doing today? I know everyone else is feeling pretty under the weather.”

Cole and her shrugged in unison. “I want to help as many as possible. But we might run out of food.”

“If word spreads like Ranier intends too – it very well might.” There was a smooth and coy voice behind them that caused them both to jump.

Cole made a soft groaning noise and put his head in his hands. “Leliana - I forgot the honey today. I’m so sorry.”

The Spymaster raised a hand to silence him and shook her head. “Today did not feel like a day for honey, Cole. But thank you.” She then looked down and blinked slowly. “Is that what I think it is?”

Athena raised the plate and offered her one of the smaller pieces that was left. “It’s a recipe my mom used to make. There’s some sugar and syrup on the counter – and some tea in the pot if you want.”

The former bard moved with grace through the kitchen and dipped the toast in the sugar and then
the syrup before popping into her mouth. It was rare to see the woman smile, even after she took her personal trip with Rathein to receive Justinia’s final message. But that morning she smiled as the flavors of the toast hit her tongue and Athena could only grow happier while drinking her morning brew. “This is fabulous, Athena. You say the recipe was your mother’s?” Athena responded with a small nod.

Leliana relaxed into the chair and took a sip of fresh tea while sighing. “I overheard you and Blackwall talking about the bear.” She chuckled under her breath in her usual sing-song tone. “I remember when you told that story to the children as we were traveling to Skyhold for the first time.”

Athena softly whispered “oooooh” before putting her tea down to wave her hand at the sink. Much like one of her first Disney movies, the brushes and the dishes began to bounce from place to place until they got into a smooth cleaning pattern. As if she weren’t even bothered, the red-head continued. “Everyone was so frustrated at you, trying to pin the blame on you because you knew everything. But you ignored that and spun a story of your own misfortune for the children.” She paused to take another bite of her breakfast. “Cole, can you go and grab Josie for me? She would absolutely love this. Maker knows she needs it.”

He put down his drying cloth and immediately left, a sneaky smile on his lips as he did so. The moment the door closed, Leliana blew the steam from her tea. “It was really nice of you to do that, you know. Those children were terrified then. I think you made a few people smile for the first time, even though they had just lost everything again after the Breach.”

“Tobi was a very hard boy to say no to.” Athena said softly, trying not to get choked up on her son’s name alone.

“You must miss him dearly.” There was a softness to the bard’s voice and she couldn’t help but feel comforted.

“Every day, but it gets easier, especially seeing how much Leafy has grown into her own person. But - I’m learning scars never go away, they just get less painful with time.” She took in a deep gulp of her tea and exhaled, steam rising from her breath. They both enjoyed their respective meals in silence until there was a ruckus from outside.

“Cole - really – thank you I am not hungry this morning.” The door opened and there appeared a rather flustered looking Josephine with Cole behind her. “I do not need to be - “

“Josie - shut up and eat this. You’ll feel better.” Leliana prepared a fork full of toast and put it in
her friend’s mouth without any warning. Josephine let out a final whine of protest before the bard slid the fork from her lips and left her to process the food. She moved it around in her mouth, her expression shifting from apprehension to happiness with each bite.

The diplomatic leader of the Inquisition took her time and finally swallowed it down, eyes slightly closed in relaxation before she let out a sigh. “That is delightfully sinful, Athena. What is the occasion?”

Cole moved around the group and started digging through the ice box for ingredients for lunch – burgers – or whatever Thedas version they could cook up with french fries. Thankfully magic could come into play so she wanted to make them as authentic as her favorite place on the West Coast of home. He then poked his head from behind the door of the make-shift fridge to answer her question. “Bad energy. Helping.”

Leliana continued on with the train of thought. “Food brings out the best memories too.” She then aimed her fork at the scars on Athena’s arm. “We were just talking about the first time she told a story to the children on the way to Skyhold.”

Josephine licked the honey syrup from her fingers with a sound of happiness purring from her lips. “I miss the dancing. Leliana – do you remember when we were teaching everyone how to dance? The poor Commander had so many surprise ‘war briefings’ that week it was a shock when our Lady Athena dragged him on the dancefloor during the ball itself.”

Athena couldn’t help but laugh, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “It was either dance or continue to be fondled by Orlesian nobility. I think we can see which one our dear Commander prefers.” Leliana and Josephine shared a glance that obviously had subtext and secret meaning within it. She looked to both of them and made a noise of disapproval. “What?”

Josephine giggled under her breath and suddenly Athena felt like she was back in middle school in a gossip circle. “I think he would have gone if you asked even without the pressing of the nobles. You don’t know how many people asked me if you two were betrothed because of the way he watched you dance.”

She instantly felt her face get hot and she turned around to put the dishes away while the two girls laughed. The thought had passed her mind, but it still made her feel embarrassed. He couldn’t still feel that way, could he? She had felt like things had progressed to more sibling banter after Halamshiral, but in a way she had blinders on due to her feelings with Solas. The only other person she had somewhat felt things for was Zevran and that was due to his aggressive and suave flirting. How could she not, especially knowing he wasn’t going to be there forever? Josephine let out a wistful sigh and ripped her from her thoughts as she stirred her cup of tea. “Their reaction when I told them that you were with the supposed ‘elf servant’ however, that was almost even
She then gave a knowing smile that calmed her nervous heart, looking up when the door opened behind them. There was an amused hum as Athena heard the clicking of heels against the kitchen tiles. She didn’t even have to turn to know who was walking in with those kinds of shoes at nine in the morning. “Scandalous indeed, Lady Montilyet. The courts were buzzing for weeks – how could the Inquisitor put her faith and trust in someone who slept with a - ”

“That’s enough, Vivienne.” Athena cut from the side of the kitchen, her magic pausing long enough for the dishes to still in their dance in the air. They began moving again after Vivienne began to chuckle and the tenseness in the room dissolved, if only slightly.

“Forgive me. Quoting was in poor taste. Besides – they were more interested in discussing the fact that you had literally bared the neck of Florianne to her brother and marked him a coward. Even though he is the claimed ruler of Orlais, the country knows him now.” Cole wordlessly made Vivienne a cup of tea from one of the freshly washed cups and added three lumps of sugar before giving it to her. She leaned against the counter and winked at Athena, plucking the last piece of toast from the plate.

“You’ve always been so blood thirsty, Madame de Fer.” Leliana teased as Josephine shot Athena an apologetic gaze. She simply shrugged in response, crossing her arms over her chest while leaning onto the kitchen counter behind her.

“Our Lady Wolfsbane knows this. Women like us in this room aren’t so different. Isn’t that right, my dear?” She purred while looking up over her teacup as she sipped it slowly. Their gazes met and Athena arched a brow before nodding slowly. That phrase used to bug the shit out of her. Women like us. She didn’t want to be associated with the scheming, manipulative nobility of Thedas. But, with what it seemed like her future held for her, she figured she probably should start learning how to play The Game. Solas had said that’s what elven had been like with the ballrooms, the posturing, and the secrets. She had no doubt that it would happen again as the tides of powers shifted after the fall of Corypheus.

“You’re absolutely right, Vivienne.” She then playfully looked down to the toast in her hand and shook her head. “I did not think you were one for breads – didn't you once tell me that a lady was not to eat with her fingers?”

The mage slowly put the toast in her mouth, chewed while never breaking eye contact, then swallowed. “It seems as of late I have allowed myself many liberties.” She licked the sugar from her finger and then looked at the back of her hand, examining it while flipping it back and forth. “I woke up with the strangest feeling in my body today, like something isn’t quite right.”
Athena took the teapot from Cole’s hands and filled Vivienne’s cup with a smile of neutrality. “That - I understand. Feel free to hide here until you feel better.”

The women talked for the next few hours about everything from the gossip at Skyhold to all of the eligible bachelor and bachelorettes. Josephine had attempted to pair Vivienne with a new person for a date but she quickly turned it down. Cole was also doing his own experimentation of what snacks they liked then talking and how sometimes food wasn’t required to help: it was people.

Cole and Athena had only half an hour after the shade brigade until they put the meat patties on the skillet. The sizzling sound brought her back to her home memories when her father would put meat on the barbeque with rock and roll music playing in the background on the stereo. Nostalgic tears formed in her eyes as she flipped the spatula around in her hand.

“Meatloaf? Is that what we’re making next?” He asked innocently.

Athena scoffed a laugh under her breath, flashing him a wicked smile. “No, my dear, that’s a musician. My father used to listen to him while he grilled food like I’m doing. How much can you still hear of people?”

He made an odd face and closed his eyes, as if trying really hard to listen in. “Words - fragments – passing thoughts. They’re not as loud as they used to be. But I can still feel them. There’s pain waiting outside the door, but he doesn’t know if he can come in.”

She flipped the meat patty in front of her while her cooking assistant for the day cut the rest of the vegetables. Athena flicked her hand towards the door and swung it open, where a frustrated looking Cullen was standing there with his hand up as if he were about to knock. He retracted that hand and rubbed the back of his neck, clearing his throat before coming in. “Afternoon, Cole – Athena.” He looked to each of them with a nod.

Cole looked over his shoulder and hummed in acknowledgement before going back to his task. The boy was an expert with a knife and she was glad to be able to direct his murderous dexterity to another task. Athena began to smile as the smell of the seasonings in the meat took to the air. She tried her best to mimic her father’s seasoning salt but it was difficult considering she didn’t know Thedas’s different plants as well. It took a lot of licking things and combinations from her fingers and spoons to get something sort of familiar to be created.
“Afternoon, Cullen. We were talking about you earlier.” She teased while pushing one of the patties around with the tip of her spatula. He came to her side with a chuckle while leaning against the island in the middle of the kitchen.

“That’s never a good sign.” He said with half a smile.

“It was Leliana and Josephine. We were talking about Halamshiral.” He immediately rolled his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with a groan. “Cole says it felt you hurting – you alright?” She kicked the front of his boot before turning back to the stove. Cole was looking at the buns cooking in the oven while keeping an eye on the cut-up slices of potato they had in the other one.

“I think my headache has gotten worse with you saying I was the subject of that conversation.” She shot him a look of concern that was quickly settled with his playful wink. “The headaches are getting better actually. It has been many weeks since I’ve had a day so bad that I couldn’t get out of bed.”

“It’s been two weeks and a day. I brought you warm soup – but that was before.” Cole cut in, looking at Athena with a blank stare before turning back to his task. The Commander cleared his throat and itched the side of his temple.

“As I was saying, they’re still better than they have been.” He nudged Athena in the back of the calf with the tip of his boot. “What about you? How have things been for you? I feel like it has been a long time since we’ve spoken.”

Athena tried her best to push back what the ladies had said to the back of her mind, shrugging with an innocent smile. “I feel like things are good, even with the potential of Corypheus coming back. I’m back to full strength – if not stronger now. Things are just generally falling back into place. With things how they have been around the Keep, Cole suggested that we try to help so I’m teaching him how to make food. You want to try the first of this meal? It’s a fairly common one from where I’m from.”

He nodded and suddenly became uneasy when he realized that she had willed the plate to go from the counter to her side. It floated at about waist level so she could flip the patty in the air. Her magic moved through the kitchen like air. It opened the rune-powered oven door and lifted out the tray of warm buns before placing them on a cooling rack close to the stovetop she was working with. As she was assembling the burger she looked over her shoulder to her friend. The fries on a baking pan followed the bread and Cole sprinkled their coarse salt over them before the whole meal came to a finish in front of the Commander. He looked slightly stunned, looking it up and down with a half smirk.
“Go ahead and try it, it won’t bite you. But don’t tell me if you hate it, you’ll break my heart.” She said without a care as she switched the finished patties to a different plate before working on another batch. She had a feeling the kitchen would be a revolving door for the Inquisition’s inner party. The Commander looked around for utensils but she shook her head with a laugh, coming to his side and pointing at it with her spatula. “I’m giving you permission to use your hands, Ferelden, you should be thrilled.”

Cullen shrugged to himself then took off his gloves. He took a bite, eyes immediately closing as he sat back in his chair with the burger almost falling into his plate. Cole looked to him and then to Athena. “He likes it.” He said with a quiet sort of confidence that made Athena grin.

She walked over to her assistant in the kitchen and gripped his shoulder. “This is you too. Good-job, Cole. There’s a happiness to be had from watching someone enjoy something you made. It means you made them feel better.” He looked to her touch and had the ghost of a smile, nodding his head in response. “Why don’t you go grab a few more people? Let’s get some life back into Skyhold today.”

He put down his knife and left the kitchen after taking off his apron, draping it on the edge of the island where Cullen was continuing to eat. “Maker - Athena you have no idea how much I needed a hot meal.” The commander lamented under his breath while plucking a fry into his mouth.

“You and everyone else it seems. I have no doubt that half of the Inquisition will pass through here by the end of today. But that was the goal I guess.” She patted him on the shoulder before pulling a ribbon from her pocket to tie her hair up in a loose bun to keep it out of her face.

“You know, I don’t know if I ever properly thanked you.” He said in between bites, not even looking up from his meal. Athena walked around the island so she could rest her hands on the counter and look him square in the face.

“For what?”

He looked up with a crooked smile and sat up from his plate. “For throwing my lyrium out the window.”

She huffed out a laugh, meeting his gaze with a smile. “Rathein would have done the same – she just needed a minute to come to her senses.”
He leaned back on the barstool and crossed his arms over his chest. “That’s what she told me as well. We’ve spoke about it since then – but you knew first. I have to ask.” He rubbed his chin and let out a sigh. “Do you know what would have happened to me if I had stayed on it?”

Athena pushed from the counter and let out a groan, pacing for a moment while rubbing the back of her neck. Cullen took a sip of water from a small cup and arched his brow. “Was it really that bad?”

She wanted to snap at him but instead she took a deep breath in through her nose and then out through her mouth. “You would have died, Cullen. Don’t make me go into the details.”

He put his hands up in defense before sighing. “I figured as much. But still – thank you.” He caught her gaze and then smiled. “You and Cassandra were the two that pushed me to do it, and so I have you two to thank.”

“Shucks, Cullen. Don’t mention it. You did the same for me – so we’re even.” They shared a smile and Athena bent over and stole a fry from his plate, assessing its taste before furrowing her brows. “Definitely needs more salt.” She walked back over to the counter and ground up some of the salt rock that Cole had found in the back of the kitchen.

The door opened behind them as Cullen finished his meal and she looked to see who else had joined them. It was just Cole, but there was a new addition to the hat on his head. Looking up over the rim of his hat was a small black and white kitten that appeared to be napping.

Cullen and Athena shared an almost parent-like glance of confusion before she cleared her throat. “Uh – Cole – sweetheart, what is that?”

He pointed up to it with a smile. “When it vibrates, it means it is happy. It was hiding behind some of the broken wood next to the tavern outside.”

Cullen nearly choked on his burger trying to stifle a laugh, silently gesturing to her to handle the situation. She sighed and pointed to the corner where there was an empty crate. “If you’re keeping it, you’re taking care of it. Put some cloth or an old pillow in that crate and let it sleep.” She then walked over to the kitten and scratched underneath its chin with one finger. The purring was so strong she could hear it and feel it from her touch. It was very hard not to be happy with a small animal in the room. If it had a family, she didn’t know, but for now they would watch it. “And wash your hands before we cook again – we don’t know where it has been.”
She had expected most of her friends to come through the kitchen, but once Cullen left she didn’t anticipate the speed at which they would come through. The Commander leaving wafted the smell through the training grounds and near the tavern. Loranil and Illrith were the first of her people to come through and the main of her group followed hot on their tail. She felt like she was back in her teenage years working at a food kiosk in a downtown area mall. The door was propped open at one point and she was barely able to pick up conversations of the people behind her.

Dorian had made his way down into the kitchen and was sitting on the island at Athena’s back. He refused to take the meal to go and wanted to sit to enjoy it “like a civilized person” of the Keep. He had caught onto the habit of reminiscing over the meal and he chose a story that fit the two other people in the kitchen. “All those spiders! I couldn’t get the smell of cave and the dead out of my clothes for weeks. You had us all scared with the red lyrium shard in your shoulder, Mata. Maker knows if I’ll ever go on an adventure like that with you again. That is really a sign of how much I love - “

“DRAGONS!” Hawke bellowed while almost falling out of her chair. Varric and Fenris laughed at her as she slammed her ale down on the counter. They had all been sharing two plates over lunch while Athena and Cole took a break to make another batch. She had to remind the boy to eat, since he still wasn’t used to having to do “real” things.

“Adamant was fucking terrifying, but that dragon? And Athena you just – burst out the side of it like some messed up darkspawn blighter. That whole battle was such a rush.” She took a large gulp of ale as Fenris groaned with his head in his hands.

“Rush? Try watching you and half the Inquisition disappear into a Fade rift.” The elf lamented. Athena had pulled a special bottle of wine for him when she heard he was coming and slid the glass across the island to him. He looked to it, paused, then raised it to his nose to take a deep inhale. His lips twitched in what she assumed was interest before he sipped on it.

“Don’t remind me, I’m still trying to forget it. Imagine a thousand little Bartrands all running at you at once. I never want to go back there. I’m still not over the first time, Hawke.” Varric smeared his fry in the remnants of the burger’s drippings on his plate. He then chuckled and glanced over his shoulder at Athena. “Although you’re right, Hawke, that part was pretty note-worthy.”
Athena pointed her spatula up in the air before shooting him a warning glare. "Hey! I thought we agreed on songs and small anecdotes only!"

The dwarf shrugged innocently. "That will only sell so much. If we’re telling tales of the otherworlder it needs to have a little something in it."

Hawke finally finished chugging the ale in front of her and slammed it down on the island. "Definitely dragons. Include that part – and the part where she turned into one yesterday."

Varric immediately broke out into laughter. "Maybe - I have a feeling people would be interested to hear how our Walker danced - “

“Elegantly through the ball! Wintersend was a great reprieve after everything. Even though I did not partake in the dancing myself, it was beautiful to see others do it,” Cassandra nearly swooned.

“Why didn’t you dance? You looked lovely that night. It was nice to see you in something other than armor.” Athena commented. The kitchen had emptied after lunch and they had a moment of silence before they started prep for dinner. She had stripped down to a basic tank top and put wrappings on her feet to move easier in the kitchen, and her and Cole matched that way.

The Seeker blushed, looking to the side to avoid contact. “I... frankly have never learned how. I dread doing it in public and was too busy looking into Seeker matters when Josephine was teaching everyone.” She appeared visibly uncomfortable, hands gripping onto her crossed arms.

“We’ll have to fix that. You know that Josephine is probably going to plan something soon. It would be a good opportunity for you to try. You and Cullen could practice on each other!” Athena teased while wiping her forehead with the bottom of her apron.

“Don’t be absurd.” The Seeker snapped back, face then instantly softening and tilting while she considered. “Actually. That may be possible, he has the discipline to be a viable partner – but enough of that. May I ask something personal, my friend?” She paused, itching underneath her messy bun with half a raise of her shoulders. Cassandra cleared her throat and continued. “It is not my place to pry, but I am wondering, have you and Solas reconciled?”
If Athena had been drinking something she would have spit it across the kitchen. Instead she looked over to Cole and took in a deep breath before blowing it out. “Kind of? We are friendlier, for sure, but not where we were. You know him – he keeps things so close to his chest.” She rubbed her hand over her belly at the sudden ache that shot across her scar. “Why do you ask?”

Cassandra raised and dropped her shoulders slowly, a nostalgic and soft smile coming to her face. “I cannot help it. Seeing you two at Wintersend, it was entirely romantic. He had been planning that suit for weeks and showed up at the last but perfect moment! It was like something out of a book, Athena.” The silence hung between them longer than anticipated, bringing a sort of anxiety to her stomach.

The two were friendly, but this was probably the most vulnerable of conversations that they had discussed. Cassandra had briefly brought up her brother and her former lover, but the topics left as soon as they came. “Connections like that... they rarely come more than once in a -”

“FRIGGIN LIFETIME!” Sera let out a giggle and nearly fell backwards from the barstool. Cole silently caught her ale mug and put it back on the counter in front of her. Athena was trying not to laugh while she prepped the chicken soup for the night. The elf had come in when they were in the slower part of the preparation so she was snacking on what was left over from lunch while rummaging through the food stores.

“You were – on a – you were on the back of a bear! Riding into battle shooting spells like – pew pew SPLASSHHH!” She threw her hands in the air and leaned back in the chair again, this time Athena caught her with her hand and pushed her back to a safe angle for the barstool to be at. “I’ve never seen anything like that before. Was it awesome? Did it feel super powerful to be riding on the back of one of those big beasts?”

Athena sipped on some of the broth forming from the chicken before adding more salt, looking over her shoulder with a shrug. “I wasn’t focused on how it felt – but yeah – it was pretty cool. Old Scarred Paw sure knows how to fight though.”

The elf crossed her arms and blew a hair from her face, turning to look at Athena with a scowl. “Ye - but then it had to go all elfy. First Solas, then you kinda, and now that new broody woman Morrigan. I swear she can go and blow a steaming- “
“Giant stream of fire!” Bull roared while lifting his large flagon of ale into the air. Rathein, who was sitting quietly next to him, groaned and put her head in her hands.

Athena didn’t quite know how to feel. Apparently, the Chargers had seen the majority of her fight with the dragon as they were coming back over with the mayor in tow. Krem saw most of it, since he had the better vision on top of Bull. The lieutenant was sounding off what he saw as their horses raced towards the bottom of the hill where the battle was occurring. As The Iron Bull told his side of the story, she could only attempt to not relive the entire fight sequence.

From an outside perspective, she knew it probably looked really fucking cool. One v one, dragon versus woman, a battle in the sky. But what she remembered was the heart-pounding terror and the pain that followed. Rathein picked up on that, tugging on Bull’s shoulder harness and finally pinching him as he carried on about it.

“Oh - uh – sorry, Athena. I mean, you have to admit, it was a pretty awesome fight. You took down a dragon by yourself and then it disappeared. How did you do that?” He looked up over the edge of his mug with a curious twinkle in her eye. She looked to Rathein for permission to divulge a little of her weird magic and the Inquisitor responded with a helpless shrug.

“I have this artifact given to me by spirits that allowed me to absorb magical energy until it grew to proper strength and now its manifested into something on the physical plane and floats around in my staff that is being guarded by my people in my cave office downstairs.” The pair standing across from her blinked in unison, the short-haired brunette looking over to her lover with a sarcastic yet pleased gaze while he processed all of the information.

“That. Is from freaky Fade-shit there, Slayer.” There was a wicked curve to his lips that made her pause.

“Wait, Slayer? What happened to Alpha?” She looked up from picking the meat from the chicken with her fingers. Cole had suggested that she do magic so she wouldn’t hurt her fingers, but this specific recipe needed all of the love she could put into it. At least, that was what her great-grandmother said when making it. Cole was next to her with the other bird, trying to use his knife where he could to get the bigger pieces but relying mostly on his fingers.

“You killed a dragon. By yourself. I think that deserves an upgrade, don’t you?”
Athena stifled a laugh under her breath. “I suppose so.”

Out of the corner of her gaze, she saw Rathein make a face of disapproval at Bull before rolling her eyes. The Inquisitor then snapped her fingers together with a grin. “But hey – at least you can turn into a dragon now. Think you can give me a ride sometime?”

That broke her. Athena bust out into laughter, taking a step back so she wouldn’t be laughing all over the chicken. Tears formed in her eyes and she turned her head to wipe them off on the hand towel that Cole mysteriously made appear. “You know what? Maybe. Count that as a maybe.”

Rathein fist pumped into the air then high-fived Iron Bull, the grin never leaving her face. Athena went back to her job before huffing under her breath. “You know, Morrigan can technically turn into a dragon too.”

The Inquisitor’s face dropped from one of utter glee to slight disdain. “Yeah. But I would feel better knowing you were up in the sky instead of her. I mean, you saw her at the Temple, Athena. It wasn’t about the history of the elves, it was about the power.”

There was a subtle shift in the energy outside of the door and she felt the hairs on the back of her neck go up. It was a strange familiarity, something within her spirit told her so. Thanks to Flemeth, she could now chock up that weird feeling to the Well. Rathein opened her mouth to continue to talk but Athena snapped her fingers and made a slashing motion across her throat to silence her. Bull gestured towards the door behind him with his thumb and they stood up and left together as the other door opened.

As she suspected, Morrigan strode in and looked to the boiling pot that was now full of chicken and noodle bits. She took in a deep breath through her nose and smiled, if only slightly. “Smells delightful. What are you creating for us tonight, Lady Wolfsbane?”

Athena looked from pot to pot to see which one was more done. “It’s a recipe from my world – I call it chicken ‘n noodles. My great grandmother taught me the recipe when I was young and passed down a recipe book to me that was 60 years old.”

Morrigan scoffed, “And to think the only thing I have is my mother’s grimoire, and the Warden had to almost take it from her corpse.”
The mention of Flemeth sent a jolt of nerves into her stomach but she rolled her neck around to try and alleviate the feeling. She attempted to lighten the mood. “Any good recipes in there?”

“Well, unless you’re looking for a potion that shifts a person into a frog, no.”

They both smiled to each other, gazes quickly dropping to the floor. Cole made a strange humming noise behind her, lifting a pot while sniffing the air. “Sisters in spirit, but not blood. You’re both angry at her – she took things from you – but she can take it.” He looked to Morrigan with a far-off gaze. “You’ve grown.”

“Do not speak of things you do not know, Spirit.” The Witch warned under her breath but Athena raised a hand to her.

“Trust me, it’s not just mad ramblings. He used to be a Spirit of Compassion and is slowly learning how to be a little more human. Give him a chance.” Athena had put herself between the other mage and Cole with nothing but a pleading expression on her face.

“He says sister... and the Well can only confirm it. I knew there was a reason as to why you were unable to take the Well for yourself. You already had a piece of it within you.” There was a cool yet sympathetic gloss over her eyes as she appeared to look through Athena, not at her. “Did you know?”

“Of course not.” She instantly spat back, considering her words next before softening her expression. “There were, odd things that made a little more sense when she told me. I went through my phases. I was pissed, I was upset, but now I’m in a better place about it all.” Her hand absentmindedly rubbed over her scar as her gaze traveled away from Morrigan’s to the side. “It has made my future a bit clearer.”

The daughter of Flemeth hummed and crossed her arms. “As grateful as I am for the knowledge of the Well, I am unsure as to what my future holds. Being connected to my Mother for the foreseeable future... It is not a place in which I am entirely comfortable.”

Athena twisted her lips to the side with an uneasy expression. “I tried to warn you. But speaking of orders from Mythal - “ Morrigan raised a single brow. “She has asked that I make sure you do not battle in the upcoming battle with Corypheus. It would be easier if you heeded my warning instead of making me incapacitate you somehow.”
“Why would she ask such a thing?” There was a drop in her voice that sounded close to curiosity but edged along the lines of fear.

“In her weird way, I think she still cares about you. But you know I am compelled to act from whatever shard of Well exists within me. If I were you? I would take Kieran or help others at the Keep when the chaos ensues. You’re a survivor of the Blight – you know how to handle these kinds of events.” Morrigan turned and leaned her back against the counter of the island, looking to the ceiling.

“Unfortunately, you are correct. You are bound by Mythal’s will to follow through with that command and I have no fight with you. If anything, I suspected you would want such a fight from the . . . well the dealing with the demon.” It was the Witch’s turn to drop her gaze and Athena stepped forward, putting her hand on Morrigan’s shoulder to draw her attention back.

“That was not your doing, Morrigan. You saved my life doing what you did. The side effects. . . were my own fault. Please do not fault yourself for that. I have forgiven and moved past what put me in that bed to begin with.” She gestured over her shoulder to the pots of soup on the stove with a smile on her face. Cole had apparently read her mind and was already grabbing the next stack of bowls and spoons. “Stay. We can talk about it over dinner.”

The two mages talked as the world and the doors spun around them. There was an influx of people that came in at dinner time. The buzz was that tales of her soup had been spread around by Varric and the lot so the Keep was eager to try it. Cole was pleased with how happy the meal made everyone and did not hesitate to pass out bowl after bowl. Morrigan even stuck around after to watch her make the dessert, which was a pie passed down from her family on her mother’s side. It was sinfully sweet, but this one’s recipe specifically said to make with love or else the meringue would fail.

The daughter of Flemeth assisted in making the pie crust and Athena was able to see one of her rare genuine smiles. As the pies were baking even Cole was dragged away from the kitchen by Varric. The dwarf claimed he needed to make himself happy too and made some comments about taking him to the tavern for a game of Wicked Grace. He made sure to extend an invitation to her as well and said there would be an empty chair waiting for her. Athena knew exactly what game they were referring to. Perhaps if she could finish up in the kitchen she could go join now that they were all in good moods.

As darkness crept into the Keep she was in the kitchen sitting on the counter of the island with her legs crossed. She held a large bowl and was whipping the meringue by hand. She thought for a
moment to use her magic to make it more like the electronic mixer she would have had on Earth, but that wouldn't put quite the amount of love she needed into the pie. Once the topping was the correct thickness, she swirled a design onto the three pies she had made and put them back into the oven to finish.

The smell of vanilla and chocolate filled the air, bringing her back into her memories of home. She moved the barstool to sit in the corner so she could prop her back up against the wall and close her eyes for a few minutes while the pies worked on getting that final golden brown.

For the first time all day, the kitchen was silent and peaceful.

It was quickly broken by the soft padding of bare feet outside of the kitchen door. Athena crossed her arms over her stomach and relaxed a little more into her posture, hoping that the person would just go away. But the noise of footsteps brought a familiar aura into the kitchen, once that intensified once the door opened. The icy chill was curious almost, spreading out as if to see who else was in the kitchen. She kept quiet and concealed hers more so, smirking to herself as he came into the kitchen.

There were no lights on in the room – simply the warm glow coming from the ovens. When she heard the oven-door open, she opened her eyes and grinned. “Why did I have a feeling you would come down when I started to make the desserts?”

“Fenedhis!” Solas cursed while dropping the oven door completely open. Athena raised a hand and coaxed her magic to shut the oven door while she lit the candles in the kitchen with another turn of her wrist. He immediately brought large mage lights to bear and soon she was squinting from her position in the corner.

“Why are you hiding in the corner?” He asked, almost out of breath.

“I was getting a moments rest. I’ve been cooking practically since dawn trying to teach Cole different recipes and how to ‘help’ people with food.” She bent her head backwards and rubbed both of her temples with one hand, letting out a heavy sigh. She could feel her feet aching in beat with her heart. “It seems to have perked the Keep up a bit.”

“Yes - my companions in the Fade have been absent or distant in the past few days. I suspect there is a change in the air. The spirits are sensitive to events before we are.” His gaze flicked over to her and then to the oven, his body slowly settling and leaning against the island to face the ovens. Was he waiting until they were done? He wasn’t running away – he wanted to be in the same room as her. Athena’s energy level perked up instantly. She sat forward on her stool and nodded in
“I agree. I’ve already briefed the Inner Council on the remainder of what I know with Corypheus.” She could see Solas clench his jaw, his hand flexing against the countertop as he leaned against it.

“Oh, only of the Tevinter Magister?” Athena couldn’t help but chuckle, pushing herself up from the barstool to walk over near him and look through the oven window.

“Of course. It’s the only relevant information at this time. The other . . . “ She looked over to him and caught his gaze for a moment, trying not to let a blush come to her cheeks at the domestic familiarity returning between them. “Will come later when it’s relevant.”

He relaxed softly as she opened the oven and took a deep breath in. “I think they’re done. You can’t have any yet, they need to cool for at least a few minutes.” She opened the oven and wrapped her magic around the three pies before levitating them to the cooling racks on the island. She moved her lips from side to side in consideration before nudging him in the arm with her elbow.

“I’m . . . shit at ice magic, can you maybe make a small swirl of wind or something to cool them faster?” There was a low chuckle behind her, a sound that she hadn’t heard in a long time. Her belly flipped, filling itself with butterflies and she caught herself smiling. Magic swirled behind her and she could feel the light breeze of whatever spell he crafted tickling her arms. It wouldn’t take long to cool with his magic working around her creations.

The silence was, for lack of a better word, awkward. The last time they had spoken it was the friendliest and most familiar they had been since before the dragon. The conversation wasn’t even about what had been between them, or what possibly still was. It was over their future as Gods, or something of the sort. She felt childish thinking it, but they had almost held hands and that was exhilarating for her. Even looking at him now, she remembered the smell of his skin and the warmth of waking up next to him. It had been so long, yet it was still such a familiar and comforting thing. She felt her belly twist into knots, leaving her nearly breathless.

Corypheus was coming soon, and she did not want to leave things unspoken as they were in all of the stories she knew. She did not want to be the troubled protagonist left in the dark until one large moment many years later. She knew better, felt like she was better. He was watching her with a silent curiosity as she moved through the kitchen, bringing down stacks of small plates with her magic and looking in the fridge to see if they had any druffalo milk or something sweet to pair with the pie. And to feed Cole’s new kitten, which he had aptly named Whiskers. She tried to convince Bull to make a batch of his hot cocoa but he sarcastically swore that it was a Qunari secret protected by warriors for generations.
“How long do you think we have?” He asked calmly, eyes widening in intrigue when she cut the first slice. Cutting through the meringue released a cloud of fresh vanilla and chocolate scents that immediately brought her back to her childhood.

“I don’t think long. I instructed some of Cullen’s soldiers to pull back from Haven and to have Leliana’s scouts skirt the bottom of the hill, but I do not think our pal Corypheus will come quietly. He has a knack of theatrics.” Her aura flooded through the drawers of the kitchen until she found an instrument akin to a pie server.

“As most Tevinters are.” He managed to crack a smirk. Athena couldn’t help but laugh as she began putting the different slices on the plates. That way she could just leave them out when she left the kitchen and not have to deal with who got what slice. She wasn’t making more – she had a card game to catch.

“You’re not wrong.” She saved the last two pieces for them, handing him one while grabbing a handful of forks with her other hand. He took one and looked down to it, gesturing with a slight raise of his chin as an indication for her to go first. She shook her head and tapped on his plate with her index finger. “It would be rude, guests first.”

He gave her a leery look before cutting into a piece and sliding the fork into his mouth. Immediately his eyes rolled back and he visibly relaxed against the island of the kitchen. There was definitely a joy that came from someone else eating your creation, but it was something entirely different when it was someone you loved. She felt the guards and barriers she had been putting up near him fading away and it left her vulnerable, brave even. She put her slice down to the side and gripped the counter, mirroring his stance as she thought over what words she wanted to use. “Solas, can I ask you something?”

He looked up from his place, conflict flashing across his face before he gave her a passive shrug. “You have trapped me with this wonderful creation, what do you wish to ask?”

_Fuck it._ She quickly took a bite of pie and allowed the taste to give her the boost of confidence she would need to talk about the elephant in the room. They were running out of time. They _all_ were running out of time. “I fucked up – and you left.”

He unfortunately had a mouthful of pie so he only leveled his gaze at her, the happiness from the treat fading back into the usual cold, hard expression he lifted to hide what he was truly feeling. She continued, however. “True – we had a disagreement. We both said things that were harmful to the other. You left to get some air, I left to blow off some steam. My way of handling things, as usual, was the most destructive. But even after all of that, you left.”
He swallowed and supported himself with one flexed hand on the counter behind him, his answer soft and barely audible. “Yes.”

“I know you thought you were protecting me, shielding me away from whatever future you have in store. But I’m not some helpless girl, Solas. I went into this knowing what could happen from the beginning. Even in the beginning I spoke to Wisdom about what to do because – “ She let out a sigh and rubbed the back of her neck, giving him a moment to process before speaking again. “I didn’t want to mess this up or hurt you, but I ended up doing both.”

Solas huffed under his breath, shaking his head once without meeting her gaze. “Do not act as if you were alone.” He furrowed his brows before looking up towards the ceiling. “I never meant to hurt you. When I think of what is coming, of what I have to do, it terrifies me to think of you standing by my side.” He clenched his jaw and then sighed, obviously fighting with himself as Athena could only sit there and watch. She wanted to run forward and touch him. She wanted to talk to him while holding him or being held. It hurt her to be so close yet so far away. So instead she waited. She allowed him to lead. “I walk the Din’anshiral. There is only death on this journey. I would not have you see what I become.”

Athena hardened her stance to keep from rushing over to him, even though the space between them was so close. She did pulse magic from her palm to put a silencing barrier over the entire kitchen. He looked up at her with a flash of gratitude across his gaze instead of mourning. “Ah yes – the Big Bad Wolf.”

“Do not jest. What I must do – “

“Bring the world to an end. And look what doing that has done to you already, ma’fen. Do you think you can survive doing the same again? What cost are you willing to pay to try and restore what was lost?” She took a step forward towards him and thankfully he did not step back or try to move.

He finally looked up at her and she saw nothing but storms in the gray of his gaze. What he needed to do and what he wanted for himself fought in an endless battle. He looked to the space between them and shook his head, closing the gap between them and continuing until her back was pressed against the counter. She stilled under his touch, afraid that if she were to return the gesture he would run away, so instead she closed her eyes and relished in the feeling of his hands on her hips. He bent down and pressed his forehead against hers, still subtly shaking his head as his hands nearly trembled against her waist. “Everything.”

Athena pushed up against him to apply a small amount of pressure back to his head, her hands moving to cling to his hips as his were on hers. Her throat grew tight and caused her voice to grow hoarse and at the level of a whisper. “But . . . that is the future. Why not live for a few days more?
Be happy – make mistakes. The world will take the rest away from you soon.”

He took in a deep breath through his nose, a sound of consideration vibrating in the back of his throat. She fought a smile, fought the urge to press her chest to his and breathe in the scent of scrolls and rain on his tunic. His hands went from balling the fabric of her shirt in fists to relaxed, but still squeezed against her waistline as if to keep her from running away. They both seemed to be afraid of the same thing – that the other was going to flee. “There is much to still consider. It would be better for us in the long run to – “

She smiled, looking up and meeting his gaze, being close enough that she could taste the vanilla on his breath from the meringue. “Then go – mull it over.” She reached out with her left hand and summoned his plate before pushing it into his chest. “Take your time eating this and just think about it, Solas.”

He relaxed and took a step back, looking down at the treat with confusion. She left the rest of the plates out on the island for people to come get while using her magic to levitate half a dozen slices for the party to share at the card game. “Where will you go?”

She turned towards the door and then stopped at his words, looking over her shoulder with a wistful smile. “Life is too short to wait too long on these kinds of decisions. I have a card game to catch – that should give you some time.”

Chapter End Notes

So with me submitting this - we are at the 2 year anniversary of me starting this fic. I do not have the words to thank you all for your continued reading, comments, kudos, shares, whatever you do to put energy into this story. It has really changed parts of my life, helped me develop as a writer, and has allowed me to make some great friends within the fandom.

I could go on, and probably will in more detail on my Tumblr, but thank you. Thank you. Thank you.
Walking into the tavern and seeing the final game of Wicked Grace made everything rush into reality. Mugs of ale were being passed around and she could see that they were already a few hands deep into the game. Josephine had a healthy amount of gold on her side of the table and Cullen had the determined look of a soldier on his face. The only thing different was this time Hawke and Fenris were there to tell their own tales from Kirkwall, much of the details were confirmed or exaggerated by Varric. She walked in towards the end of the tale about how Hawke said a snarky comment in response to the murder of the Viscount’s son.

Cassandra’s noise of disgust was audible from the doorway, even though the group’s laughter threatened to drown out the sound. Athena tried to shut the door quietly with her foot but ended up essentially slamming it closed. Hawke stood up from the table with her usual shit-eating grin. “Did you bring dessert?!” There was a slight slur to her words that made Athena smile.

“Yes - hold your mabaris, it’s coming over.” She flicked them out with light waves of magic to be even around the table before sitting next to Dorian. He leaned in for a one-armed hug before kissing her on top of the head. He made a low hum of approval in this throat.

“You smell like food – it's kind of amazing.” He said with half a laugh, gesturing for Josephine to deal her in with the next round. Athena patted around for her bag of coins that she kept tied to her waist band but felt nothing. Suddenly, Cole threw her bag over the table.

“You knew you needed it – Kain helped.” She brought the small coin purse up to her nose and was able to smell his wolf’s breath on it. She rolled her eyes and then nodded up to Cole.

“Thanks, kid. Alright, who is losing the most?” The group laughed together and simultaneously looked to Cullen, who was sinking back in his chair with his arms crossed over his chest.

Josephine adeptly shuffled the cards in her hands with a glimmer of mischief in her eyes. “Our Commander has many tells when it comes to Wicked Grace.”

“Do not.” Cullen roared from the end of the table. “Can she take my spot? I have a thousand other things to do.”
“Losing money can be both relaxing and habit forming. Give it a try, Commander.” Dorian winked down the table.

“Come on, Curly, stick around. If anybody needs a hobby, it’s you.” Varric huffed a laugh and threw a pity coin at Cullen for him to stay in.

“Plus, if someone has to be worse at this game, it’s me. So, stick around and see if you can win some money from me.” Athena said with a self-deprecating smirk, messing with her cards in her hand with a confused look on her face. Varric had tried teaching her the game over discussions of his upcoming books about the Inquisition and her songs, but it was complicated. At home, the most she had ever been able to play with craps and blackjack. She had a trick for Wicked Grace though, and her companion’s scent on her coin purse gave her a terrible idea.

She summoned the wolf with a thought, unsurprised when he scratched at the door and Cullen let him in as if it were a habit. How often does that wolf go to his office, anyways? She snapped her fingers and pet Kain along the top of his head before scratching behind his ear. Want to play a game, boy? She whispered into his mind, trying not to smirk while looking at her hand. Dorian leaned to the side and attempted to look at her cards but she nudged him away before putting the cards on face-down on the table. Kain whined happily in response, licking the inside of her palm.

Go give Josephine some love and look at her cards.

Kain dutifully went over and rested his head on the Ambassador’s lap, looking up at his hand. He would occasionally whine at what he saw or she would just follow the magical link between them. She would close her eyes and focus, allowing herself to see what Kain saw. It saved her many pieces of silver and she suspected that only Dorian could tell what she was up to. He was the most familiar with her “witchy ways”, but he did not tattle on her. When he caught on, he winked at her and squeezed the top of her thigh with his hand.

The pie was demolished within the first round, a rather tipsy Hawke demanding more. Fenris held the back of her shirt and brought her back into her chair to finish the round of cards.

They went through coins, drinks, and stories.

By the end of the game, her heart felt full. It was nearing the final round when Cullen huffed a laugh underneath his breath. There was a hearty pile of gold and other belongings in front of Josephine, but Athena had kept her pace. She didn’t want to be so successful that others caught on to her secret, but she would be leaving with a much heavier coin purse. Hawke was asleep at the table with her head rested on her hands while Fenris was still in the game, one hand absent
mindedly stroking her back. The Commander smiled. “Deal again. I’ve figured out your tells, Lady Ambassador.”

Josephine leaned forward with her hands clasped, a coy smile on her lips. “Commander: Everyone knows a lady has no tells.”

Cullen sat back in his chair while Athena subtly nudged Dorian to get him to pay attention. He leaned over to her and she whispered as the Ambassador and the Commander talked. “Remember that time – long ago when I may have hinted about you seeing the Commander?”

The mage thought for a moment then nodded, his lips curving back into a wicked and knowing grin. “That was forever ago, my dear.”

“Pay attention – Dorian and I will be dealt in!” She piped back into the conversation, looking over to Rathein.

The Inquisitor raised her mug while sitting back into her chair. “I don’t want to miss this round.”

Clothing piece by clothing piece... the Commander came undone.

Athena was able to use her trick to get his overcoat and she wore it with pride as Josephine collected the rest. The fur of his coat smelled of sweat, armor polish, and a twinge of elfroot. She suspected he would chew on the actual herb to sway his headaches, but Kain was more interested in trying to get it off of her to sleep on. That was the Commander’s fault for leaving his clothes on the ground for the wolf to sleep on at night.

“Not a word, dwarf.” He spat next to Varric, who was trying to hide his laughter in his hand of cards.

“I tried to warn you, Curly.” He responded with a laugh. The entire table was either directly staring doing their best not to. Athena was caught in the middle. With Cullen on her right and Dorian on her left, she was trying to keep the blush from rising up on her cheeks. She had allowed Cullen to borrow her scarf that Zevran had picked out from the day before to cover his vulnerable areas. He
accepted it begrudgingly but sat a little more comfortable when he realized the family goods were not visible to the entire table, much to Dorian’s dismay.

The table began to disperse for their nightly routines, Bull and Rathein obviously leaving for their quarters. Varric collected all of the cards while looking at the individual hands that were folded previously in the game. He flipped over the Inquisitor’s and raised his brows, huffing a laugh under his breath. “If she weren’t drunk she probably could have won that round.” He then looked over to Athena with a knowing smile.

“When did you learn how to do that?”

She feigned innocence and kissed Dorian’s hand as he wished her good-night. “I do not know what you’re talking about, Ser Tethras. I played an honest hand.”

There was a groan from Cullen as he leaned forward and put his head against his hands. “Liar.”

“Your wolf seemed awful interested in Josephine’s lap and hands for a while, Walker. That’s a clever trick though.” He smiled and tapped the deck against the table to line the cards’ edges up before resting it on the corner.

“Saved the Commander’s naked ass for the walk back. As warm as it is – here.” Athena shrugged the overcoat off and tossed it over to him. He gratefully caught it and swung it over his shoulders, pulling it closed in the front. Varric and her laughed as he struggled to keep it on while covering his skin. Varric continued to tidy up the table while pulling his bifocals from his pocket and resting them on the edge of his nose. He blinked and tapped his foot against something on the ground and picked it up while blowing the dust off of it. “Looked like Maryden forgot to take it home.”

The dwarf looked up with a half-smile, gesturing to Athena with a shrug. “Come on, Walker. Give a dwarf one more thing to write about.”

Athena was busy scratching Kain behind the ears and whispering praises to him when he asked. She looked over to the lute and narrowed her eyes before looking back to her companion. “What do you think, Kain? One more before Cullen makes the dash of shame back to his room?”

The Commander groaned as Kain let out an excited whine, bending down into the play stretch with his tail idly wagging with approval. She reached across the table and took it from her friend. She tested the strings out while resting her feet on the table in front of her, being careful not to kick or
disturb Sera underneath it all. “Alright, boys. Varric, got your quill ready?”

He grinned and produced it from his boot and a roll of parchment from the other. *A writer is always prepared, apparently.* She took in a deep breath and closed her eyes, trying to sum of the events of the night in her mind. There was a chance she could leave the tavern and there would be someone waiting for her. There was also the chance that she could leave and just have the night with Kain. If she had to be honest with herself, it was probably an equal opportunity for both. Her and Solas has both hurt each other. They both knew what came ahead. It was all up to what risk they were willing to take to be happy for as long as they could.

She began a slight strum of the lute until she found her rhythm, humming the opening melody to herself before smiling. “Ahead on the rise again, there’s a road. Suddenly something is up ahead, I see somebody I don’t know.”

Varric sat down at a diagonal across from her, his hand quickly scribbling with a trained accuracy of her words. Cullen’s blush had disappeared and he was now just listening with his head resting on her hands. Kain went over to his side since Athena’s hands were busy on the lute and tried to get pets from him. He was too busy trying to recover his pride. “Dreams are all I own, I guess I should go. Love is a shadow of loneliness, and Gods I’ve been alone.”

She relaxed and softly crooned a note, fingers strumming to the rhythm as she built up to the chorus. It felt oddly nostalgic playing for the two of them with an empty tavern. The first times she had started to experiment was on the road during guard duty or in the Fade with Inspiration and Harmony. It continued to be a smaller reminder of home, something to keep her grounded in the days to come, and a way to never forget the life she came from. “I feel with my base, here I go. Yeah your body is calling my name.”

Athena smiled a half-cocked smile to her companions and at the rousing Sera who was climbing up from the floor. “So, one last mistake – I need a change. Let’s make one last mistake, the harder stuff is always love, I guess.”

Cullen looked over from his position with a smirk on his lips, one hand coming down to finally give their wolf the attention he deserved. Athena caught his eyes and couldn’t help but smile, caught up in the euphoria of the song. “Time will heal the pain – it’s already starting to fade. Let’s make one last mistake, the harder stuff is always love when it ends.”

There was a growing buzz of anxiety within her stomach. It was all potentially coming to an end. Corypheus. The main bulk of the Inquisition. Solas. In one foul swoop it would all be taken away and she would be left facing the unknown. There was an exciting thrill to it all, to be able to carve out what she wanted for her people. Rathein would have to descend into the mines to discover the Titans and go to the Frostback Basin, but those were quests she would only go on if
need be. They weren’t things she needed to be there for. Flemeth had told her to focus on what wasn’t known, and that was almost everything ahead excluding the events of the Exalted Council.

It would be the first time she could just live in Thedas without the ever-looming thread of catastrophe over her head.

“Can’t fool the time I spent throwing stones. Am I destined to be desolate – building bridges to be alone.” There was movement next to her and Cullen stood up from the chair with her scarf tied around his waist to lean against the wall behind her. It was the oddest outfit she had seen, but seeing him reminded her of something they had previously talked about. Was something other than isolation even in their future? Was it something possible for people involved in the larger events of Thedas? Even through the Warden and Alistair were married, duty dragged her away from him. If Athena had not intervened, the Fade would have done the same to Hawke and Fenris. The future was unknown for Rathein and Bull but he would continue to do mercenary work with his group. She would more than likely be reined in to do work for the Inquisition and the future Divine.

Athena’s thoughts ran through her head as she sang through the chorus, the sound of Varric’s quill scratching against the parchment fading into the buzz of her mind. “Whether it’s just one or someone, I don’t know how you can drink this stuff. A little taste of love, just enough, yeah you know you’ll hit the harder stuff.”

Even if it was for a short time, she thought they all deserved something. Josephine deserved to be with Blackwall even knowing he was going to the Wardens. There was just too little time for them to sit there and write it all off because of some future ahead of them. She didn’t know if it was the night with her friends that was making her feel so carefree and give-or-take about it all. Something in her spirit felt light, even with the winding knot in her stomach of what was coming. “Let’s make one last mistake, the harder stuff is always love when it ends.”

She finished with a final thrum of the lute and sighed, looking over to Varric who was finishing up the last few words with a smile on his face. There was a hum of appreciation behind them as Cullen smirked, rubbing the back of his neck before sneaking out the front door of the tavern. Kain followed him while nipping at the bottom of the Commander’s overcoat. Good boy. Sera had almost fallen asleep leaning against the stair rail but then waved at all of them before walking back to her room. That just left her and Varric. He blew the parchment dry and gently rolled it up before sliding it back into his boot.

“I think that calls it a night. Do you want an escort back to your room?” He offered with a genuine and soft tone to his voice.

Athena waved him off, pushing from the chair to return Maryden’s lute to her usual spot. “This night is not dark or full of terrors, Varric.” She met his gaze with a cheeky expression before
winking to him. “I appreciate it, but you go get some sleep. I’m going to leave soon.”

He walked over and patted her on the lower back before heading out the door. She tuck ed her chair in underneath the table and was smiling at the whole mood of the evening, grasping the last bit of meringue from Dorian’s plate with her finger. As she licked it off with a hum of happiness, Varric stopped in the doorway as it opened. “You’re late, Chuckles! Care for a game?”

Athena’s eyes widened and she gripped the chair tightly with her free hand as a calm and somewhat winded voice answered. “Another night, Master Tethras.”

What she asked wasn’t simple.

What she asked was not something so easily given.

There was too much at stake to allow himself a simple pleasure, even one that he had craved since the moment he left that cave in Crestwood. It had just been too much. There was an itch in the back of his mind, an inkling that she knew the entirety of it ever since she fell from the sky. It only grew as he grew to know her. There were small nervous ticks that she possessed early on in the birth of the Inquisition. Avoiding eye contact, taking time to choose her words, it was as if she was weighing every conversation and their consequences in her mind.

Then there was the gathering in the tavern after the events in Redcliffe where her fore-knowledge was uncovered. Most of the listeners were furious. They felt betrayed. He was doubtful of it all but as the veiled secrets of their companions fell from her lips, their stone faces of denial crumbled. There was a moment where their eyes met, and he knew his gaze was something full of defiance – daring her to utter a single word of what could have been known about him.

But she backed down.

It was a continual cat and mouse where he would try to prod to see if she would hint to anything, but she never did. That was the one secret she remained tight-lipped about. Even under the guise of a wolf in the woods, she would wait for him to take the first step. She would greet him with familiarity, but it was as a separate identity.
Nothing was ever easy for them, and he knew he was partially to blame for that himself.

She had extended an invitation to him, a simple chance at happiness before the world would surely tear them apart again. The offer was something he had wanted ever since he left the cave. He had only needed a moment to clear his head. He had come prepared that night to tell her everything and to be willing to face the future together. Never in a million lifetimes did he expect what happened to occur. Seeing her in the bed barely clinging to life, it was then he had decided that for her life it would be best to step back. It had taken every bit of strength to do it, but she couldn’t heal with him that close. He couldn’t heal seeing the damage that was done.

The entirety of their relationship flashed before his eyes as he feverishly sketched onto the final piece of the wall with a bit of charcoal. The images were faint, but they were there. It was his last addition to the rotunda, the final piece of the story that he would leave behind of the Inquisition. Visitors for hundreds of years would be able to visit the Keep and witness the history that occurred there.

But with every line of the charcoal he felt a tugging urge within his gut to run.

Not away, but to her. The smallest brushes of renewed affection had lit a fire of loneliness within him. He had not realized how much he needed her, missed her in the day to day familiarities of life. It felt wrong to sleep in his own bed. The Keep felt entirely silent without her.

He missed her touch, her laugh, her music.

It was one of the first things that made him realize she was not from Thedas. She had sung a song, almost entirely under her breath as they were trekking up a hill to hunt ram in the Crossroads of the Hinterlands. I’ve got to be honest, I think you know. We’re covered in lies and that’s okay.

He smiled at her snarky jab towards him, the pain in his heart turning a light feeling of excitement in his stomach. She had never been afraid of wolves. Every time he looked into the future, he saw her next to him. In the Fade, he would revisit shadows of the former Arlathan. He would weave through the kingdoms of the trees and look up at the crystal spires, realizing she was not there at his side to witness it with him. Once again, he had grown accustomed to the loneliness of the Fade. It used to be something he cherished, but now he grew to loathe the solitude.

There was a shift in the air and the change of energies sent a shudder down his spine. The odd presence had been growing exponentially larger and he did not doubt that the Tevinter Magister would reappear any day now. It made their time that much shorter. There was even the chance that there was no time left. He gripped the charcoal in his hand until it turned into dust, staining his
hand black as he put it against the wall.

Then, as he focused on his measured breaths, he thought he heard music. It was soft and distant, but it was there. He furrowed his brows and looked to the side in an attempt to locate the source. He closed his eyes to focus and found that the sound increased ever so slightly. Then the answer seemed obvious, as the sound wasn’t coming from anywhere within the Keep, but from the Fade.

Inspiration.

*What are you waiting for?*

The words entered his mind but the voice was his own. He knew it was the spirit’s influence. The Keep was so closely intertwined with the Fade, it wasn’t difficult to pull onto those tethers and connect. Still, the spirit wasn’t wrong.

He pushed back from the wall and immediately pushed open the door towards the main entrance, a hurried and determined look in his eye. He nearly fade-stepped down the stairs when he almost collided with a small elf in front of him. “Apologies, *da’len*, I - “

Lev’adin looked up from the book she was reading with an apprehensive expression. “*Hahren.*” She looked him up and down and shut the book before tucking it underneath her arm. “Are you well? You seem... disturbed.”

Solas looked over the young woman towards the tavern and fought to find the right words. “I fear I am late for an engagement, young one.”

“The card game? It’s over – I saw the Inquisitor leave a few minutes ago.” The gears were spinning within the young girl’s mind and then her eyes widened in realization. “You’re going to see *Fen’mae.*”

He went to swallow the sudden nerves that gripped him but found his throat to be dry. “Yes.” Lev’adin immediately rolled her eyes but then look to the ground, indifference and sympathy battling on her face. He then put his not charcoaled hand on her shoulder, his lips twitching into a half smile. “With your approval, *da’fen.*”

Lev’adin took in a deep breath and met his gaze. She then adjusted the book so that she could hold
it to her chest as she let out a heavy breath. “If you hurt her again, I won’t miss next time.” The implication was clear and he remembered how her arrow stung when it grazed his side. The young hunter had impeccable aim, especially when facing down a foe that many deemed to be fictional. If she wasn’t Athena’s daughter... he would have thought to recruit her.

Those were thoughts for another time.

He pulled on the magic of the Veil to fade-step down the steps and outside the tavern door. He was able to hear the last bridge of the song. As he stabilized his breathing, he pressed his head against the door and simply listened. She sounded... happy again. There was a moment of hesitation where he wondered if he should even be there. She had found her own happiness again, without him. Would coming back into her life only hurt her again?

As the song came to a close he heard footsteps on the other side of the door. He veiled himself with magic and blended back into his surroundings, seeing a rather lewdly dressed Commander assess his surroundings before making a break for his office under the cover of darkness. Was that Athena’s scarf around his waist? He hid a smile underneath his hand, allowing his magic to fall so he could walk over and push on the door. As he did, he heard a familiar and warm voice come through. “You’re late, Chuckles! Care for a game?”

He put a hand up and shook his head, politely declining. “Another night, Master Tethras.” He paused, glancing over at Athena and feeling his cheeks getting flushed at just the site of her. “Did I just see the Commander leave?"

Varic put one hand on her belly and let out a full laugh. “That’s what he gets for trying to play against Josephine and our Athena here. She’s learned a few tricks for the game. It definitely kept things interesting.” The dwarf turned with a sincere smile and what he assumed was a wink when he turned to look towards her. She rubbed the back of her neck with an innocent shrug, slowly looking up to meet Solas’s gaze.

He was going to comment on how important it was to be almost deceitful during a card game, but he lost his words looking at her. The ale had given her a soft flush to the top of her chest and her cheeks. Her hair had gentle curls from being up all day in the kitchen, and he thought he could still smell remnants of the different meals coming from her, especially the vanilla and chocolate from the dessert she made.

She was breathtaking.

Varic walked around him and patted him on the thigh with a coy smile. “You two have a lot to
talk about. I’ll leave you to it.” He then called out. “Night, Walker!”

Athena took a moment to respond, waving a moment too late. “G’night. . . Varric.”

The door shut leaving the two of them alone in the room. They couldn’t take their eyes from one another and Solas found himself slowly walking towards her. Each step melted away any of the fear, any of the doubts that were in his mind. In that moment, he wanted one thing and one thing only. She broke the silence with half a laugh. “So.”

Was it a statement or a question? He smirked, coming close enough to her that she was within arm’s reach. “So,” he answered, his voice falling to a soft level. Seeing her in the candle light of the tavern with the potential of something again quickened his pulse and brought him nearly speechless. “I had some time to think on your words.” He managed to get out, his hands twitching at his sides from restraint.

She put her hands behind her back and swayed from her heels to the front of her feet, softly biting her lip before answering. “And?”

He could have laughed. Instead, he shook his head in disbelief and closed the space between them, gently pushing her back into the table before leaning in and pressing his lips against hers. He felt her gasp underneath his touch, which immediately turned to a sigh as his hands smoothed over her hips to anchor her to him. Things felt right within the comfort of her warmth, where he was close enough for their bodies to press together. Her hands did not hesitate in gripping onto his arms for support, her mouth eager for the kiss.

They broke apart to catch their first breath and he knew that if he released her his hands would be trembling. Instead he rested his forehead against hers, steadying his breath even though he longed to taste her once more. She reached up to cup his face, her thumb dragging along his cheek bone. Out of habit, he turned his head into her touch and kissed inside her palm, holding her hand to his mouth for a moment.

She smiled, and in turn so did he. “So that’s a yes then.”

Chapter End Notes

Song:

One Last Mistake - LP (Have I said how much I love her yet?)
What about the future?*

Chapter Notes

That was a bit of a break, huh? I'm sorry for taking so long. I switched shifts at work, lots of family came in and out of town, and somewhere in life I lost my happiness in writing. I'm slowly getting it back thanks to everything stabilizing and me performing some self-care/TLC.

Hope you guys enjoy it, and thanks for waiting. :) <3

The walk to her room was a total blur.

They walked hand in hand, like there wasn’t a care in the world. It was just a stroll in the moonlight, and as they continued on he occasionally allowed his side to brush up against hers. It reminded her of how carefree he was on the walk to the cave in Crestwood. Every time he gently squeezed her hand or glanced to the side to see if she was still there, she couldn’t help but smile.

With what was about to happen, their actions felt free of consequence. There was no telling how long it would take for Corypheus to emerge, but the time they had was full of limitless possibilities. She didn’t feel as if she was in Skyhold. She was in every memory they had shared together, all brought together in one moment that was beginning to reignite her spirit and give her hope. For what? She wasn’t quite sure, but it bloomed within her heart like a flower and spread warmth all the way to her fingertips.

He led her through the door to her tower and shut it behind her, leaving her to feel suddenly like an awkward teenager. Where were they to start? The last time they had been together... it was a buildup of weeks of separation, only pain and loneliness filling the days. He flexed his fingers against the door and she felt his magic move through her room like a wind current. What was normally frigidly cold felt warm against her skin as the candles hiding in every nook and cranny of her bedroom lit from his magic alone. Athena smiled and looked to each one as they lit, shaking her head in disbelief. “Charmer.”

He hummed under his breath in agreement, the chuckle that followed coming with a dark tone that twisted her stomach into something of excitement. He closed the distance between them, pulling the ribbon keeping her hair up so that it fell down and bounced below her shoulders. She felt pinned beneath his gaze as he ran her hands through her hair. Her nerves felt on fire in anticipation of his touch. He ran his hands up her arms before cupping her face in his hands, thumbs stroking over her cheekbones as he caught her gaze. “You are so beautiful, vhenan.”
The words were familiar, but she did not have fear in her heart like the last time she had heard them. If the last few months had taught her anything, it was that she had not heard her own story yet. She was her own person, uncrafted in the likes of Thedas. There was no known future for her, no line that would give away her future. She was herself, and she had her entire future ahead of her to shape what she wanted.

That started with the man in front of her.

She tilted her head into his touch, eyes closing to relish in the feeling of the warmth of his skin on hers. She placed a slow kiss in the center of his palm, closing her eyes to concentrate on his scent, his presence, and the comforting feeling of his aura trickling out from his guard. His lips parted at her gentle touch and she heard his breathing deepen, as if he were still trying to reign in control still. She moved with a smooth brush of her lips to his fingertips, making sure to give each and every one a slow, lingering kiss. With every kiss, his guard melted away. She felt his aura go from icy to warm against her skin, wanting, inviting. She wasn’t even sure if the pressure on her skin from his magic was intentional, but she opened her eyes and met his gaze with his thumb stroking against her bottom lip, in a low tortuous motion.

The darkness in his gaze lit a fire within her core, and their last time together that was something that had caused her pain. The scar was still there, but she had healed and grown stronger. It was now just a subtle pull but her want for the man in front of her was greater than her pain. She pushed through the pressure in her belly and gave him a coy smile before kissing him again, flicking her tongue out to lick the pad of his thumb.

In the shadows cast on his face by the flickering candles, she saw his lips curve into a smirk. She didn’t have time to breath before he moved his hand from her lips and onto her back, pulling her to him as he pushed them back onto the bed. He caught them with his other arm and she couldn’t help but watch his muscles flex with their weight in his arms. His lips were on hers and her hands began to move at his clothes to remove them. He would groan in frustration when he had to pause to remove his tunic, and his undershirt following, but there was endless touching between them that could not be broken for unspoken consequences.

The moment he removed his undershirt her hands smoothed over the sudden expanse of skin available to her, her lips soon to follow across his jawline and down his neck. Solas’s hands gripped at the front of her shirt and quickly ripped it open, her eyes flying open in surprise. In her hesitation, he removed the scraps of her shirt before working on her bandings, a flash of sincerity coming over his face. “Too much wasted time has already passed these last few weeks, I do not wish to waste another moment.”

The regret in his voice was endearing enough to give her pause. He shifted and rolled so that she was sitting on top of him, straddling his waist to look down at him. He leaned against the headboard to sit up and cup her face with one hand, the other sliding down over her bandings to
come to rest at her waist. She reached back and quickly undid the clasps and allowed them to fall to the side. He leaned up to meet her kiss and sighed when their skin made contact. Everything felt new after being so long yet familiar within his touch. She trusted him, fully and truly.

She may not have known his future plans or exactly what he was going to do the next two years, but she knew in that moment in her tower within her grasp, he was completely hers and the past and future didn’t matter. The future would come with the dawn, but they would relish every second left spent together. She could tell he longed for her kiss – every time she pulled away to cherish another part of his body with her lips he would bring her back to his own. His hands were the thing that roamed, smoothing over her skin and tugging at whatever clothing was left. She was hyper aware of every touch on her body, it was filling some void that she didn’t realize had been there.

It had been filled with retraining her body how to walk, how to fight, and how to function normally. It had been filled with her daughter’s own personal growth and watching her people make a decision for themselves. It was filled with ensuring that final plans for the Inquisition were in place. She had not even given time to be with her own hand in those days, it wasn’t something on the fore front of her mind except for small glimpses when Zevran flirted with her or Solas began to become friendlier with her. It had never been a thought - but now – it was all she could think of.

His lips brushing against her skin, his fingers gripping to bring her closer to him, every feather light touch of warmth was a silent apology. They were the drawn-out conversations they were meant to have since the cave in Crestwood. Her teeth lightly sinking into his neck as he removed her bottoms and smalls were the fights, they were meant to have during the silent moments they had instead. She wanted to draw things out, use all of the time they had left together pressed against one another. . . but there was the carnal rush to be surrounded and filled with him and nothing but him.

Athena was lost within his touch and the racing of her heart. It drowned out any ambient noise and left only room for the sounds of his sighs and moans under her touch. Solas kissed up her neck and grazed his teeth against her earlobe, one of his hands trailing down into the crux of her legs. “’Ma ‘sal’shiral,” he hoarsely whispered against her skin. Love of my life, he said, bringing a smile to her lips as he traced a finger down her folds and inside of her.

His obsession for kissing her spread and she no longer wanted to taste anything but his mouth. She sighed and bucked her hips against his hand, gripping his face and bringing it back to hers so that she could kiss him fully. As his finger moved inside of her, she finally began to feel that small sharp jolt of pain that jolted to her abdomen. She winced momentarily, but he was aware and she could feel that his touch was veiled in magic. It moved up through her like a wave from the ocean, covering more and more each time he moved inside of her until the pain was gone and all she felt was him. As the pain subsided, a familiar pleasure unrolled from within her core and she became breathless.
“Solas – “ Athena begged, bearing her body down upon his hand and riding it in rhythm with his movements. He stole her words from her with his continued kisses, drowning her within his presence of magic and heat. It broke him to growl her name across her skin, dragging his lips to the pulse of her neck. She knew it was probably pounding so that hard and fast that he could feel it on the skin of his kiss. The pressure within her belly grew and it crashed into her all at once. She gripped to his arms and burrowed her head within the crook of his neck to stifle the sound of her peak.

Everything within her body felt light, like it was floating on clouds. She was brought back to reality by his shifting between her legs and a familiar pressure replacing his hand. The last time it had happened, she had almost whitened out from the pain alone. The tug on the scars, both emotional and physical, was too much for her to handle at the time. The moment he was fully within her, she arched her back against him and gasped, hands clinging to the swell of muscle within his arms as the combination of discomfort and his magic fought within her. His presence won as she felt the warmth of his moan of her name across her skin, a grounding comfort as his hands gripped her hips, and a feeling of being complete as his magic and body moved inside of her.

It was easy to allow her magic to flow out to match his movements, both of them filling one another until her heat was lost within his. She did not know where her touch started and his ended. She was addicted to that sensation, completely losing herself within another. There was a freedom in letting go of her responsibilities and plans and only focusing on him and the way he cherished her. Even as he was buried inside of her, she could tell he craved the taste of her lips. When he moved away and blessed her skin with brushes of his lips and nips of his teeth, he would travel back to her mouth with a groan of relief.

The tingling, almost prickling sensation within her body and atop her skin drove her mad. It was addicting and she only sought to increase the feeling by matching her rhythm with his. Her hands gripped to him and she anchored her kiss to his as they both reached that almost impossible seeming peak that for her meant – he was there. He sighed her name into the crook of her neck as he came, one hand fisting her hair while the other held her hips close to his. The fog of pleasure had taken her mind and she was entranced by the scent of his skin and the slight tinge of liquor on his breath.

The fog lasted until they were sitting in the bath together on the lower level. There were no words between them; they were wasted breath at this point. Her back pressed against his chest and he leisurely ran a cloth soaked with soap over her arms and chest as she rested with her eyes closed in the crook of his neck. Time felt frozen in their night together and she was thankful. Even in the safety of his arms she could feel the growing power in the air. It was a dissonant, chaotic type of energy that set her on edge.

He apparently could feel it too.
“Can you walk me through? How . . . it will happen.” He sighed into her hair before placing a kiss upon it, his hands stilling in their travels over her skin.

She tensed immediately, groaning softly in reluctance. “Must we?”

He let out a half of a laugh before relaxing back into the tub, his fingertips now just barely brushing her skin to comfort her. “It would help me to better prepare, to see if there is anything I could do.”

Athena rolled her eyes, drumming her fingers on the rim of the bathtub before surrendering. “It starts as it did in the beginning, with an explosion. The timing is uncertain, but it originates in the Temple of Sacred Ashes, or what’s left of it anyways.” She sat up from his warm embrace and itched behind her ear, suddenly feeling the urge to move out of the bathtub. He let her, keeping in his position in the bath as she wrapped a towel around herself and leaned against the vanity across the him. “He will raise the ruins of the Temple into the Sky as a Breach opens above him once more.”

“He will open the Breach?” She turned and saw his nostrils flare as he processed the information but she shook her head.

“Albeit temporarily. Mythal has demanded that I fight in her daughter's stead so you will see this gorgeous, amazing autumn dragon-” She paused after her sarcastic flattery of herself to see him smirk. “Fly into the sky to battle Corypheus’s beast. In what I know . . . Morrigan was supposed to be wounded.” She took in a deep breath through her nose and shrugged in his direction.

He arched a brow. “And for you?”

She released the breath shakily with a smirk. “Undecided.”

He met her gaze and held the moment of silence between them, a subtle tilt of his head making her feel the need to elaborate. “I do not wish to stray from the path, but I do not wish to join the battle just to be knocked down.”

Solas’s concern broke into an endearing smile. “No, vhenan, that is not normally within your battle strategy.” He rose from the bath to stand in front of her and she fought to not be distracted by the water running down the curves and muscles of his body. She cracked a smile instead, looking up to him while fighting the tears in her eye.
“Perhaps I shall set a trap for the Dread Wolf instead, so he does not leave with my heart.” The breath caught in his throat as his expression softened. He pressed his forehead against hers and let out a sigh. She relaxed against him and found comfort once again in the feel of her skin against his.

“If only there were such a thing. The list of regrets in my life is short, but I lament having to add leaving you here to it.” He ran his hands over her shoulders until they wrapped around her back and brought her in close. She huffed against her chest, having accepted his leaving since she had fallen from the sky years prior.

“Perhaps I shall copy Andruil and tie you to a tree. I will bind your mouth so you can’t bite through my ropes and vines.” Thankfully that broke the somber tone of the conversation. He began to laugh, leaning against the tub while covering his mouth. When he could, he playfully glared at her as she grabbed her robe from her vanity and slid it over her skin.

“I had wondered what you thought of that tale. Andruil did have a voracious and sometimes violent . . . appetite.” He wrapped a towel around his waist and looked down at her with a wicked gleam in his eye.

Athena’s eyes widened. “Wait - was that story actually true? Did she really want to keep you as a sex slave?”

Solas gestured up towards the stairs and smiled, the gesture putting warmth like honey in her chest. “If I’m going to tell this story, I am going to need wine. Would you like to hear it?”

There was no hesitation. She nearly fade-ripped him up the stairs to where the wine and a comfortable bed were located.

They spent the rest of the night like that – in each other’s arms telling stories of their past. It was how it always should have been. He would speak of his time in Arlathan and the differences between lore and truth. She would sprinkle in stories about her past with her family and her sister. He was quite entertained by the idea of theme parks and she teased him with ideas of taking him to the “happiest place on Earth” through her memories in the Fade.
They never made it to the Fade, however. The warmth and smell of one another was inviting enough, but just as she fell asleep Athena feared that they were wasting their last moments together sleeping instead of cherishing each other’s time. He felt the same. If he began to drift off into sleep something within his core would cause his body to twitch awake. It didn’t take long for him to find her lips again and shower her with affections.

Athena rarely lamented the sunrise, but that morning the gentle warm light filling their room felt like a curse. It put dread within her stomach and she wished that she could turn back time to relive their night over and over again. It wasn’t just the sex, although it was perfect and everything she had missed in the past months: it was the full transparency and honesty between them. He wasn’t shy to share his past experiences anymore and even confessed to a small tryst with Andruil. It was what got her so interested in the first place. Time moved differently then and Athena wasn’t shocked to hear that monogamy was rare, even amongst the elvhenan.

But as time went on, he grew more and more disenchanted with the life of the Gods. He began to see the corruption and the lust for power that infected all of them. She began to wonder if that was just a repetitive pattern of humanity. Was that something that she was destined for as well? The thoughts were apparently plastered all over her face because Solas tucked her hair behind her ear while softly humming.

“What is on your mind, vhenan?” Athena raised a brow and rolled over to face him, her head resting in his lap.

“Just thinking about what we’ve talked about. What if we are all doomed to the fate of Arlathan? The Divine, the Inquisition, the world? Even leaders from my world had the same patterns – there was rarely a politician or leader that didn’t have some ulterior motive or dark past they were trying to hide.” She confessed, squeezing the sheet within her palm as she sighed against his chest.

Solas’s hummed in consideration and tilted her gaze up to his. “You must center yourself with your goal. There will be days that feel impossible, like the world and all of your enemies are breathing down your back. Ensure that your goal is pure, selfless, and do not be distracted by the temporary grievances that life will throw at you. Your aspirations come from a place that cannot be corrupted. Do not lose sight of that, and you will stand a better chance than most.” He kissed the top of her head then quickly shot a glare towards the door where they could hear the Keep gathering for the morning activities.

There was then a rapping on the door. Athena closed her eyes, realizing that their perfect night was soon coming to an end. “What is it?” She called out, looking up to her love before kissing him as if he were going to be ripped from her bed any moment.

Cullen’s voice answered. “Inquisitor wishes to gather the War Council for an update
on Corypheus’s movements. We meet in an hour.”

Athena could barely hear him over the sound of her heart beat but she cleared her throat and answered back. “Thank you, Commander. See you then.”

The sound of his boots descending the steps gave her a small amount of comfort that was instantly replaced by an overwhelming anxiety that manifested into a single word: “Fuck.”

She sat up in bed and put her head in her hands, running them through her hair in a poor attempt to smooth the knots out with her nerves. Immediately she felt a calming hand rubbing up and down her back in slow, smooth motions. “Today?” Solas asked, the realization finally hitting his voice.

“I believe so. I really do not wish for this to be here, today.” She looked over her shoulder at him and attempted a wistful smile. “I had such a perfect evening with you - I would hate for it to be spoiled by a rotten Tevinter Magister.”

He huffed a bitter laugh under his breath. “They do tend to ruin everything eventually. Come now, let us get you prepared for the day. It would be wise to have a vial of lyrium with breakfast if you are to undergo such a transformation today.” He swung his legs from the bed and stood gracefully, allowing Athena to get one last look at his form before he began getting dressed.

“I appreciate the thought – but I try drinking as little of that stuff as possible. Knowing where it comes from kind of makes it taste bitter in my mouth.” She commented, opening her wardrobe and staring into the vast majority of options as she tied the sheet from the bed around her chest. If today was truly the day, she felt like she needed to make a statement. At the same time – she would be dressed in scales more often than clothes. She twisted her lips to the side and began filing through the different outfit options as Solas slipped out to get them some breakfast for the morning.

As he left, Leafy and Kain slipped and attacked her from behind. Kain playfully nipped at her ankles and Leafy threw her arms around her in a tight embrace. “Good morning, Fen’Mae.”

Athena hummed and looked down at them both. “Good morning, trouble makers. Sleep well?”

The girl beamed. “Loranil kicked me once in his sleep but that’s it. How did you sleep? I assume Fen’Harel found you well - “ She was cut off when Athena bat her on the head with her bandings.
“You watch that now – not around here. You never know who is listening, alright? Between the three of us – we all know what each other knows, but out there is different. Okay?” She then adjusted the sheet and slipped her bandings and smalls on so she could get dressed in front of her.

“I am not good at this secret stuff. It’s really hard.” Leafy pouted before flopping herself onto the bed with her arms stretched out. Kain joined her and rested his head on her chest while joining in on the pouting.

“You should have thought about that before you left your clan with a mysterious shem and a flat ear.” Athena turned with a playful wink, grabbing a pair of thicker pants from her wardrobe and slipping into them. She figured her attire from the Temple of Mythal would suffice for the day and the festivities that would follow the evening of. She then began to think about what role her people would play in the events of that day. She paused in putting on her top, fingers kneading in the fabric when Kain let out a whine as if to ask what was wrong.

“Lev’adin.”

The teenager looked up from the bed. “Yes, Mae?”

She slipped the top over her head and then began sliding on the familiar maroon and black scaled light armor that was specifically crafted with her in mind. “Something might be happening today. If it does, I want you to be smart. Stay with your people, help those that come back to the Keep. The healer’s tent is going to need more hands and they will need help brewing healing potions - “

She pulled the coat over her armor and adjusted it as Leafy sat up straight in bed. “Wait. What’s going on? Is today the day?”

Athena swallowed down a stone of nerves, hardening her expression before meeting her daughter’s eyes. “I believe so. I’m still trying to process everything but I can’t help this gnawing feeling that I have in my gut. I’ve learned to trust it instead of fighting it so I would rather be prepared. Kain can go with Illrith or Loranil with the fighters as long as he has his armor on. It will be demons mostly coming down so he doesn’t have risk of catching the Blight.”

She sat next to her daughter on the bed and began working on her boots until the pointed tips came above her knees. It was as if each piece of armor hid away a piece of her that was nervous. The armor painted over the cracks in her expression and her doubts and presented something resembling a warrior. Leafy grew quiet behind her as Solas entered with their breakfast. He did not
even pretend to act surprised that her daughter had joined them.

“Good morning, da’len. Did you sleep well?” He glanced over to Athena and looked her up and down, subtly nodding at her wear of choice before setting the collections of fruits he had brought on the vanity near the bed.

“Not as good as you -” Leafy murmured under her breath but Athena shot her a glare so quick she cleared her throat and answered more loudly. “Not bad! Kain and I were just checking in with Fen’mae but we have to go now. See you both later!” The girl quickly leaned over on the bed to give Athena a kiss on the cheek before scampering out of the room with the large, black wolf on her tail.

The door slammed and Solas looked to Athena before slowly arching his brow in silent question. “She knows. I told her to stay out of the way and help the healer’s huts as people start coming back. I do not want her anywhere near that battle field.”

Solas plopped a grape into his mouth with a subtle shrug. “With that personality and her tendency for chaos that will not last long, vhenan. What will you do when our little huntress wishes to fight in the days to come? In most clans, she is of fighting age.”

Athena was messing with the cuffs on her jacket in front of the mirror tilted up against the side of her wardrobe. “Don’t get me started on that. In my world, children would not go off to war until they were 18. I will not be able to stop her for long, especially once the People find a place of their own in the Emerald Graves. But for this fight I can. For what I still know in Thedas – I can.”

She was shushed by him turning her towards the food with his hands pressing on her hips. He led her to the edge of the bed and put a strawberry in her hand to slowly chew on as he crossed his arms over his chest. He knew her well enough to know she didn’t eat when she was stressed. Ass. The sweetness of the strawberry on her tongue helped distract her from the wasps that were buzzing around in her mind. “Focus on only today, Athena. Even though you know past what happens today, the Tevinter Magister is still the largest threat as long as he has my orb. Once we get it from him, all will be well.”

She fought the frown that wanted to curl her lips, so she ate more fruit instead. “You’re right. I get so distracted by everything else I tend to forget about the task at hand.” Her gaze traveled over him and to her staff that was leaning against the vanity, the orb slowly rotating on its axis with occasional sparks of white or maroon light. “Which unfortunately is this War Council meeting then whatever comes after.”
Solas’s voice softened and he reached out to cup her cheek. “Whatever comes after.”

Athena stood and wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her head under the crook of his neck. He kissed the top of her head and rubbed one hand up and down her back before ending with a tight squeeze of her against him. She knew she needed to go, that it would be better to go to the meeting early and figure out what was going to happen than wait. But almost as if he could read her mind, he pled against her hair. “A moment longer, vhenan.”

How could she refuse him that? She tilted up and kissed his jaw, then his cheek, then finally captured his lips and brought a sigh from him. He cradled her face in his hands, bringing her the slightest bit closer as she gripped the front of his tunic. With a move of finality, he broke off the kiss, giving her one last brush of lips against her forehead. “Ar lath ma, vhenan.”

She smiled in his touch, shuddering under the feel of his words against her skin and met his gaze. “I love you, Solas. You are... beyond words.” He furrowed his brow and began to look like he was going to make some sort of confession or serious statement. She put her finger on his lips and shook her head. “This is not good-bye, ma fen. This will not be the last time we see each other.”

He took a moment to process the words, nodding and pulling her finger from his mouth. “I will... see you on the battlefield then.”

She fought the burn of the tears in her eyes and the dryness in the back of her throat, kissing the inside of his palm before nodding. “I’ll be the one in scales.”
Athena arrived to the War Council to see Morrigan and Rathein already speaking with Leliana. The Witch of the Wilds had a displeased look on her face and her arms crossed over her chest, but the amount of people that elicited such a reaction was vast, so she didn’t exactly know who they were speaking of.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you, Nightingale. I’m still trying to wrap my head around it myself.” Rathein itched at the back of her scalp but then smiled when Athena came into the room. She looked her sister up and down and then pressed her lips into a thin, focused line, and Athena could see her working out why exactly she was wearing her armor.

The rest of the room noticed too and it suddenly went still. Athena nodded solemnly then broke it with a shrug, motioning to the Commander to continue. He cleared his throat and nodded, thumbing through a small pile of parchment in his hand. “All that remains is to find Corypheus’s base before he finds us.”

He looked to Athena who had a stony expression on as she looked to the war map, her hands flat on the table next to the Inquisitor’s. The soldiers had been shifted around and the bulk of the army that was at the Temple of Mythal was almost home; it appeared that they were only a few days away. She knew Cullen would be happy to have his perfectly calibrated trebuchets back within Skyhold’s walls.

“We’ve been looking for his base since this all began, with no success.” The Spymaster commented. Every word weighted down the pit within Athena’s stomach, solidifying her initial feeling that today was the day. The weight of her staff on her back suddenly began to feel heavier and her shoulders began to grow tight.

“His dragon must come and go from somewhere.” The Commander snidely remarked back.

Just in a poor attempt break the tension, Athena cracked a smile and looked up at him with a wink. “Sure, from his sparky red Tevinter ass. The things big enough to fit his head, why not a dragon?”

Gratitude came in the form of a light hit on the back of her head from the Inquisitor while Cullen and Leliana fought a laugh. Josephine pinched the bridge of her nose and asked for guidance from Andraste underneath her breath. The joke lightened the room if only for a second before it
came back to business from the mouth of the Ambassador. “What about the Deep Roads? We could send word to Orzammar, hire some envoys - “

Just as expected, and right on time – a green burst of light flooded the War Council. Athena cursed under her breath and stood up, looking through the window directly at the Breach. It was still oddly beautiful, in a way that was unsettling yet entrancing as the Veil was torn before them in the sky. Rathein groaned and looked at her hand as it suddenly appeared to be lit in green flame. She looked at the mark with a focused expression and then looked to Athena, who could only nod in confirmation.

“Corypheus. Wonderful.” The Inquisitor spat between clenched teeth.

“He did that? But why?” Leliana questioned with a suspicious look.

“Because he’s an asshat. Either we close this, or it’s going to swallow the world and bring about that demon army. We don’t have a moment to lose.” Rathein closed her hand with the mark in it during a moment of confidence. The movement barely squelched the light but it set the tone of the room.

“Inquisitor - we have minimal forces to send with you. The bulk of them will return in a few days' time.” His gaze dropped down to the map but Rathein didn’t seem to be bothered.

“We cut off the bulk of his forces in the Arbor Wilds. We suspect that the only thing we’ll be fighting is him, his dragon, and whatever demons fall from the sky he just ripped open.” Rathein pointed between her and Athena with the jerk of a thumb.

“Whatsoever you need, Inquisitor. You will have it. We’re all behind you.” Cullen said with a stern look, but there was at least hope in his voice. Athena nodded to them and then looked to Morrigan, gesturing her to the side with an apologetic glance.

“This is it - I'm sorry you can’t be there but your damned mother,” She cursed, knowing full well there was a possibility that Flemeth could hear them through whatever connection the Well gave them.

Morrigan raised a hand with her usual smirk and shook her head. “You do not need to explain my mother to me. I am fully aware of how she is.” The mage then rolled her eyes and pointed into the direction of the gardens. “Do not worry yourself, Lady Athena. I will occupy myself with
something here or perhaps meditate in the Crossroads with the whispers of the Well in my mind. I would not wish the wrath of Mythal upon you."

Athena made a sound of amusement. “Thank you?”

“You’re welcome.” Morrigan finished, turning the corner as they entered the Grand Hall. She then paused and gave somewhat of a smile. “Good luck out there. Fly splendidly and proudly.”

Rathein then came up to Athena’s side and rapped her on the shoulder with her knuckles. “Wolfsbane, I’m going to get in my armor. Get Solas, and Cassandra and tell them to meet me at the gate in battle regalia. Everyone else can follow and guard the ground below. Today’s the day we get the bastard!” She touched her back gently before running off to her room to fetch her armor, and Athena assumed her lover. It started to feel like they were going off to play a game of football instead of fighting a Magister to the death with the weight of the world in their hands.

She looked at her hand and suddenly felt an odd detachment to the whole thing, flexing her fingers until the sensation went away. Solas’s words rang true in her head to bring her back to center. Even if she knew what was going to happen after, Corypheus was not a walk in the park. He still held a Blighted orb and commanded the Archdemon. She had fought it once during the fight at Adamant and had gotten a little too intimate with the creature bursting out of its side. There was a competitive surge of excitement that fluttered in her belly at the thought of fighting it in its own domain.

The panic from the Breach spread through the Keep and Dorian burst from the rotunda with a look of curiosity and anger on his face. ”’Mata, what is going on?”

Thankfully he already had his staff in hand and all Athena could do is shrug helplessly and point outside. “It’s time, love.”

“Kaffas. I was sleeping so well too. Are you coming down with us or are you going to be skyborne?” He then leveled his hand out and waved it in between them in a “zooming” motion. She slapped it away and tried not to smile.

“The latter. I’m going to go to the hills and scout out for the dragon. I will look for you on the battlefield!” Athena ran down the stairs and witnessed the chaos breaking out within the courtyard. Soldiers were flooding the battlements preparing for an onslaught while small troops of archers gathered in formation waiting for Cullen’s arrival and orders. The Inner Party were quickly gathering in full armor by the gate, looking to the main entrance for Rathein’s arrival. Athena flitted down in a fade-step and met their eyes.
“Cassandra and Solas, you’ll be going with the Inquisitor and Bull to the bulk of it with Corypheus. She ran to get her armor on then she’ll be joining us.” They all nodded or made their sounds of acknowledgement while Vivienne looked to her with what Athena thought was a look of concern on her face.

“Where shall you be, dear?” The subtext of “are you up to the task” put an acidic fire in her chest. She pointed up towards the sky and smiled with something wicked in her expression.

“Air cover – don’t worry about me. Inquisitor!” Athena stepped back and straightened her posture, gesturing towards the rest of her group while making room. Rathein, Cullen, and Bull pushed to the front to address the troops that were prepared.

“Cassandra, Bull, Solas, and I will take the Magister head on. Everyone else will watch the ground and prevent any demons from scurrying their way to Skyhold or the nearby villages. Be on your guard. The ground may – uh - shift.” Rathein gave a weary glance over to Athena who confirmed the details once again with a curt nod. “Morrigan will stay here and help with the wounded so make way for the soldiers when they fall. This will not be a repeat of Haven and he will not leave this time. Inquisition!” Everyone around her cheered with their weapons in the air before following her across the bridge and down the mountain.

The sense of dread that had been in the air only intensified as they grew closer to the birthplace of the Breach. It made her skin feel like it was crawling, armies of insects skittering over her skin and bringing every hair on end. The stones around them began to float and vibrate from the ground, each crevice of the earth being infected with Corypheus’s Blighted magic. Rathein snapped her fingers and pointed to a small cliff off to the side where Athena could have a vantage point. She cut to the side without any questions, feeling Solas’s hand grip hers momentarily as she passed. Athena looked over to her shoulder and met his gaze, seeing his clenched jaw and focused expression. But there – in his eyes – for the briefest of flashes she saw something other than concern and the doom of the world. There was concern, for her.

She mouthed the words **ar lath ma** to him and then blurred her body into a fade step as the voice of the Tevinter Magister echoed over them all.

“Tell me, where is your Maker now?” His gravelly voice felt like sharp stones across her mind. She flitted and jumped with the speed of the fade magic up the cliff, coming to a stop in a crouched position with her staff low and flat to the ground. “Call him. Call down his wrath upon me.” He switched the orb from hand to hand as if it were a toy, and that infuriated her. He called the Inquisitor the pretender, grabbing after power that did not belong to her. But he was the ignorant one, tossing around an elven artifact as if it were a baby’s rattle for him to shake when he needed it. A low growl trickled from her throat as the power from her orb slowly moved into her at the rise in
her emotions.

“You cannot. For he does not exist. I am Corypheus. I shall deliver you from this lie in which you linger.” Athena rolled her eyes and she could feel that she would not be alone in the gesture. “Bow before your new God and be spared!”

“Fat chance.” Those were the only words uttered before a large ball of lightning was shot towards the false god. Rathein stormed behind the Inquisition soldiers that were standing before them with her spirit blade lighting the way, chaotic sparks of energy falling to the ground as she moved. He deflected it with a barrier formed from his orb, snarling at her while lashing out at her with a dome of blighted energy. It pushed the ground back but the Inquisitor held strong against him as the demons began to attack.

“I knew you would come, imposter.” Corypheus said with a melodramatic bow towards her.

“You’re done, Corypheus. No more!” Rathein gripped her sword with Bull at her back, both of them staring the mage down as he spread his arms and reached up from the ground.

“And so, it shall.” With a large crashing sound, the ground itself began to split. The stone fractured and burst into several large islands that floated from the surface. Soon Athena’s cliff didn’t seem so high. Only the Inquisitor and her chosen remained in the Temple of Sacred Ashes with their enemy while the rest were left to watch and fight the demons on the ground floor. She craned her head to watch the ruins of the Temple scrape the sky, choosing a solitary island to launch herself to with the help of her flame wings, which immediately extinguished on her command when she landed. If he saw her or knew of their gambit beforehand, there was still a chance it could not go their way.

The power within her orb now filled her like fire, its power brushing up against her skin from the outside. She felt incredibly full, as if the magic were pouring out of her ears, her eyes, her nose. It longed to be released, the view of the battlefield being obscured by the growing energy over her eyes. Even still, she could see the group steady their postures into a guarding stance against him.

“You have been most successful in foiling my plans, but let us not forget what you are.” Corypheus spat down to the Inquisitor, who only boldly met his gaze with a defiant smile as he continued on. “A thief, in the wrong place at the wrong time. An interloper, a gnat. We shall prove here once and for all, which one of us is worthy of godhood.”

Rathein ground her feet into the ground and gripped her blade with both hands. “Nobody is – that's the whole point.” Athena saw movement behind the Magister as she screamed back at him. The dragon had been hiding in the ruins and was crawling up towards them with a malicious snarl on its
maw. She panicked, gripping her staff and allowing that surge of energy to flow through her. It felt like liquid fire, but it was a sensation that she reveled in. With every fevered heartbeat her form was no longer human, the shine of her magic stretching and growing until the shape of the dragon with the autumn scales came to be. “One who calls himself a God is no God!”

The Blighted dragon came over the arch where Corypheus stood and roared towards the Inquisition... just in time for Athena to drop down and push the beast out of the way with her extended claws. The orb above her eyes glowed like the sun, reflecting off like fire in the reflections of her scales. She could feel the way her claws tore through the corrupted skin like wet paper, giving her an eerie satisfaction to her blood lust. Her blighted opponent crashed into a floating island and roared at her, flapping its wings as the wounded tissue began to seep black ichor.

“A dragon. How clever!” She could hear Corypheus scream as she brought herself higher into the sky. Just as a small addition to her sister’s attitude towards him, she turned her head and spat a small fireball towards the Magister as an annoyance before moving her attention towards her flight. In this form, she missed her wings crafted from flame. It was difficult to navigate the skies when throwing around multiple tons worth of weight. Even still, the freedom of the air beneath her wings and the thrill of the battle kept her mind distracted from how draining it was on her mana pool. Her opponent was right on her tail, snarls of effort letting her know of its location. She swerved through the skies, dodging the falling debris as Corypheus’s magic waxes and waned in the battle.

“You are nothing! All of you will be ground under the Imperium's heel!”

The words put a fire in her belly that she redirected towards the dragon that was now advancing on her. It swerved to her side and rammed its body into hers, forcing her to turn and lock her claws against it's in a show of strength. The two spun into the air and collided into the floating bits of debris, its teeth snapping at her neck. She dodged a bite directly to the neck but took a glance in the shoulder, roaring out loud as she felt scales ripped out of her hide. The sensation of hot blood flowing from her body sent a rush of panic through her. Maybe it would have been a better idea for Morrigan to stay in her place after all.

Mythal be damned.

Even if she was potentially trapped to be in the same fate as her Well-sister, it didn’t have to be exactly the same circumstances. She had to have a weapon in her arsenal that would give her the upper hand. The weapon in mention gave her a sharp pinch between her eyes and began to heat up like fire, mana glowing so brightly from her orb that it almost obscured her vision. Memories flashed of her first time using the orb in the Fade in the form of a wolf crafted from flame, a beam of pure spiritual power striking down the Nightmare demon. Athena gripped her claws onto the dragon to keep it from moving and summoned all of the strength she had into her orb, pooling her magic until it felt like it was about to burst.
A radiant stream of energy burst forth from between her eyes and through the corrupted beast, actually running a line along the battlefield and striking against Corypheus’s line of demons that he had summoned to fight the Inquisition. Rathein snapped her sword up in appreciation before bringing it down upon Corypheus’s barrier, sparks flying from the impact and igniting the dead brush on the ground. Athena barely had time to watch the battle before she saw the Tevinter’s pet pick up wind again after her attack.

“As you wish!” The Magister roared from the ground, an unsettling wave of Blight energy following the words and urging Athena to fly away from it. After a quick glance over her shoulder, she saw that the creature was right on her tail. As she passed a floating island, she swiped her hind claw at the edge of it and caused a cascade of rocks to fall down and stall its flight. The best way to escape was up, so she repeated the method again and again while summoning another wave of energy into her orb. Their actions were beginning to line up with what she thought she knew and an anxiety burned in her core at the thought of a fall.

The Breach glowed beautifully in the sky, and like a moth she felt drawn to it. The swirls of energy and power flowing through the colors invigorated her, snapping her from her trance. Although Corypheus was tearing open the Fade to bring demons into the world, there were benevolent spirits on the other side, innocent souls being dragged into a place they did not wish to be. She could feel them lingering on the other end, fighting the pull that was summoning them. Beyond that, she knew her friends lingered and thankfully were far away from the fight. Even still, the Fade was not purely something of malice like the Chantry preached.

It was on that energy that she filled her form, allowing it to soak into her blood before she turned her body back onto the Archdemon. It roared a challenge at her as it continued to ascend, but she responded with a sky-shaking roar of her own. The beam of light from her orb manifested and pierced the dragon once again, pushing it down and out of the sky. Even I crash, at least it will have a harder time getting up. She thought as she used gravity and the strength of her wings to collide into the Archdemon. To repay it in kind, she clenched her jaws around its corrupted shoulder and tore its disintegrating scales with a snarl.

They were completely locked in combat as they plummeted towards the floating islands, like two eagles trapped in their dance, except for most of it. … Athena was on top. Every time the Archdemon twitched to move away, she would dig her claws in harder, the appendages tearing like diamond through its corrupted flesh. It was painful to be that exposed to the Blight. The dark, shooting energy brought a dull pain to the healed scar on her shoulder where she had been pierced with a fragment of red lyrium. The deadly song put a haze over her mind like nails on a chalkboard, the dissonant tones clashing against the radiant song of her orb.

The two sounds created such a vibration between the dragons that Athena began to lose grip. She shut her eyes to block out the sound, and that moment of hesitation was all that the Avatar of the Blight needed. It gripped it claws on her in return and used the little energy it had left to spin her
until her back was facing the ground – allowing her a split second to cast a barrier and think a single word -

**FUCK.**

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Even with the assurances from his lover, things felt bleak in the moment of battle. The Breach inflected the party with a mana drain that felt like gravity pressing down around them tenfold. Solas gritted his teeth and gripped his staff to remain upright, maintaining a barrier that protected the Inquisitor as she confronted the Tevinter Magister with her ethereal blade burning bright. The Seeker was helping The Iron Bull from the ground after a demon crashing into the earth knocked him from his balance. He had a crippling wound on his leg but he pushed through it. Solas attributed the endurance to his Reaver training. Even with the amount of blood on the ground, the warrior did not hesitate to lift his axe and run back into the fray.

Every time they found a moment to breathe, the battle filled it with something else to occupy them. It felt as if Corypheus were waning in his strength since his dragon was occupied with another in the sky. It was difficult not to watch the two titans battling in the air, especially since he knew the identity of the autumn-colored champion of Mythal. Thinking of that title put a bad taste on his tongue. She did not drink from the Well like the Witch of the Wilds. She was not shown the path and given an option. The option was almost a trick, which was a way of persuasion for his old friend. She had simply wanted a different life, an escape from the mundane. It was something he understood well, the itch to get out and change something.

Perhaps it was a reason why they worked so well together.

Even still, that itch led her being trapped in a fate that would not be easy or forgiving on either of them.

This was made abundantly clear as the twisting forms of two dragons fell from the sky. A radiant beam of light burst down through the Archdemon and into the ground below, causing Corypheus to stumble back into the shadows as his beast appeared to be on the losing end of a bout. He was able to smile at the sight of the light shining off of his love’s scales, until the corrupted beast gained the upper hand and switched their positions at the last minute. The force of her body colliding into the ground shook the strength from him, his eyes wide staring at the sight of impact. He knew it was going to happen, so did she, but that didn’t make the sight any less disturbing. There was a trail of unblighted blood that fell off the side of the floating ruins they were on and to the side, meaning that she had truly fallen.
The air suddenly felt bitingly cold, everything still as the Inquisitor released a cry of anguish at his right.

The Seeker ran to the trail of blood to determine the fate of their friend and Solas wished to join her but he couldn’t move. She was intercepted by the dust clearing and the victor of the battle rising with a strangled cry. The dragon swept its arm and caught the Seeker in its swipe, lifting her from the ground and slamming her into a wall on the other side of the field. He subconsciously gripped his staff but it was difficult to bring his mind back into the battle. He had seen many friends fall during battle, most of his life had been war after all. This felt different, albeit anticipated, because he felt like he was seeing a glimpse into their future. He would not be able to keep Athena safe, even with all of the power she would learn to grow into. There would be no protecting her from the world and the evils held within.

The Archdemon roared at the party but he could tell quickly that it was injured. A piercing wound on its right bled a sickly looking ichor that sizzled when it hit the ground. The air stunk of the Blight to the point of making his nose curl. The Iron Bull did not hesitate to drive his axe into the front leg of the beast, bringing it to its knees so that the Inquisitor could unforgivingly strike at it with her spiritual blade. There was a look of distraught on her face, and he knew it was from seeing her sister fall. For a brief moment he understood how his vhenan felt for the last few years. Even having the foreknowledge of events did not take away their sting, no matter how prepared. It was a bittersweet realization as he found his resolve and gripped his staff, bringing the might of his mana into a wave of ice spikes that burst from the ground and launched themselves at the dragon in time with his movements.

It kept the dragon’s attention on him while the Iron Bull and Rathein stayed in the shadows underneath the beast’s body to break it down at its weakest joints. The Seeker attempted to rouse herself, but he could smell the fresh blood coming from a wound. The battle didn’t seem very fair against the Archdemon, but they were all invigorated with a new drive to finish the battle. Even the usually stoic Iron Bull possessed an increased rage about him as he drove his giant battle axe into the hide of the dragon.

In a final attempt to fend them off, the dragon focused its posture and began to beat its withered wings. The force of the wind drew them all in and the Inquisitor used that change in pressure to her advantage. She jumped into the air, allowing the enormous gust of wind to lift her, and drove her energy-fueled blade into the dragon’s skull until the hilt was only visible. Blood spurted from the life-ending wound and bathed Trevelyan, but she was too distracted by the shard of Corypheus’s life floating from the dragon’s spirit up into the air where the Tevinter now stood.

“Let it end here. Let the skies boil. Let the world be rent asunder!”
Solas let out a sound of disgust and snapped his staff to the side. “Inquisitor. The orb. We must preserve it!”

Rathein wiped her face with the back of her hand and nodded. “I agree – but stopping him is our first priority. We are almost there – come on!” She jerked her sword from the skull of the dragon and ran up the stairs to where the Magister was waiting for them. Solas was the last to ascend since he took a second to look over his shoulder at the bloody trail his love left behind. It put a stab of pain into his heart, tempting him to stay back and search for her. But they had a task to finish and a madman to put down like the self-proclaimed Gods of old.

Unfortunately, it was something he was becoming quite adept at.

He let out a groan of frustration and gripped his staff, running up the stairs with mana charging from each step. The other three were already in pursuit of the Magister, who was surrounding them with walls of Blighted energy that made his teeth begin to hurt. Every time they took a step towards him, he summoned a swarm of blighted flies to bite at any exposed skin and obstruct their view. Even in the midst of battle, he found himself reminded of their missing party member, and that brought his next spell about quicker.

Solas twisted the energy of the Fade to collect the insects at the other edge of the battlefield, scorching them all with a bolt of green lighting that switched their small bodies to ash. Cassandra and The Iron Bull were switching strikes to gather Corypheus’s attention while the Inquisitor took a few steps back to fire spells and litter the ground with flame mines and ice glyphs. If the false God took a wrong step, he would regret it with the might of the Inquisitor’s magic. His orb felt so close to touch, its energy calling out to him as if it were the smell of his own bed at night.

He caught himself watching for any opportunity to fade-step into the spaces between his allies to reclaim what was his, but every opportunity was spoiled with the slash of a blade or the firing of a spell. Corypheus teleported himself around the battlefield in attempts to gain the upper hand through landscape alone, but they gave him no breath. He drew from the power of the orb and from the raw power in the lyrium in the earth below him. Solas had to wonder – did he choose the Temple of Sacred Ashes for its importance in creating the first Breach? Or did he know of its origins as a Temple to Mythal? It was a perfect location for ritual from the amount of sheer potential in the soil.

His arrogance told him that Corypheus was not smart enough to unlock such a thing, but his pride had led him astray before.

The Iron Bull swept his mighty axe underneath the legs of the Magister, leaving him almost prone but he used his magic and deception to warp to the other side of the battlefield once more. In the light of the corrupted energy that sparked from his fingertips, they all began to see fear in him. It
reignited their need for battle, pushing past whatever else was in their minds and broken in their bodies. Cassandra swung her sword with her wounded shield arm clutched to her chest. The Iron Bull fought through a limp on his leg that was soaked in blood. Solas mocked their enemy by creating ice walls to close him into a corner in the same fashion Corypheus had made. It also was enriched with an electrifying barrier so that their opponent could not teleport through it again.

Rathein charged through the two warriors and brought her ethereal blade across the Tevinter’s barrier. The end result was a wave of energy that pushed the other three onto their backs. Corypheus scrambled up to the middle of the ruins, almost fumbling with the orb in his hand. “This... cannot be happening.” The amount of magic he was trying to pour into the orb was palpable. It set off all of his senses and just screamed wrong. He used all of his might to push himself from the ground, just in time to witness the fall of Corypheus.

“Dumat! Ancient Ones!” The Magister shouted over the sound of roaring winds caused by his last attempt at power.

The Inquisitor reached out with her mark blazing like ethereal flame – and Solas felt it before he saw it. In that moment, her magic overpowered the Tevinter’s and snatched the orb from his grasp. The shift in power balance was too great, it wouldn’t be able to take anymore strain. Solas sat up and pushed himself to a standing position, screaming over the sound of the Breach as she raised her hand to close it.

“Inquisitor! Don’t!”

He reached out to her in desperation but the force of closing the Breach pushed them all back once more. He slipped and pressed his back to a pillar to prevent himself from losing his footing, especially as debris and rocks began to fall from the sky. He heard the metallic thud of an object hit the ground, and he knew in his heart of hearts exactly what it was. A fire within him had died, a magical connection that had gone back thousands of years from when he had fetched the orb from the heart of a titan. It was a bloody conquest, but that was the theme of the time and the damage was already done. It would have to be another loss he carried with him. He clutched his hand over his heart, taking in a shaky breath to gather his actions and focus his breathing. Endure, his friends voice echoed through his head.

“The Old Gods were never here for you. And they shall never be.” The Inquisitor spoke with pure determined malice. There was a crackle of energy and a flash of light, then when he turned around the pillar, he saw a rift being opened from within the Tevinter. It was a macabre way to be vanquished, but the Magister deserved worse than what horrors the Fade had in store for his powerless husk. But once it was over, there was not even an echo of a scream left of the monster that had torn the world asunder.
A great quake shook the floating island that they stood on, and just as it was in the sky it was no
more. The bulk of the Temple of Sacred Ashes and its surrounding islands fell from the sky and
crashed to the ground. He was barely able to wrap his allies in a thin barrier before their bodies
collided with the earth. The Seeker and the Iron Bull were nowhere to be found, but he was on his
feet, walking towards the final battlefield as the Inquisitor rose.

He had been warned. He knew this was a possibility in his head. But he didn’t quite believe it until
he saw the fractured remains of his hope for bringing back his people on the shattered rock before
him. In a moment of mourning he fell to his knees. He brought the largest fragment into his hand
and examined it. It was still warm to the touch from magical use, but there was nothing within.
There was a sound behind him. He did not know its source, but the words fell from his lips as if
someone was listening. “The orb.”

The Inquisitor placed her marked hand on his shoulder and squeezed in sympathy. He felt the
warmth through his armor, but it could not fight against the bracing cold that washed through
him. “Can it not be repaired? Morrigan, Athena, they might know a way.”

“Damage this extensive... it would be impossible.” Solas clenched his jaw tightly, shaking his
head once as a feeling of absolute resolution came over him. There were motions that needed to be
put into place, agents to call in. His entire plan for undoing what he had done to trap away the Gods
had to be rebuilt from the ground, but first he needed to seek out an old friend. Their shared
meeting place was not far if he went by eluvian, and he remembered there one being close by so he
would not need to show his face in Skyhold. He had finished his affairs that morning when Athena
had been summoned into the War Council meeting and -

“Solas.” Rathein pressed as she removed her hand from his shoulder.

“It was not supposed to happen this way.” He lamented, gripping the fragment of his destroyed
hope for the future in his hands as he stood up from his kneeled position.

“Things never do, my friend.” She remarked, making a small, subtle wave of her hand with the
mark. The shine of victory was hidden in the exhaustion on her face. Exhaustion from being in the
wrong place at the wrong time, the exhaustion of burden and loss etched into her features. Even
still, she found the strength to jest.

“No matter what comes, I want you to know you shall always have my respect, Rathein.” He said
in a moment of sincerity, dropping all pretenses and posturing while meeting her gaze. The change
in demeanor was noticed. It was apparent in the softening of her expression and the veil of
confusion over her eyes. The Inquisitor sheathed her staff onto her back and stepped towards him
but there was a call from behind them.
“Inquisitor? Are you alive?” The Seeker asked in a weak and weary tone.

Rathein turned around to look for the source of the voice and allowed Solas the opportunity to escape. He pivoted and twisted the magic of the veil around him with his hands, clawing and forming it as his will until he snapped into a silent fade step away from the area. He could hear the gathering of the Inquisitor’s - no – his friends at the base of the ruins. In the midst of his travel, he appeared like a specter at the top of the ruins, allowing himself one last glance at the leaders of the Inquisition. None of them noticed his presence, save for Cole. The spirit was always more aware of his surroundings, even if they were wrapped in the mystic of the veil.

He navigated through the remnants of what was left of the Temple of Sacred Ashes, his eyes thoroughly investigating every pile before he left. There was one last loose end he needed to wrap up before he embarked on his own venture, and he would not leave until he saw her.

Chapter End Notes

Dun, dun, dun!
The collision was devastating, her draconic form instantly flashing back to human as her body bounced from the larger bulk of the Temple down onto a smaller floating piece of rock. Each hit of her body against the ground brought a groan or curse from her lips. She could see spots of blood floating in the air when she finally landed, pain screaming in her veins as magical exhaustion set in. Athena gripped her hand and felt her staff in it, the dull hum of her orb moving through the staff into her body.

At least that didn’t break. Unlike what felt like her leg and potentially her arm.

The slow process of doing a physical assessment came back into her memory from her time before Thedas. She began by wiggling all of her fingers and toes, making a mental note of which ones caused her pain. The right arm felt tight, a small amount of tingling shooting up her arm when she moved her fingers, but with a slight crane of her neck she was able to see that her arm was intact and the bones looked straight. Those on her right leg, did not. She cursed to herself and pushed with her arms until she was sitting up right against a large slab of stone behind her, ignoring the trail of blood that was sliding underneath her as she moved.

Everything hurt, so it was difficult to tell which was more injured.

Athena took in a deep breath of the biting air and winced when her ribs expanded. If things didn’t start healing soon, she would have maybe an hour? She looked down to her leg and didn’t feel phased when she saw bone protruding and the blood coming out in smalls spurts that were in time with her panicked heartbeat. Arterial, great. Probably the femoral and the tibial by that break? She thought to herself, trying to save her energy to potentially form words later. The leg would need to be reset if Imshael’s lovely blessing was going to heal it properly.

The piece of floating bit she was on levitated lower than the main bulk of the Temple. She was unable to see any of the battle, save for flashes of magic that sparked in the clouds. The cry of the dragon resonated within her chest and made her grimace. It sounded as if the creature were near its end, but that thought didn’t help her situation much. She pushed herself into a higher posture and gripped her thigh, pushing her lips into a thin line as the power from her orb began to wax and wane with her energy level.

What would come next?
He had to leave. It wasn’t that she wanted to see him go, if anything, it would pain her and reopen the void that his return had filled. But she knew better than to fight against what was written at this point. If Corypheus was defeated, the Temple would return to the earth in a not so gentle fashion, which meant she needed to start to move. His orb would shatter, and he would move on to the meeting place with Mythal. She wasn’t sure exactly when that fated meeting took place. There was no epilogue of life. This was going to happen and they would have to move past it and endure. She wouldn’t be waiting with baited breath on what came next.

Josephine would surely throw some kind of ball; it was her specialty. The Inquisition needed to celebrate their victory with all of Thedas. It would be a show of unity and strength in the face of adversity. In the meanwhile, Athena needed to check in with her Sylvan and assess the land on which they would build their future. They would have to go from the ground up—shit did she even know how to build? There was a game that she played where she could build houses from the ground up and decorate the insides, but that did not apply to real life. It began to dawn on her exactly how intensive this future project would be. She would need carpenters, craftsmen, anyone that would help build the land for their people from the literal ground up.

It all felt like so much.

Athena took a deep breath and hit the back of her head against the stone. She needed to get up. She needed to move. She needed to set her leg. Even sitting there, she could feel a pressure on her leg as if the magic were beginning to work. It felt like vines growing across her skin, the magic coursing through and doing its job to mend. It felt like foreign magic though, with an edge of recognition. She moved her trembling hands down to her broken thigh and felt another pair of hands there. Her eyes shot open and she put one of her hands up to push them back with a pulse of magic but looked into a pair of unfortunately familiar eyes.

“Those who strive for empires do not often think of what it takes to build it. This is why I chose you.” A white-haired Goddess kneeled at her side with her usual cat-like smile. Both of her armored hands were clasped around her thigh, small amounts of magic coursing through her body.

“I do not strive. It is just—overwhelming. Are these the moments where you, what do you say, nudge?” Athena fought a smile, trying not to be completely anxious that Flemeth had her hands on her broken leg. It reminded her of when the bear broke her arm and Solas had to reset it. Rathein at her back, holding her in place while trying to muffle her screams even as Athena nearly bit her arm off. Now she was alone, looking into the eyes of the person who had brought her there.

The woman laughed at her remark, silently nodding in answer. “These are the events that you will learn to enjoy in time. There will be many, where it seems like the world is at its end, but there will always be hope. No matter how buried.”
“Enjoy? Hard to say. Not if all of them end up like this.” She gestured to her leg and winced as her current ally readjusted her hands.

“I do not see what you mean.” Then in a sudden flourish as she reset her leg, leaving Athena to nearly bite her tongue off as she clenched her jaw. The pain was like fire, worse than that, but the bone was popped into the correct position. As the leg was set, Mythal’s magic went to work and aided her own, sewing together the vessels, nerves, and hardening the bone. She barely had time to scream, instead she was overwhelmed by the dozens of sensations flying through her leg. In what felt like hours but was barely seconds, she opened her eyes again and looked down at her leg, which now had a somewhat lightning bolt shaped scar running up her thigh. “Not my cleanest, but time is of the essence.”

She repeated her test and wiggled her toes, finding sensation slowly returning in the form of pins and needles grinding through sand. But still, improved and thankfully healed. “I do not know whether to thank you or slap you.”

“Both will suffice, but save your strength. We do not have much time and we have things to discuss.” Athena responded with a slight tilt of the head but Flemeth held a focused and cold gaze. “You wish to make a safe haven for the people? In the home of their ancestors?”

She bent her knee out of the opposing woman’s grasp and brought them to the side to sit more comfortably. Already some of her flexibility was returning to her limbs but the taste of copper was fresh in her mouth. “At the edge of the Emerald Graves, in the valleys where no adventurer dares to hike.”

There was a twitch of a smile on the All Mother’s lips as she rose to a standing position, offering Athena her hand. She took it and when she did, she felt the connection through the Well flare. Whispers crawled over her mind in a tingle, sending a shiver down her spine but her eyes felt glazed as Mythal’s words floated through the air. “There are ways of protecting your haven. I have, perhaps selfishly, used these enchantments for my home in the Korcari Wilds for generations to keep my family safe. You are already aware of using the animals and insects in defense, but do not forget the trees, the grass, the vines, the wind as well. Nature is at your disposal, as long as you give back.”

As the magic flowed between them, quick flashing images passed over her mind. The memories felt like hers, but it was just Mythal’s knowledge reinforcing what she already suspected, bringing that magic and the incantations to the surface. There was a faint heat on her face that made her suspect that the mark of the Well was showing on her face. “I am anticipating I will have to use these sooner rather than later. History has a tendency to repeat itself.”

Flemeth took a deep breath in through her nose and took a step back, turning towards the battlefield
as sparks began to fly out above them. The green and blue were beginning to show more than Corypheus’s blighted energy. Hopefully that meant Solas and Rathein had gained a second wind. “You will be the hope in these battles to come. When your people fall on the battlefield, they will look to you for guidance. But -” She looked over her shoulder, her gaze on the ground as a sad expression softened her features. “As the victories begin to roll in, they will find their own strength. They will begin to look to themselves for guidance, for the answers they can’t seek. As time goes on, your face will not be associated with victory. You will be a face in the murals, a myth on the wind. The People will grow and thrive, but soon, like me, you will become a fairytale that parents tell around the fire to scare their children.”

She opened her hand, a small amount of light floating into her palm before she closed it into a fist. “The people will sprout from the land of their ancestors and grow into a forest the likes of which have never been seen. Alas -” She pauses and took in the light of the sky, brilliant greens flashing across her face as Rathein closed the Breach in the sky. “How often do the trees look down and thank the soil, the foundation that allowed them to grow? They thank the sun, the sky, and the rain – then try to grow to touch them. They may call you the Sun Wolf, girl, but you must be aware of your purpose here.”

Athena felt comfort with the stone at her back, because with the kind of talk that was going on, she began to feel bad for her. It was obvious Flemeth knew of her soon to be demise. She had to wonder, did she ever talk to Morrigan like this? “To nudge when needed?” Her voice was hoarse, mostly in disbelief. Even still, it got a smile from the woman across from her who then sighed as the final scream of Corypheus rang out through the air.

“Indeed, it is. I pray that your reign is more benevolent than mine.” Mythal clasped her hands behind her back and watched as the island began to shake, and in that moment, there was a pulse of magic from the Goddess that felt like it stretched time. Where gravity would usually tear the Temple of Sacred Ashes to the ground, they fell slowly for the two women. With a final catlike smile, she turned to Athena. “It is time. Do you have a question for me?”

A question? There were thousands. Who brought the killing blow to Mythal? Did she really use her daughters to live forever? Was that part of Imshael’s curse for Athena as well? Her mouth opened to speak but she had no words to say. A light blush of embarrassment flushed her cheeks and she was shocked to have the blood supply to do it. She gripped her staff and took in a deep breath, deciding to just ask whatever question came across her mind next. “How did you give the spirits a body? Like Solas?”

There was a small hum of amusement. “Hm. Pride. As you well know, there is strength in intention and purpose. If one has enough drive and power, it is not as hard as people think to make it to the other side.”

“But that’s with anything in life, really.” Athena said with an edge of disappointment, grinding her
feet into the ground to get a better posture as the island began to descend.

Flemeth chuckled, the sound lingering within the air with her trademark smirk. “So it is.”

All of a sudden, the magic she was using to suspend their conversation dropped and gravity resumed as normal. There was no trace of the Witch of the Wilds left except for a small cloud of black smoke that had disappeared as the island fell. Athena cursed multiple expletives out loud, grabbed her staff, and jumped from her small platform into the air. Her body was sore and recovering, but she pulled on the reserve from her orb to give her wings and take flight. The flames of her magic were nearly extinguished with the debris falling through the air. She expanded her aura so that she was aware of everything in the air, anticipating the fall of the rocks she could glide without being hit until she came to a clear spot within the clouds.

It gave her a beautiful vantage point as the sun peaked in through the chaos. The dust and the stones settled on the ground below her, and it felt almost intimate to be seeing it from her perspective. The Inner Party was prone, save for Solas. She saw his tortured steps towards the shattered orb, and the heart break on his face as he dropped to his knees. She wanted to be there, to help him get back up again, but it felt like too much. She had tried to warn him, but there was nothing that could have been done.

Athena clenched her jaw and turned away from the scene, flying away from where the survivors were gathering to find refuge in the cliffside. There was a calm area behind where the Temple had fallen in the cliffs. She found a ledge to catch her breath, being thankful that it wasn’t going to fall from the sky at any given moment. Her legs swung over the edge as she filled her lungs with the now clean mountain air. The sky was painted with the scars of the Breach’s finality, the brushes of green decorating the air. It was as hypnotic as what came before, but instead of a sense of dread it brought peace.

Corypheus was dead.

There was a pressure lifted from her chest but a greater one now burdened on her shoulders. There was now a period where she had freedom to make her own choices, have her own adventures without being saddled down by the expectations of what she thought was a game. Rathein would be kept occupied with the Deep Roads, the Titan, and the Jaws of Hakkon. Athena wasn’t sure if she considered herself necessary for those expeditions. The Deep Roads sounded beautiful, especially in the heart of the mountain, but the thought of going that deep underground made her feel claustrophobic. Her place was now in the sky and midst the trees with her people.

She took a deep breath in and rolled through her mind into the connection she had made with her wolves and Sylvan scattered across the lands. All of them were looking to the sky to bear witness of the calamity that was the Breach ending. The Sylvan even had to pause at the beauty of it, even
though their thoughts came across as slow and drawn out, they were impressed. *I was not aware mortals could create such a thing.*

Even Thunder watched from a distance in the hills of Crestwood, leading his herd in a loud groan of approval. There was a difference in the air that was palpable. Clean wasn’t quite the word, but it did remind her of when she lived in the desert after a rain. Suddenly things were more vivid. Buildings that she typically couldn’t see popped and the little lights on top of the mountain glowed proudly with the absence of dust in the air. This felt the same. Athena sat with a mixture of pride and homesickness in her stomach as her feet swung over the edge of the cliff like a carefree child on a swing.

There had been a park that she would go to as a child. It was nestled in a green clearing with different tennis courts and a single baseball field. It was where they were allowed to go on some “field trips” in the small town that she had grown up in. It had the types of carousel and swings that were probably no longer safe for children to play on since the equipment was probably made in the 1800’s. She remembered that a girl in her class had gotten her clothes snagged on a part of the slide and had to have someone cut her down because the metal could not give.

It was almost hilarious to look back on those times compared to where she was now. She would run down those hills so fast that her body would tumble until she reached the bottom. All she remembered from those times was laughter, riding her bike to her friends' houses every day, and being weirdly excited to do homework because it involved reading. Never in a thousand years would she imagine herself looking down on a war field victorious. Her friends and her would “play”, and her friend Jared used the typical “force field” so he was never allowed to be hit. But whenever she could maneuver around it and get him on his back, she left the playground filled with pride.

Pride.

Even thinking the word brought her back to the present so quick it almost gave her mental whiplash. Her eyes examined the scene below and there was the joyous reunion of the Inquisition in the ruins of the Temple. The soft echo of their cheers reached her location in the cliff and she could only smile for them. The sounds floating in the air were filled with relief and joy, and it was infectious. She continued to scan the ground but found and felt nothing. The air was too charged with leftover magic from the Breach to feel a shift in auras. She twisted her mouth to the side and leaned forward from her perch to look, her hands gripping the edge of the cliff.

*Athena!*

It almost sounded like a thought, not a sound, but she jerked her head to the side to try and find the source. There was nothing, but she felt a flutter start to form within her stomach. It sounded just
like him, but where was it?

_Athena!_

It grew even louder and this time she realized she was catching the end of an echo. She jumped up from her position and leaned on the mountain wall for support, looking down a great deal below and through the ruins to the back of the Temple to see a misty form fade-walking from place to place. It was difficult to trace, but there were shadows of movement followed by the definite blur of his aura that was growing stronger with each movement. Her breath caught in her throat, and she wished to go forward to him. She knew it would be the last time. She didn’t know how long. But each moment not with him was a moment wasted.

Before she could begin to doubt, she gripped her staff and began to run down the mountain. Her magic swirled around her and it felt as if she were descending in slow motion. Magic kept her footing firm, the earth rising and wrapping around her ankles as if it were cushioning each footfall. Her orb pulsed with her heart and began to glow like the sun, light spiraling out around her in small wisps of magic in the air.

_Athena!_

He called again, hood falling to reveal his worried face as he searched for her amidst the wreckage. She understood his concern – there was no definite likelihood that she would have survived Corypheus. Even with Imshael’s favor, she was not a part of the known fate of Thedas. She was an enjoyable side benefit that came with the Inquisition and the future. The phrase made her smile and put an extra push into her step. She saw Solas cup his hand to the side of his mouth to call her name again, but he paused.

He turned towards her and looked up to her. There was a shift in her expression and she couldn’t wait anymore. She pushed her magic into her feet and fade-stepped, leaping from the mountain into his open arms. He caught her in a tight embrace, pulling her towards him until her movement ceased. She wrapped her arms around him in a half-laugh, finding comfort in his presence within her arms.

“I was so worried – I couldn’t find you after you fell.” His words were muffled by him kissing the top of her head, hands gripped into her so hard she almost couldn’t move. She couldn’t complain, she was doing the same to him while feverishly checking him for any wounds that she could heal. But they were both there. They were both safe. Their worried and traveling gazes finally met and they stopped worrying. He stroked the backs of his knuckles on her cheek, his lips pulling back into a smirk of awe. “You flew beautifully, vhenan.”
Athena shook her head with a self-mocking smile. “The fall was anything but that. I think my leg is going to be sore for weeks.” He knit his brows in worry, looking down to the broken and torn armor where Flemeth healed her. She dismissed him with a soft kiss to his lips. “It is mended, do not worry yourself.”

He nodded in response, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear while trailing it down to her neck. “I should have listened to you.” The gravity of his tone let her know exactly what he was talking about. The orb. The mention of his broken artifact put a spur of protectiveness over her own. If he wanted to take it, he had a million opportunities where he could have, but she was still cautious. “If I had. . . there could have been other things I could have done.”

“There was nothing, Solas. That is the point. My warning could have simply cushioned the inevitable blow.” She could read the sadness on his face as plain as day. “But it is over. You no longer have Corypheus looming over your shoulder with your orb.”

“There is that at least.” He stilled and took a deep breath in, sighing into the top of her head. He gripped her hair to hold her closer and she didn’t fight it, breathing him in while resting her head underneath his chin. There were many statements, questions, that were obvious in the moment but she didn’t want to say them. When did he have to leave? Did he still need to go? Would he ever come back? The questions felt foolish, needy running through her mind but they were there. Instead, he broke the silence. “When does your foreknowledge start again?”

Athena hummed and gripped the front of his wolf sash, rubbing her cheek along the soft fur. “Two years. But the time between then is unknown, for you and for me, ma’fen.” She then knocked her knuckles against his armor, nudging his chin with her head. “You better not wait that long before I see you, Solas. I’m stronger now, I will hunt you down just to chastise you.”

Solas’s chuckle rumbled his chest and filled her with a satisfied warmth. “I believe you and shall do my best not to disappoint you.” He moved back to give her the room to look up into his gaze. “I. . . do not know what kind of man I will be as we move on. I am not the same man I was when the Dread Wolf was created, nor do I know what will be necessary to do what I have planned. I would not want you to see what happens should I lose myself.”

She stood up on the balls of her feet and kissed him gently, touching her forehead against his. “Then allow me to find you again if the time comes. I suppose I have the same warning. I’ve never been in this kind of position before, but I know I will do anything to help the people that have put their trust in me.”

He arched a brow with a curious smile. “So, it is our duty to keep remind one another?”
Athena couldn’t help but smile. “I suppose it is. I can only hope the people you surround yourself with in the future are as kind as mine.”

“As do I. You are a warm, compassionate person, you attract like-minded people. It is a trait I have always admired in you.” He looked over her and to the horizon, his expression suddenly turning focused and calculating. Athena turned to look and saw nothing but the dust clearing, but a sinking realization hit her.

“Is she calling you?” She asked softly. He responded with a twitch of his hands against her, then a subtle nod.

“We have a meeting place, one that is as old as our fallen empire. It is reserved only for us two – I did not expect her to be there so soon.” His features turned from worried to those of sadness, everything softening and Athena felt a pang of guilt in her gut. What was to happen was unavoidable, but she nudged him anyways.

“I saw her. She was the one who helped heal me after the fall. I think. . . she’s expecting you, vhenan.” It was difficult not to get choked up, but she had to keep thinking it was not the end. They both wouldn’t allow it to happen. It was like they were going off on quests without one another; they had done it several times through the Inquisition. “I think it is time.”

Solas took in a deep breath through his nose and sighed, his entire posture changing within her arms. He straightened his back and kept his gaze in the direction of where he was going next. Still, his hands were strongly gripped to her, and she felt the same way. She didn’t want to let go. She imagined it wasn’t easy for him either. He had been the one to leave. He left after Wisdom. He left after Crestwood. He left her side when he returned. He was always the one to take the first step, and she knew that had to have been a burden on him. She bit her bottom lip in a tick of nerves and pressed her cheek to his chest.

“I need to return to the Inquisition. I don’t want them worrying about me. I think. . . I will just say the Inquisition no longer needed your services since the orb is no longer a threat and the Breach is closed. They know you are a traveler – that should settle their minds for a while.” He hummed in agreement and the small vibration from her chest fluttered her heart.

“I. . . do not know how to thank you.” He whispered, an exasperated desperation in his words as he looked down to her, his hands tightening their grip on her. She could see it in his eyes, a final plea avoiding the inevitable good bye before they separated. He leaned down and she rose up to meet him quickly, ignoring the words and allowing her actions to speak instead. The moment their lips met there was a burst of magic within hers, and she was too distracted to know if it was hers or his. Their auras melded together and he sighed underneath her touch, running a hand to grip her hair to pull her closer.
Athena felt like she was melting, fighting back tears while her hands fisted into his wolf furs. The impact of their auras against once another made her feel like she was no longer on the ground. The butterflies in her stomach made her feel as if she were floating, her body supported only by his hand in her hair and on her lower back. Time stretched between them and she wished she could live in that moment forever. The rush of emotions filled her body with a tingling electricity from her head to her toes, making it that much harder to pull away. When she did, she heard his voice, happy yet broken: “Athena. . . “

“I have to.” She cut off him off, trying to fight the tears from showing in her voice. She put her hands up in surrender and took a step back, knowing that if she touched him again the voice of reason in her head would be silenced. “I cannot go with you and we both know that you cannot stay, ma’fen.” Athena took another step back, but he did not follow. He stiffened in his posture but never broke his gaze from hers.

“I know.” He whispered, defeated but still fighting. There was conflict in his gaze and she knew hers had to match, every muscle in her body screaming to rush back to him but she forced herself to continue to back up. The rushing of the wind began to fill the space in between them, and almost in unison they both stood tall and nodded towards one another.

“I love you, Solas.” Her body was turned to the side to prepare for a retreat but her eyes never left his.

His eyes appeared to be glistened with tears, the very sight of which bringing a wave of fresh emotions to her stomach. She couldn’t bear to see this, couldn’t stand to see him upset about her leaving. It was what made her feel confident about their passing. They both cared too much to part indefinitely, so she took a step away from him and turned her back to him, thankful that the tears began to fall once he couldn’t see. She summoned her magic to press around her, the earth splintering as her body prepared for a fade-step back to the ruins of the Temple.

Athena pushed into the ground and sprung forward, the words of her lover echoing within her mind as her body disappeared in that space between the physical and the Veil.

Ar lath ma, vhenan. Until we meet again.
I'm going to take this natural break in the story to go back and edit what I have already written - there are a few parts that make me cringe that I want to clarify. No major plot points will change, just small details here and there. Thank you everyone for the continued reading and support! Please, check out my Tumblr for the million commissions I have acquired of Rathein, Athena, and others. <3
The walk back through the ruins felt unreal.

Athena was trapped in an out of body sensation, her feet managing to keep her upright as she navigated the shattered remains of the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Even though she was trudging forward, it didn’t feel like she was actually going anywhere. Her feet rose and fell in what to her felt like quicksand, it pulling her lower and lower until she couldn’t feel anything but the static of the void. Still, she had to keep moving forward. If she looked back, even once, and saw him there - she wouldn’t have the fight to separate again. It would be too much to see that he hesitated in moving forward with his plan for her. He couldn’t. He had to keep moving, and so did she. She hid the tears in her gaze and locked them away within a box that would be opened when it was safer, when she was alone within the comfort of her own blankets.

She didn’t have a path planned back to Skyhold, her feet simply carried her mindlessly through the wreckage of the aftermath. The air stunk of battle and blood, the almost overpowering smell of magic lingering in the air. It reminded her of cleaning solutions or insulin from her home world. Something strong but not entirely unsettling. The scent brought a wave of nausea to bear which forced her to almost collapse against the closest large piece of rock. She was fighting to keep her breaths calm, but everything would crash into her then recede like some kind of fucked up ocean current.

He left. She was stuck. She was free from what she knew. She had hundreds, if not thousands, of people counting on her. She had two years until the Exalted Council. She needed to make a haven for her elves. She needed to discover the powers of her orb. She needed to help Rathein. She needed to finalize the designs for her arm when the mark inevitably took it. There were so many drops of thoughts rushing within her brain it began to feel like deep pressure.

The roaring of the water in her head grew so loud, she could do nothing else except close her eyes and focus on her breathing. The feeling of the air going in and out of her lungs exemplified the feeling of being tossed around in riptide. It wasn’t just the fact that he was gone. Him leaving was the catalyst for so many different events worldwide. Soon elves would begin to start disappearing from all of Thedas, including the Inquisition. How many of her own would leave her? Loranil? Illrith? Lev’adin? Would she return only to see the backs of the people who pledged themselves to her? Was their loyalty temporary depending on who was the strongest? She knew that’s how things worked in her home world, especially in politics, and things tended to mirror with positions of power.

Loyalty only went so far and she knew it would be hard to defend herself and her beliefs as
someone with curved ears from another world. He was their God. Someone that every Dalish and most elves had heard of, used his names in curses, and were wary around wolf statues just by legend. If he called on them, how could she fight? Use what you know. The words of Wisdom and Command rang through her head like a heavy-toned bell. It put a stone’s weight in her stomach and a desert in her throat.

It was only the firm grip of a hand on her shoulder that ripped her from her nightmare. She flexed to defend herself, not knowing if it was friend or one of Corypheus’s lingering demons from the Breach. Flames blossomed within her palm as she held it outwards but it was quickly squelched with another hand gripping it and bringing her into an embrace.

“Kaffas, I was so worried about you! Where in blazes have you been?”

Her immediate response was to fight back, the pain from her broken leg flaring up into her chest and causing her to push back against him. Dorian continued to hold her through her struggle, completely wrapping his arms around her until she stilled and looked up at his face.

“Dorian? I’ve been. . . “ She paused and pressed her eyes closed, pinching the bridge of her nose in an attempt to regain sanity. “Recovering. The fall knocked me out and broke my leg. . . It took me a minute to get back.”

He let out a sigh and kissed the top of her head, pushing her back to shoulder length to look her up and down. “It healed? Are you alright? Where’s - “

She quickly put a finger to his lips and furrowed her brows, shaking her head back and forth. “It is a long story, one that I promise I will tell you. Where’s Rathein? Is everyone else okay? I know Cassandra got injured during the battle and they all collapsed when the Breach closed.”

Dorian wiped his lips quickly after her touch and pointed over his shoulder. “Why don’t you come see? We’ve all been waiting for you before we go back to regroup.” Apparently, she made some face of surprise, because he rolled his eyes and began to pull her forward with his grip on her hand. “Stop isolating yourself. We’re all this fucked up kind of family so of course we waited for you. You do not get to have another pity party like after Haven.”

As he said, the whole of the Inner Party was resting near the break in the path that led back to Skyhold. Soldiers were still trickling back, but everyone had a mixture of expressions. Cassandra was resting on a cot with her leg in a splint. Vivienne stood over her and was slowly casting her
healing spells with a slow wave of her staff. The Iron Bull was trying to shoo Rathein away from helping him but her stubbornness won in the end. As Dorian and Athena arrived, the Inquisitor looked over and immediately grinned. She pushed from her lover into a fade-step, colliding into Athena with a stone-armed embrace.

The air left her lungs but she squeezed her sister as tight as she could, burying her face into her neck. They both released sighs that felt heavy with the weight of the world. Dorian stretched his arms over them both and pressed his chest against Athena’s back. She couldn’t help but chuckle, shaking her head back and forth before sliding out of the embrace.

Rathein looked around and then at the trail where Athena and Dorian walked from. She arched a brow then met Athena’s gaze. “Athena - where’s Solas?”

 Fuck. The Dreaded Question.

Everyone in the immediate area seemed to notice his absence at the same time, looking behind the pair at the path they had just come from and then to her. Every pair of eyes felt like a dagger in her chest, all of them tearing through her heart strings. She had barely had a minute to process his leave herself – and now she had to explain it to them. She swallowed down a lump of what tasted like bile and blood, gripping Dorian’s hand behind her back for support. “With Corypheus defeated and the orb destroyed, he continued on his travels since it seemed the Inquisition no longer needed his aid.”

Dorian almost dug his nails into her palm he squeezed it so quickly, but she ignored it and kept her eyes on the Inquisitor. Rathein furrowed her brows and never allowed her gaze to leave hers. The rest of the group had their scattered reactions. She heard a few curses, many sighs, and one low, defeated “shit” from Varric that seemed to pierce through her more than anything else. The Herald then gave a slow, solemn nod while hiding the obvious sympathy that was trying to coat her gaze.

“Very well then. Inquisition, move out back to Skyhold.” The command was terse but obviously veiled with strangled emotion. He hadn’t just been close to Athena; he had become a crucial part of the family structure that was the Inquisition. He discussed the monotheism of the Chant with Cassandra to help settle some of her doubts as the scandal of the Seekers was uncovered. He played every card game known to Thedas with Blackwall. He assisted The Iron Bull in reclaiming his independent and free will once he became a Tal’Vashoth. He gave Varric material for his stories by recanting his “fade observations” of Arlathan and the times before the humans. He connected Cole to the spiritual powers that resided within the boy. He conversed with Dorian back and forth about the origins of magic, Tevinter or elvhen. He educated Sera, most of the time against her will, on how to better organize the Red Jenny’s and harmful pranks to play on her friends. Surprisingly, he helped Vivienne make a tonic for sleep after the passing of her lover.
He connected to everyone, and now he was gone, as well as the overwhelming presence of Corypheus.

Athena continued to hold Dorian’s hand as they ascended the path back to Skyhold. Their group grew as lingering soldiers and archers filed back in with them, but the mood lifted as they walked. The joyous celebrations of the remaining soldiers made it difficult to be sad about their friends’ departure. Cullen’s confident report that there were no casualties during the final encounter began splintering the melancholy of the Inquisition. It shattered when Leliana and Josephine joined in with them, tears in their eyes as they gripped Rathein by the shoulders and simply exclaimed: “We won!”

The crowd roared as they escorted the Inner Party back to the keep. The injured were ushered away inside of the castle, which made Athena confused because the healer’s tents were normally inside of the gate to the left. Unable to leave habits from her past go, she decided to follow the wounded. She let go of Dorian’s hand and moved in the current of people that flowed towards the lower levels of the keep. The common baths had been converted into healing baths, with Morrigan standing at the head of it. Runes were drawn into the bottom of the pool and along the wall edges. She stirred the water with her staff, eyes constantly at a low-glow to show her power usage.

Athena moved to her side in a kind of awe as they slowly lowered Cassandra into the water. The water illuminated her wounds and created a warm aura around the Seeker as her eyes closed in relaxation. It wasn’t long before the warrior fell asleep with her head resting against the stone behind her. “You found a way to help.” Athena said hoarsely, struggling for words as she still held back tears.

Morrigan hummed and nodded, both hands gripping her staff. “Instead of simply keeping myself and Kieran safe within the plane of the Crossroads, the Well urged me to use my knowledge to help those trapped in Corypheus’s war. These runes – I have never seen them before but when I picked up my staff the whispers of Mythal’s fallen guided me.” Her voice was in awe, appearing impressed with her own work and the work of those that led her hand.

“Myth, the Witch of the Wilds at her side flicked her gaze to the side, smirking.

“The runes should be in you as well. Take to your own bath, listen to the faint whisper inside of you. The designs will come on their own. It as if a pressure draws your hand and you find yourself helpless to it.” Her hand bounced in the air with her bell-like words, finally landing on Athena’s shoulder. “How was your flight, Athena?”

Even with the ache in her bones, she managed a smile. “Marvelous, but the fall was terrible. Be
thankful I took your place in that. Your mother helped put me back together – if you catch her in the Crossroads, you may be able to speak to her.” One last time. She tried to emphasize with her tone, turning to catch Morrigan’s eyes. Something about Flemeth’s departure was heartbreaking. The woman had protected the world through the Blights and tragedies with her odd meddling – and she knew her time was up.

There was a small glimmer of recognition within the cat-like eyes of the opposing mage, a soft nod accompanying her words. “That I might. What of you? Do you not need to finish healing?” She gestured to the pool once more but Athena quickly shook her head.

“Not before the others, I wouldn’t dare. Your mother assisted in popping my leg back together, so I still have the strength to care for my friends and allies. I can stand guard over the pools if you need a moment to breathe or celebrate.” She pressed and placed a hand on the woman’s shoulder, giving a gentle push with a smile towards the door. Morrigan looked down to her hand, slowly nodding up and down before dismissing herself with a respectful bow of the head.

As the other Witch of the Wilds left, the one remaining went to work. It had been years since she had been the role of a healer, but she knew the time management skills and first aid was still within her somewhere. With shaky and tired hands, she pulled her hair from back up into something that would keep it out of her face. From there she disrobed until she was simply in a pair of trousers and a bloodied shirt that was underneath her mage coat. She removed her boots and remained solely in her foot wrappings, a lovely emerald green that Solas picked out for her after their adventures in the Exalted Plains.

The knot in her throat grew but she pushed it down and covered it with her duty. She walked through the water that was at hip-level, moving from patient to patient with clean rags. She washed the dried blood from them and reinforced the healing magics with her own to accelerate the process. Once the lesions, abrasions, and slashes from demon claws were sufficiently cleaned out, she wrapped them with cool, clean gauze-like material. As long as they weren’t actively bleeding and their wounds were cleaned with the healing waters, they could finish resting in the tents out in the courtyard.

Within an hour the majority of her soldiers begun to pitch in. Loranil and Illrith directed the uninjured to carry those finished healing outside. Lithari worked in tandem with Athena to reinforce the wards and clean the waters between loads of patients. The elf mage was a wonder to watch. There was a serene grace in their movements, one that almost reminded Athena of a certain Elf Queen of Lothlorien of tales from her home world. Even when constructing the most mind-intensive energies, the bald-elf looked at peace within their own aura.

As dusk approached, the bulk of the Inquisition soldiers and volunteered had been rejuvenated in the waters. Even those that were not wounded came to soak in the mystical energies of the water. Chefs, the cleaners, and the people that formed the back bone of the Inquisition came to soak last
before dinner was to be prepared. Since they did not require active healing, Athena moved herself to a patient that had been unconscious since the morning.

Cassandra.

The Seeker did not seem to be in pain, her face was slacked in what she could assume was relief. The stress of Corypheus and the Inquisition had to be lifted with the Dark Magister’s defeat. Cassandra only had to worry about the Chantry and the Seekers when she woke, but that wouldn’t be for months now. They all had obtained a bit of freedom that day. Freedom to pursue their passions and the projects that were on the side table during the war. Athena knew where she was headed, and had a vague idea of what the rest of the Inquisition was doing, but this was now their time.

She moved her hands gently over Cassandra’s wounds, removing old bandages and replacing them with fresh ones. The soldier would be bed bound for a few days to not reopen the healing, but things appeared to be getting better from that morning. Athena used the bottom of her staff to carve another spell of fortitude underneath the floating feet of the Seeker, making a small sound of triumph as it glowed then settled into the stone.

The water moved behind her and indicated that new people had arrived. Athena turned and saw the final of the Inner Party enter the waters. They were all out of their battle worn, sweat drenched pieces of power and wore basic linen, much like her. Rathein groaned next to Iron Bull as she sank into the heated waters, steam surrounding her like a cloud. “Is that everyone?” she asked, her voice obviously exhausted from the day.

Athena hummed in response, gesturing to the now empty looking pools save for those in the room. “Fortunately, yes. I dismissed Morrigan this morning. The damages didn’t look too severe except for those close to Corypheus in the fight.” She gestured down to the visibly fresh scar on her leg through her torn trousers then over to Cassandra. The Iron Bull proudly flashed his own new wound, his toothy-I-just-slayed-a-dragon euphoria pouring from the smile.

“Oh yeah! This one is going to heal nice.” He then playfully flexed towards Rathein, earning a quick but tired smirk.

“Has she woken yet?” Cullen asked from his corner, his arms resting on the cool tile behind him. He still looked tense, but with every breath Athena saw miniscule relaxations in his posture.

“Oh yet, but I’m not pushing it either. I speak from experience, but sometimes the rest is best when suffering a grievous wound, even if your body is healed. Cassandra has been working so hard
from the start, I think she deserves a little bit of uninterrupted rest.”

The rest of the group all made gestures or sounds of agreement. Leliana dipped entirely underneath the water and then looked around the bathing room. “Is Morrigan going to be staying with the Inquisition? Do you know for how much longer, Athena?” The Nightingale had a mischievous hope in her eyes as she spoke.

“So quick to get rid of your friend from the Blight, Leliana? But I do not know. She tends to move with the wind. I would not be surprised if she moved with the current once the celebrations are over.” The red-haired Spymaster met her gaze then nodded with a sarcastic roll of her eyes. Even though the mood felt light in their words, their actions screamed *let me sleep*. She could feel her own exhaustion in her bones. Every step felt like her feet were filled with obsidian and her bones no longer had cartilage to comfort them. But she would not rest until everyone was healed; it was the least she could do.

“I do hope that is not to be a trend that Solas started – leaving the Inquisition I mean.” Josephine added softly, her eyes instantly flicking to Athena with a look of shock quickly flashing over her face. “I’m so sorry – Athena! I didn’t mean to say it like that!”

She fought the wince but felt it twitch her lips to the side. That was not something to prepared for from the start. It wasn’t just him leaving, it was her answering to *everyone* why he left, if he was coming back, if they were still together, if she were now available to be married off, etc etc. The future hypothetical conversations brought a groan from her lips. She scratched at her scalp and slowly ran her free hand through her hair, resting her hand on her neck while looking at the ceiling. “No apology needed, Josephine. Not everyone is in this like we are. The people in this room. . . you all built this Inquisition on your backs.”

There was a soft splash from the corner as Cullen furrowed his brows at her. “Hey. You are included in that as well. Do not forget you were in the war council meetings since Haven, Athena.”

“Much to your displease at the time, Commander.” Rathein teased with a wink, crossing her legs in the water and resting her hands behind her head.

Cullen made an attempt to dispute her words but groaned and rubbed his palms into his eye sockets. Athena couldn’t tell if it were a lyrium or exhausted headache, but she knew his ticks well enough to know he was experiencing some sort of migraine. “Things were different back then.”

“Yeah. Back in the day where we herded prized Druffalo to their owners and hunted ram to feed people in the Crossroads. Things have just. . . exploded since then.” Rathein said as she closed her
eyes to rest, sighing with contentment as Iron Bull wrapped his arm around her waist.

Leliana crossed her arms over her chest, which Athena had just realized was bare under the water. “It mustn’t always be so grand. Now that we do not have to worry about Corypheus, we can focus more of our attention at the base of the matters. It could be a help in rebuilding everything from the bottom up. The red lyrium is a poison to the local farms and mines that our people depend on. It wouldn’t hurt to start reassigning our soldiers to more civilian-type assignments – “

“Please not today. I need a break.” Cullen groaned from under his hands, tensing all of his muscles before sagging into the water until it was at the level of his chin.

Josephine gasped in a mocking tone. “By the Maker! Do I hear our Commander asking for a break?”

“Andraste...something must be wrong. Is he injured?” whispered a broken voice from the other side of the pool. Cassandra slowly opened her eyes and looked to the Commander, wincing as she moved in the water. Out of instinct she went to put pressure on her healing wounds but Athena stopped her, placing a knee underneath her back so she could continue to float on the water’s surface.

“Welcome back to the world of the waking, Cassandra. Do not move, your wounds are serious and you’ll need to rest for a little longer. Would you like me to use my magic to put you into sleep until the morning? I do not want you lurching in the middle of the night and ruining my good work.” Athena scolded, poking the women who was known to be stubborn in her shoulder.

The Seeker looked to her friends in the water and nodded, a soft smile gracing her face. “Some rest. . . might be nice. Thank you, Athena.” She weakly grabbed Athena’s elbow before closing her eyes, allowing the sleep magic to wrap her mind in an embrace of sleep. When the room went silent, Cullen lifted up and out of the pool, wrapping a towel around his shoulders with a shudder.

“We will get her back to her chambers. Athena, you need to rest. You look like you’re about to fall over.”

Josephine stood up with a gentle smile. “I have already had a lyrium potion sent to your room to recover.”

Rathien opened up once eye. “Kain is waiting for you in your bed.”
The Iron Bull then pointed at her before she could argue. “Nope. Go. We’ll see you in the morning, Slayer. Don’t make me knock you out my way.”

Slap. Rathein sat up quick enough to slap him directly on the shoulder, a playful scowl coming over her face. She took that as a moment to exit the bath, realizing exactly how tired she was once she left the weightless feeling that the water provided over the day. Her joints were aching, her staff felt heavy, and the sensation traveled to her eyelids. She threw her armor over one arm and trudged from the healing baths, up the stairs, and out into the courtyard.

There were dozens of people surrounding the campfires, rejoicing in song and dance for the fall of the False God. The few that noticed her raised a drunk glass in her direction and she could only muster enough energy to acknowledge them with a nod or a wiggle of her fingers. By the time she made it through her door, she dropped her armor and quickly leaned her staff against the wall. Her breaths came in heavy pants, her body shaking with each rise and fall of her chest. The pounding of her pulse was so loud in her ears it took a moment for her to hear the splashing coming from downstairs. Athena arched a brow and turned to look towards the stairs that went down into her basement.

She found a second wind and quickly descended the stairs only to find a tanned, toned man with cucumbers over his eyes resting with his head on the back of the tub. “Did you know you have the third best tub in all of Skyhold? The Inquisitor first, Vivienne second, and you third. I figured it shouldn’t go to waste today, plus, you were distracted healing everyone within three empires.” Dorian mocked, not moving a single muscle to meet her gaze.

Athena moved to her sink, washing her face quickly before pulling her hair to the side to start braiding it before bed. She had to thank Leafy for teaching that; she was a terrible “girl” growing up and knew how to put it up and then put it back down again. Her fingers shook as she worked her hair, but with all of the blood gone she began to look like a normal person in tattered clothes.

“Did you also know I sleep better next to you? I think you Dreamers are contagious. It happened when I shared a tent with Lord Sleeps a Lot too.” She was thankful he didn’t say his name. It almost felt like a trigger word for her, and the day hadn’t even ended yet. She knew it was bound to get worse before she recovered from it at all.

Over the next hour she went up and down the stairs putting things in order. She hung her armor on the stand next to her wardrobe, picked up the loft area where apparently Leafy had taken a rest on a bunch of thrown around blankets and pillows underneath the Fen’Elgara mural on the wall. Everywhere she turned in her room she saw a piece of him and it began to steal a brick from the wall she had erected in her mind. Once she was in clean pajamas, Dorian decided he was finished with the bath and joined her upstairs smelling of a mixture of a few of her different perfumes.
“Thank Andraste you’re looking back to normal, Mata.” He pulled her in for a tight hug and kissed her on top of her recently washed hair. The smell of jasmine and lavender emanated from his pores and it made her want to curl up with a rune-heated blanket and sleep for a week. Perhaps she could learn to shift into a cat so she could get away with doing just that. “But there is something I need to show you before we go to bed. I . . . wanted to be here when you opened it.”

“What do you mean? I didn’t see anything when I came in.” She asked, putting her hand on his upper arm while looking around.

“It’s because you weren’t looking and you’re mana exhausted. It’s a little trick I used to pull on my father and Alexius when I wanted to hide my wine. Look.” He walked over to her vanity and tapped on an invisible object before pulling off what appeared to be a magical veil that suddenly revealed a parcel. There was a small card on top, in a script she couldn’t deny she knew. Vhenan.

The entire wall within her fell as she walked slowly over to it. Her fingertips brushed over the surface. His aura still lingered on whatever was underneath. There was even a faint trace of his scent within the air. She took in a deep breath and savored every scrap of him that was now within her, eyes closed in a moment of peace.

“Do you want me to open it for you?” Dorian whispered from behind her. She nodded but could not find the strength to move backwards from the vanity. Instead, Dorian’s hand covered hers and squeezed it in a moment of comfort. He opened the parcel while keeping constant contact with her whether it be brushing shoulders, his hand on her hips, or him pressed against her back.

“He left you . . . his wolf bone necklace. Then – wait what are these?” He picked something from the table and Athena felt something hit her feet. She moved to pick it up before Dorian could, reading a small card that was still in the hand writing of her lover.

She read aloud. “For when we meet again and you still find me worthy, vhenan. What did this come with, Dorian?”

She slowly turned around and saw a swirling of familiar colors, green, blue and gold, in a perfectly tethered cord. It was roughly half of her height but she recognized it immediately, a soft gasp coming from her lips. She slowly took it from Dorian’s hands, gripping the symbolic piece of work to her chest. Everything broke through the dam, tears streaming down her face as she began to
weep silently with her back leaning on the surface of the vanity. Dorian quickly came and wrapped his arms around her, absorbing her tears onto his clean sleeping shirt.

He didn’t try to silence her, he didn’t try to slow her cries, he simply held her as she let everything from the day go into his arms. After a few minutes he picked her up and moved to the bed. They both fell asleep in that position, with her in his arms and his head resting against hers. Even in her sleep, she did not drop the two boons left by the Dread Wolf.

A token of power.

A promise of forever.

For when we meet again.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone for your patience! Life has kind of been throwing me some curve balls and I was finally able to get a chapter out. I am hoping to return to a normal writing schedule once I return from this work conference I'm at. <3 Love you all and am eternally grateful for the comments and kudos that are still trickling in as new people find this story.
Aftermath

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Athena was almost thankful that her mind and body were too exhausted for the journey through the Fade. It would be too easy, too easy to go searching for him immediately. They still had their dream world, after all. It didn’t mean that their total contact had to cease because they were walking their own paths. Those were some of the hopeful thoughts she had as she drifted to sleep within Dorian’s arms, her hands clutched tightly around the items that Solas left behind. They didn’t move the entire night, so when the sun began to pour in through the small windows on her doors, she groaned and flexed within her friend’s grip.

He instinctively tightened his arms and brought her closer, small whimpers indicating that he was beginning to wake up. He furrowed his brows before opening one eye to look down at her. “Thank the Maker, you actually slept.”

Her fingers flexed around the strings in her hands as she rubbed her cheek against the fabric of his sleep shirt, which was of course luxuriously soft. “Turning into a dragon, shattering my leg, and healing half the Inquisition tends to leave a person pretty tired. Were you able to sleep?” She lifted her eyes, which she could feel were bloodshot, to him. He didn’t look as tired as she expected but he shrugged.

“On and off. Harmony was asking about you. They miss you in the Fade apparently.” He released her legs from his right arm and rubbed his nose. “Look at you, having me talk to spirits. You’re a bad influence on this Tevinter necromancer.”

Athena pushed off from him and stretched until her back popped. Her body was stiff from the healing and the way she slept, but she also felt a hollow pain within her chest. Her eyes dropped to the items in her hand and she sighed, remembering that it all wasn’t a bad dream. She was still there, in Thedas, with him gone. Unfortunately, Solas leaving was only a small part of the problems she was going to have to face. Had she been home, she would have spent multiple days mourning in bed, eating chocolate, and watching bad television. Now there was people who depended on her so those moments would have to wait for when she was alone by herself at night.

She stood and walked over to her staff, braiding the wolf necklace and the promise thread together around the bottom of the moon curve underneath her orb. It levitated calmly in the crescent shape of her staff, pulsing with a calming energy that made her skin tingle. Dorian sat up and walked behind her, his hand hovering over it. She could feel his aura assessing the energy coming off, but then he retracted it with a small hum. “Corypheus’s seemed so much more malevolent when he threw it around. But this – I only feel your magic. It’s oddly calming.”
Athena gripped her staff and twisted it so that the moon would spin around. Solas’s wolf bone lifted then rested on the staff and she felt a twist in her heart. She would need to get over that sooner rather than later. “I hope it is nothing like his. His was... not even his. Ironic - considering he always said Rathein was the mistake and the one with stolen powers.”

“Solas had said his foci was of elven origin, is that what you mean? Unfortunately, the late Elder One was such a walking stereotype of Tevinter.” He asked, stretching his arms up high to get rid of the morning ache.

“Yes, cultural appropriation and theft is uniquely Tevinter.” She joked with a wink, walking over to her wardrobe to find something to wear for the day. It would probably be a day full of War Council meetings and presenting their victory to the people. There was no doubt half of the Keep would be hungover from the previous day’s celebrations. Josephine had already been talking about planning the victory ball. As much as she wanted to stay in her pajamas, she settled for an outfit in between formal and casual. It was an emerald sleeveless shirt with golden accents. It tucked into her pair of black pants and she picked a shoe with a small elevated heel, something that Leliana would approve of. The Spymaster was adept at slipping in additions to her wardrobe that she thought would be “cute” and make a statement.

Antivans and their accessories.

“Perhaps not uniquely but we have been the best at it. What do you plan to do today? Why not just take the day off? There is no emergency you can just -” There was a sympathy in his voice that almost hurt more than the day before. She didn’t want pity. She didn’t want to get the look from everyone like she was a heart broken girl was jilted at the prom.

“I will not allow my duties to be affected because of a man. That gives the event more power than necessary.” She said definitively, sliding on her shoe and tying the laces with terse, purposeful movements.

“She is woman - hear her roar. Alright then, Mata. You do what you need to. Just know that I’m here for you, okay? For whatever you need.” He gripped her shoulder until she looked to him, nothing but sincerity pouring from his gaze.

“I know, Dorian, I know. Trust me if anything changes, I’ll be knocking at your door with wine in hand.” He waved as he left the door, leaving her to sit alone on her bed for the first time. She took in a deep breath, putting her head in her hands while rubbing her eyes with her palms. *Fuck.* Solas’s scent still clung to the bed, and there were lingering remnants of his aura on the cord and his necklace.
Her eyes drifted to the objects wrapped around her staff. Seeing the bold colors of the marriage tie brought a tug of pain to her stomach. In another world, they would never have left the cave. They could have been married. The word sounded foreign even running through her mind. She had never considered marriage to be something she had wanted, even on her home world. It wasn’t a priority. If someone had fallen into her lap that she loved, she wouldn’t mind it, but her goal in life wasn’t to be married. *If you find me worthy.* She could hear the sad, weighted tone he probably used when writing the note.

“Never feeling good enough, always regretting.”

“Jesus fucking Christ!” she screamed while startled, the curse falling from her lips from an ingrained habit. Once she recovered from the scare, she saw a sleepy looking Cole coming down from the loft with a kitten sleeping peacefully on the rim of his hat. “Cole? Did you... sleep here?”

He nodded, rubbing his eye with one hand. “I felt pain, sadness, in your tower. I wanted to be close just in case I could help. Ever since you helped me... I hurt and I feel tired all of the time. Why?” Cole asked innocently. She noticed there was some color coming to the unnatural hollow of his cheeks and a more life-like look to his gaze. She relaxed her posture with a sigh, giving him a half smile.

“That’s being human, Cole. It’s not sunshine and rainbows all of the time. Are you hungry? Are you hurting here?” She pointed to the middle of her stomach and he nodded.

“So is he.” He pointed to his hat where the very content kitten stretched out then covered its face with its paws. She couldn’t help but melt a little inside.

“Let’s go get us some breakfast, come on, babe.” She extended her hand to him and waited until he grabbed it. She led them out of the tower and down the stairs through the courtyard. The Keep still stunk of last night’s celebrations. Her nose curled as she took in the wafts of stale ale and broken casks of whiskey. Soldiers and members of Skyhold were strung out on cots, completely asleep. She tried not to laugh at how the Commander would probably scold them when he did his morning walk around the battlements.
The halls seemed abnormally quiet so Athena turned towards the kitchens instead of going to the dining hall. When she got there, all she saw was Syla scurrying about trying to prep something. There were baskets of various fruits strewn about and the smell of fresh bread wafted through the air. Athena mimed rolling up her sleeves, because she detested them and only wore them when she had to, and walked over to her side. “Okay we probably don’t need to do a heavy breakfast because more than half of the Keep is either injured or hungover. Cole, you work on cutting up the fruit and snacks since you’re good with dagger work. Syla, help me with the bread and getting the dining room ready.”

“But Athena . . . are you sure?” Syla asked with a soft voice, her eyes holding that sympathy that she was already loathing.

“It’s not even a problem. Besides, this will keep my hands busy.” She lifted her staff and sheathed it on her back so that it wouldn’t be in the way.

“Busy hands, busy mind, hides the hurt.” Cole mumbled loud enough for everyone to hear, Athena only making a small humming sound to confirm his thought. Syla nodded in understanding and then they were off to the races. Athena would load the ovens and heat them with her magic as Syla mixed the different doughs and checked the rising ones to ensure they didn’t over prep. Cole seemed perfectly content chopping up different berries and apples. His hands moved in a blur while his eyes were fixated on the task at hand. She caught herself getting distracted and watching him move with a machine-like accuracy.

They would need to fix that. Cooking wasn’t all about the tasks and the skills; he wanted to learn from her because there was heart in her food. It would have to be something he learned as became more of a person than spirit.

They moved in a rhythm until more of the kitchen staff started coming in. Their eyes were bloodshot and they were unbathed, which resulted in Syla shooing them to the communal baths until breakfast was served and they had drunk their morning tea. As they were finishing and the trays were in the dining hall, Cole tapped on Athena’s shoulder then pointed outside in the courtyard. “We need to take two plates that way.”

“What do you feel, Cole?” She asked, wiping the sweat from her brow with a long piece of cloth that Syla had given her that she quickly turned into a headband to keep the flyaways out of her face.

“Tired and hurting. Both emotions from two separate people. I think one of them is Cassandra.” He looked up and adjusted the kitten that was still snoozing in his hat after having a helping of milk for breakfast.
“Yeah, she took a hard hit during the battle yesterday. Okay, let’s bring her and the other person breakfast.” Between the both of them they brought enough breakfast for four mouths. They weaved through the growing crowd of waking people and made their way into the blacksmiths workshop where Cassandra slept in the loft above it. There wasn’t any blacksmith present that morning, so the two crept up the stairs to see Cassandra resting in bed with Cullen asleep in his chair that was leaned against the wall. She couldn’t help but smile at the scene.

“I do not think he has slept this well since before Kinloch.” Cassandra whispered, one eye opening to look at the pair as they came in.

Cole put a finger to his mouth and pointed towards the Commander. Athena had to bite the side of her cheek to keep her from laughing. She nodded and silently crept over to Cassandra’s bed, sitting on the edge while making sure not to touch her injured leg that was propped up on pillows. “Yeah he’s told me about his nightmares before.”

“It is more than that.” She winced as she readjusted her position in bed, sitting up more to look at them both. “His sense of duty will not allow him to rest until the task is complete. It is unfortunately a trait him and I both share.” Athena broke her off a piece of bread and handed her a small plate with some fruit on it.

“You two have been nonstop since before Kirkwall. It is time for both of you to have some well-deserved rest, even if it’s just for a little while.” Cassandra scoffed, popping a grape into her mouth with a slight roll of her eyes.

“You act as if you do not know Josephine will be planning some large affair. Once I get the use of my leg back, I must begin work with the Seekers. Although... the Chantry has already reached out and asked if I will be campaigning for the position of the Divine.” Cassandra looked focused and dropped her gaze to her leg. The bandage thankfully didn’t have any drainage on it but Athena knew she would still want to change it before she left.

“How do you feel about that? Is it something you would want?” Athena asked carefully, keeping a steady eye on Cole who was throwing a blanket over Cullen and sneakily putting a pillow behind his head.

“It isn’t that you would aspire to be Divine, you are chosen. You are called to it by the Maker himself. If the Chantry called, I would answer but - “ She leaned her head back into the pillow and let out a sigh. “There is so much I would like to do with the Seekers. They need to be rebuilt; they need to better than what they were before.”
Athena focused and chewed on her bread and what Cassandra was saying, mixing in what she had experienced in Thedas with what she had known from before. The Seeker was one of three options for the Divine, the other two Leliana and Vivienne. Cassandra had always been her choice, but watching her go through the realizations of the Seekers was difficult. The rug was pulled out from underneath her and she seemed the best person to rebuild the Order. “What does the Inquisitor think? Have you confided in her about this?”

“She pushes me to go where my heart lies. I believe Leliana has reached out to her about the same topic. It is such a heavy decision -”

“It’s a good thing you are trapped in bed for potentially a week then, yes?” Athena teased at her, gesturing to the injured leg with a strawberry before taking a bite out of it.

Cassandra flushed in her cheeks, releasing her braid from the top of her hair to come to the side over her shoulder. “Yes. . . I suppose you are correct. Tell me, Athena. You have told me before briefly, but did your world have a faith like the Chantry? What do you believe in?”

There was a soft and hopeful look in the Seeker’s eyes, as if she felt like Athena was going to confess that the Chant was spread across worlds. It was difficult to pin, because she was becoming such an objective person. Andraste could be real – her ashes were proof enough there was something magical about her. The Elven Gods were real, obviously. It was difficult for her to pinpoint exactly what her faith was, but she knew it wasn’t religious. She had faith in her people, her family she had found, and her friends. She had faith that there were Titans within the planet’s underbelly and that there were many mysteries to unlock within Thedas.

“My world. . . had something similar. We simply called him ‘God’. He varied in different religions and practices, but the largest faith was called Christianity. The main thing that dictated that religion was a book called the Bible. I was raised under that faith but sort of lost it as we grew up.” Apparently, that had upset Cassandra whose brows instantly furrowed and she sat up in bed straighter.

“What made you lose your faith?”

“I can’t exactly tell you what did. Time? Too many tragedies happening to my family? War? Science? There was too much going on in the world and in my mind for me to believe in a singular man in the sky that created everything. We had evidence that the world existed before man put this person to paper. But here – here is different for me.” Her hands smoothed out the fabric of her pants as she struggled to find the words.
"Forgive me, I did not wish to bring up a subject that could be controversial for some." Cassandra quickly apologized, raising her hands in defense.

"No, you're fine. It's a conversation that friends should be able to have." She gave a half smile to the woman, waiting for her to return it before she continued. "There is concrete evidence in something more here. I guess the thing I have faith in is people. I have faith there will always be evil in world, but I have faith that there will be good ones to survive it. I came into this world hated by most but have been proven wrong about a lot of people." She looked over to Cullen and smiled as Cole sat next to him to keep him propped up in the chair. "I used to think all Templars were bad, and that was just from my outside knowledge not even with my personal. There is good and bad in every person, ever Order, every church, but I would like to think that even sometimes the good outweighs the bad."

Cassandra let out a sigh and relaxed back into her pillows. "That sounds very romantic, Athena. I am glad your views have adjusted to Thedas based on your experiences. Some will go through their whole life ignorant and stubborn to change. It's comforting to know that you will continue to have an open mind. What...are your plans now? I hear that your own group is growing. What is it they call you? Fen – I apologize I am not going to pretend that I am good at speaking elvish."

There was a frustrated blush on her cheeks that made Athena smile, running a hand through her hair. "Fen'Elgara. It means Sun Wolf...from when I almost set Gaspard's feathers on fire but crafting a gigantic wolf of fire to save the Dalish. It all sounds rather fanciful – but nobody's ever said I'm lacking in imagination..."

"Isn't that the truth." There was a tired scoff from the wall, Cullen finally opening his eyes to playfully glare at her. He groaned and arched his back, the pain of sleeping against a wall in a chair finally catching up to him. She could hear the popping of various joints where she sat but she couldn't help but laugh when Cole still tried to keep him covered with a blanket.

"It really bothered me at first, but I imagine it's like people calling you the Right Hand or the Savior of the Divine. Now I'm kind of used to it. The people expecting me to have the answers thing? Will never get used to it." Cassandra rolled her eyes and began to rub her temples, Cullen giving a half laugh under his breath before shooing Cole away. He kept trying to cover him with a blanket, insisting he was still tired, but Athena wondered if the recently turned human could detect exactly how tired the Commander was.

She walked over to Cullen and offered a hand to help him up. He took the opportunity immediately, gripping her hand and almost lurching to a standing position. He gasped and gripped his back, falling forward until he could catch himself. Athena winced sympathetically. "Yikes, back spasm, I get those sometimes. That's what happens when you sleep in a chair at your age."
Before he could react to the comment she winked, giving him another little tug to make him stand straight. He gave her sheepish look of discomfort while Cassandra groaned from the bed. “I do not think any of us will ever get used to it, but it the role we have been given. Take him to do something – he’s restless even when he is sleeping well.”

Cullen grumbled under his breath. “Thanks for the sympathy, Seeker.” He arched his back until he was satisfied enough to walk. “Alright, Athena. Let’s get to the War Room. I’m sure there’s bound to be a meeting this morning.”

He walked over and touched Cassandra’s shoulder with his hand, giving her a hopeful smile before turning and descending the stairs with Athena and Cole. Cole had an uneasy look on his face so Athena gripped his hand and pointed back towards the kitchen when they left the blacksmiths. “Why don’t you go help Syla finish cleaning up then help Varric with his letters? I’m sure he would appreciate the company while he updates all of his friends on what is going on.”

“Should I tell him to invite them to the celebration?” He asked timidly, meeting her eyes with a smile.

Cullen made a face. “What celebration?”

There was then a flurry of wings behind them as what looked like a swarm of ravens left the tower all clutching ribbon-wrapped letters. Athena and Cullen sighed then spoke in unison. “Josephine.”

“She works fast. . . “ She whispered out of the side of her mouth, keeping track of the direction where all of the ravens were going. With her orb, she could probably try to tap into them if she tried, but that would have to be for her own uses, not to pettily track who she had to look forward to seeing. Gaspard would probably be coming again – but this time she didn’t have Solas to use as a body shield to hide from his disgusting gaze. Her lips pulled back into a sneer.

“What’s wrong?” Cullen asked, apparently catching her expression.

“Not exactly looking forward to seeing the Emperor again.” Her fingers nervously twitching before she crossed her arms over her chest.
“Yeah, Orlesians tend to make me feel the same way.” He said with half a laugh, gesturing towards the stairs that led up into the grand hall. “But we should probably go in and act surprised when Josie announces what kind of ‘grand celebration’ we are going to have.”

Athena made a gesture in a light mocking towards their Ambassador, her voice changing as she tried to attempt an Antivan accent. “It’s going to be wonderful! Representatives from every country we can reach in Skyhold to celebrate the defeat of Corypheus and the union of allies! How fantastic!”

The obviously tired Commander managed a laugh, rubbing the back of his neck. “Perhaps I can actually hide successfully from this one.”

“Not a chance. If I have to go to this, so do you. We can suffer together tragically and hide behind my piano with a bottle of wine. I’m sure we can get Dorian in on this plan. Did we suffer any casualties during the battle yesterday?” She looked over to the Commander with an uneasy gaze, but he shook his head.

“Thank the Maker no. Corypheus seemed more desperate to take out the Inquisitor instead of our forces. The demons that made it to the ground seemed... I do not know, strange in a way? Their purpose wasn’t as strong. It was something I had meant to ask Solas about - “Apparently she had pedaled back with a flush. “Er - Sorry. Cassandra had said not to...”

Athena let out a groan as they made it through the main hall. “Please don’t treat me like a broken glass. It would be like everyone side stepping around Kinloch or Kirkwall for you. It happened, I kind of knew it would, let’s move on.”

Cullen paused, his hand on the door to the War Room. “But it was just yesterday?” His voice softened into a question but she rolled her eyes and pushed through.

“So was the triumph over the Elder One so – let's talk about that!” As she came into the room and saw Rathein speaking with Josephine, she put on a smile and walked around the corner, gathering the Inquisitor into too tight of an embrace in order to pick her up off of the ground.

“Someone is feeling better! Good morning, Slayer!” Rathein grunted through her sister’s right grip, looking back to Josephine with an exasperated expression before getting her balance back once her feet hit the ground.
Athena could only shrug. “Closing the Breach, destroying the orb, and killing Corypheus can make for a good night’s sleep. Do I dare even ask what the surge of ravens was for?” She pointed a finger out the window to the stragglers that were still leaving the Keep.

Josephine blushed and quickly jotted something down with her quill, avoiding her gaze with a coy smile. “You act so surprised, Lady Wolfsbane. I’ve been planning this for weeks, ever since you refused to answer how the battle would turn out. The date has been set and everything has been ordered. All that we need is for people to begin arriving and for the Keep to be prepared! It’s going to be such a great union of our allies – I cannot wait!”

The mysticism and excitement in her voice was near nauseating, Athena looking the Ambassador up and down to make sure she hadn’t accidentally put elfroot in her morning fire. “Well. That’s a start for the meeting. Have any scouting troops gone down to the Temple? What is left of his forces? Have any demons been seen since?” She pressed, looking to the map and the different markers there. From the feelings she had in her gut, she moved the different wolf markers around to their accurate location.

Cullen cleared his throat and straightened his posture. Even though he wasn’t wearing any armor, she could see that he had reentered into the role of Commander and Soldier. He walked over to his place around the War Table and plucked most of Corypheus’s troops from the map. “As I was telling you earlier, our defense of the base of the Temple of Sacred Ashes was a success. While you were battling in the sky, we had the ground covered and were able to clear the soldiers before the island came tumbling down. Leliana’s scouts have been tracking the remaining Red Templars due to Samson’s...” He paused and had a flash of uneasiness before his hardened expression returned. “Volunteering of information during his stay with Dagna.”

“His information is proving to be correct.” Leliana stated from the door as she plucked raven feathers from her hair. For once, her hood was down and she was allowing the sun to shine on her face. Athena chocked it up to a sign of more hopeful times. No more hiding. “There are scattered camps throughout Orlais and one left in Crestwood. The numbers of remaining Red Templars are few, but we will hunt them out.”

Rathein spread her hands on the War Table and looked over the different trails. “But what of the Red Lyrium itself? Varric’s friend Bianca stated that it was normal lyrium with the Blight – what do you think we can do to stop its spread?”

Cullen huffed under his breath. “Cure the Blight.”

Josephine arched a brow. “Can such a thing be done?”
The whole room paused and slowly looked towards Athena, who was engrossed with the map and the different units. She heard them but she was analyzing the different camps and how there was a surprising lack of soldiers or units from Orlais or the Inquisition. The area calling to her the most was where the dragon of the Emerald Graves was located, near the north of their map that they had crafted for the Inquisition. She knew there was a tree there rumored to have had hung dozens of invading *shems* for trespassing as a warning. If there was any place that would be good for establishing, it would be symbolic for her people.

“Athena?” Josephine and Rathein pressed in unison, bringing her attention up from the map. She blinked, clearing her mind and meeting everyone’s gaze with a confused expression.

“What?”

“Is there a cure for the Blight?” Leliana asked calmly, the intensity of all of their gazes breaking her neutral expression. Unfortunately, she chose a smile.

“And you think I would keep *that* from you? I mean there were theories where I came from but none of them actually panned out.” Cullen’s eyebrow twitched in what she assumed was curiosity so she pressed on, pinching the bridge of her nose with a sigh. “They say that King Calenhad consumed the blood of a dragon that he was led to by a Witch of the Wilds. Rathein, Leliana, and I know that Flemeth could turn into a dragon and her daughters are known as Witch of the Wilds. Morrigan is one, and there is one other that I know of. It has also been revealed recently that Flemeth is the Elven Goddess Mythal. If that is the case, then there might be some connection between her dragon blood and curing the Blight but the only person left in King Calenhad’s line is King Alistair.”

Her words were very straight to the point as if she were giving a patient report at work in her home world. Cullen crossed his arms and let out a sigh, but Josephine had a ray of hope on her face. “I just sent an invitation to the King for the celebration! Perhaps if we explained the theory to him, he would be willing to participate in Dagna’s tests.”

Leliana pointed directly up. “Let us ask Grand Enchanter Fiona as well. She is the only Grey Warden known to be purged of the Taint.”

Rathein made a sound of agreement and clapped her hands together. “Then we shall ask her as well. That is a good goal to focus on, or it can be what we turn our forces towards for now. But, for now, let us rest. The Inquisition has earned it.” She looked to the side and put a hand on Josephine’s shoulder. “Will you assist me in drawing up a speech for tonight? We should address everyone tonight in the Grand Hall.” Josephine nodded emphatically, moving a fresh piece of parchment to the top of her writing board. The Inquisitor then looked to the rest of the Council.
“For the rest of you, think of what your ranks should do next. The Inquisition and the refugees in Skyhold may rest but we as their leaders will not.”

Chapter End Notes

I think I stopped and started this over a dozen times but it finally got to something I was happy with.
Where Do We Go Now?

They all split their separate ways after the War Council meeting.

Josephine and Rathein retired into the Ambassador’s library to begin making some sort of speech for the Inquisition. Leliana and Cullen disappeared to count up their troops and the different levels of success. That left Athena to make plans with her people. Her people. The phrase still felt foreign even though they made a symbol for her and wore it on their skin with ink. She rubbed her temple with one hand as she descended the stairs and turned into her office.

As usual, it was swarming. There were wounded lined up on the walls and Loranil made sure to tend to each of them individually. Syla and Cole were quick to finish in the kitchen so the red-headed elf was back to setting things up at Athena’s desk for her. She walked over to her friend, wrapping an arm around her waist while looking at the massive amounts of paper on her desk.

“Sorry, Lady Athena, things have been a bit... well chaotic since before Corypheus’s defeat. There are questions from different nobles at the keep about elven disappearances in the estates and how they are flocking to your troops. The Spymaster has sent us different reports of what appears to be a moving tree through Orlais that is reaching the most north points of the Emerald Graves. As a more personal note, many of us had... strange dreams last night.” Her face flushed and her brows furrowed as she attempted to organize the missives in order of importance.

Athena fought to not tighten her grip. Fuck he works fast. “What kind of dreams, Syla?”

Illrith came up to the desk, obviously overhearing them. He had a dark look about him as if he hadn’t slept well. “Whispers. I thought it was you at first, Fen’Elgara, but the creature I saw was much darker.”

“His arrow scar has healed it seems.” There was a sarcastic and bitter comment from behind her, Athena turning quickly to see Leafy with her feet propped up on a table spinning an arrow between her fingers. The posture aged the elf and made her look like an adult, especially with the battle-survived edge that had appeared on her features.

“Ma’fen.” She scorned, leveling her gaze at her daughter before walking over and snatching the arrow from her head before hitting her on top of the head with it playfully. “Did you have this same dream?”
The blonde-haired elf scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “He tried. Thankfully my dreams were inspired by a spirit of Bravery last night so I was able to fight him off.”

“Bravery now? That is a new one to our group. What did you dream of instead of the dark creature?” Athena began to fix her daughter’s braids as she talked to her, her hands moving with a mechanical precision. Thankfully her lessons with Leafy gave her comfort in doing hair. It was a lost art to her before. Her mother would have called her a ‘bad girly-girl’. Her father used to make comments about being more ‘lady-like’ at the dinner table - The lessons never caught on.

“Battles! I had this dream that I was shooting arrows of energy in a fight against these purple spirit looking things. My body felt so alive, Fen’mae! Is that what you feel like when you’re fighting with your magic?” The novice mage looked up with a wicked excitement in her eyes. Athena glanced over to Lithari, who was floating two crystals within her palm with an unbreakable level of focus. She knew that mage couldn’t be teaching her daughter about the exciting part of battle. Lithari was too regimented for that yet serene at the same time. The mage was an enigma.

“It is different when you are fighting for your life, Leafy. It isn’t something you want to do, but have to do. There’s adrenaline running through your blood and you can’t hear anything but the sound of your panicked heart. You remember the first time you shifted; it wasn’t good emotion that made you do it, remember?” They both shared a somber look before the teen nodded in agreement, crossing her arms stubbornly over her chest.

“That was not my favorite day. I - ” There was a flush of embarrassment on her face. “I feel like I should apologize to that soldier. I was not myself. I just wanted to kill him so bad.” Tears welled up in the girl’s eyes and Athena didn’t hesitate to bend down and bring her into an embrace.

“I know. I know, Lev’adin. Emotions drive us to do and want crazy things. But do not forget that power you felt, okay? Your spirit that holds that power will guide you to great things in this lifetime.” She tilted her chin up to meet her gaze, Athena giving her a loving, motherly smile.

There was a firm grip on her shoulder and she looked over to see Illrith gripping Leafy’s as well. He gave a wicked smile and then winked towards her daughter. “Just wait until you actually kill someone for the first time. Who knows, you may get addicted!”

Syla came over and flicked the rogue on the ear before flashing a blushing smile. There was a sincerity in the woman that Athena was drawn to. She didn’t think that the elf had the capability to lie. It wasn’t because she was transparent or green; she was just honestly good. That was difficult to find in the war and Blight ridden Thedas. “That is only for dastardly people like you, vhenan.” The title caused Athena is immedialy a tely smile, but she tried not to bring more attention to it.
Illrith shrugged nonchalantly and walked over towards the table where a map of Thedas was rolled open and weighted down with his daggers that she knew he could hide in probably a dozen different spots on his person. “Speaking of this lifetime, you’ve made mentions of that tree creature searching. Where is it at now, Fen’Elgara?”

She walked over to the table and let her fingertips dance over the drawn mountains and forests. She closed her eyes and allowed her magic to flow into that place that connected her to the sylvan. The slow trudge of its barked feet hitting the ground sounded in her ears, branches and fallen leaves crunching underneath its weight. The sylvan tilted its top branches up and for a moment she saw through its eyes. The trees were thick and appeared to reach the skies. There were small signs at the bottom of the trunks and Athena recognized the glen immediately. Hopefully the creature wouldn’t run into any giants. “It is in the Emerald Graves, close to where I hope we will be able to move to.”

Syla brought over her clipboard, that was smaller compared to Josephine’s but worked just the same, and began to take notes. “How soon do we anticipate the move? Just because Corypheus was defeated does not mean the Inquisition will stop. . . right?” She looked over with bright green eyes and Athena kept her face passive.

She looked over her shoulder at the door and made a motion for Loranil to keep an eye out. As she glanced around the room, she took note of who was in and if she could trust them or not. More details of their move and their separation would get out eventually, but timing was sensitive. She tilted her head back and forth trying to make a decision before she shrugged and took in a deep breath. “There will be a time, a few years from now, when an Exalted Council will be called to determine the fate of the Inquisition. The Inquisitor is aware of this, and from that point on no matter which way it goes the troops and resources left will be for the newly elected Divine. It is up to our people which way they wish to go.”

The room grew silent but there was a tension in the air, all of the different elves meeting one another’s eyes in attempts to communicate silent messages. She understood it was difficult. They joined in the fight against Corypheus but now many of them were joining because of her. She had freed them from their oppressive jobs in Orlais and from there rumor spread that she was providing freedom. A voice cut through the silence; its tone heavy with potential. “What are you offering instead?” Lithari stood gracefully from their chair, walking over to the rest of the council with a cool and collected expression. “The Dread Wolf came to us in a dream. He speaks of promises of bringing back what was, bringing back a time where we were ageless and powerful.” They tapped their finger on the map where Athena had previously suggested they might go. “What do you offer instead?”

Syla turned and opened her mouth to snap back in argument but Athena held a hand up to stop her. It was a question she would be asked in the near future. What could she offer against a God? He had literally thousands of years of experience against her. He had power. He had a following and knowledge of the time before. “I will end up saying this stance multiple times – but let it be known. I am not making promises to make us better than what we were before. I am not promising to take the entirety of elves back to the times of Arlathan. What I am invested in is the now. The People
have survived Arlathan, they have survived multiple Blights, they have survived being exiled to the Dales, and they have survived being force fed Andrastian beliefs in the cramped alienages. It would be disgraceful to not consider that strength.”

She turned from the map and walked towards her desk, rubbing the back of her neck before looking forward to her daughter. The blonde-braided girl was now standing, a type of proud ferocity in her gaze. She simply nodded to her mother with her hands clenched into fists at her side. There was a spark between her gazes, something that filled her with confidence and the words to continue. “I don’t want to go back. I want to move forward. We need to grow, find our own place, make a home for ourselves. I want to create a haven for those in need to come to. We cannot go back to a time before the humans, the Qunari, and the dwarves. This is the world we live in now and we need to fight for our place in it.”

When Athena finished, she was slightly out of breath from nerves, her gaze flicking to each of her council members. Syla, Illith, and Loranil looked back to her and made different gestures of agreement, expressions of confidence on their faces. Lithari, as composed as ever, simply raised their chin slightly and truly smiled, the gesture dazzling considering how infrequently they did so. “That... will do. How will you tell the people? Surely there are those not in Skyhold who would like to hear such information after having a visit from the Dread Wolf.”

Leafy walked over to Athena’s side and perked up with her idea. “She can dream! She’s a Dreamer, so she can visit the dreams of other people! Maybe she can project a message like he did.”

Loranil arched a brow. “Do you think you can do that? Have you ever done something like that before?”

Lithari took in a deep breath through their nose and gestured towards Athena’s staff with the orb floating content within the crescent moon. “She has traversed dreams, but not to that scale. Who knows what can happen with this article of power, however?”

Syla looked to the orb with a sense of uneasiness. “To be honest, my lady - “ Athena cut her off with a stern look at the title. She then corrected herself. “Athena, perhaps it would be best if you project a certain image when you try to do so - “

Loranil cut back in. “My tribe will forever remember the Sun Wolf in its glory when you summoned it in the Dales. That would be a good thing to oppose the Dread Wolf.”

Illrith had his arms crossed over his chest with a look of sarcastic questioning. “Do you think you
can do it, Athena?”

She let out a groan and shrugged, reaching behind her back to simply grip her staff. “It is worth a try. I think it would help if . . . maybe I slept around you guys? Something to connect me to the People more than whatever spiritual thing I have. We could try it tonight, in here, after the Inquisitor speaks and I’m sure some miniature celebration happens.”

Syla continued to write things down, the sound of her quill scratching against paper filling the tense room. “Would you like to address the troops we have before the Inquisitor speaks?”

Athena nodded, looking around the desk and realizing they would need to rearrange or bring in more cots if they were to host a fade slumber party. “If anybody was negatively affected by the message sent last night or wishes to have reassurance, let them come. We’ll show our strength through community. I do not wish to raise an army, if it happens so be it, I wish to create something greater. You know what?” She clapped her hands together and began to point at different pieces of furniture. “Let’s push everything to the walls and gather all of the blankets you can find. Go to my tower, there’s a lot in the loft, raid your rooms, I want to fit as many people as I can in here tonight. Lithari, can you make sure I have some lyrium just in case?”

People already started moving and her and Loranil lifted her desk and moved it flat against the wall. Over the next few hours they stacked chairs, moved furniture, and placed enough cots and blankets to fit a couple dozen people within her save of an office. Athena considered levitating stones behind the dragon skull to fit more people but the sky was thick with clouds so she was convinced against it. Her and Leafy had gone into the herb stores, putting each one to their nose and smelling it until she found sage and prophet’s laurel. Both were supposed to have cleansing capabilities, and she had used sage in her own home before Thedas.

“Athena, you need to get ready for the Inquisitor’s speech!” Syla pressed, urging a more formal attire towards her. She scoffed and clicked her tongue on the back of her teeth as she reached up on her tip toes to get the smoke of the herbs in all corners of her office.

“Magic can do a lot, but sometimes you have to get old school. We’re doing something unprecedented tonight, Syla, so I want to make sure everything is perfect. We need to make people feel safe. We need to create an image tonight that people will want to come to.” She was balanced on a normal chair that was leaned against the wall, trying to swirl the smoke in a counter-clockwise fashion in the most upright corner of the cave. The smell brought back memories of home, which was comforting in a way, but she needed to be focused in Thedas on the future of the People. Her sister had been into crystals, the cards, and different incenses. At one point she believed in fairies and that one sat on her shoulder and told her what was going on. Athena judged at the time, but if her sister could see her then spreading the sage like they used to, she figured they were even.
“Whatever you are using, it smells great. I just want to curl up and take a nap.” The elf remarked with a kind of relaxation in her voice.

“With Illrith, no doubt,” she said with a wink, looking down at her friend from her perch on top of the chair. “How long has that been going on?”

Syla instantly flushed, her neck and her chest becoming the color of her hair. “Creators. I think it started around Winter’s end. He appears rugged and crafty. I assumed he was going to be like Master Zevran, but he is kind and sweet with me.”

Athena smirked. “Zevran can be too.”

There was a change in the air as she leaned back on the chair and did a small jump down. She felt a tightening over her scar but it was something she was growing used to. Syla handed over the outfit before stretching with a cat-like smile. “You know. A few of us thought that you two were going to become more comfortable with one another.”

She froze, casually taking off her now dirtied and sweaty closed before changing into a fresh white, sleeveless blouse. It was similar to her outfit she wore for when she sat on the Inquisitor’s throne. She wrapped the white wolf’s sash around her waist, keeping it snug for support. As she slipped on her black pants with gold accents on the buttons, she looked behind her towards Syla. “Oh yeah? What made you think that?”

The elf responded with a shy shrug. “You two interacted quite comfortably. He was that way with most people, men and women alike. But he treated you with a different kindness. Plus, Illrith thinks he saw you go with him to your tower.” There was a pause. “Alone.”

“Of course, he did.” Athena scoffed as she was lacing up her boots. The thought made her chuckle. Oh, how she must have looked to the nobles. First with Solas then with Zevran with barely any time apart. Perhaps she had a type. The Crow had been of special interest to her because she had seen him a lot during her multiple playthroughs of Origins. He always appeared charismatic, difficult to make falter, but like most of the people in Thedas there was something more underneath, something more sincere. There had been a few glances of that when he was hiding in Skyhold. He treated Leafy well and her daughter had told her that he taught her how to hide a dagger up her sleeve without anyone noticing.

Athena straightened her posture and looked for her water flagon to use to tame her hair. “He’s an
There was a sound of surprise from behind her and she turned to see her friend assessing the staff with the orb. Solas’s wolf bone rested in her grip, a kind of sympathetic expression on her face. “These are. . . betrothal ribbons, are they not, Athena?”

Well I’ll have to talk about it sooner than later. She gave a quick glance around to see how many people were in the office. Thankfully the crowd was thinning since they were making preparations and people wanted to listen to the Inquisitor’s speech. Leafy was resting on the floor on her bedroll, clutching a pillow to her chest. “They are. ‘For when you find me worthy again.’ He had said.” Her words were suddenly heavy with grief but she clenched her fist and began building small blocks in her mind. If she allowed herself to get wrapped up in heartbreak, nothing would get done. They had been through this before, but this time she had something to work towards. He wouldn’t be there giving her looks from the side of his gaze. He wouldn’t be on her side of the battlefield throwing barriers when he could.

There was distance. Weird enough, it helped.

“Oh. . . so with what you know, will you two meet again?” There was a mixture of what sounded like hope and anger, if the kind woman was capable of that emotion, in her voice.

“Yes. But it might be years. That’s a lot of time for a person to change.” She wasn’t sure who she was referencing, but she knew that there was a lot to happen in that much time. They could end up enemies on the battlefield. She could end up hunting him in the Fade. She couldn’t imagine what would happen if one of his men hurt one of hers. Would she be able to strike him down if she saw him commanding from the other side of the battlefield? The thought alone began to harden her heart.

She would have to.

“That’s also a long time for a person to be alone, Athena. I know a person does not need a partner to go through life, or - “ She gestured towards the room. “Start what appears to be a new pilgrimage. But it helps to have people there.”

Athena forced a corny grin, smoothing out her hair into a high, sleek bun. “That’s what I have all of you for, Syla. How can I be lonely with such good company?” She then grabbed her staff from its lean on her desk, snapping for Kain to come to her side. “I will see you upstairs!” She called, her forced and sarcastic optimism dripping from her words.
Before anyone else could comment on her sudden loss of a love life, she pushed herself up the stairs and into the back of the grand hall. Rathein was already sitting in the throne as people were gathering, her cool blue gaze looking over the crowd. The Inner Council was behind them, Cullen shifting awkwardly with the sudden increase in people’s gazes upon them. Athena weaved through the crowd with Kain and took her place next to the Inquisitor.

“Didn’t think you were going to show.” The mage said out of the corner of her mouth, her fingers tapping in a rhythm against the decorative armrest.

Athena smirked and crossed her hands over her waist, tapping her fingers in a mockingly similar fashion. “I had prior arrangements but I shifted some things around to make it to see your speech. How are you feeling?”

“Like my father.” Rathein stated flatly.

“Is that bad?” Cullen asked meekly, trying to keep his voice down as the roar of the great hall grew as people trickled in.

“Very.” Rathein, Josephine, Leliana, and Athena said in unison, not even bothering to share a glance because they all knew of the strained relationship between father and daughter. The Trevelyan Family had a deep and well recorded history with the Templar Order. They sponsored the knights and often the males of the family were promised off when age allowed. It was how the Inquisitor lost her brother, which meant the entire subject of her family was a sticky subject. They initially had tried to keep her magic a secret, but her rebellious attitude and loud voice made that near impossible.

“My apologies.” The Commander whispered underneath his breath, nervously running a hand through his hair and looking over the crowd. “I suppose we should start. Is everybody ready?” He asked, meeting his gaze with all of theirs. Rathein nodded and gracefully pushed up from her throne, taking a few determined steps forward until her feet were at the edge of the stairs that led down into the grand hall.

At her movement, the entire room hushed. It had been years, and the people knew that when the Inquisitor was in formal garb and addressing them it was serious. She was the kind of person to be seen in the tavern at night and in the healer's tents when she wasn’t meeting with her Inner Council. She was not detached from the people like her family was rumored to be. Rathein Trevelyan was different.
“My friends,” she called, her voice completely silencing the room. Athena’s gaze looked out over the crowd, making small notes of where her people and the rest of their friends had gathered. “It has been a long time, and we have traveled so far.”

She began to slowly pace the length the top step, making sure to scan her eyes and meet everyone looking up at her. “For many of you, this battle started in Kirkwall at the peak of what was called the ‘Mage Rebellion’. Chaos entered your homes, inspired rebels from both sides stole your land, your food, your family.”

“As word of the attack on the Chantry spread, Chaos followed. It inspired a man to try and attack our Divine before the vote for independence. Then as we gathered to meet as equals, as brothers in arms instead of Mages versus Templars, Chaos struck again and took our Most Holy from us.” There was a grave heaviness in her words.

“Yet all of you persevered. You came from your homes to join our cause. You flocked to the ruins of Sacred Ashes with whatever skills and abilities you had. Men who had only held farmers tools picked up a sword and shield or healer’s tools. Women who had only worked in the home picked up a bow or became the mouth piece of the Inquisition. You came with your entire homes on your backs and filled the city of Haven with hope. And even when Chaos took that home away... you survived.”

There was a stir of hope within the crowd that was infectious. Athena felt a swirl of happiness bubble within her since they all knew where the story was going. Rathein’s natural magnetism made it easy to keep listening, especially with the energy of her words and coordinated movements. “You literally climbed mountains to find a new home that was safe from the Chaos. In these walls, you built a force. You rebuilt your homes. You spread hope through your words, actions, and good deeds towards the refugees that flooded this castle.”

Rathein arrived in the center in front of her throne and clapped her hands together, tears in her eyes. “The world now knows what the Inquisition stands for. We are the fighters of Chaos, the ones who storm through the darkness without fear in our hearts. We are the swords that rise against the nightmares and demons of the world. Divine Justinia created our path that we marched in her name and have eliminated the one who took her from us!”

There was a wave of roaring applause from the citizens of Skyhold. Athena arched a brow and smiled, looking over to the other members of the Inner Council. Josephine was wiping a tear from her eye with a handkerchief Cullen handed her while Leliana smiled while removing her hood. This is one of those moments they talk about, she thought to herself as she slowly clapped her hands. She had been to museums in her world with portraits and oil paintings that were snapshots of history. Washington crossing the Delaware, the Declaration of Independence being signed, the Gettysburg Address – they had all been immortalized in art. She got a weirdly queasy feeling about one day seeing herself portrayed on a wall. The feeling only increased at the realization of how
long she would live to see those paintings potentially faded with time.

“You may be asking, why not state the name of Chaos? Why not speak of the creature that started this mess? I believe that a name gives someone power. I am not afraid of the monster we struck down and banished to the beyond, but I do not want history to focus on him. It shall we written that we vanquished over an impossible foe. He claimed himself to be a God, and we shall claim he was defeated and turned into nothing but ash.” The soldiers in the audience cheered while others stamped their feet on the ground to create a thundering sound of approval.

Rathein looked down to a soldier that was raising a glass for her to take. She walked down the stairs, took it from him before touching it to his mug. “So, everyone, please, take this time to recover and celebrate the hard work you have done!” She raised her glass above the crowd with a smile on her face. “Long live Divine Victoria! Long live the Inquisition!”

Long live Divine Victoria! Long live the Inquisition!

The joy and cheering from the Inquisition felt like it shook the walls. There wasn’t a single person in the room who wasn’t celebrating in some fashion. Orlesian, Elvish, and Common were all being shouted with a smidge of Antivan coming from her right. It was refreshing to see that, for once, all cultures could come together under one roof and be celebrated in unison. She looked over to Rathein, expecting to see her waiting for an embrace, but instead the Inquisitor ran to the Iron Bull and was swept up into a spinning hug. There was a warmth around her heart in knowing that she had him for support. Perhaps it would be easier to pull away for her own people. Just as the thought entered her mind, Rathein put her feet on the ground and turned towards Athena with a grin on her face.

There wasn’t a moment’s hesitation before the Inquisitor made large strides over the stage before wrapping her arms around her so tight it was difficult to breathe. Rathein buried her head in Athena’s neck before whispering: “None of this could have been possible if it weren’t for you. Thank you, Athena. Thank you for falling from the sky that day and changing my life.”

The words opened up the tear ducts that she had forced closed. They fell in small streams down her face as Athena hugged her back just as tight. “Thank you for not killing me on the spot. What do you plan to do now?”

Rathein leaned back and ran her hands through her hair, staring up at the ceiling. “Is there anything I need to know about? Anything big? Another Tevinter God coming to screw the world up?”
Her body reacted before her mind could so she scoffed out a laugh. “Not Tevinter, no.” Rathein’s eyes widened slightly so Athena put her hands up. “But that’s not for a few years! Why do you ask?”

Rathein put her hands-on Athena’s shoulder and looked her straight in the eye. “Don’t tell me anything yet. I need a break from world disasters and keeping marriages and holding my family at bay. Don’t tell me unless it’s life-altering permanent and within a couple of months!” She then flashed a wicked grin with lines of sarcasm on the edges. “Think you could do that for me?”

Athena nodded slowly, a curious smile creeping on her cheeks. “Absolutely, Inquisitor. Whatever you desire.”

She felt the Inquisitor lightly punch her arm as she shook her head. “Shut up with that. Family doesn’t use titles, ass.”

“Brat.” Athena instantly spat back, poking her in the center of the chest.

“Ladies!” Josephine scolded from the side, her eyes suddenly feeling like a stern mother’s. Both women straightened up and smiled to her, winking when she finally turned away.

“I suppose I should get to the celebrations. What are you going to do tonight? Have a fun night with Dorian or Varric planned?” There was a glimmer of hope within her sister’s eyes, but she shook her head.

“No, my people and I are doing something downstairs in my office. A kind of Fade slumber party if you will – don’t ask. It’s weird Dreamer elf stuff.” Athena cut her friend off before she could start, leaving the Inquisitor to shrug and put her hands up in defeat.

“You’re right. I don’t want to know. I trust you. Enjoy sleeping with your spirits, demons, or whatever. I hope it goes well?” Their gazes met, their confusion and playfulness fading into genuine smiles. The Inquisitor nodded in silent agreement, going her own way into the crowd of soldiers and families that wished to thank her. As the image of the Herald faded away, Athena looked into the crowd and found the faces of her people looking to her for orders.

With a quick jerk of her chin towards the door, the plan to take back their dreams was on.
The Board is Set

“Holy Sylaise on a Cracker.”

The room was completely packed from wall to wall.

There were no blank spaces on the immense sleeping pad they had created with every spare pillow and blanket in the Keep. Leafy had saved her a spot to rest near Nikani, the young recruit who looked nervous amongst the large group of people. Syla was waiting at the door, something akin to fear in her eyes. She was biting on the tip of her nail when Athena entered.

“The turn out. . . was well, more than expected, Athena.” The elf whispered, her nervous green eyes scanning the room. Illrith had saved a space for his lover on the ground, but the space was slowly becoming smaller and smaller.

“No shit. This looks like the entire elven population of Skyhold .” Athena paused, clutching her hand over her belly while taking a deep breath in. “They’re here for me? Shit, Syla. I don’t know if I can do this.”

Syla put her hands on Athena’s shoulders and gave a small, reassuring squeeze. “Yes, you can. Do you see what you’ve drawn here? The energy in here is so calming. We’re all here for each other as well. Help us claim back our dreams, give us the peace to rest tonight.”

“Okay okay okay. Let me get to the front and get this started. Thank you, Syla.” Athena looked over with a nervous smile, gripping her staff before starting her determined walk forward. People moved slightly to give her a path, but she also was able to step in between the bedrolls and groups that the gathered had made. The space for her was directly in front of the dragon’s skull, whose empty and bottomless gaze felt ominous looking over all of them. She swallowed down the rock of nerves in her throat, tucking the hair behind her ear before turning to address all of them.

There were dozens of curious eyes looking up at her, ages running from children to elders. She only recognized half of them as her people that had come to her before. Were there still new people showing up daily? She let out a n attempted cleansing breath and then began to speak. “Thank you for coming tonight everyone. From what I understand, the majority of you had strange dreams last night. Is that correct?”

The majority of the room nodded or hid their gaze from her in embarrassment, but the overall
feeling she got was yes. “I wish I could tell you that will be the only time, but it’s not. With Corypheus defeated, there is a power shift within the world. I am making a promise to you all today. I will not mince words. I will not lie to you. I will not play the politician and try to sway you with presents and veiled lies. The creature that came to you last night was indeed The Dread Wolf of old.”

Panic spread through the room quickly but she raised her hands to try and silence them, not a single bit of fear entering her gaze. “He does not wish you harm. He wishes to help bring back the Arlathan of ancient times, the elvhen who breathed magic and lived agelessly for millennia.” She took in a deep breath and sighed. “If this is something that appeals to you, if you feel drawn to his cause, we will hold no fault against you. Every person must follow their own path and what is right for them. What we plan to do, is make the future of the People something great. You all have struggled... and survived through so much. Let us not look backwards at what was, let us build something for the future that shows and exemplifies our strength.”

The murmuring of the crowd was still loud, but it was more conversational than panicked. Leafy reached over and grabbed Athena’s ankle in a gesture of support. She looked down at her daughter with a nervous shrug. The young elf simply smiled, squeezing the ankle one more time before jerking her head back towards the people. “I know this must be terrifying for you all. We just defeated someone who claimed to be a God only to be visited by an actual one in history. Do not fret.” Here goes nothing. “The Dread Wolf paid me visits during my time in the Inquisition within the thickest of the woods. I heard the tales of old, the power that the People used to hold, only for it to fall away by his own hand when the Veil was crafted to lock away his divine brothers and sisters.”

Typically, she would be tearing up mentioning Solas. The wound was still too fresh, but her position and fate apparently did not allow her much time to grieve. There were dozens of eyes looking up at her with desperation and worry set in on their features. “These stories – your past – are not things we should return to. We should learn from the mistakes of our elders to create something better.”

Even though she felt as nervous as the time she had to do a debate at school, there seemed to be a softening in the room. Athena let out a sigh and brought her staff to bear, removing the orb from the crescent before resting the staff on the floor behind her. “This was a gift from the spirits of the Fade to me. Those of you that were in battle may recognize an item like this from what Corypheus used. They are not the same.” She rested it in both of her hands, the soft glow lighting up her face as she smiled. “This foci feels... warm and safe. We will discover what it can do, together. To start – I was going to use it to lull us all to sleep. The plan for tonight is to send a counter message. It is not a threat; it is not a declaration of war against the Dread Wolf. But we need to let others know we’re here. Get in your positions, find your loved ones in this place, and we’ll get started soon.”

The conversation in the room started up again as Athena used her magic to levitate the orb within her hand and channel her magic through it. There was a gentle touch on her shoulder as Lithari
came up from behind, their pensive gaze examining the room. “Would you like me to ward?”

Athena nodded, tracing her own wards that Solas had taught her before pushing them towards the cave wall. Almost like puzzle pieces they fell into place, other mages in the room adding their own additions before it was fortified with both silencing and protection spells. Nobody would be bothering them for that night. As the sun disappeared behind the mountain range, she noticed how many children and teenagers were in the crowd and decided to give them something a little magical to calm their fears. With the orb levitating above one palm, she spun it with the other hand and allowed it to balance on a magical axis. The lights spun and decorated the walls with red and white until she controlled the light and projected an image onto the ceiling of the cave.

Trees larger than giants appeared before them, towers of marble and crystal weaving in between them while stretching up into the sky with the sun reflecting off their surfaces. There were hundreds of shadows acting as future people walking on bridges crafted from leaves and on the stone paths on the ground. There was one large eluvian within sight at the back of the image, its light shrouded with all of the People and their creations. “This is what I desire for you all. A place for you to live and grow, free to believe whatever you wish to believe. I wish to cut the strings that have held you back from thriving and being in this world, not simply struggling and living on what the world gives you. It is your time.”

The images continued to play across the wall as she paced back and forth in front of the people, a soft smile on her face. “So, when you dream tonight, dream of this. Dream of the safety that the trees will provide, the warm glow of the sun on your face, and the feeling of freedom that can be in your heart. Dream of your connection to one another and the connection to elders long gone from this world. That is the energy we will use to reach the People tonight.” As she spoke, she wove a soft sleeping spell, the kind that Solas used to use to help her go to sleep. From her point of view, it felt like a warm blanket being tucked up underneath her chin and a heaviness over her eyelids.

One by one her people began to succumb to the sleepiness. Families held each other tight and friends curled up under blankets with one another. There was a continuing touch going through the room and it ended with Leafy’s grip on the fabric of her pant leg. “Your turn to come to bed. Maybe we’ll run into Fen’Pae and I can yell at him for you.”

The comment made her laugh as she sat down next to her daughter, pulling the blanket up over her shoulder before kissing her on the head. She tucked her orb near her chest and wrapped one arm around it, the other reaching out to support Leafy’s head. With all of the good energy in the room, it was not difficult to find herself in the Fade within seconds. The familiar green mist floated over her skin as she walked forward, looking for the best path to take. As she stepped forward, a spirit began to walk in time with her on her right.

It had been months since she had seen this particular spirit . . . but the company was appreciated. “You are about to attempt quite the undertaking, Athena.”
“Hello, Command. It has been a while.” She remarked calmly, flicking her gaze over towards the armored spirit that walked with a divinely straight posture. The spirit’s hands were clasped behind its back as its boots echoed against the mossy stone ground that they treaded upon.

“Nightmare left a large void that needed to be filled. I used my influence to get the Fade back into order.” The spirit took a deep breath in and sighed, the slightest hint of a smirk on its lips. “It is a wondrous feeling to be able to Command as I do. I sensed that tonight with your task you would need the help of a spirit who is used to doing such things. Inspiration can deepen the feelings your message is trying to convey and Harmony can ensure that demons are not attracted to the sensitive minds at work . . . if he isn’t busy flouncing around in the dreams of that mortal.” The spirit scoffed. “Tis not the way of a spirit to mingle as he does.”

“That is probably my fault. Helping demons become spirits is not exactly a frequent ritual, so who knows what results may occur. As long as it is in line with his purpose, I suppose it isn’t harmful, right?” There was a teasing optimism in her voice. She knew Command was the old type of spirit, the kind that Solas would appreciate. They were driven to their purpose and mainly saw things in black and white. It appeared that the spirits she, well, converted were of a different breed.

“Time will tell. You, Dreamer, have a solid concept of traveling to another’s dreams, but now you’re attempting to project images to minds you have never seen or met. Tell me, what process were you hoping to use?” Athena could feel the snide undertone in the spirit’s words, whether it meant them to be there or not.

“I can feel the energy of those sleeping around me. . . even here. I was hoping to use them to project through their families and connections.” She reached out and flexed her hand in a hopeless fashion, emphasizing her words with a different motion. “But. I’m. Not. Sure. How.”

Command rolled its eyes and took a step behind Athena, gripping both of her shoulders with its sharp gauntlets. “Close your eyes, Athena. I and the Fade gave you a gift in that orb, now it is time to learn how to use it.” Aggravated, she listened to the spirit, closing her eyes and resting with her hands crossed over her chest. Command continued on, “That orb is the creation of a bridge between worlds. It was crafted in the Fade and through the eluvian Mythal gave it to you. Your blood seals it to you, only you can awaken its true power while thieves and pretenders would only get a fraction of it. Feel it pulse in your hands as you rest, feel how the energy connects your mind, body, and spirit to the Fade.”

As she closed her eyes, she began to use different meditation techniques that she had been taught by Dorian and Solas to focus her mind. She focused on her breath and how it entered and exited her body. She felt how her ribs expanded with each breath and how the cool air flowed into her lungs, dream or no. Command was right: the more she focused on her breathing and the orb being cradled
in her physical form, the easier it was to see how simple of a switch it was. The barrier between her path and the waking world was as thin as a sheet of paper, and she could see herself walking both paths at the same time, merely reflected like the surface of water. The orb was the strengthening factor between them.

But even farther, she could feel the potential within the orb. It wasn’t just being close to the Fade; the orb gave her the eyes to see far through it. Her mind projected and flew through layers of dreams and memories. The splashes of colors and the information she absorbed filled her head like a swarm of stinging insects. She didn’t realize it, but her lips whispered the words: “Don’t. Please, stop.”

“Why? Why do you run away from power when others claw to achieve it? Do you not realize the potential you have with this?” Command asked with a stern tone, her hands gripping harder on Athena’s shoulders.

“Power corrupts. The ability to see this much, this many dreams, this many memories – they are not mine to see. I do not wish to turn into those that have walked this path before. The People... they put their trust in me - “

“Then do what you said you were going to do. Protect them here. The Fade no longer solely belongs to the Wolf in Black. Use your light, use that fire to burn away the threat. Remember how you defeated Nightmare? Remember how the spirits gathered around you to help you grow in power? Reflect on that memory and let it grow.” Even though its voice was terse, Athena could hear a matronly kind of comfort behind the orders. The fight against Nightmare was something else. She had pushed her friends from the Fade, she had entered the fight with the possibility that she could die, and she had no idea what she was capable of. Since then, she had done things she had never imagined.

She turned into a fucking dragon for Creators’ sake.

The power of the orb danced through her body like an endless flame. The tips of the flame brushed on the inside of her spirit until it made her feel like she was going to burst. Even still, she could feel herself holding on to it. She wasn’t ready to let it go and see what would happen. She remembered the fear she felt when she played through the first time and saw the damage that Solas could do at the Exalted Council. If he could turn people to stone without even looking at them, what would she be able to do?

*Let go. Help them.*
Athena felt a small whisper of Bravery inside of her – and it broke her walls. The energy surging from the orb melted her form and tugged on her memories. The wolf she crafted from flame in the Exalted Plains, in the Fade against Nightmare, manifested and pulled on the strings of her people sleeping around her. Like a tower the form grew in the dreamscape, the orb taking its place between her two, glowing white eyes. Command stood underneath the wolf with its hand on her front leg, guiding her to go forward. Each step of her paws left a scorching mark of mana on the floor of the Fade, trailing from the safe clearing they were in up to what felt like an ethereal cliff that overlooked all of the people she wished to reach.

Her mind was beyond thought, it was focused on a task and she took in a deep breath before surging her presence through all of those small spaces. Through those waves of energy, she saw their dreams. Dreams of love, dreams of moving, and in some of her people she saw dreams of growth in those crystal-filled forests that touched the skies. The thought put a swell of inspiration in her heart so she went further past those connected through physical touch and sought them all. When she spoke her voice wasn’t booming, it wasn’t a thunderous noise that rattled the dreamscape of every elf she wished to reach. It was almost like a whisper, but with the influence and direction of Command behind her.

“For those of you that desire change, for those of you who no longer wish to just scrape by – heed my words.”

Athena paced through the Fade, each step sending out a pulse to reach out to another person, their kin, and whoever had an open or fearful mind to listen.

“You may have heard whispers, promises, of bringing back what was long before you were born. Promises of longevity, potentially promises of life without the separation from our true natures.”

She took in a deep breath and huffed it out, the cloud of steaming mana pushing away some of the more curious lesser demons of the realm that were attracted to her light. Fools. Command had cursed in a terse tongue, pressing on Athena’s leg again to get her to continue.

“That separation is the Veil. The one who erected it is the one who reached out to you – “ She paused, knowing that in that moment she had to make a choice. Was Solas the villain in this campaign? Would she have to paint him as some kind of ancient monster returning to destroy the world? In her heart she knew that wasn’t true. The life he yearned for was something he had seen with his own eyes – but that was thousands of years in the past. Thousands of years of progress in the past.

The sunken city of Atlantis -
The Roman Empire -

Ancient Egypt -

Many of those times were praised and almost fetishized from her home world, where people would obsess with their mythology and fanciful stories. She was one of them. But now that she had looked into the face of some of those stories, she knew exactly how history was written and read with rose tinted glasses. They saw the pyramids and the statues but not the mountain of slaves that built them. Solas had said that kind of dichotomy existed within Arlathan. If Mythal, the ‘nudger’ of history’, was the best of them, what was so redeemable about the past?

The choice was made.

“Was none other than the crafter of the Veil himself, The Dread Wolf. He wishes to undo his mistakes that led to a millennium of your suffering, your existence underneath the thumb of those who claim to be your betters.”

She hesitated, fighting not to let her emotions flood into her words. The heat of her magic and the feelings of thousands of eyes on her kept her focus, but somewhere inside the freshly heartbroken girl from Earth was screaming out. But even still, she felt that new rush of Bravery flush within her chest like a hot wind in the desert summer. “I do not. I see your growth; I admire the strength that you created to persevere through these times. I have seen your suffering and abuse at the hands of people who do not deserve you.”

Athena felt small little tingles in her chest, small pinpricks that intensified and carried a new wave of sensations over her ethereal body. Her large form turned and looked out to the Fade, only for her vision to be stopped as if it had hit a wall. Her brow furrowed and she dug her claws into the earth of the dream world in a protective stance. Shit, of course he is listening.

“I can offer you something different – no – We can offer you something different. It is not just I who can make this offer, this promise of a better life. Many of your kin have already flocked to my side and have pledged their futures to the seemingly impossible task of creating a safe haven that anyone who wishes to be of the People can come to. A place where you can come and go as you please and we are treated as equals with the rest of the world.”

There was a soft chuckle behind her words as she added: “Even though we all know your perseverance, strength, and patience puts you above the rest of them. But mountains do not fall overnight, they crumble stone by stone. The same it shall be for the world’s grasp around you.”
Each world that she spoke as Fen’Elgara battled with the internal spirit that was Athena. The powerful words felt foreign on her tongue as she wrestled with imposter syndrome, feeling unworthy to speak on such a level and a thief of such power. The subconscious battle fought within the center of the orb, the light flickering as if it were a vibrant candle.

“So come to me, children of the Dales. Bring your kin, bring your children, bring your lives and I will enrich them. I make this promise to you in your dreams and will carry it out in the flesh. Follow the call of your blood in the woods, follow the wolves, follow the bears, follow the birds that carry a song that makes your heart soar. For I shall be within all of these things, and on the wings of that song we will let your future fly.”

_We’re beginning to gather more eyes than intended; We shall practice your limits with the orb._

Command and Harmony spoke within her mind almost simultaneously but she heard them like crystal. For the last bit she summoned up all of the strength she had left to put intensity within her gaze and her voice. She needed to be remembered when they woke. “For those that see me tonight are those who have doubt in their heart, whose minds and souls were desperate for change. What we promise is not a dream, and it will become real. Come find me and I shall pledge myself to you and your future.”

“I make this promise as Fen’Elgara, the Sun Wolf, The Dragon of Autumn, The Fallen - “

The visage of the wolf crafted from flame disappeared down until it was her natural form left, the fire reduced to radiant wings on her back as she looked on with the same power-lit eyes. Athena turned her hands to be open palmed, willing to greet anyone that would embrace her. There was a hopeful smile on her face as she finished, the last of her endurance for the night fading out.

“I make this promise as Athena Wolfsbane, the Fadewalker.”

All at once like a vacuum the connection to her peers and those watching stopped in an abrupt halt. Athena fell to her knees in the fade, gasping for something other than air to fill the void that was left behind from the power’s absence. The orb rested, now pulsing with a dull light, at her feet as she clutched her chest with one hand. It almost felt like she was coming off a strange high, but with a terribly crumbling withdrawal.

“That was an adequate first attempt. We will have to stretch the bounds of your powers even more, Athena. You have work to do.” Command summarized, putting her hands behind her back before
walking off into the deep mists of the Fade. In her stead, Harmony rushed in with his spear of golden energy at his side while reaching out a hand to help her from the ground. She took it and brought herself to a shaky standing position, putting the orb within her hand before dismissing it with a close of her palm. The object popped out of existence from the Fade as she felt her hands leave its surface in the physical world. It wasn’t needed and nobody within their room would even dare touch it.

“I personally thought it was great. Command has always been a bit of a stiff - “

“No. She’s right. I’m barely starting with this kind of stuff. I am going to have to grow, and fast.” Her words were breathy and weak, the mana exhaustion taking an effect on her dream state. What were crisp and clean images began to blur and join together within the background of her mind. The former demon of Rage frowned and put his hands on her shoulders.

“Even if that is true, do not dismiss what you did tonight. Do you know how many people you reached? You -”

“Did splendidly.” A cool voice rang within the distance. The voice was all too familiar and the sound of it put a pit of excitement and terror into her heart. Her posture instantly straightened as she summoned whatever mana was left into her palms to defend herself. The distance turned dark, all of the familiar colors of green clearings and Harmony’s kind golden glow fading into shadow. What appeared to be small red tears within the Fade appeared around them, closing in until Harmony and Athena were back to back. He brandished his spear, electric energy running down its shaft as she summoned veilfire to her palm to illuminate their surrounding area.

“Quit the theatrics.” She snapped, putting on a stronger front than she had.

She wanted to run, not away but to him. It hadn’t been that long in reality but every day apart was a reminder of what was to come and how long they would be separated. Who knew what time would do to them? The betrothal cords he left in her possession were wound tightly around her staff in the physical world, but who knew how long she would leave them there as a reminder?

All at once, the red slits that cornered them opened into countless, staring, omnipotent eyes. Harmony cried out as his body was dismissed into the Fade, his presence a mere annoyance within the realm of a God. Athena spun around, creating a protective circle of veilfire as she stood in the center. A chuckle echoed from all around her, it sounding just as much hurt as it did proud. “Oh, but how am I to respond to such promises but with theatrics of my own, Dragon of Autumn?”

Directly in front of her, from the bowels of the suffocating darkness, the all too familiar form of the
Dread Wolf appeared. Its form looked to be smoke, the mastered energy of the Fade flicking out in smooth, controlled motions, almost mocking the chaotic incendiary energy of her own form. In between its front legs stood the man she loved, clad in the armor he had worn on the battlefield but with a much different posture than she had seen left.

He had absorbed Mythal’s power, that was evident in the soft blue glow of his gaze looking towards her. He had his hands clasped behind his back as he walked forward, the echo of his armored boots sounding like ominous thunder to her. “I see this is to be your first move of our little Game.” He looked to the side and smirked, Athena finally seeing that wonderful mixture of emotions across his expression, that poetic and subtle hurt bringing her physical and emotional pain to bear. She knew, if she did not grow stronger, that would be the weapon that would end her. Solas met her gaze, for a moment all power, all posturing, all theatrics leaving their eyes as she saw the eyes of her heart looking back at her.

“Then so be it, vhenan.”
Athena woke with a gasp, her hand clutching her chest with tears in her eyes. It wasn’t morning yet, and everyone appeared to be sleeping deeply within their dreams. There were faint smiles on the faces of her people, and when she looked to her daughter and waved her hand over her mind, she could feel dreams of battles and glory. The young huntress was blood thirsty, so it only seemed right that she would want to act out her fantasies in dreams. She wriggled out of the bed roll and walked to the back of the dragon’s skull, sitting with her legs off the ledge of the cliff that led into the valleys below. The air was chillingly cool as it ran across her skin, but she simply sighed and allowed the goosebumps to spread over her body.

There was a small change in the sky that told her that sunrise would be happening soon. She was grateful for the moment of isolation. The orb rested within her lap as she casually ran her hands over it, the tingling energy strangely calming for her.

They had started.

They had met as their now chosen personas in the Fade, each reaching out to recruit those for their cause. They weren’t inherently against one another, but she knew in the bottom of her soul that their troops would meet on the battlefield at some point. Would she be able to face him in combat? Would she actually be able to summon the malevolent energy to harm him? The thought made her uncomfortable. She barely had the commitment to harden her mind enough to summon a snowflake, let alone have the resilience to harm someone she loved. She tapped her fingers slowly in a rhythm to a nameless song, perhaps something the bard had sung in the tavern once or twice.

While she did it, she heard a soft voice.

“Athena?”

It was the voice of her friend, Inspiration, which led her to sigh and open her eyes. Skyhold was a place that had many thin patches between it and the Veil. Fuck, it was the place where the Veil it was made so it was bound to have some weaker parts. She had taken advantage of that when she first got the orb at its weakest, smallest point. She used it for entertainment but was terrified of what could happen if she always had spirits talking to her. It wouldn’t just stay spirits for long, eventually demons would learn of the connection to her through the orb. Nightmare, Desire, Rage, Despair. . . she had a life’s worth of demon encounters to keep her content to never deal with them again.
But now the spirit’s arrival felt more like a friend coming home from school. She was excited for it and welcomed the spirit’s presence on the other side of the thin magic that kept them separated. It was almost like a ghost; she felt a warmth on her right side sitting on the edge looking over the valley with her. But when she looked, she saw nothing, just the empty night and a cave full of dozens of sleeping elves.

“I saw your message. It... got to a lot of people. You’re really going to help, Athena. How are you feeling after all of it?” There was a soothing touch on her right side and she felt the energy spread over her like a hug. That was the joy in her friend’s energy, it was like a warm blanket or the sun kissing your skin on a cool day. “I saw that he made an appearance towards the end. A bit dramatic if you ask me.”

Athena couldn’t help but smile. “I think he responded in kind to my announcement. He did always have a flair for the dramatic, but that’s what made him so interesting underneath that cold, unmoving guise he put on for the world.” She shook her head and tapped her nails on the surface of the orb to the melody of a song. “I don’t know how I’m going to be able to separate what is us and what is us as leaders with differing plans in my mind. What if it comes down to it, Inspiration? What if falls to me to strike the blow against him? I do not know if I can do it.”

There was a scoff that she knew meant another spirit had showed up, a breeze welcoming her on her left side. “Sure, you can. He did it plenty enough to you. It will be difficult, but you’ll have to find the balance between Athena and ‘The Dragon of Autumn’. Both are fierce, compassionate people, but the direction of that compassion is different. I think for you to move forward and be what you need to for your People, you’re going to have not actively pursue him. The feelings you have are genuine and deep, they cannot be dismissed overnight. But if you do not feed the flame you feel, it may not cause as much of a burn.” Harmony had begun to sound wise over the time of the Inquisition. A babe of a spirit in Fade’s terms, but there were enough events and battles within that time to age anybody.

“I suppose you’re right. This is just a situation I never anticipated myself being in. I’ve fought just to survive in Thedas - but now... “She whispered in a defeated tone while picking up the orb and lightly tossing it over her shoulder. She could feel the magnetic pull between her staff and the orb, the artifact floating to its resting place within the half-moon atop her staff.

“You must learn to fight and live as a God – essentially. Your problems are now greater than I think any of your compatriots can fathom. When do you think you’re going to start going forward with this? This new safe haven for your people?” Harmony asked, his voice shifting from teasing to serious.

“It has to be after the ball! Who knows when you’re going to get to dance again with everyone
there?” Inspiration whined, her warm grip wrapping around Athena’s right arm.

Athena melodramatically rolled her eyes, putting her hand over Inspiration’s with a soft squeeze of mana. “I think that sounds the best. People will start going their separate ways after that. Rathein will go off on her own adventures, Blackwall will go to Amaranthine to begin training as a Grey Warden, and who knows what else. I don’t think it would be as noticeable if I started to be away a little more, especially if I used the eluvians. I could find one close to where the Sylvan is at and start from there, slowly bring more and more of our people through until they have the resources they need.” She pinched the bridge of her nose and leaned forward, feeling no fear in her heart that she was hanging above a thousand-foot drop to the valleys below. “Maybe I can send the wolves and bears there first to clear out whatever Orlesian troops may be left and to scout the area.”

Harmony leaned back while resting on his hands to take in the sunrise, or whatever the Fade equivalent was if they couldn’t see what she could. “They won’t be an issue, but it is a good plan to start with.” He perked up and looked over behind her as if she was looking through the room instead of at it. “People are beginning to stir, we will depart.”

Then with a small breeze the two disappeared from her field of vision, leaving her to wonder if they were even physically there in the first place. *The Veil is so thin here,* she heard Solas whisper into her mind. She had half a mind to wonder if he would return to his former home to bring the Veil down again. She understood why he wanted to do it; it was an unnatural creation that separated the current people from how the world should be. It made sense to her. But, if it would destroy half the world, she knew she wouldn’t allow it to happen or she would have to research alternatives.

First, she needed her scouts.

Athena looked over her shoulder and beckoned her staff with a twitch her hand, the instrument of magic floating over to her grip until she could lay it across her lap. Her mana pool was exhausted but she had to push further, just long enough to get a message through. *Friends of the fur and hoof alike, hear my plea.* She then projected the area that she desired to move to, the valley beyond that of the Twisted Tree and the dragon that rested in the ruins there. *Our People have a desire to relocate. Please, carefully scout out the area and clear out what pests you may find. Leave the dragon to me.*

There weren’t words, but there was a feeling that they had heard her that resonated through her chest. The Sylvan was resting amongst the massive trees in the Giant’s valley of the Emerald Graves. The wolves all howled back in acknowledgement and began to rouse for the morning. At the very end of their calls, Thunder the wandering Druffalo moaned back his rejection from the hills of Crestwood and went back to sleep. She chuckled. They would have to do without him, the one random friend she had at her side when she slayed the dragon.
The next to stir from their sleep was her daughter, obviously disturbed by her mother’s movements from the bed roll. The growing teen sat next to her mother, her feet carelessly kicking over the edge. Athena had a mind to extend her hand over Leafy’s chest like she was slamming on the breaks in her car, but they both knew that she wouldn’t let anything happen to the young huntress.

“That was a better dream, *Fen’mae*.” Leafy said before resting her head on Athena’s shoulder.

Athena turned to kiss her daughter on the head before wrapping her arm around her. “Yes, before I left the Fade after my talk, I saw you fighting some dastardly monsters. Were you victorious?”

The elf grinned and stretched out her arms and legs until she was defeated by the stretch. “Of course! Those skeletons didn’t see me coming! My magic is getting better, I think. It doesn’t feel quite as - “ She flexed her hands looking for words, small sparks of energy dancing between her fingertips - “Crazy!”

“That comes with time, my dear. So – want to know what I dreamt of?” She asked, her voice dropping to a low enough whisper that only Leafy could hear her. Her daughter responded with a curt nod, angling her head to listen better. “*Somebody* had to come visit me after my speech. He was listening.”

She could feel the eye roll that was happening underneath her. “Of course, he did. Did he like your message?”

She pressed her lips into a thin line and shrugged. “I think he did. Our meeting was all posturing and power plays, but . . . “ She said the next part with a bit of knowing in her voice. “I wouldn’t be surprised if I hurt his feelings. I’m unfortunately going to have to talk about him like the Big Bad Guy that Fen’Harel is to a lot of people. They don’t know him like we do, Leafy.” Athena knew there was a sound of disappointment in her voice.

“Well. You’re right.” Leafy groaned, her lips slightly curving into a frown. “Why can’t he just help us?”

Athena pulled her in for one more tight hug, burying her lips into her hair with a small shrug. “We all have to walk our own paths, babe. This is the one he is called to. We have ours. If they cross over one day – it will be wonderful. But in the meantime, we will be working separately, okay?”
Leafy nodded in her grip then wriggled out of it like an animal, pushing to stand while holding her arm out to help her mother up. “So what will you be doing then? Most things won’t start until after the ball, right?”

Athena gripped her daughter’s hand and moved to stand as well, looking over the valley beneath them with a sigh. “Politics, unfortunately. Lots and lots of politics.”

“Athena - as happy as I am to hear of your desire to purchase land for yourself, because it means you do feel at home in Thedas and want to make a life for yourself – but... why there?” Josephine asked with curiosity as they looked over the map of Orlais and the edge of the Emerald Graves. The land was currently unowned, or more accurately it was unwanted due to the ghost stories from the Twisted Tree and the dragon that prowled there. Perfect, she had thought to herself, but she didn’t dare to show that expression on her face.

“It has meaning to the people that are now under my guard and is in close proximity to outlying trade routes. We also hope to explore the unexplored since a dragon there has kept its residence for many a year.” Athena stated with a smirk, her hands flat on the table as she looked upon the map. She had quickly washed and pulled her hair to the side in a braid, dressed in a semi-formal look of a nicer blouse with studded pants. She had even worn a pair of heeled boots that she initially thought were disastrous, but they worked for the occasion and topic at hand. “I asked you once how I obtain currency through the Inquisition – but now I am wondering how far that can stretch.”

Josephine showed an expression of discomfort, placing her walking desk down on the table before taking in a deep breath. “There are different levels of income for somebody in our position. See for me, I have my family, our trading vessels, and all of the property within our name. Those properties and deals will accumulate revenue for me, while I will have a separate set of income for my sponsorship and position in the Inquisition. The two do not crossover. So, are you going to be using this property for Inquisition business?” The Ambassador asked, a kind and hopeful smile on her face.

Athena shook her head with a helpless shrug. “Unfortunately, no, this is something for myself and the People who have come to me. You have said before I have sponsors for my position from varying nobles across Thedas, but how much of that crosses over to the personal and family oriented spendable coin?” Josephine kept the pleasant smile but dropped her gaze to the map, leading Athena to let out a soft groan. “How much property as least?”

Josephine brought over her quill and circled a spot in the targeted area. It was barely a tenth of the land they wanted and over the ruins of a former estate. “Approximately this... if you spent every gold coin in your coffer and sold most of the luxurious items in your wardrobe.” The Ambassador couldn’t help but smile as she placed her pen delicately on the table, making a small show of
'that’s it’ towards the map. “Unfortunately considering you have no family name here and no chil -” She immediately stopped herself to correct, bowing her head in a small apology. “And Leafy is not of age to earn an income or gain sponsorships of her own. . . The only way to get what you desire is by either partaking in trade or marrying someone with enough gold to get you what you need.”

She couldn’t hide the scoff, her hand instantly going to her brow to hide her expression. “And who would you suggest I marry? Some noble from Orlais or perhaps Ferelden? I doubt many of them would be agreeable to my future plans so perhaps find someone deaf so they can be innocent.”

Josephine flushed, avoiding her gaze while looking to the side out a window. “Actually, many of the women in the court of Orlais assumed you would be courting the Commander due to the personal nature of your dance.”

If Athena had been drinking something, she would have spit it out. Instead, she let her jaw hang slightly open. “What.”

“You had rescued him from a rather rabid group of curious Orlesian women. Vipers, they are. So of course, you are now within their targeted gaze.” Josephine’s gaze then softened with an understanding smile. “But I would not even dare to press such a thing on you so soon after his leaving. How have you been, Athena?”

This made her pause. The two had spent time during Cassandra’s book clubs and at various meetings throughout the entirety of the Inquisition, but here, she wasn’t the Ambassador of the Inquisition. She was Josephine Montilyet, none of the first women who had been kind to her when she fell. She called her by her name after she screamed it during Cullen’s Templar exorcism. She actually cared when she asked, and that knowledge alone brought a swirl of warmth to her heart. “I would be more than happy to tell you about it, if you have the time.”

Josephine’s eyes widened as a smile spread over her face. “Truly?”

Athena winked. “I will grab us some breakfast and then we can have a chat in here by your fireplace?”

“That sounds lovely, I will clear my morning schedule.”
She wasn’t able to be sneaky enough for her morning plans, in the end a certain Altus of the name of Pavus followed her with a fruit plate and pillows from his own corner in the library to join them. He said he had some notes to compare to a book on necromancy from Rivain so the setting would be good for him. They had set up the office and were all scattered on the floor with different snacks and assortments.

Josephine cleared her throat, the sound instantly putting a pit in her stomach that knew it would soon be her turn to talk. She had always been told that talking things out helped with healing, but it had only been a couple of days and she wasn’t quite sure if she was ready for it yet. “You know... my sister and I used to do a similar ritual when one of us was having a tough time.” The Ambassador smiled. “She made the sweetest cookies that could wash away any sadness.” She looked down at their spread with a genuine smile. “These fruits, breads, and wines will have to do.” She raised a glass to the two of them, the trio toasting to one another before starting what would probably be a day-long adventure. “Do you... know why, Athena?” Josephine started, the tension thick in the air with possibilities of which way it would go.

After mulling the taste of the wine over on her tongue, Athena decided.

Honesty was always the best answer. They were all stepping into this unknown period, and she knew she had a habit of pushing people away when she was vulnerable. Having her friends beside her as she grew would be an added side benefit. “Of... course I did.” She relaxed back into her posture and put her wine down. “I always knew there was a chance of him leaving. You see... the visions I saw of Thedas from my home world. They were through another person’s perspective – Rathein's actually. But there were other options, other paths to choose from and view. One of those paths... was that of a female Elven Inquisitor – that ended up in my position with Solas.”

Josephine’s eyes widened at the mention of possibilities. “How many other choices were there for Inquisitor out there in the world?”

“Dwarf, elf, Qunari, and human male and female alike. It all depended on who ran into Corypheus at the Conclave.” She took their stunned silence as an opportunity to fill her mouth with a rather luscious strawberry. Dorian let out a low-tuned whistle at her side, looking up from his book.

“That must take up a lot of room in that fascinating memory of yours.” He remarked with a subtle smirk, his eyes going back into his book that looked chock full of ancient runes that she couldn’t even begin to translate.

“You have no idea.” She turned her gaze back to Josephine. “All of them had their different little quirks, but the path I knew best was that of the female elf. During her path – Solas left. He left every time. But I thought I was different, so when he and I had our camping trip to Crestwood with
the Chargers. . . I let my mind get ahead of me. I got so lost in the memories of the other I had seen, I didn’t stop to see what was actually in front of me: something entirely different.”

Almost as if she were on the edge of her seat, the Antivan woman leaned a little more forward in her graceful and composed position. “What was it?”

“He proposed, well, or was going to be before my doubts got the best of me. I confessed what I had been afraid of, and, well, you know what happened from there.” She gestured to her stomach before pulling out her staff from behind her, twirling the promise cords in the palm of her hand. “But, eventually, we were able to find a way back to one another just for one night. The night before Corypheus. I always knew he had his own path to walk after the defeat of the self-proclaimed God, but I wanted to cherish the time we had together instead.”

As she was speaking, she didn’t realize that tears had begun to form in her eyes. The words fell from her lips as if she were reading off details from a battle in one of her reports, but her face and her body betrayed her. Towards the end of it, her grip tightened around the staff and Dorian put his hand on her thigh. He let out a sigh and placed a gentle kiss on her shoulder, turning to look towards their breakfast partner.

“After the battle, he left these in her tower for her to see when she got back.” Dorian’s fingers lifted the cords and allowed them to drop back into Athena’s hands, his touch lingering to give her a second of warmth. “Marriage cords – or something of the elvish sort – for, what did he say? If she still finds him worthy?” Athena confirmed what he said with a nod, gripping her hand over his. It was difficult enough to form the words of their story to people. Even though it was written over the course of years, reliving it within a single conversation left her feeling raw.

Josephine’s eyes were glistening with tears, her face the perfect expression of sympathy. Athena thought to herself, there is no way this woman is an ugly crier. She cries diamonds and birds come to eat the tears from her cheeks. How is she so pretty? The Ambassador leaned forward and took her hands into her own lap, thumbs gently rubbing over the top. “Andraste help me – that is so romantic, Athena. You are in such a tough situation.”

Dorian laughed with half a scoff. “That’s barely scraping the top of it all.”

Josephine sat back in her poised position while wiping the tears from her face. “But - do you hold your heart for him? Or turn that compassion towards your duty? Knowing you, fierce Sorciere, I’m inclined to think the latter.” Yet again, Athena confirmed with a small nod. “I think. . . it would be best to keep that love near your heart, but do not lament over it constantly. I am in a similar situation with someone I fancy - and if our paths cross again it will be beautiful, but it would cause me too much pain while we’re apart to constantly be dreading our separation.”
Dorian smiled with a wiggle of his brows. “Going to be missing a certain future Grey Warden, are we?”

Josephine instantly flushed, her gaze turning towards the embers of the fire. “I did not think it was that obvious.”

Athena grinned, jumping on the subject change. “Oh please, Josie. Do not even pretend. Ever since Wintersend I have seen you two talking over meals.”

She put her hands to her face and hid her expression, letting out a frustrated sigh. “But he is to be leaving after our celebration ball! He’ll be in Amaranthine!”

Athena winced and put her hands up. “I’m sorry! That seemed to be the most fitting punishment!”

“Halt your tongue – it was more than just.” The Ambassador snapped back, her tone fighting the softened expression on her face. “He is such a good man; it just pains me that the situation isn’t different. If the court hadn’t happened – he would have a good name, a good standing in the military, it wouldn’t be so farfetched to get married -” Her bell-like voice began to ramble but she rolled her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. “There’s no point putting weight into the impossible.”

Dorian and Athena looked to each other with a shrug. “Well - you know, Josephine. Grey Wardens are unable, supposedly, to have children after the Joining. The only one to prove that wrong is Fiona. So, if that is something you want in your future. . .”

Josephine gasped. “A baby out of wedlock? My family would pull me by the ear back to Antiva.” Her lips then curved into a wicked smile. “But wouldn’t that be so romantic? A distant warrior fighting in the Grey Wardens and his pregnant wife longing for his return.”

Athena almost rolled her eyes, instead she settled for poking Josephine with the tip of her foot. “You wouldn’t just be a pregnant wife in love. You’re the head of your family, Mistress of Trade, and Ambassador for the Inquisition.”

“You’re right. Perhaps I shouldn’t put too much stock into it – but. . . I’ll keep that information on the Joining in the back of my mind.” Josephine returned to the foot nudge to Dorian while lightly tossing a piece of bread at him. “And what of you, oh Sir Has a Comment on Everything? What of your affairs?”
Dorian blanched and the trio laughed as their conversation went throughout the day. Meals came and passed and soon twilight was approaching Skyhold. Athena was resting her head in Josephine’s lap as the Antivan wove intricate braids through her wavy hair. Dorian was spread out on the floor with his series of runes that somehow grew more complicated looking as the day went on, with his notes in Tevene on the side on extra pieces of parchment.

“So, what do you think you are going to do about your funding, Athena?” Josephine asked softly, a soft hum on her lips as her fingers delicately wove through her hair.

“Varric. Unfortunately. He wishes to sell my songs and stories I’ve told from home.” Athena scrunched her lips to one side in thought, nervously chewing on the inside of her cheek.

“Oh! But that is a wonderful idea! You are such a curiosity to many that I am certain you would have backers in no time. It would be a shame for you not to share your voice in the days to come. I am sure it will help some people return to normalcy.” She emphasized her words by lightly tapping Athena on the forehead with her perfectly manicured index finger.

“You put such a positive spin on it. More than likely it will be ‘Ooh look at that weird girl who fell from the sky that has been rumored to sleep with wolves and sleep with every elf across Thedas’.” She said with a soft slur in her words, the days champagne and wine catching up with her. Dorian let out a bark of laughter from his corner of the room as he ran a hand through his hair.

“Infamy helps, whether it be good or bad. You’re practically Tevene now with the amount of controversy around you.” He began to gather most of his papers, his eyes flicking over to the dwindling fire. “I suppose we have avoided reality enough.”

Athena rolled her eyes. “I need to go talk to Varric. I’m sure I have kept you from many an important diplomatic matter. "She pushed up from Josephine’s lap as she quickly did the finishing touches on her braids.

“I’ve enjoyed the distraction, truly. So, thank you!” The Ambassador lifted from the floor with grace before moving behind her desk to address the pile of letters that had been slowly growing through the day. Dorian had his arms full with books and papers so Athena opened the door for him to return to his little nook in the corner of the library.

As she walked back to grab her staff, Cullen walked out of the War Room office. She stilled, tilting her head in slight confusion. How long had he been in there? There had been people coming in and
out of Josephine’s office all day, but usually she would have noticed if he came through. He had a very specific scent that was recognizable from his armor and overcoat, plus the teas he had to drink to manage his headaches. It helped that wherever he went, their wolf was quick to follow, but Kain had been distracted by Leafy that day.

He stopped in his tracks and gave her a quick once over, nodding in greeting. “Athena.”

She tightened her grip on her staff and responded with the arch of a brow. “How long have you been in there today, Commander?” What all did you hear?

He stopped, opening his mouth to answer but shrugging instead. “Most of the day, truly. I have been catching on bringing back troops from different stations across our reach. Why?”

She fought her best not to flush, but the wine had other plans. “What all did you hear?”

They began to walk together out towards the main hall. He responded by rubbing the back of his neck while avoiding her gaze. “Your voice has a tendency to carry, Athena. I wasn’t listening in per say, but in between my meetings I would catch snippets.” He then paused and put his hands up in surrender. “I have no opinion on the matter! I am just. . . glad that you and those two were able to talk through the day. We all are carrying our own troubles; they don’t disappear just because Corypheus has.”

Athena could only sigh in agreement, “Unfortunately you’re right. I almost feel like I have more on my plate than before. Speaking of – Hey Varric!” She called over to the dwarf, who as always was in his chair by the fireplace with a piece of parchment in his lap. He looked at her over his reading glasses and waved her over.

“Walker! I’ve been meaning to talk to you. I sent your book off a couple of weeks ago to my editor –” He said with a grin, Athena cutting him off quickly.

“What all did you hear?”

“About that – I wanted to talk - “

He put his hand up and then clapped them together. “We have a book tour!”

Cullen choked back a laugh while Athena paled, her grip on her staff loosening and her shoulders dropping. “A what now?”
The writer chuckled and placed his things on the table in front of him so he could stand. “A book tour! I did one with the Tales of the Champion, she thought it would be perfect with yours since it’s full of so many songs. You could do little performances, meet some of the local nobles, it’s going to be great! She was thinking right after the ball so we can use the momentum of the Inquisition’s victory to spread word. What do you say?”

His energy was contagious, but she couldn’t help but feel sick to her stomach. “I suppose I don’t have a choice in this, do I?”

Varric winked. “Now you’re catching on. After the celebration, we’ll got to Denerim, then on to Kirkwall!”

Chapter End Notes

Don't forget to come hang out at my Tumblr! I'm always available for a chat :)
Every day that brought them all closer to the ball, the more antsy they all became. Athena was feverishly plotting out their tour while comparing their locations to known eluvian locations throughout Thedas. There was also a change within the Crossroads. Instead of giving her a mild headache, the air felt energized, almost like when she was in the Fade physically. She knew it had to be the side effect of Solas growing stronger and using the enchanted glass as well. Loranil and Illrith were trusted with the passcode to the eluvians and they began to run scouting patrols at night to monitor any potential enemy movement. They soon realized they needed more people that they trusted because it was difficult for two men to traverse the seemingly limitless area that was the Crossroads.

Kain started volunteering to assist them. He was good at recognizing if there were any new scents just in case their foes were good at hiding their tracks. At some point he was so vigilant she would have to coax him back with some food from her plate set on the outside of the eluvian. One night, Illrith came into her office with heat on his heels and a small cut on his face. “Okay I don’t know what that was, but we got attacked by this spirit looking fuck.”

Athena immediately looked up from her map of Denerim and its alienage with a snarl. “What?”

Her chief rogue scoffed at his love’s attempts to try and tend to him, pushing forward until he was at the desk eye level with Athena. “It was a warning shot, but this purple figure on top of a floating I’m fine!” He snapped at Syla, who rolled her eyes at him before returning to her duties. “Anyways. It’s not moving now and it’s speaking Elvish at me and I can’t understand it. Can you come look?”

She nodded and grabbed her staff without a moment’s hesitation, Leafy hot on her trail with her own staff and lightning crackling in the air. They moved through the Keep as the moons watched over them, Athena waving a pulse of her magic through the magical doorway to allow them access. She was beginning to know the Crossroads without needing navigation. It was her own experience combined with the knowledge of whatever or whomever Mythal put inside of her, but she was able to just follow the pull of her gut.

The medium world between the Fade and physical twisted and warped around them as they went through door after door. It wasn’t long before they approached the border of their usual rounds, where she saw the figure of a large purple-colored spirit. Its features were sharp, distinct to see. The Spirit Champion was brandishing a large war-hammer, the malevolent violent energy coming from it. Athena was too blinded by focus to take in the lush greenery surrounding them in this part of the Crossroads; it was a stark contrast to the eluvian closest to Skyhold.
“Atish’all vallem, Fen’harel elathdra.”

The spirit slowly said in a cadence familiar with the God he fought for. Athena raised a brow, taking a moment to decide if she wanted to go with the traditional response or something else. She was not wanting a fight, but if they were automated based on responses - they were left with no choice.

Thankfully the elvhen tongue didn’t feel as foreign as it used to, so she took a deep breath in and put a hand to her chest. “Fen’Elgara’s blessings to you. Were you instructed to guard this place?” The Champion nodded and put its hammer to the side, the weight of it shaking the earth. Leafy’s brow was furrowed, her lips twitching with the urge to snarl or say something. Athena put her hand to the side and kept her expression neutral. “Is that why you attacked one of my guards?”

Yet again, another passive nod of answer. The spirit then looked to Illrith and raised its lips in rejection. “This one does not know the tongue and could not answer for its presence.”

“Whatever it said, I don’t like it. Can it speak the common tongue?” The spy-chief asked with disdain in his voice. Athena shook her head, gesturing to the spirit to give her a moment so she could explain.

“I believe these are the spirits of the elvhen that Fen’Harel once freed many many years ago. He’s summoned them now to plot out their territory, essentially what we are also doing.” She turned her attention back to the spirit and straightened her posture. “Can your master hear you now?”

“That is why we are here, yes. The Dread Wolf can see all corners of this realm through us.” There was a large amount of pride in the spirit’s ancient tongue and Athena could hardly contain her irritation.

She clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth. “Perfect. Can you relay to your God that the only reason you are able to traverse this plane as you do is because I gave him the passcode to the gates? Otherwise, he would still be scrambling and clawing trying to reclaim this place.” She paused to allow the spirit to hopefully send some sort of message to Solas. This part of the Game felt frustrating, but they were both about to be forced to delegate tasks like these. She doubted she would be graced with his presence often. “We can both co-exist here without needing to harm one another. If that is not what he wishes, I will be forced to respond in kind.”
She then quickly summed it up in Common to her party, making a mental note that she should potentially try to teach them the Elvish that she knows so that they can communicate with the spirits in the future. Leafy couldn’t help but smile at her mother’s threats, the fierceness of her beast showing in the light of her eyes. The spirit appeared to look over its shoulder, as if someone was standing right behind it. Even then, she could feel the air grow a little colder. She used to relate that sensation to happiness, nervousness, because it meant that he was around. Now? She only felt the heat of her restrained power lighting within her core, ready to strike should the Spirit Champions make the wrong choice.

Eventually, the Champion turned with a nod. ”Very well. By your leave, Fen’Elgara. May you find your way home.” It then disappeared into a cloud of purple smoke, the remnants blowing away by a light breeze. The last bit of words was said with almost a sneer, which made her arch a brow. Were the Spirit Champions unnerved by her presence? She imagined if they were anything like Abelas and Solas, they had a hard time even accepting the existence of other elves or magic folk, Creators forbid a curved-ear like her. The way it said home... it couldn’t mean Skyhold with that tone. The spirit probably meant Earth.

Athena’s lip twitched into a snarl. Was that a thought of the spirit’s or something Solas had said? She knew, deep down, that it was the former, but with the rush of the confrontation her emotions were raw. There was a stirring in the people behind her when she had a thought. Her eyes glossed over the eluvians around them and the gorgeous, serene floating bits of history sitting still within the air. There had only been a few places that she had not been able to access so far in the Crossroads – how far could she go? It was something she did rarely, but she asked the question within herself, to that fragment of a bitch Mythal had put inside her when she first fell from Earth to Thedas.

Where is it.

There was a deep pull within her gut, the kind of familiarity that made her think of when she would ride her bike from her friend's house. She could do the ride blindfolded, even now. There was a moment when she could release her hands from the bike handles and do the whole thing with her balance and legs alone. In a creepy way, she knew this was going to be similar.

“All right, continue scouting out but try and leave the Spirit Champions alone. I’m going to show Lev’adin something but I will meet you all back at Skyhold tonight. Can you make it back alright?” The group looked to each other and had similar expressions of ease and if anything, anger towards the pushback from Fen’Harel’s troops. “I know some of you are disappointed there wasn’t a battle or something worth drawing blood for, but just know this is only the first of these types of encounters.”

The majority of her Inner Party turned and left immediately, Illrith lingering to look at the path of the Spirit Champion with a sneer before whipping around with his cloak on his hand. Leafy tilted
her head slightly in confusion, whispering under her breath. “What do you want to show me in here, Fen’mae?”

“Spirit Champion told me to find my way home. Mythal told me she brought me here through an eluvian – I want to see if it still somewhere in this place.” She placed a hand over her chest as she watched her friends leave their area of the Crossroads. “The Crossroads hold the history of the People and apparently have windows into many worlds. Mine was just one of them.” Athena moved her hand to her daughter’s back and began to follow the path that tugged at her chest. They passed through an eluvian seamlessly and into the next area, which had a variety of floating pieces of bark and branches from ethereal-appearing trees.

Soft, floating pink and red autumn leaves fell from the sky, swirling in an unorganized mess around their feet as they walked on a path whose tread was starting to fade. “She said that during the opening of the first Breach – there was such a surge of power from the orb - “

“Solas’s orb.” Leafy cut in, remembering the details out loud with an inquisitive expression on her face.

Athena still couldn’t help but let out half a laugh. “Yes, his orb that was supposed to kill Corypheus but he underestimated him. The power that was let out when the Breach was created was enough to light all of the Eluvians in the crossroad. The orb, combined with the mark, was a tool meant to walk through the Fade and enter the Black City itself. Nothing like this had been sent through the world since the time of the elvhenan.” She paused - “It’s a wonder more didn’t happen honestly.”

“Besides the sky being split open?” The young elf responded sarcastically, picking up too much of her adoptive mother’s rebellious nature.

“Yes, besides that and hordes of demons falling out of it. The day that happened, it had been a normal day for me. I had gone to work where I was my world’s version of a healer. I had been riding home in what we had for transportation – large machines like carriages with wheels that turned on their own. There was this device inside that was able to save and play music, so I was singing along to something on the way home - “

I think it was Bruno Mars? Fuck it’s been too long.

“Yeah - that sounds like you. Even back then you liked to sing?” Leafy asked, looping her arm in her mother’s while walking with her other hand on her staff.
“Believe it or not my sister used to sing more. Thankfully I’ve gotten better with practice and then Leliana giving me small pointers along the way. It’s just always been a way to get things off of my mind, more escape my mind in a way. Especially with this carriage from my world, you could just increase the volume until it was so loud that you couldn’t hear your own thoughts.” For the first time in what felt like weeks, she felt homesick for the technology of her home. She would kill for an electric toothbrush but she had grown accustomed to using a small brush from Tevinter combined with a paste that Dorian used and with boiled horsehair she acquired to floss. Gods be damned if she didn’t have the cleanest teeth in all of Thedas.

“That sounds nice. Sometimes the sound of silence gets annoying. My mind races so much and Kieran is completely silent when we do our studies together. At least Tobi used to hum your songs or tap his wooden sword against the ground. . . “ They both fell into silence and looked towards one another. Leafy squeezed her hand around Athena’s upper arm, and for once there weren’t any tears in her eyes at the mention of her brother. “What do you think he would think of all of this? You becoming this Goddess-Wolf-thing and fighting Solas?”

Athena took in a deep breath through her nose and sighed, her breath forming as steam into the Fade air. She arched a brow, looking around and pulsing her aura in a calm wave that searched out every corner of where they were at. They were alone – but she had the feeling that somebody was watching them, and due to the change in temperature she knew who. Can he hear when people say his name? Fuck. It’s like god damned Voldemort and the taboo spell. “ Oh , you know him, the little action junkie, he would be one of the first ones to sign up with Loranil if Bull wasn’t taking him off on some adventure with the Chargers.”

“I think he would have attacked that Spirit thing without a second thought.” The teenager froze and shook her head. “Not that he was reckless or mindless – but he loved you so much, Fen’mae . He wouldn’t handle it well if somebody was speaking ill of you.” She then scoffed with a smile. “Tobi would have had a fit when Solas left you after the dragon.”

Athena gripped her daughter’s arm as they leapt from one small platform to the next, small floating rocks keeping them afloat as they passed onto the next area of the Crossroads. She had never seen this area with her own eyes, but there was something within her that knew it was familiar. Fucking spirits. “The whole situation was beyond complicated, da’fen . Before we were even together, there was an unspeakable comfort I had around him. I knew he had been from another time, another place, almost another world, like me. As a Dreamer I could show him visions of my world and things that couldn’t be explained – like the night I came to Thedas. I had gotten out my car – the carriage I was telling you about – and was greeted by a wolf that looked like the Dread Wolf.”

She let out a bitter laugh, shaking her head back and forth. “In the end – that was Mythal posing as Fen’Harel . I still don’t know what she saw in me that night, but she knew I wouldn’t follow her if she showed up in her form. Even before I came here there was always something so mysterious about the image of the Dread Wolf – this three eyed being that brought down the
Pantheon of Gods. She knew how to appeal to that part of me, I suppose.”

As they walked, the environment slowly began to shift from something fairy-tale like to almost cryptid. Gnarled vines of red mystery curved around the trees of the Crossroads, leading to a clearing of eluvians that had gone dark with time. Only one of them was capable of being seen through, and she recognized what was on the other side immediately: The Fade. She walked to the surface and held a protective hand in front of Leafy while tapping on the glass with her staff. It responded like a ripple in water, the entire surface shimmering and vibrating until it came to a still. The sick smell of rotted flesh and ozone permeated through the gateway, causing Athena and Leafy both to wrinkle their noses in disgust.

“We’ve been there before. Let’s not go again, shall we?”

Leafy unlaced her arm and shrugged, tapping her own novice staff against. There was no reaction and she let out a grunt of frustration. “I agree. It was weird being in there when we went to get Kieran. I didn’t like how it felt. It was like there was a million different pairs of eyes on me and they all felt...hungry.” The young elf turned and looked towards the other ancient mirrors. “What are we here for, Ma?”

Athena looked to the ring of eluvians surrounding them, smiling because it reminded her of the clearing in Nightmare Before Christmas. She began to whisper underneath her breath as she paced in a steady tempo, taking in each and every broken threshold. “Twas a long time ago, longer now than it seems in a place that you’ve seen in your dreams.” She swirled and cast a spell circle surrounding all of the broken archways, including the gateway to the Fade. “For the story you are about to be told took place in the holiday world of old.”

“This is another story isn’t it.” Leafy stated flatly, her expression seemingly fed up.

She responded with laughter, twirling her staff in her hands while summoning her orb to her palm. “Perhaps another day, remind me. I brought you here because I believe one of these gateways is the one Mythal pulled me through. The Spirit Champion told me to go home...to me that means the gate might still be able to be opened.”

Leafy stepped forward, a flash of fear on her face. “Are you leaving?”

Athena leveled her eyes and met her daughter’s gaze, shaking her head while surging her power through her orb. “No. I want to make sure nobody else will have to walk my path again. Nobody else in the surrounding worlds will be a victim to a God’s ploy. Bring up a barrier, my love, I don’t know what’s going to happen but I’m going to try to “use” this thing like all the spirits keep telling
It was a foreign feeling to tap into the power of the orb, even though it was technically created for her. She wasn’t used to the sensation of every nerve suddenly feeling alive, she wasn’t used to getting a jolt of energy that beat any cup of coffee Bull had made to perk them all up. The spirits weren’t wrong when they said she resisted the power that she was given. She didn’t want to get lost in it, but the sensation when she tapped into her powers was overwhelmingly satisfying. She had first caught a glance of it whenever she summoned the fire wolf within the Plains and then again in the Fade to take down the Nightmare demon. Perhaps the sensation was more that she was protecting others, but she was afraid of becoming like those that had walked this kind of path before her.

Who knew if she would become like Andruil, so corrupted by Power and the power of the Void that others would have to rise to take her down? Her fingers clenched and her nails felt like claws as the orb levitated within her palm, a sharp wind spinning within her spell circle and lifting every hair on end. As she channeled more power from the orb, it felt like her body was being filled with a pressure, as if her skin was stretching to accommodate the electric feeling. Just when she thought she was going to burst, everything went still.

Small sparks cracked in the air but the wind was suddenly absent, even the leaves that were in the air were frozen in place. Athena turned towards her daughter, eyes a lit with power, and extended the orb towards her as a gesture to come into the circle. “It is safe, da’fen. Come, I wish to show you my home.” Her voice was not her own, layered with what she thought was different spirits that existed within the orb and perhaps the spirit Mythal had given to her. Lev’adin looked cautious but nodded.

The young elf dropped her barrier and walked through the veil of the spell circle, instantly shuddering on entrance. “Woah. This feels really weird, Ma. Like I’m under water and getting hit with one of Morrigan’s spells at the same time.”

Athena smiled and looked to the door that she supposedly came from. “Worse than the Fade, right? Here, I think it’s this one.” Leafy came to their side as they both looked into the shattered glass of an eluvian. Athena lifted her orb into the air and swirled her staff around it, redirecting the power before she pointed her staff at the shattered in question. The glass vibrated as she flowed her energy through it, the only command in her will being heal. The glass vibrated and then almost melted into a goo-like substance, filling the cracks of the damage and becoming one whole, flat surface that rippled with her magic in time with her breaths.

“Show me my home,” she commanded softly to the mirror, urging the glass to take shape and show her what she needed to see. Slowly, colors began to swirl and take shape as solid images before their eyes. Leafy let out a soft gasp, her hand twitching on her staff as she reaffirmed her posture.
“This... is where you’re from?”

Athena confirmed with a nod as the image of her old house came into view. It felt odd, looking at the place where she was taken from. Her car was no longer in the driveway and it was obvious some time had gone by. Cole had made a comment that the times didn’t line up correctly and that her family was farther away from her in age. The lack of tree in the front yard and the fading of the paint made that point more obvious. The expected lump of emotions began to form in her throat and she let out a shaky sigh, the surge of power following it and distorting the eluvian. “This is where I was taken from. It wasn’t my childhood home, but this is where I was living when I worked as a healer in a huge clinic.”

Leafy walked towards the magical gate, resting her hand on the surface to balance herself to make the viewing easier. “Can you move it? I want to see more.”

“I don’t know, honestly. Let’s find out.” Athena moved the orb to its safe haven within the half crescent of her staff’s top, putting her hand on the glass and pushing onto it slightly. She didn’t know what she wanted to show her, so she decided to delve into locations from her own memory to see if they had changed. Vision by vision they went by, from the skyscrapers of New York to the Grand Canyon, she was showing Leafy the beautiful things that had shaped her home world. They also happened to be the same locations she had once shown Solas once upon a time.

Leafy’s fascination grew as time went on, questions fumbling from her lips like a child meeting Santa Claus. They were all answered in time and she showed her all of the sights that she had seen in her life on Earth. Her emotions felt like a tidal wave within her body, exemplified with the power of the orb coursing inside of her.

She truly understood how Solas felt looking at her world. The locations were the same, she had walked those streets, but they weren’t hers anymore. Everything was one subtle shade of different in ways that she couldn’t describe, and it nothing but expand the feeling of loneliness in her heart. Leafy gestured that she had her fill by taking a step back and removing her hand from the eluvian. She looked up to her mother and nodded with an inspired smile. “You know... for a long time I didn’t believe your stories of home. It sounded made up. Metal birds in the sky, strange things that made you go fast – but this makes more sense.” The young girl stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Athena, burying her head into her chest while murmuring. “Thank you, Ma.”

Athena fought her tears as she ran her hand through her daughter’s hair, letting out a sigh before smirking with wicked intent. “Want to help me destroy it for good? Let’s see how tough you are, little wolf.” She teased her with a spin of her staff. She tapped it against the ground twice and added an extra layer of protection to her spell circle, a shimmering wall growing from the ground up. Leafy’s hair began to levitate, her braid floating from her back. The young mage smiled and
spun her staff in her hand. She moved to a side-standing position so that she could have the target within sight while also facing her mother.

“This isn’t your typical spell, Lev‘adin. Mere lightning will not break this eluvian. I do not simply want to shatter the glass, I wish to erase it from existence, destroy it down to the smallest particle.” Power pulsed from the orb and Athena drew from it, like water flowing from a lake into a river, and spun it around their ritualistic circle. With each pass around their bodies, the strength of the spell grew stronger. “This is a spell of your will, darling, the kind of magic that helped you change the first time. It’s not something you can learn from a book or a Circle. It comes straight from your heart, understand?”

“Is this like old magic? Like what Solas does?” She asked softly, looking around as if the God were listening.

Athena could only smile. “No, my dear. This is my magic, which I will pass on to you in time. Books, lessons, written word, these are beautiful things for passing on knowledge, but they limit the mage’s mind. Creativity, imagination, those are the true fuels for magic.” She gestured with her free hand, moving it up as she took in a deep breath and then downwards as she exhaled. Leafy copied the gesture until they were breathing in sync. Athena would siphon energy from the orb and rotate it around them, Leafy using her hand and staff to mimic her movements.

The air quickly grew thick with their combined magic. Athena’s felt like the first day of autumn, hot at first but then cooled to something comfortable and warm. Leafy’s was like winter going into spring, bitingly cold in a way that hurt someone’s face that faded into a pleasant glow of warmth in the afternoon. Combined, the air whirled in a circle around their faces, the force of the power almost hiding everything from their view. It wasn’t about seeing at that point; it was all through feeling. Light cracked across the image of the mirror with each passing go, varying images blurring together until the images were unrecognizable.

“Ma, it’s getting hard to breathe – I don’t know how much more I can do.” Leafy gasped in between movements of her spell, her magic faltering and cracking into bits of lightning. Athena immediately stepped in and put her hand on her daughter’s shoulder, gesturing to the edge of the circle.

“You’ve done beautifully. I can take it from here. Wrap yourself in a barrier and just watch.” The elf nodded and did as she was told, pushing her back to the barrier’s wall, her bright, tired eyes still watching with the fascination.

Athena squared herself directly in front of the eluvian, almost rousing up a vendetta against the thing. It was the port of her new life, the start of what she used to think was her demise. This was why she had to end it. How many other Earth-like people could live in a world with dragons and
magic? If they had plucked somebody purely random from the streets, their ramblings of Earth would make them come off as mad, and with no knowledge of Thedas to protect themselves. . . she couldn’t bear the thought. She had her own people to protect, but she couldn’t go forward with the knowledge that the people she used to identify with would still be in danger.

“I thank you, Mythal, for the blessing of a new life you gave me - but it will have to be your last.” She let out a feral scream as she directed her staff and the orb towards the eluvian, channeling everything within her person at it. The archway shattered immediately, that was the more delicate of the parts, but then she channeled her energy into the magic that was holding everything together. The glass began to vibrate, the rippling effect shaking the image but not quite breaking it.

“Fuck.” She grunted, the pressure of what she wanted to do almost bringing her to her knees.

Leafy went to stand - “Ma!”

“Stay back!” She barked back, barely affording the energy to look over her shoulder and give her a pleading gaze. She didn’t see if Leafy was able to sit back; she didn’t have the energy nor the time. The orb began to shake within her grip and she knew she probably didn’t have much time either. Athena turned her microfocus to the glass remaining, surging her will into the parts that constructed it. Slowly, the images began to bleed out again. She squinted through the wind in an attempt to see what was shining through.

Her childhood home. Her school. Her parents’ home. The places had changed but they were still her own, calling out to her heart in a way that couldn’t be described. She felt the heat of her tears across her gaze but the fierce whipping of the magic in the air took them away before they could hit her cheeks. Athena found herself reaching out to them one last time, reaching out to those memories that shaped her as a person. The force growing within the barrier began a constant pressure, making it almost difficult to keep her hand open while bringing her vision back to the images on the magic door.

“Ma!” Leafy cried out, shoving her staff forward with a pulse of sharp, cold energy.

That was enough – the glass finished rippling and shattered into a thousand shards, but even that wasn’t enough for her. The ethereal and red fragments swirled within the current of the magic and continued to break down into glimmering dust of ancient elven magic, the sort of will that was put into it by its creators. The Orb flared in a spectrum of colors from red to white within her staff, drawing in on that ancient energy until the remnants of the eluvian disappeared into its core.

Like a vacuum the barrier and the spell ended, Athena falling to her knees and gasping for air. The
orb slept comfortably within its place on her staff, humming with an almost satisfied note. She turned on her hands and knees and looked to Leafy, who had fallen unconscious during the ordeal. Athena quickly scrambled to her side and did a small assessment on her, only to find her sleeping. “Thank Christ, Creators, whoever the fuck.” She whispered, maneuvering herself so she could lift her daughter in a position similar to a piggy-back ride. She held both of their staff in her hands and began to walk with measured steps back home.

Even still, the air felt somewhat cold. Athena looked to her side and scoffed under her breath, adding on a comment. “If you’re going to watch, the least you could do is help. She isn’t getting lighter as she gets older.”

And for a moment, Athena swore she heard the comforting and familiar chuckle of a certain God echo in the distant Fade as she walked on the path home.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this one took so long folks!
Celebrating the End of a Tyrant, Part I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Ma. You need to wake up.”

Shove shove.

“Maaaaa. It’s the day of the ball. Nobles are already starting to arrive in their carriages and Lady Valerie told me she would be here soon to help get you ready. I love these days!” The elf said with absolute giddiness in her voice.

Athena groaned from the bed, turning her head to the other side to avoid looking into her daughter’s pleading eyes. “It’s fun for you. You just show up and dance. I actually have to talk to people.” She flipped the sheet off and sat up quickly, rubbing her hands over her face while making additional groans of protest. “Fine. You win. Let’s get the bath ready so both of us can be prepped for her.”

“Why me? I can do my own braids.” She rejected, gracefully skipping down the stairs into their basement where the bath and vanity was.

“I think it’s about the time we officially introduce you as my daughter, don’t you? Let’s get those Orlesians really riled up tonight?” Athena said with a wink, shrugging off her sleep shirt before tracing a heating rune in the air that began to heat up their bathwater.

Leafy let out an amused snort as she followed her mother’s movements. She disrobed quickly and then looked at herself in the mirror in an attempt to work out the knots in her hair before they bathed. “I don’t see how it’s a bad idea. It will also be a good way to see who you can trust as well, right?” Leafy took a cloth and dipped it in the hot water, rubbing some soap on it before starting her compromised abbreviated wash. “You need to raise money to buy that land you want.” She started at her shoulders and worked her way down, Athena taking the time to lay the water and enjoy the feeling of the heat on her pains. “You know... some of the other are wondering why we’re not taking the land. You know. By force.”

Athena put a hot cloth over her eyes and let out a sigh. “Modern problems require modern solutions, my dear.” She ran the oils over her skin and rubbed some of the aches from her arms before continuing. “If we own the land, they cannot take it from us. Instead of fighting, we can grow. If we fight for it, we’ll come off as the savages they expect us to be. The battles I plan for us
“to prepare for are not against Orlais or Tevinter – it's far greater than that. You remember what I told you about that demon Ishmael? The deal Morrigan helped make to save my life?”

She removed the cloth from her eyes to see her daughter’s answer. Her daughter slowly nodded as she ran a towel over her body. “You’re going to live for a long time, right? Kind of like Solas?”

Athena confirmed with a nod. “Yes, ma’am. If I’m around long enough, I can protect the land with everything I have. I can ensure that it remains in the hands of our People. To you, and whoever that follows. Do you understand?” She slid underwater and ran her hands through her hair until it felt ready to be washed and came back up. “That’s why this is so important. It’s not just a ball, it’s not just a silly book tour with Varric. It’s going to help set the foundation for everything.”

Leafy came over to help, quickly running the proper oils through her mother’s hair and readying a towel for when it was to be done. Upstairs, Valerie was prompt on time already knocking on the door. “We’ll be just a minute, Valerie! We’re getting ready!”

The door opened without another moment’s hesitation and the seamstress let out a laugh. “You never are ready on time; I should really change my expectations. Lev’adin. You sound done. Get up here, your mother is a grown woman she can finish on her own.” Leafy tapped on her mother’s shoulders as a gesture good-bye, running up the stairs with only a towel tied around her torso.

Athena chuckled under her breath and finished up her morning bath, taking each moment to reflect on who she would be seeing that day. With each pass of a hand over her skin, she named each one in her head. Empress Briala. Pseudo-Emperor Gaspard. King Alistair. Teagan. Hawke with Fenris. The pressure started mounting and she let out a sigh, plucking the plug from her tub with her foot before standing in the bath. From the sounds she could hear upstairs, Valerie was deep into running a brush through her wild daughter’s hair. That was enough of a relief to give her the strength to join her.

She had gone through the song and dance enough with War Table Meetings, lunches with nobles at Vivienne’s urging, and countless dinners that she started on the basics with her hair and face. The brush against her skin triggered a reaction. Internally, the mask was on. It would be a night of posturing, speaking with nobles, dancing. It wasn’t like Orlais where there was a dastardly scheme in the background, or Wintersend where Corypheus was still on the back of the mind. What was left?

Valerie was humming as her fingers worked diligently in Leafy’s stubborn hair. Athena noticed with each stream of her fingers, the hair grew lighter from loss of moisture and straighter. She tilted her head to the side, opening what she considered her ‘other eye’ to look at the auras in the room. Leafy’s was skin tight, a sign of her discomfort sitting in the grooming process. Surprisingly, there
was another aura in the room she had never noticed before. Almost like a multi-appendaged beast, it flowed from her in serpent-like tendrils. It was calm, a river of energy constantly moving and reaching to different rune-clad items in her bag. Athena then blinked and knocked herself out of it, making a small mental note to be more aware in the future.

“I had the most interesting dream the other night, Madame Sorcière.” The stylist hummed, working through the young elf’s hair as if there weren’t a bother in the world.

Leafy still under the woman’s touch, her eyes finding her mother’s in the mirror with a worried expression on her face. Athena calmed her with a touch, continuing her make up while running her fingers through her hair, mimicking the drying spell that Solas had taught her so long ago. “What about, my dear lady?”

“Change, some needed change.” Valerie said, slowly lifting a hand to tuck some hair behind a slightly pointed ear.

_Half._

Valerie then reworked her hair over her ear and smoothed it out, the proof disappearing underneath some finely tamed hair. Athena raised a brow and met the woman’s eyes in the mirror. “Mother or father’s side?”

“Mother. She was an elf in the Baron’s estate. He was a very kind man, not what you would expect from an Orlesian land owner.”

The implications were obvious and it put a pit in her gut. If he was known to have a court mistress, it wouldn’t be so farfetched to have one in secret. Vivienne would be a smart woman to keep the child of her lover in her employ, especially a mage at that. “I’m assuming Madame de Fer knows —” She gestured up and down. “Everything.”

“Oh of course. Not every mage needs to be some high-ranking official in the Circle or fighting in wars. We can make use of our talents in many different ways. The Lady’s standing in the Orlesian Circle makes our employ flexible since we are not overtly bound to the walls of the tower.” She did a small tug on Leafy’s hair to get her head in the right position. “But I think some change would be nice. Do let us know when you have found a new home.”

There was no more talk of it but it put Athena and Lev’adin in a pensive mood. Already the
message was affecting people they didn’t expect. It was targeted to those with dreams of change, dreams of something better in their lives. She knew if Sera thought those things, she would have heard about it already, and infiltrating her head with “elfy magic shite”. Did Fenris get it? Merrill? Velanna? Names of elves from the Thedas universe flowed through her head as Valerie messed with her hair, skillfully tousling her hair into curls and decorating them with small pieces of gold that looked like branches.

Athena ran her hands over the white wolf fur that wrapped around her waist and kept her secure, thankfully also providing some support over her scar. The fur was wrapped over a black dress which started as a black, strapless bodice with a heart shape that hugged her curves then relaxed and flared out once it hit her hips. She tried to get away with wearing flats underneath but Valerie pulled out a pair of boots that Vivienne would be proud of. Thankfully the long trek through Crestwood wearing something similar had trained her feet to not perish wearing them, even though she had grown to love walking around barefoot or with only wrappings on.

Lev’adin grew antsy in her simple navy gown and left to go find Kieran before the celebrations started. Athena had to argue with her quickly to leave her staff behind but the teenager did it with only a few scoffs and complaints. Athena had stashed her own in her office, the orb hiding within the dragon’s skull with her most trusted protecting it. Not enough people knew of her orb yet, but when they did, she knew they would be clamoring to try and get it, especially if they had seen what destruction Corypheus could do with his. It was yet another struggle she was having to deal with in transitioning from the Inquisitor’s Hand to something of her own.

How long could imposter syndrome possibly last?

Just as she was prepared to open the door, someone knocked on the other side. She opened it to see Nikani standing there, his long, brown hair freshly washed and braided to the side. His inked vallaslin nearly glowed with pride in the sunlight, the fangs underneath his lips arching as he smiled.

“Good morning, Fen’Elgara. Radiant as ever. I volunteered to be the one to escort you to the main hall, if I may have that honor?”

The elf’s smile was contagious, and the warmth behind it melted away some of her nerves that had been building through the day. He was a recruit that had grown comfortable within their ranks. He had been her sleeping partner on more than one night. His skin always carried a heat with it, the warm, brown tones of his skin giving away at his desert mountain ancestry. It made him a wonderful partner when she took part in the group-sleep. “How did I get the amazing honor of being on your arm, Nikani? Don’t you have someone you’re going to this party with?”

The elf choked on his response, a flush instantly darkening his cheeks as he avoided her gaze.
“Well - uh – I had asked someone in fact. They declined.”

She arched a brow. “Oh? Who?”

The elf’s arm twitched underneath hers, his gaze unable to stay on a fixed point as they merged into the small crowd of people entering the Great Hall. He then mumbled under his breath at a volume to where only she could hear: “Altus Pavus.”

It took everything within her not to jump in the air in reaction, but she considered it another trial for the Game they were about to enter and simply smirked. “How could he refuse one of the most handsome people within my ranks? That is truly his loss.”

The archer in training feigned a blush before walking them through the front door. “We shall see, but I would also be honored if I could steal you for a dance tonight?”

“It would be my pleasure, Nikani. Thank you for being my first partner as of tonight.” They left each other with a bow, a soft smile curving her lips as she made her way towards the front of the Grand Hall. It was like the celebration speech, but with a bit more grandeur. The hall was decorated in the bold Inquisition colors of navy, red, and silver. Josephine had outdone herself on the pieces of art that now covered the halls, including rather stoic oil paintings of the Inner Council. Athena tried not to grimace at hers. The frozen pose, the overly straight posture, and the eyes that somehow appeared to have a slight glow about them – every detail made her squirm. How long would these paintings last against the test of time?

“They didn’t get your nose quite right, but don’t you look all official?” Dorian quipped, finishing with a long sip of the champagne in his hand.

She let out a low hum, gesturing to the painting a few over that had all of the mages in the Inner Party contained within it. Her eyes glossed over the image of her former lover, knowing that if she lingered on his image the pit of nerves within her stomach would deepen. “They over glorified your mustache.”

“Amateurs. Maybe once everything calms down, we can come in and sabotage them.” He chuckled under his breath. “Nobody would notice if suddenly Solas had long locks of flowing blonde hair that rivaled the lusciousness of Varric’s chest hair.”

It was difficult to hide her laugh but his comment was the boulder that shattered the wall of the
mask she was trying to build. It was contagious between the two of them with nothing but smiles to be shared. Athena then lightly punched him on the arm, “You ass. I was trying to focus for this tonight!”

“Focus? It’s a celebration. Forget the Game, forget everything else. Drink, dance, and just be happy the world is rid of one more self-proclaimed God. Andraste knows Tevinter is probably full of at least a dozen more.” He then finished off his champagne and placed the flute on the tray of one of the helpers walking around the crowd. His expression softened as he placed his hand on her shoulder, giving it a soft squeeze. “This is probably your last chance to relax before the world starts again without a major threat. Me? I’m going to have to return to Minrathous soon. The Inquisitor is taking Bull, Cole, and Sera to some place in the Deep Roads. I know you’re going to build a home from the ground up for your people. Why waste the last night on work?”

Dorian said the last word with such disdain she couldn’t help but smile. “You’re too charming to be wrong, love. It’s been too long since I’ve truly let myself relax. You’ll have to remind me how.”

“For starts, we need to get a drink in your hand. The rest, leave it to me.”

The Great Hall was quickly filled with nobles, visiting dignitaries, and anyone that was involved in the Inquisition. She had never seen the room so full, and it was obvious that people were pouring into rooms like the rotunda and attached places. She stood up on the platform next to Cullen as she nursed her second flute of champagne, attempting to keep some semblance of professionalism in her face even as alcohol began to flush her cheeks. “What are you up to?” The Commander asked under his breath. Even he appeared slightly more relaxed than normal. Perhaps Dorian’s attitude was contagious.

“Turning over the reins for the night. It seems appropriate. I don’t think I’ve truly enjoyed a drink since before the dragon attack in Crestwood. I think I’ve earned the right.” The sweet champagne felt like a release on her tongue. It was a fine distraction that kept her from counting all of the people she recognized in the room, which at her count was over two dozen at least.

“I think we’ve all earned it, but you have been through more than the usual person, especially in these last few months. Are you ever going to give yourself time to relax?” He asked, dropping his voice for the last sentence just before the Inquisitor came up and took the stage.

Everything went fuzzy within her mind, thoughts running around like bees and she was only to able to catch small bits of her sister’s speech in between her own mind. Even in times that she felt like she was relaxing, like cooking for the Inquisition, it was really a task. Everything since the dragon
could have been classified as a job that was within her duties as the Hand of the Inquisitor or The Sun Wolf. Rathein had at least been able to enjoy weekend get-aways to Val Royeaux and the like. Athena hoped that her trip with Varric would provide some semblance of relaxation, but she knew that being pressured to perform and explain her past to strangers would grow tiresome. It also wasn’t like she could abandon her duties with her people. Perhaps in days of travel she could escape to the eluvians and do other tasks while Varric was writing letters in a carriage or trapped on a ship.

“When this Inquisition was started. . . “

She was looking at the Inquisitor as she spoke but her mind was elsewhere, either checking in with her wolves, the Sylvan, or the small geckos that still patrolled Skyhold when Sera let them out of her cage. The wolves’ packs had grown significantly since she first connected with them. Fang and Claw proudly whispered back thoughts of pride at their numbers and cohesiveness of their younglings. Fang had moved more towards the Emerald Graves from the bottom of the mountain with the Clan while Claw’s people had grown enough for half of their pack to move to the bottom of the mountain. All of Orilais would soon have eyes and ears for her to look through. It was such an odd concept, but helpful.

“I would like to thank. . . “

Denerim was the place where she truly had holes of vision. Thunder was a lone druffalo who didn’t do much recruiting. Whenever she reached to his mind to look at what he saw, there was always a low groaning of resistance. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to share his mind, he was fine with that. It was more that he was asleep half of the time and did not want to be bothered. That part of his personality was something she could relate to. She couldn’t remember the last time she spent a day rolling around in bed, napping. On Earth, those were days that she loved: when it was perfectly rainy and she could spend the hours doing nothing.

“The Commander and his excellent training of our troops. . . “

Cullen did a humble bow next to her as her mind continued to race. The Inquisitor’s speech continued but Athena was only paying half attention, her expression calm and focused as she surveyed the crowd. “The last person I wish to acknowledge in our wide breadth of members is none other than my Hand, the one that we have known to call our Witch of the Inquisition. Without her prior knowledge, I can assure you that many more of our loved ones, sons, and daughters would have perished underneath Corypheus’s armies. Not only that, she has used to the Inquisition’s walls to provide sanctuary to dozens of those that were seeking freedom from their horrendous situations in life. Please help me in thanking our sister Athena Wolfsbane, the Fadewalker!”

Even with the sudden roar of applause that came from the Great Hall, all Athena heard was silence.
There was a soft ringing in her ears as she surveyed the people, meeting the gaze of a dozen people before stepping forward and falling deep into a bow with her hands clasped to her chest. To think, the people that had once thrown cutlery at her were cheering her name in gratitude. *See, vhenan, people and can and have changed. You just have to give them a chance.* As she rose from her bow, Rathein raised the first glass of champagne to the room: “Enough words, let us celebrate!”

The Inquisitor came towards the Inner Council and let out a sigh, gesturing for them to make a quick circle. “Politics aside, thank you, everyone. None of this could have been done without all of you working together and overcoming every obstacle that red asshole threw at us.” She put an arm around Josephine and brought her in for a sideways hug, happy tears glistening over her gaze. “To you guys.”

Athena felt a warm hand around her waist that tilted her to the side, her eyes looking over to see Cullen with his shy smirk. For once, he had actually dressed without gloves and she could feel the grip of his fingers above her hip bones. As their eyes met, he raised his glass to her, silently asking for the same to be returned. She couldn’t help but chuckle. “I think you and I have come the farthest in terms of the mood of our relationship. To think – it started with me in chains.”

He groaned and clenched his jaw. “I try not to think of that time. Haven had just fallen, we were panicked - “

She shrugged and finished the rest of her champagne. “Believe it or not, it’s on the bottom of my tragedy list. Plus, it gave me a sense of empathy on what mages go through! But what a way to come to Thedas right?” Athena asked with a nudge, trying to lighten the mood and not think of the attempted exorcism she went through.

There was another soft squeeze on her hip, in such a gentle way that it paused her breath and brought her gaze back to his. He had a faint blush on his cheeks, beyond the normal color change that came with catching him off guard in conversation. She couldn’t control the smile on her lips as she realized this was the first touch she had gotten besides familial hugs from Leafy or the group-sleep situation that happened when she fell asleep at the office amongst her officers. It was a nice reminder that those kinds of butterfly emotions still existed within her war-torn body. Cullen mirrored her smile and slightly raised his glass towards her. “You do deserve to have a good night tonight, Athena, make sure to enjoy yourself.” There was a loud laugh from the back and both of them looked over to see that it was Dorian and Blackwall. “I’m not sure you have much of a choice with him though.”

“What? Tevinter got your tongue?” She asked with a cat-like smirk, gesturing one of the assistants over before switching out her glasses.

“You’re not the only one he is trying to make relax tonight. We should probably be on our guard.”
The slow, biting tone of the Commander slowly leaked back into his words, his fingers flexing over his glass. His gaze suddenly switched as if he were looking over a battlefield and were trying to decide which course of action he should direct his troops on.

Athena barked a laugh, “Absolutely. Full armed and prepared.” Dorian then looked over and caught her gaze, a predatory glaze coming over his expression as he stalked across the room towards her. “Oh dear. He’s on the prowl. Wish me luck, Commander Rutherford.”

She walked down the stairs and met him halfway, reaching up to kiss him on the cheek. “You have mischief in your eye, Mr. Pavus.”

He gestured towards her glass and they both finished what they had in their hands, a sudden pit of anxiety and regret forming in her stomach. It oddly reminded her of her early twenties, which felt like an entire lifetime ago.

“Mischief? Me? Never. I simply want a dance with my favorite partner.” He then placed their glasses on a nearby cocktail-style table before taking her to the dance floor. Dancing with Dorian was easy. They knew each other well enough and had the good sense of humor to play around as they went through the moves. At first when she had been learning them, her mind raced over every detail of the style of dance. Now? They came naturally to her, especially when she had such a great partner.

Their auras shamelessly led one another, pushing and prodding to get reactions out of the other while also guiding their movements like a current in water. The dance was an odd release of emotion because he was able to jest and get her to play around in their current environment, which some would say was a pit of vipes. Nobles of each side crammed into a room. Even though it was meant to be a celebration, she knew every single person had their teeth bared. The politics were exhausting to her, with each stranger’s gaze that fell on her, the more she couldn’t wait to build her forest haven and be surrounded with people she knew and loved.

“Excuse my Orlesian, but fuck the politics tonight, Mata. They are not a part of my plan. Dancing? That is!” He spun her elegantly as they narrowly avoided a different stiff-postured couple that scoffed at their relaxed form of the dance.

“If dancing was indeed your plan all along, why did you refuse Nikani? He’s cute! And a mighty fine cuddler I might add.” She prodded at Dorian, slightly digging her finger into his shoulder.

He rolled his eyes and avoided her gaze to keep watch to where they were going around the dance floor. “Please? Dating somebody that works for my best friend. How cliché. Also, what is the point...
of making a connection when I am about to go home? I do not want to do that to anyone. Relationships are hard enough without days of distance separating a person.”

“You’re not wrong, but you have to try somewhere. Have you had anything in the Inquisition besides small trysts here and there?” She asked, her voice going from something of teasing to a little softer.

“Nothing has caught my eye, no. Very few have found happiness during wartime.” He gestured with his chin towards two couples dancing near them: Josephine and Blackwall and then the Inquisitor with Iron Bull. “But hopefully they won’t let it go, even though distance and work is probably going to separate them at some point. Bull is still a mercenary and Blackwall must leave with the patrol from Denerim tomorrow to go to Amaranthine.”

The two couples looked so in bliss; it was difficult not to feel a small bit of jealousy. She mused with a smile though, “But we all have tonight.”

Dorian finished their dance with an extravagant swirl, lifting her up onto his hip in a move that almost brought them nose to nose. “We have tonight.” He blinked and turned to the side, a sudden grin brightening his face. “I hope you wore comfortable shoes tonight, Lady Wolfsbane, for it is my plan to make sure you do not have a split second to think about what could have been and what’s not here.” He leaned in and touched her tip of her nose with his, a wickedness adding to his expression. “Whether you like it or not, love. It will be good for you. Now -” Dorian put her down and spun her until she collided with her next apparent dance partner, who looked equally surprised and entertained.

“I believe you already are acquainted with the King of Ferelden, Alistair Theirin.”

Chapter End Notes

For 2020, I am going to try and post a lot more like I used to. My goal is at least a chapter a month, and I want to finish this story this year. This means chapter lengths may vary and the style may vary because I've had this story in my head for years now and I want to have it finished, printed, and on my mantle. I love you guys for the comments, continued reading, and support. Anytime I get an email for a comment or a kudo it literally gives me life. This year has been rough and you all made it better. Thank you, thank you, thank you. <3
The King of Ferelden was not a wonderful dancer, but boy did he try and at least put on a good show. As they spoke, he arched a brow in amusement and took Athena by the hand, moving her to the next steps with as much grace as he could muster. He wore a traditional royal garb with furs and mixture of browns, golds, and reds, but she noticed a small popping of blue and black woven fabric underneath. He must have noticed her looking because he responded with a simple shrug, “I may be a King, but I was a Grey Warden first. The Order will still always have my full support.”

“Oh, I have no doubt, King Alistair. A Hero of the Fifth Blight does not simple forget the battles they have waged and won.” A cocky smile flashed across the former Warden’s face as she said that, his hand twitching in excitement against her hip.

“Oh, you are right there, says the woman who rode a bear against the attack on the Red Templars!” Athena must have had a look of surprise because he laughed and remarked: “What? I read my briefings, contrary to popular belief. . . At least the ones that interest me. Eamon and Rose can deal with the rest.” His voice dropped at the mention of his adviser and his wife, his eyes darting around the room.

“How has your Queen Wife been? Is she still searching for an answer?” Athena asked, her voice dropping equally as low because she knew that her voice had a tendency to carry when she had any type of alcohol in her belly.

“Yes, but she is able to rest from time to time, which I appreciate. It brings me some sanity to know that she hasn’t . . . ya know. Succumb to the pressure of being the Grey Warden Commander and Queen of Ferelden.” He finished quickly, putting on an obviously rehearsed expression that was carefree and more akin to the cheerful man he had been known to be. She had to keep from rolling her eyes at the switch in mood, calmly moving along with him under the gaze of a dozen Orlesians that were glaring at the Ferelden King. Even with the supposed peace that brought them together, the animosity between the two countries was palpable. It had barely been a generation since the Ferelden Rebellion and the reclaiming of their lands from Orlais.

Athena moved into a turn with him and did a similar glance around their immediate environment, “Do not worry about breaking your Warden vows with me, your Majesty. I am familiar with a good majority of the secrets your Order keeps. Regardless, I appreciate your presence at the celebration tonight.” The air of formality melted away as they became the two that were hiding in the corner together at the last ball - well, more specifically, Alistair hiding behind her piano to avoid Morrigan and Keiran.
“Oh, you’ll get sick of me. Apparently, you are to join our travel party to Denerim, or at least that’s what the dwarf with the robust chest hair over there says.” He then gestured to Varric who raised his mug at them from the corner, strategically avoiding the dancing. “Quite a party, because we’ll also be escorting Thom Rainier to Amaranthine to begin his Grey Warden training. From what I hear, they wish to rush him through a bit of the training because of his previous military and leadership experience.”

She swore she could have felt a bead of sweat suddenly go down her back. It would be much more difficult to slip away and find the eluvians with an entire royal party’s escort. The King had seen werewolves and shapeshifters before, especially with being around Morrigan. It’s not like that would be the thing to put him over the edge, but an elven uprising? That was the sort of thing to put a Kingdom on alert. Rumors had said that things had improved overall in Ferelden, especially with the removal of Arl Howe many years prior during the Blight, but she wanted to see for herself.

“Besides, maybe we can even swing the Commander into joining us. There is to be a Champions battle in the palace when we return.” Alistair said with a wicked grin. “How do you think your Commander would fare against our soldiers?”

Athena suddenly felt competitive, wanting to bring Loranil along to showcase his grace with a sword against the others. “I have no doubt that you will be swimming in disappointment at his skill. But perhaps I could enter a soldier of my own?”

“Where do you keep them? Underneath the wolf’s fur or on the inside of your boot?” The King jested with a teasing grin that seemed to light up his whole face.

“How dare you ask a woman her secrets! I thought they taught Ferelden’s better than that, perhaps I was mistaken, King Alistair.”

“You know us, once you get past the dog smell there are no manners to be found. It wasn’t Loghain’s strategy that won the war: it was our stench. The Orlesians couldn’t stand it and decided to run at River Dane.” The laugh they shared after his remark was probably inappropriate for the event, but with the alcohol and the stress level she entered the Great Hall with it was definitely needed. She led him off the dance floor over to the safety of her piano where there was thankfully another tray of drinks waiting her on the top next to the requests jar and the donation jar Varric had put back up.

With the champagne already tingling at the tips of her fingers, she figured performing that night probably wouldn’t be the best idea.
“You just missed an old Blight friend, Alistair. Zevran was here for a bit of an extended stay,” She commented between sips of the aromatic and addictively sweet brand they had circulating. Creators she forgot how good a crisp drink could be. As she spoke her eyes cast across the crowd and caught Dorian’s, who quickly winked at her before turning back to a conversation with Vivienne.

Alistair nearly choked on his drink, wiping his mouth with the back of his gloved hand. “What? Why?”

“Hiding from the Crows so they could lose his scent, as it were. My daughter took quite a liking to him.”

“Daughter? Oh yes, the little elven girl. Didn’t you have a son around here too? Cullen told me about him last time -” He must have noticed the instant change in expression on her face because he stopped, his joyful smile fading into something of concern. “Would it be rude to ask what happened?”

She felt moisture on her cheeks and touched at it with her fingers, only to find tears. Damn. After all this time. “He – ah – went on a mission with the Chargers and was felled trying to save another soldier from the blade of a Red Templar. He died peacefully in my arms upon his return to Skyhold.” He magically provided her a handkerchief from his pocket and she used it to wipe the makeup from underneath her eyes before it was ruined with her tears. She gestured to give it back to him and he held a hand up in refusal.

“I am so sorry to hear that. Ah – ugh – I am not good at this comforting stuff.” He rubbed the back of his neck in a way similar to Cullen and she had to wonder if it was a Ferelden habit or an awkward Templar habit. Regardless, it made her smile.

“It has been long enough for me to talk about it. I appreciate the sentiment, Alistair. But why such a surprise that Zevran was here? You seemed to be taken aback by the idea.” They hadn’t been able to talk as much during Wintersend, but she was also organizing the thoughts of a few dozen geckos and wolves during that night. The reprieve from business was nice, especially with a figure in Thedas she was so fond of.

“He’s just an interesting fellow. I was surprised at how quickly he gets around. He had been in Denerim recently too -” He then childish smirked at the innuendo he made, which led Athena to do the same.

“You’re terrible.”
“So I’ve been told. Oh look, here comes Commander Cullen Rutherford – the Lion of Ferelden.” He introduced with a mocking, formal voice accompanied with an eyebrow wiggle towards his own friend. The King bent down into a sweeping bow as Cullen approached – which he obviously did not like.

“Oh for Andraste’s sake – get up.” He grabbed Alistair by the shoulders and helped him to a proper posture, the flush of the introduction reddening his cheeks.

Athena gasped in mock concern. “How dare you manhandle the King of Ferelden! They hang for less in Tevinter, you know.”

Cullen smirked and gestured towards the dance floor away from the piano. “It is a good thing we are within the safe and just walls of the Inquisition then. May I steal your time from the King’s attention for a dance?”

Alistair let out a feigned groan and crossed his arms in frustration. “Hey - you did this last time. You can’t keep avoiding all of the eligible women forever, you know. Someone is going to make an honest man out of you one day, Commander Rutherford!”

“Not today, Your Majesty. Shall we, Lady Wolfsbane?” He asked with an offering of his hand, Athena taking it without a second thought.

“Of course, anything to hear you two gossips stop bickering at each other. I swear you’re more like husband and wife than brothers in arms.” They walked to the almost middle of the dance floor and fell into the current of dancers as the small orchestra played. Over the events, his dancing had improved, but she didn’t know if that was because of the frequency of events or their comfort with one another. They had started off almost as enemies; she was happy to see their progression in the weird family that was the Inquisition.

“That comes with years of friendship.” The music tone shifted into something slower, which her feet were extremely grateful for. The Commander’s hand settled onto her waist and the damn butterflies returned to her stomach. *I thought you were long gone, you bastards.* Any warmth on her skin was a blessing and also a brutal reminder of what was gone. It had been weeks since the Magister’s demise, but the scent of her *vhenan* remained on her sheets. Perhaps it was in her mind, but events like the ball made her feel lonely yet surrounded at the same time.

Out of habit her eyes glanced over to the rotunda and suddenly she remembered how he appeared
at Wintersend and the rush of emotions that came with his arrival. At the time, she didn’t think he was going to make it. She was wrapped up in protecting Syla from a former employer while keeping Gaspard at arm’s length. When he appeared dressed as he was, it made her think of home. They had both gone through troubles to dress like the other one’s past. Those gestures would now be lost in the coming battles and politics of having separated peoples.

Her dreams mostly consisted of work. She would resend the initial message of changes to come in the guise of a wolf on fire. Every night she felt the message go further through the Fade, but she also realized she was seeing less and less of the dark shape of a black wolf at the corner of her vision. It had grown to be a comforting sight, knowing he was watching or keeping tabs in some way. Illirth and his scouts had seen less and less of the purple Spirit Guardians they had run into.

It was almost like they were splitting up possessions and land in a divorce.

“What is on your mind, Athena? You look to be a hundred years away.” Cullen asked with a squeeze of her hand in his.

Athena blinked away the lingering thoughts of the past, but unfortunately their emotions still remained within her chest, heavy like stone to counteract the lively butterflies that had made her stomach feel light. “I am just thinking about how much has changed.”

There was a soft sigh of agreement and it felt like the rest of the room was beginning to fade away into a kind of blur. He looked slightly uncomfortable, his gaze looking to the side of the room. “You mean from what you said before? Athena – You don’t know how sorry I am.”

She immediately shook her head to cut him off, squeezing his hand probably a little too hard. “No. Not that, well, it’s a part of it. I mean look at us. If you had told me this is where I was going to end up, I wouldn’t believe you.” She paused a beat and gave him a soft smile. “Also, I never did really thank you, or give you an explanation I suppose.”

“For what?”

“I don’t think you realized it, but you saved my life that day, when I was still hurt in the Fade.” He reacted swiftly, his face blushing while going pale at the same time.

“We don’t have to talk about it, not if you don’t want - “
She cut him off again. “Cullen, relax. It has been plenty long enough and it’s weirdly freeing to bring it up on my own volition instead of being pressured by the entire Inquisition and their Mabaris.” Thankfully this brought a laugh and a relaxing of the shoulders from her worried Commander, their bodies slowly moving through the dance with the others in the room. “I was being cornered by a demon of Despair in the Fade. I know our experiences have been different, but any time I have encountered a demon one on one it has been more of a conversation than an attack.”

He scoffed with a dark-lined smile. “Yeah, sounds like completely different experiences.”

“Rage tried to bond with me shortly after we escaped Haven and as I was developing my experiences as a Dreamer. Despair came to me in the days after the dragon attack. It didn’t want a possession, persay, but it wanted to feed on my grief, take it away from me. At the time, it sounded appealing. To not have that hurt? I was trapped in my own pain, my own loss, that any reprieve from it sounded like a blessing. I blinded by the thought of some peace to not see the danger.” Thinking back on that night brought the butterflies back to her stomach, but not in a good way. It was one of the darkest times of her being in Thedas, fuck, her entire life. The cave, the dragon, Imshael the fucking choice spirit . . . .Not a great time.

Cullen remained silent, listening intently with nothing but sympathy in his features. It wasn’t a glance of pity; he wasn’t the type of man to give one with his background and experiences. So, she continued on. “Thankfully Cole translated for you in the room.”

That made his eyes widen. “I didn’t want to believe it when Cole was speaking for you, but hearing it from you now I guess it must be true.”

She bobbed her head side to side in a gesture of being unsure. “It is hard to say. Solas had put me in kind of a trance that was meant to be for long sleeps, for people that are able to traverse dreams like I can. I was amazed. Even without lyrium, the power of your words penetrated the Fade and banished the spirit.”

He let out what appeared to be a held in sigh, and she swore he edged his body a little closer to hers in the dance. “I am thankful then, that it was not as traumatic for you as the first time.”

Athena tried to hide her scoff of a laugh. “Oh, don’t think it didn’t fucking hurt. I wouldn’t recommend it for a third time. I don’t know if my spirit could take it.” The laugh brought back the sensation of the champagne and the buzz at her fingertips and in her belly. His slight decrease of the distance between them made her realize how warm he felt in their dancing posture. As formal as it felt, the thought made her feel dizzy. “How does that Templar ability work? You didn’t have
but you were still able to banish a very powerful demon from a mage’s mind without killing them.”

Cullen’s attitude melted into one of modesty and chivalry instead of sympathy and concern. He gave a gallant shrug, twisting his lips in a confused expression. “It’s difficult to explain. In the order they say it is the power of your faith for Andraste and the Maker that gives you strength. The lyrium enhances your ability to fight and repel magic.”

She arched a brow in response, “So in that time, it was just the strength of your faith?”

At that statement there was a definite flushing of his cheeks. “Something like that.” His honey colored gaze flicked from Athena’s to something at her right, a smirk curving his lips. “That or the fear of receiving a wrath from a strong little mage that was coming to protect you.”

“Wait who did you mean? Oh Creators -!” Athena felt a tug on the back of her dress and when she looked over her shoulder, she saw a very displeased looking Lev’adin with her arms stiff by her side.

“If I get asked to grab another Orlesian a drink – I’m going to put an arrow between their eyes and set their clothes on fire.” Cullen and Athena could not help but break into laughter at her annoyance, the Ferelden Commander giving her a pat on the shoulder that came off like an unofficial gesture of support. Leafy grinned back at him but then jerked her thumb towards her back and shrugged. “Also Madame de Fer wishes to speak with you, Fen’Mae. Dorian was trying to get her to dance with you, but she said she preferred speaking over a glass of wine instead.”

Athena mockingly rolled her eyes in frustration, letting go of Cullen’s shoulder to gesture at her Leafy. “Will my daughter be an acceptable dance partner for the next foreseeable future?” She then turned her full attention to the young elven girl at her side. “Be nice. Don’t stop on his toes. Let yourself be as graceful as I know you can be.”

Both her daughter and Cullen scoffed under their breath in unison before awkwardly finding a dance posture that worked for both of them. As she walked over to Vivienne, she made sure to focus on walking in a straight line, not letting her champagne show. The Iron Lady was waiting with another drink, an amused smile on her lips. “I don’t think I have seen anyone else order the Commander around. It is impressive work, Lady Wolfsbane.”

Athena gave a soft curtsy while holding her drink perfectly level so she didn’t spill a drop. “I learn from the best, Madame de Fer. Women like us must learn to ask for what we not, should we
not?” The phrase had once caused her pain and panic. She did not want to be the kind of powerful woman that thrived in the Game with lies and mischief. Now she started to wear it as a badge of honor, much like Solas did with Fen’Harel. Athena had scrapped and crawled her way from the Fade to become what she was. A woman like her deserved to be proud of such accomplishment.

“That is indeed correct. I will say, Athena - “ Her voice softened in a way that was almost uncharacteristic and Athena saw herself facing those same nervous butterflies that had been present earlier. “I thought you would have come to be sooner. We are two women in a similar position.” There was a subtext in the collected yet constantly amused look of the mage, something that she picked up on easily.

“I mean no offense, Vivienne, but Solas isn’t dead - “

“Isn’t he to you? My dear – he left you for dead at Crestwood, returned to you for a single night, left your side again, came back for another single night after weeks of avoidance and sneers, and then left with no trace. What have you gained from that pain?” There was no animosity in her words, no knives tipped at their ends. . .but there was a little bit of judgment and Athena winced.

“What have I gained? Understanding. . . but when you phrase it the way you just did. Ouch. That’s a lot to think about.” During the seconds of discomfort in between the two women, Athena quickly emptied the contents of her glass flute into her mouth.

“It’s perspective, darling. Sometimes it takes somebody from the outside to frame things correctly for you. I am aware of the situation you are in, and I just wish for you to know you are not the only thing that has been in such a thing.” Vivienne took a calm and collected drink from her own glass, crossing her arm and letting the flute hang to the side, the liquid perfectly coming to the rim without spilling over. “You have already learned that tasks and duty can help detract from the loneliness.” She tilted her head to the side with a soft smirk. “But company can help as well. My parlor is open for you, should you ever need it.”

“I appre- “ Athena found the word difficult to form, her eyes widening in a moment of panic before she recomposed herself and finished it. “Appreciate it, Lady Vivienne. I will be sure to take you up on me, curse on my house if I don’t.”

The fellow mage laughed at her, a friendly kind of bell sound that decorated the conversation instead of being condescending like she anticipated it would be. "If this were a formal parlor, I would be mortified. Have fun, Lady Wolfsbane. We all deserve it every now and then.” The Iron Lady raised her glass to Athena, winked, before gracefully finishing off the rest of the glass. Athena had a vision of Vivienne maybe knocking them back with Bull on nights when she wasn’t in the tavern. She could probably drink the mercenary Captain under the table if she tried.
At that thought, Athena felt a heavy hand land on her shoulder. The smell of whiskey so strong it could kill a druffalo wafted over her shoulder and she knew right away who it was. Her nostrils flared but she turned into the hand’s touch, finding herself almost nose to nose with the Iron Bull as he bent down to assumingly whisper or say something at her ear’s level. She stifled a laugh behind her hand, a smile instantly breaking the façade she was going to try to front at him. “Oh - hello, Bull. I see you’re trying to put some chest on your chest.”

“The seamstress mourns.” He mumbled with a grin, offering his large hand towards hers. “Less talking, more dancing. Inquisitor’s orders.”

Athena arched a brow while feigning grace as she put her hand in his. “Oh? She gives you orders now?” There was no hiding the innuendo, the champagne took away all subtlety.

He barked out a laugh, and Athena hummed at how much heat he was exuding from the liquor and activity of dancing. It was comfort, and she was slowly beginning to realize how much of a touch hunger she had built up since her accident. Two nights of passion didn’t repair the months of loneliness and sleeping in an empty bed. The group sleeping helped, but that was a different kind of touch. Bull, of course, picked up on this because he pulled her closer than the normal acceptable dancing posture.

“How you been, Slayer?” He asked with a crooked smile. Even when he was drinking, he acted the same only a bit louder. Damn Ben Hasserath control.

She knew she couldn’t lie, so she shrugged as she moved through the dance moves with him. At that point, the formality of the dances was becoming a blur so she just tried to keep upright and keep some formal appearance in her stature. Even if she wasn’t playing the Game, it didn’t mean she had to be a mess. “Alright. Distracted. Keeping myself busy,” she answered, keeping her answers clipped and honest to try and sway him from prodding further.

Apparently, she failed.

“Uh-huh. You know how I know you’re not doing as good as you’re trying to play off?” He asked with an almost omnipotent look on his face. Instead of speaking back, she just sighed and rolled her eyes at him, looking back with an expectant look on her face for him to answer. He then gestured over to the piano. “When was the last time you touched that thing?”

Looking at the piano brought her a sense of dread, and by connection, the lute that was back in her
office. The last time she had sung, played music, or even hummed was before he left. It felt pathetic, especially in the state of mind she was in, that she hadn’t played since he had left. Their separation was bittersweet; they both knew it had to be done. It didn’t mean they didn’t love each other – they were just on separate paths. But the constant mention from the other members of the Inquisition turned that bittersweet feeling into something sour on her tongue. He continued, “Don’t freak out, but it was just kind of, you know, your thing. You’ve been telling stories and singing since Haven. It’d be like if Dorian stopped wearing fine clothes or if Varric stopped writing.”

“That bad, huh?”

He cocked his head to the side with a shrug, pulling her into a hug so tight her feet were a few inches from the ground. The pressure against her chest was tight, but she quickly relaxed and turned her head to the side. The air was pushed from her lungs in a sigh as her spine popped in such a satisfying way. She was putty in his hands, the tingle of champagne now evident all across her skin. He put her down and she wanted to curl onto the ground and sleep after his embrace, her eyes taking a second to open and look to him. “Yes. That bad, Slayer. You know - “ The tone turned dark in a way that made her nervous and giggly at the same time. “Our door is ever open – if you ever want to . . . “

Athena barked out a laugh, pushing him jokingly. “I’m aware of your open doors. I tended to Zevran the night of your escapades, remember? I appreciate it, but she’s like my sister, Bull. That would just be. . . icky.”

“Icky?” He mocked, pushing on her shoulder back as if they were children in a schoolyard.

“She’s my sister, Bull. Holding and gossip, sure, why not. Anything past that? Gods forbid it. No, I shall warm in my bed with Kain and a heating rune, thank you very much.” The words rolled from her tongue like honey, the constant buzz spreading through her body.

“Oh ho ho! She’s not all elfy now, hah?” Athena heard to her side, a seemingly just as drunk Sera leaning against the wall for support with a wicked grin on her face. The elf stepped forward and threw her arms around her, her entire body weight falling into Athena’s arms. She caught her and had to step back onto her heels to steel herself, but the two were giggling into one another’s necks. The warmth of her body felt comforting, even if it was a hug brought out of inebriation – she appreciated it.

The warmth continued into her next glass of champagne – the first shot of Bull’s flask – and soon into a comfortable, tingly darkness that quickly enveloped her. She was thankful to not have dreamed that night. It had been exhausting to broadcast through the Fade night after night in an attempt to reach as many people as possible. The dark, albeit quick, darkness brought a sense of relief.
Athena woke the next morning as sunlight peered through the window. She groaned as the foreign headache of a hangover ripped her from her sleep. She rubbed her face against the pillow and brought it closer to her face. Everything felt so warm. As she adjusted in her position, something firm pulled her back in the bed. *Leafy must have slept with me last night.* She thought to herself, fighting the nausea that was curling within her belly like a territorial snake. There was then a resounding groan behind her.

And the tone was not female.

Her eyes jolted open to see Dorian sitting in a chair with a book in his lap, pages of notes scattered about as he flicked a quill in his hand. “Good morning, my little lush. How are you feeling?”

Athena’s eyes narrow, her lips moving as she mouthed to him: “Who. Is. That.”

He grinned and winked towards her, “Both of your clothes are still on, don’t panic. I couldn’t levitate you separately in my own state so I came to this room I’ve been using to work on my studies.” Dorian quickly jotted something down then let out a sigh. “I do some of my best work after a few glasses of wine, or something of the sort. *You* gave me quite the topic to study.”

“For fuck’s sake what did I say?” she asked as she hid her head in the pillow, tilting slightly so one eye could look at him as he turned and tapped on a book that said: *Elvhenan – The Shapers of Thedas.* As she read the title, her eyes widened into shock and the nausea flared up into a striking position. “Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.”

Dorian must have seen something on her face because he dug through his pockets and tossed a familiar vial of a purple potion. “Don’t worry, it was said in confidence and in private. But you and I have much to discuss.” His expression then brightened even more as Athena felt movement behind her. “Good morning, sleepy head.”

“*Oh Maker I feel I have been poisoned.*”

Chapter End Notes

What is this? Two chapters in a month? There may be life in this lady yet!
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