No One Expects the Assquisition

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Summary

On First Day, in 9:41, Divine Justinia called together the mages and templars of southern Thedas, in an attempt to put an end to the war. The Conclave drew enough attention that only those of rank could get seats, inside the temple, but the village of Haven swarmed with interested parties, including Kirkwall's own revolutionary duo. When the sky cracked open, no survivors were expected...

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Amid more corpses that would need to be cleaned and named, Cullen found a writhing pile of flesh that he slowly resolved into two figures struggling to get up. He recognised the grey, horned face as it appeared. "Adaar?"

Beneath the fallen qunari, a pair of brown hands stretched out, one glowing the same green as the sky, and a breathless 'gerroff mh' could be heard.

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And then, things got weird.
The symbolism of having the Conclave at First Day hadn't escaped Cullen, but the fact remained that it was the middle of winter in the foothills of the Frostbacks. Even when the snow wasn't falling, it still covered everything as far as the eye could see, icy and blinding. But, the tavern was doing good business and the merchants kept fires going, and most of the faces he saw were hopeful -- it was a good look. It was almost enough to make him hopeful, if he hadn't been so familiar with how tightly people held on to their fears and beliefs.

He rubbed the back of his neck and took a deep breath, wishing the squeezing pain in the back of his head would pass. He knew it would. It had to. No one could possibly spend every single day with a headache, no matter how his body tried to convince him otherwise. Really, he just needed to focus on something. Then he could ignore it.

That needed distraction came in the form of a qunari, hard to miss as he trudged through the snow, easily towering over the humans he passed. Stares followed him as he went, lingering on the set of horns that swept up and back from his forehead, pausing on the massive sword strapped to his back. Cullen squinted through the headache and tried to remember his name.

"Adaar," Cullen remembered at just the right moment, extending his hand for the qunari to shake. Tal Vashoth, he reminded himself. Not Qunari. Some of them, at least, took the distinction very seriously. "Well met, again. I was hoping to run into you."

"Hard to do much running without tripping in all of this, Ser Cullen," Adaar said, looking down at his boots, "but here I am, anyway." His hand dwarfed Cullen's as he shook it, his grip surprisingly light, likely to avoid crushing any delicate human fingers. His smile was wide and white against grey skin. "I had a few questions about where you would like our people to be."

"Absolutely." Cullen's faint smile was awkward and relieved. "Where do you estimate the choke points to be in the--"

"Oh, look! Dogs!" bellowed a familiar voice from near the gate. "That's how you can tell you're in Ferelden, you know, Ser Peryn! Dogs, dogs, dogshit, and dogs!"

"Oh, shit," Cullen muttered, taking a deep breath. "Walk with me, Adaar. I need to take care of something, and then we'll go up to my desk, where I have the maps, and sort this out."

A tight group in Ander robes came up into the town, the hoods hiding their faces from view, but even the loose cloth couldn't hide how tall one was, or the heft of his beaded beard. Another was in recognisably Templar robes of a sort Cullen had only seen in books, and two more dressed as if they might be with a more monastic arm of the Chantry. The fifth dressed in sweeping purple with blue and gold trim, clearly still an Ander cut, but styled in a way that reminded Cullen of First Enchanter Irving's favourite robes. Foolish, of course. He knew Hossberg's First Enchanter was a good bit taller than that, but ... something about them was more familiar than he liked -- particularly the part where one of them was obviously Anders. He'd know 'dogs and dogshit' anywhere.

"That is... a very colourful group," Adaar commented, following just behind Cullen's shoulder, a bit too tall and wide to make a convincing shadow.

"You don't know the half of it," Cullen sighed, running his hand through his hair and reminding himself that screaming at Anders would not be the best course of action. "Yes, yes, welcome to Ferelden," Cullen said as he intercepted the Ander group, pausing to stand, arms folded, in front of
"Now, what exactly are you doing in Ferelden?"

"Enjoying the fine mountain air, of course," Anders replied breezily, his wide smile visible under the hood. "It's good to see you too, Ser Cullen. Anton hasn't turned your hair grey yet, I see."

"Not for lack of trying, I assure you," Cullen replied, his words clipped. "Though you're not exactly helping either, Anders."

"Hey, I'm perfectly Ferelden!" the second tallest figure protested, hood still pulled down to hide his face.

"No, I meant... Anders." Cullen pointed to the imposingly large mage in front of him.

A shorter member of the group shoved back his hood to reveal a face Cullen had been expecting -- Cormac. "Well, you could've meant our other Ander!" he said, tossing an arm around the man in Templar robes.

"Are we so rare you can call us so? There is only one?" Peryn started to laugh, only to be brought up short as he remembered the last time he'd said something of the like. "Apostate! You're him!"


"He's not an apostate," Cullen assured the other Templar, quickly. "I once made that mistake as well, but he is genuinely a Grey Warden, and I have Commander Amell's signature to prove it."

"Allow me to introduce Knight-Commander Cullen, of Kirkwall," Anders said, stepping out from between Cullen and Peryn. "Husband to the viscount, Anton Hawke, Lord Amell. I promise I would not be out running around in the wild without Solona's approval, and Cullen was unkind enough to ask for it, once, weren't you?"

"You do remember what my job was, don't you?" Cullen drawled. "But, Warden or not, this isn't exactly the best place for you to be right now. Your Warden status may not protect you if the wrong person figures out who you are."

"If they figure out I'm Jan Kasselmann?" Anders asked, much too innocently. "Now, why would anyone have a problem with that?"

None of this was helping Cullen's headache.

Peryn looked back and forth between Templar and mage, looking lost and more than a little shaken. He wanted to argue, to feel betrayed, but if the Knight-Commander in front of him didn't condemn him, Peryn didn't think he could.

"I don't even know what to do with this," Cullen lamented. "But, fine, okay. Just try not to get anyone killed, yourselves included." He trailed off, trying to make out Anders's other companions under their hoods. There was something else familiar here, and Cullen had a feeling he was going to regret finding out what.

"Oh, come on, when was the last time Mack and I got anyone killed?" Anders emphasized the name, to remind Cullen what to call their friend. "I'm a healer. I get people less dead, not more dead! Speaking of which, you're looking a bit shit, Cullen. Here, lean in." He held up his hands, lit with a healing glow Cullen would recognise.

"It's fine," Cullen sighed, resting his forehead on Anders's palms. "It's just a headache."
"Is this a jest?" Peryn finally snapped. "You have been a Warden healer since we met, and you splinted my arm? You did not heal it?"

Cormac shrugged. "We were foreigners. You're a Templar. We'd been through this once already, with Cullen, and ... that took weeks. No offence, Peryn, you're a great friend, but when we met, we didn't know you well enough to judge that you wouldn't drag us down to be held at Hossberg until you could get confirmation back from Solona. You know that would've been the right thing to do, and so do we. The potions were good, though, weren't they?"

"The potions were the best I've had outside the tower," Peryn admitted, shaking his head. "And you are right. I would have taken you to be verified. You were building the house then, yes? I can see avoiding the trouble, but ... it is still a poor thing to do to your friend."

"As soon as we could prove I'm who I said I am, we told you. The Knight-Commander of Kirkwall can vouch for me. And now, we're in Ferelden, if you want me to send for Solona. We can run up to Amaranthine, after the Conclave. I want to see her, since we're in Ferelden. I'm sure she's got stories." Anders shrugged, trying to look like there was nothing wrong at all, and he spent his time with Templars all the time -- which, to be fair, he really did, these days. Between Cullen and Peryn, they'd become a regular fixture in his life, again. Couldn't shake them after all.

"Forgive me this, then, Ser Peryn." The shortest member of their party pushed back his hood. "Senior Enchanter Alim Surana of Kinloch Hold. Do you remember me, Ser Cullen? You were very young, the last time I saw you. But, I need to be sure there is room for me at the Conclave, proper. I have come to hear and be heard, and I believe the title is sufficient to grant that. Do you know if First Enchanter Torrin has made it out? I'd love to let him know we made it to the Anderfels, without losing anyone. I picked an excellent group to travel with."

Once again, Cullen found himself speechless for a moment. Surana looked older, certainly -- they all did -- but he was that same... unusual mage Cullen remembered meeting when he was still new to the Order. "Of course I remember you. You... are a bit hard to forget."

"Senior Enchanter?" Peryn finally managed to stutter out. He tripped over a word or two in Ander before he was able to collect his thoughts enough to continue, drawing in a deep, steadying breath. "You are a mage?" He stared at Fen'Din, then turned a pleading look on the tall, hooded man next to him.

The tall man cleared his throat, scratching his head under the hood, and Cullen scowled, certain he knew this man too. "You know I've got mage blood," the man -- Kinnon, if memory served -- said. "I'm sympathetic."

Cullen was starting to feel bad for the poor Ander Templar, particularly when he looked at Kinnon with that kicked puppy look.

"So you knew?" Peryn pressed.

"Of course. But, the First Enchanter said he could go. Who am I to question that, if he doesn't bring blood magic or demons into it?" Kinnon shrugged, far more tensely than was usual for him. "Besides, we were travelling with dwarves, and when we got up there, we had a Templar to call on if anything went wrong! We knew where to go. I can name every Chantry from Nordbotten to Tallo!"

"I am a responsible adult travelling with the permission of my Circle," Fen'Din offered, breezily. "Perhaps I should have checked in, when we came through Hossberg. I admit that would have been wise, in the past tense, but things were very uncertain. Our First Enchanter was newly elected, after
the former had been murdered for no reason we could uncover, in that massacre at Val Royeaux. The walls of our tower had finally caved in after centuries of neglect. I could not know who to trust, and we sought nothing more than a safe place to move our mages and their accompanying Templars out of the reach of the madness that had seized Orlais. These are troubled times, Ser Peryn. I can only hope this Conclave leads to peace."

"These are things you distrust me with, even after you know me?" Peryn's accent was heavier than usual as he tried to sort through all of this.

"We do know you now," Anders assured him, "and we are trusting you now. Do you think we would have travelled with you, would have revealed ourselves to you like this if we didn't trust you?"

That took some of the sadness from Peryn's eyes, but the poor man still looked overwhelmed. Cullen clapped a hand on his shoulder. "I'll buy you a drink later."

"Careful, Cullen," Anders teased. "He might drink you under the table. Especially if you're drinking cordial."

A high-pitched laugh forced its way out of Cullen's lungs. "We agreed never to talk about that, so this is me, changing the subject. Senior Enchanter, you mentioned Torrin. I'm afraid he won't be able to make it. He sent me his regrets this morning."

"A shame." Fen'Din shook his head in a way he thought approximated regret. "Do you know where he is? I would like to pay my respects, while we are here."

"I believe he's in Redcliffe, at the queen's orders. Lord Hawke's working on a new tower, but I guess they're not done, yet. Can't say I'm surprised. Even with that family, you can't build a whole tower that fast." Cullen chuckled wryly, then glanced at Cormac and Anders. "Are you two expecting him, here?"

Cormac laughed. "No, but I wouldn't be surprised if he showed up. You know what he's like. I said I'd visit after the Conclave, but..."

"Maker, don't let him bring that lunatic elf along." Cullen rubbed the back of his neck, again.

"What his husband?" Anders asked, grinning broadly. "I'm very fond of that lunatic elf."

"No, the other one. The Dalish one." Cullen groaned.

"Ah, that one. I'm more fond of his wife." Anders nodded solemnly. "But, we brought our very own lunatic elf, just to liven things up."

"That's Senior Enchanter Lunatic Elf, thank you," Fen'Din retorted, looking utterly unperturbed. "Speaking of which, if Torrin is not here, am I the only representative of Kinloch Hold?"

"You... may be," Cullen admitted, glancing over his shoulder toward the Chantry. "Sister Leliana would know. I have to go that way, anyway, to get the maps for Serah Adaar."

"Leliana's here?" Anders's face lit up. "Maybe I'll get to see what it takes to make a nightingale sing, after all."

"Give me all of your potions, first," Cormac suggested, with a snort. "Maybe I'll be able to save you."
As he filed in next to the colourful Ander group, Adaar decided that he had no idea what he had just witnessed. He wasn't about to ask, either, not with the way a few of them were watching him out of the corner of their eyes. Unfortunately, a disarming smile and a compliment to Ser Peryn, the human next to him ("Nice sword.") were not the way to get them to stop doing that, as Adaar learned the hard way.

It was, however, a way to get the tallest human, this Anders, to start snickering. Adaar would count that as a success.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Artemis and Fenris continue their tour of the far south. Over Haven, the sky splits open.

"Amatus," Fenris sighed, tucking his heavily gloved hands further under his arms, "it is freezing. It has been freezing for days. If you intend to convince me you once lived here, this is not the way to do it. You have shown me barbarians in bearskins who look like they were carved from the ice. I am still not certain they are not ice animated by spirits. This is not a reasonable place to live, and I cannot believe you spent a winter here."

"Hey, I spent plenty of winters down here!" Theron cut in, gesturing to the snowy near-tundra, around the edges of the yet-unfrozen marsh. "There's humans down here who actually want to trade! The food's great, too! You go a little further north, and suddenly everyone's an asshole." He shook his head. "Honnleath, next, right? I wonder if they're still dicks in Honnleath. Always something about us stealing their hunts. That's why you keep sheep and goats, townie! You leave my deer out of it!"

Artemis could see his breath as he chuckled, walking closer to his husband and wrapping his arm and his cloak around him. "Cullen might have a word or two to say about that, if he heard you. About the people in Honnleath being dicks, I mean. I don't know if he's ever whined about deer."

"I've only ever heard him whine about the goat," Fenris grumbled, huddling close to Artemis and tucking his hands between them. His mage made for a nice heater, but one he preferred to enjoy curled up in a warm bed.

"That's not a very nice thing to call Anton," Theron replied.

"He's been called worse things," Artie said around another laugh. "Though I suspect he'd rather be called a dragon." He blew his breath in front of Fenris like a dragon breathing smoke.

Theron scoffed. "The day your brother breathes fire, I'll have that conversation with you. Just because the Gazette seems to think he'd look good getting mounted by a drake, that does not make him a dragon."

"I would almost welcome a fire-breathing dragon," Fenris muttered. "Or even just a fire. It is far too cold, and the lyrium holds the chill."

Theron eyed Fenris speculatively. "What if we rolled you up in a blanket, and I just carried you to the next village on my back? You'd fit on top of my pack, right?"

"I would prefer to walk." Fenris stuffed his hands in Artemis's pockets. "I would also prefer to be further from your singing, when that starts again."

"Oh, sing me songs of shemlen bottoms, rounded flesh soft in the hands!" Theron belted out, clapping a hand onto Artemis's well-padded posterior, buried under layers of leather and fur.

Fenris's ears twitched, red from the cold and annoyed by the singing. "Do you see what I endure for you, Amatus?" he sighed.
"I'm the one whose ass is getting slapped!"

"Which you enjoy," Theron pointed out, which Artie didn't argue. "And it's called musical accompaniment!"

"I'd much rather be accompanied by silence," Fenris muttered, rolling his eyes when Theron went on to the next line.

Artemis grinned, rubbing Fenris's cold-numbed ear between his fingers. "We're not so far from Sothmere, Fen," he assured him. "I'm sure I can find a way to make it up to you, there. Perhaps more than one way."

Fenris grumbled, but let Theron continue with his singing.

There was song and fire, and while the beer wasn't the best, it was better than most of what had been available on the way to Haven. Anders had an arm around Cullen, telling the story of when they'd fought together against the red lyrium horror that had once been Knight-Commander Meredith. On the other side of the table, tucked against the wall, Kinnon curled up in Peryn's lap with a tankard in one hand, heckling Anders's telling of the tale until Cullen cut in to assure him it was all true, except maybe for the part about flashing his ass to half the Templar Order.

Peryn looked more at ease as he continued to drink and Cullen kept praising the mages he'd fought alongside. Perhaps Anders and Fen'Din were good people too afraid to come forward in a foreign land, just as they'd claimed. Ser Cullen seemed willing to not only vouch for their heroism, but proclaim it -- Anders's anyway. But, Fen'Din's First Enchanter would speak for him, and no doubt the Knight-Commander of his tower.

Beside Anders, Cormac laughed uproariously with Lady Montilyet, as they spoke of the wedding of the Prince of Starkhaven.

"You are the worst fake Antivan I have ever seen," Josephine assured him. "And do you know that fool still believes you're a Crow?"

"That's on him. I never said it." Cormac jammed the point of his finger against the table and took another swig of ale. "His father's smarter, but worse at cards, as I understand it."

"'Smarter' is not setting the standard high," Josephine said with a wide grin that said she was on more than her first cup.

The door opening brought a rush of cold into the room, a glimpse into the weather outside before it closed again, sealing them all back inside their warm, cosy bubble.

"What's a dwarf gotta do to get a drink around here?" asked the new arrival as he unwrapped himself from his wintry layers.

"Varric!" Anders exclaimed, recognising that shaved face and troublesome grin anywhere. He lifted his tankard in greeting, half rising out of his seat but finding himself wedged in between Cullen and Cormac. "What the Blight brings you here?"

It took Varric a moment to recognise him, staring up at Anders's bearded face, but then he barked out a laugh, making right for their table. "Not the beachy shores, I can tell you that. This is the last place I'd have expected to see you, you know."
"Yes, and I wouldn't let Cassandra know he's here," Cullen said. "Or him." He pointed past Anders at Cormac. "In fact, I'd just avoid Cassandra altogether if I were you."

"Don't worry, Knight-Commander, that was my plan to begin with."

"You didn't bring Anton along, did you?" Cormac asked, offering a lopsided grin. "That'd just be old home week."

"No, and I didn't bring Carver, either, you'll be glad to know. I have no doubt he'd use his Templar powers to punch you right in the teeth." Varric chuckled drily and accepted the ale Anders poured from the pitcher on the table.

"Please, I'm older and far more skilled. I'd take him down before he could land a hit," Cormac scoffed, waving to the seat on the other side of Josephine. 

"You mean you're older and far more thick, and he'd lose his fist in your billowing mass. What are they feeding you out there in the wilderness?" Varric asked, taking the offered seat. "You'll have to excuse us," he told Josephine. "It's been a few years."

"It's what he's feeding us!" Anders chimed in. "If he's not cooking he's buying food or growing food!"

"And you like me that way." Cormac pinched Anders's thigh, under the table. "Besides, that's not all I do. I helped rescue some other people's farms, this summer!"

"Gerda's better at it," Kinnon teased, "but you'll do. Who's the dwarf?"

Varric picked up the accent immediately. "Who's the dog lord? Don't tell me Bran's got cousins in this blighted place..."

"Which Bran?" Kinnon asked, even as Peryn giggled into his cup.

"Ferelden Bran, I think," Peryn said, the drink making his accent thick.

"And... who's the drunk Templar?" Varric asked, eyeing the Sword of Mercy on Peryn's robes.

"I present to you, Kinnon and Ser Peryn," Anders said with a grand sweep of his arm. "Friends from the north who liked us well enough to come with us south."

"And now I understand why he's drinking," Varric quipped.

"Kinnon, Peryn, I give you Varric Tethras," Anders went on as though Varric hadn't said anything, "marksman and writer, who's never quite up to any good."

"Now, I'll have you know that I would be perfectly capable of keeping myself out of trouble if it weren't for a certain family whose name rhymes with 'squawk'." Varric pointed his gloved finger in Anders's face.

"Wait, wait," Peryn interrupted, patting the air in an exaggerated motion for them to stop. He squinted at Varric. "Varric Tethras? Writer of Hard in Hightown?"

Varric groaned and ducked his head.

"Jan," Peryn went on, "you knew Varric Tethras and you did not get me a... ah, what is the word. When you sign your name in a thing." He gestured scribbling something with a pen.

"That, his word."

"You didn't tell me you were a fan! Why, we have everything he's ever written -- or, I think Anton
does, anyway. Close enough. I still have keys." Anders laughed and poured another beer for himself
over Justice's protests. "Varric, tell me there's a bookseller, here."

"I just got here. Don't look at me." Varric leaned back and gestured at the bartender. "And I'm not
signing anything until there's at least some meat and ale in me. Rough sailing does not lend itself to
eating much."

"Or eating anything," Cormac muttered, rubbing his face.

"Er, yes, I ... I think I've seen booksellers. The Chant has been oddly popular. Everyone wants their
own copy, or at least their favourite canticle." Cullen rubbed the back of his neck again, and Anders
gave him a sharp look. "I'm fine. Just a headache."

"You have to tell me if that changes, Cullen. Anton will kill us both if anything happens to you."
Anders slid a slice of cheese off the plate someone placed in front of Varric.

"Hands off my supper, Blondie. Get your own." Varric swatted at Anders's hand. "Anyway, yeah,
I'll be available to sign a book, if you bring it to me," he told Peryn.

At the other end of the tavern, the singer took a break, stepping down to get a beer of her own, as the
crowd applauded wildly.

"Hey, Kinnon, you know what this place needs?" Cormac grinned over the table. "Dog lord songs."

"You know Andraste's old mabari!" Kinnon started, swinging his tankard out.

"He don't show up in the Chant," Cormac joined in, reaching over the table to smack his tankard into
Kinnon's.

"Maker's breath, you're not going to--" Cullen started, but Anders cut him off.

"And if you ask those holy sisters, well they'll say Andraste can't--"

Josephine blinked at Varric in amusement. "Have you been to Ferelden before? Is this common?"

Varric sighed. "Not often, and yes, which is why not often." At least if the idiots around him were
singing, they were less likely to try to steal his food.

All around them, voices picked up the song, boots stomping along to the beat. Peryn looked around
him in amusement, pounding his fist on the table in time to the song, grinning at how loudly and
exuberantly Kinnon was still singing. Cullen, on the other hand, just held his aching head and
sighed.

They were just rounding the end of the second stanza, when a bright light flashed through all the
windows, and the words Maker's Holy Bride were drowned out by a loud boom Cullen could feel in
his chest. The ground shook, cups, plates, chairs rattling against tables and tottering to the floor.
Cullen made a grab for his tankard, but it rolled off the table.

When everything stilled, the tavern was silent, the singing patrons all gaping at each other.

Varric cleared his throat, a slice of cheese still between his fingers. "I guess Andraste didn't like you
singing shitty songs about her."

"Siege weapons," Cullen breathed, pale as he leapt up from the table, tangled in the bench and Anders.

"Gaatlok," Cormac decided, remembering the qunari in Kirkwall. He helped Anders up and rushed to the door which flapped freely in the mountain wind.

Anders made a sick sound as he took in the roiling green sky over the broken top of what had been the Temple of Sacred Ashes.

Varric picked his way around Anders and froze in the doorway. "Well, shit. I want you to know I didn't know I was serious, when I said that."

"What have they done?" Anders groaned, looking up at the sky, the sheer vastness of the event still settling into him, as he fumbled for more words.

"Maker's breath," Cullen swore from just behind him.

As Anders's fragmented words gave way to a ragged scream, Cormac's arms closed tightly around him, keeping him from running straight into whatever it was that hung over them.

"No. You can't go up there." Cormac's words were strained, as he struggled to hold Anders back. "You can't go up there, yet!"

"He's all I had left! You let go of me! He's all I had! He was the last! I'm the last! It doesn't matter any more! Let go of me! I have to go! I have to go!" Anders fought even after he felt the barrier rise around himself and Cormac. Above them, the edge of the tavern's thatched roof began to steam, as the snow melted and evaporated instantly.

"Anders!" Cormac barked, as the blue glow started to creep up Anders's arms. "We'll get there. But, if you run up there, you're going to die, and then we're out the healer, do you hear me? We don't know what's up there, but we do know it's bad. We'll get there. I promise you that. But, I need you to look at me. I need you to look back into the tavern. Does anyone need help, here, before we go forward?" In the back of his head, he hoped Artemis hadn't meant to surprise him by showing up here. But, he couldn't think of that. He'd send a messenger to Gwaren, as soon as he knew what was happening and how bad this was.

"I don't care about them!" Anders snapped, eyes glowing as he turned them on Cormac, still straining against Cormac's arms. "Where is he? He's up there. I have to go right now."

"Holy shit..." Kinnon breathed, trying to keep himself between Peryn and a clear view of Anders.

"Cullen, take Peryn and get your men. Start looking for survivors. Take the injured to the ... what's the largest building?" Cormac didn't take his eyes or his hands off Anders.

"The Chantry." Cullen stepped back from the door, toward where Kinnon still sat in Peryn's lap. "Is he--?"

"He'll be all right. You send a runner the instant you lay eyes on Enchanter Fen'Din." Cormac finally looked back, catching Cullen's eye. "You find them. We'll fix them."

"Right." Cullen nodded smartly and helped Kinnon and Peryn to their feet. "You heard the man." They slipped through the doorway behind Cormac and Anders. Peryn threw a concerned look back at his friends, but Cullen ushered him onwards.
Anders was still struggling, albeit more weakly, despair settling like a weight in the middle of his chest, making it hard to breathe. Justice was there, blue light flickering at their seams, but he was holding Anders back rather than pushing him forward. They both knew what that was in the sky, the green scar that cast the snow-topped mountains in a sickly glow. Beside Solona, they had seen a few such scars, if on a much, much smaller level.

*And yet we lived,* Justice reminded him. For certain values of living. It was a small comfort, but at least it was comfort.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Not everyone died in the blast. Cullen gets a bit of a surprise. Anders has a lot of work on his hands.

The closer the recovery team moved to the temple, the fewer survivors could be found. Cullen wondered what had happened to that young qunari and his team, what had happened to all the enchanters and commanders who had shown up to negotiate. What would have, he realised, happened to him, had he not met with the Divine in advance. The Divine, he had little doubt, would be found dead. Whatever this was, it had been a strike at the upper echelons of the Chantry and the Circle. For just a moment, he wondered if Samson had somehow been responsible. If the man had finally taken his rage at the system out on the Divine, herself, at the cost of hundreds of others.

"Here!" called one of the scouts, and the team loading corpses dropped the body they held and ran to help. Someone was still alive.

Cullen wasn't looking forward to breaking the news to Anders, when he didn't find Fen'Din alive. Another death on their heads.

"You do not have the time, yet, Ser Cullen," Cassandra chided, noticing his distraction. "Grieve when we are done here."

A chorus of surprised muttering broke out behind them and they turned to see the team around the body cart pointing at the sky.

"It's Andraste!" one of them declared, loudly enough to be heard down the line of rescuers.

"Andraste?" Cassandra muttered. She followed their gaze to where they were pointing, and words stuck in her throat. The green scar in the sky seemed to open, and inside was a woman's figure, backlit against the glow, wearing robes and a hat much like the one the Divine wore. "It can't be," she breathed.

Next to her, Cullen stood just as still, mouth agape.

The scar closed again as the woman held out her hand, and in the ensuing flash of light, Cullen almost didn't see the figures falling from the sky.

"What is that?" Cassandra gasped.

"Over there," said Cullen, following their trajectory and running after them, Cassandra hot on his heels. Cullen reached for his sword as he ran, hoping those weren't demons.

Amid more corpses that would need to be cleaned and named, Cullen found a writhing pile of flesh that he slowly resolved into two figures struggling to get up. He recognised the grey, horned face as it appeared. "Adaar?"

Beneath the fallen qunari, a pair of brown hands stretched out, one glowing the same green as the sky, and a breathless 'gerroff mh' could be heard.
"They have survived this!" Cassandra sounded amazed, first, but that didn't last, the mark on that hand holding her eye. "Bring chains! These survivors must be responsible!"

"Cassandra, don't be rash," Cullen warned, realising he still held his sword at the ready, and more, that the demons he feared could be seen further up the path, where they seemed to have taken the temple. "The qunari's just a mercenary."

"And what about the one under him?" Cassandra demanded.

"I can't see who's under him," Cullen admitted, after a moment's effort. "Still, they're alive. We have to get them back down to Haven, along with everyone else still breathing up here. And then we have to decide what to do about that." He pointed to the doors of the temple, where the shapes of demons appeared in higher windows.

"Maker's Breath," Cassandra swore. Her fingers twitched for her sword, but she knew she and Cullen couldn't take on that many demons alone. "Fine. Let us get them back. We can question them there."

She circled the qunari as he tried to push himself up, tensed to either run or fight. Except his momentum brought him more to the side than up, and he only stood long enough to tumble back over in a different direction.

"Adaar?" Cullen prompted, cautiously stepping closer, one eye on the demons who had both eyes (or more than that) on them. Without the massive lump of qunari in the way, Cullen finally caught a glimpse of the half-squished elf beneath him. He sucked in a breath. "Andraste's ass. Fen'Din?"

"Their hands," Cassandra breathed.

Cullen saw that unearthly green light spilling from Fen'Din's palm, and when he looked over at Adaar, it was to see a similar mark on the same hand. The green scar in the sky -- what Cullen was beginning to suspect was a breach in the veil separating their world from the Fade -- flickered and rippled, the ground humming, and the marks on their hands reacted, flaring to life. A scream tore from Adaar as he rolled to curl around his hand, at the same time another demon appeared by the temple.

"Jim!" Cullen barked, pointing into a crowd of similarly-dressed rescuers, sure one of them would be Jim. "Run to the Chantry and tell the healer we found his man alive. Someone else get me the cart for survivors! We've got two!"

One of the rescuers bowed sharply and took off back toward the village, while the others slowly worked the cart over the wreckage to the two who had fallen from the sky.

"A cart," Fen'Din scoffed, pushing himself up, now that he could breathe. "I can walk. Tell Anders I'm just--" As he made it to his feet, he went right back down, the pool of blood where he'd lay soaked into one side of his robes.

"Oh, that can't be right." He tried to stand again, on the un-bloodied leg, lifting his robes to the knee, to reveal jutting bone. "Tell Anders my leg is broken, I suppose. What a bother. Fine, fine, bring that cart here."

Cassandra watched in horror. "He has done this," she hissed to Cullen. "However he survived, it is why he can not feel his leg."

A strangled laugh escaped Cullen as he stepped in to offer Fen'Din support with the arm not holding his sword. "No, I know this elf. He's always been like this." Still, given this elf's delusions, he
couldn't guarantee Fen'Din hadn't in some way been responsible, but he was equally sure that the man would take credit for it and roll his eyes at being asked why, if he were responsible. This seemed that particular kind of crazed, as opposed to just a simple prank that might be waved off without a proper answer.

While Cullen supported Fen'Din, trying to keep the elf off that leg as much as possible, a few of the other rescuers were trying to lever Adaar into the cart. He wondered if it said more about qunari or about his men that it took five of them to move him. The qunari, at least, was responding appropriately to having fallen from the sky, crying out in pain before he was out cold.

Once Cullen had made sure Fen'Din was settled in the cart as well, Cassandra jumped up after him. "I will accompany them," she said. "You keep looking for survivors. And be wary of demons!"

Cullen wasn't sure it was a good idea, sending her off with them, but he couldn't be in two places at once. He would just have to trust that Anders would keep her from doing something foolish and that Cormac, in turn, would stop Anders from doing something foolish.

"I left Kirkwall to be away from this sort of thing for a bit," Cullen sighed when a couple of demons wandered a little too close. He was beginning to wonder if it was just him.

Cassandra eyed her prisoners, as the cart stopped in front of the Chantry. The qunari was still asleep, and the elf still watched her, curiously. Of the two, it was the elf who made her more nervous, so he would need to be moved first. The group that had been unloading the survivor cart, each time it returned, stepped forward again.

"These two first. The elf first. They go in the cells downstairs," Cassandra told them. "The others go to the healer."

"And bring me the healer," Fen'Din demanded, crisply. "This leg doesn't work."

"That leg will be the least of your concerns, if you are the one responsible for this." Cassandra's glare was sharper than her sword, as the first two unloaders picked up Fen'Din, to carry him inside.

A Templar held open the door, as they passed through it, the rest of the team still trying to figure out how to lift the qunari. "More survivors!" he called to the two healers who had been working ceaselessly since the first survivors had come in.

"Roundear?" Fen'Din called out, expectantly. "There's something wrong with my leg!"

Anders had been focused on healing a woman's torn shoulder, keeping himself busy so he would stay distracted, when he heard that voice. He almost dropped the spell, first by accident, then on purpose when he recognised who it was, but Justice helped steady him, keeping him on task for those few extra seconds while his magic stitched the woman's skin together. But then he was up and running, uncaring of the blood on his hands or his robes.

"Elfhole! Is that you?" Anders finally caught sight of Fen'Din, being carried through the hall. Relief washed over him like ice water, almost hard enough to send him to his knees, followed by concern at the sheer amount of blood on Fen'Din's robes. Where were these people taking him?

He ran out ahead to intercept the group. "Hold on! I'm a healer. Let me see to this elf."

"The Seeker's taken him prisoner. Says he's the one did all this. He'll be lucky if I don't drop him on the stairs," the man on Fen'Din's left said. "Don't waste your magic."
By the door, the rest of the team was struggling under Adaar's weight, Cassandra following as they came in.

"Be still," Anders commanded, and the floor lit green under the two carrying Fen'Din. They didn't move, but neither did Fen'Din. "Could've done that better," Anders muttered to himself, trying to get close enough to set the leg without stepping into the spell, himself.

"What are you doing?" Cassandra roared, catching sight of the sudden flares of magic. She drew her sword and rushed across the Chantry. "Stand down or I will have you for abetting these murderers!"

Cormac intercepted her, first with a barrier and then with himself. "Don't interrupt the healer. He knows what he's doing, and what he's doing is right, even if Enchanter Crazypants is responsible for all this, which I'm pretty sure he's not. You won't get answers out of that elf unless he feels like giving them, and denying him a healer is not going to incline him toward you."

"In most cases, people tell me things whether they are inclined to or not," Cassandra retorted, slamming her fists against the bubble and then dispelling it, with a brief gesture.

Cormac stepped between her and Anders. "You can't torture a man who can't feel pain. Let Jan work."

"Then what does it matter if he is healed?" Cassandra asked, trying to push past Cormac only to be met with surprisingly effective resistance.

"If he doesn't stop bleeding, he'll die, and then you won't be able to ask him anything," Cormac pointed out, as the point of Cassandra's sword found the soft spot under his chin.

"Cassandra," said someone at her shoulder, and Cassandra snapped a glare at whoever was interrupting her, her scowl only easing slightly when she recognised the cowled figure of Leliana. "Ser Cullen tells me you have a pair of suspects in your custody. Is this one of them?" Leliana eyed Cormac, and if she recognised him, she gave nothing away.

"No, but he is in my way, which is bad enough." Cassandra kept her sword steady under his chin.

"We are just trying to give my friend some healing," Anders said between spells, gesturing at the injured elf being carried. "so that he can survive whatever... interrogation she plans to put him through! Leliana, can you talk some sense into her, please?"

"You know these men?" Cassandra asked, making it sound like an accusation.

"We've met," Leliana shot a sly smile at Anders. "Among other places, at that disastrous wyvern hunt of Duke Prosper's, the other year. The elf is new." She leaned to look around Cormac. "Ah! No. I have met him, too. A senior enchanter of Kinloch Hold. I gave him First Enchanter Torrin's seat. I suppose Torrin's not so sorry he couldn't make it, any more."

"All the more reason--" Cassandra started, leaning into her sword again.

"No one ever said you couldn't question me," Fen'Din drawled, looking extraordinarily irritated that he could no longer quite sit up. "Jan would just like to be sure I don't die in the process. Not that I would necessarily mind that -- how does one die while dead? -- but it would be terribly inconvenient if I could not do things like sit up or close my mouth."

Anders reached across the fading paralysis spell and wiped at the corner of Fen'Din's mouth. "That might be the stun wearing off," he apologised, "or it might be blood loss. I can't be sure. Your men, here, will be fine in another minute. Elfhole's not a senior enchanter for nothing. He's a little quicker
to shake it."

"Just let the man do his job," Cormac grumbled, head tipped back to avoid being stabbed by the woman who could dispel his shields.

"It looks as if he is almost done," Leliana noted, watching Anders work. "Is the bleeding stopped?"

"Almost," Anders said, uncorking a lyrium potion one-handed. "He's going to need a lot more work, for a break like that, but Mack can do it, once I get the worst of it. He's good at finishing things, but lousy at starting them."

"Hey, I resemble that remark," Cormac complained. "You want me to go down with him, and you'll take care of them up here?"

"Could you? He's not going to die. I just can't spare the time to finish settling the bone with all this. It's set. It's not going anywhere. The bleeding is... stopped. Just finish the bone and clear the bruising?" Anders glanced over at Cormac. "And don't let either of these lovely ladies stab him?"
Kaaras Adaar woke up to pain, to a diffuse ache that spoke of bruises and to a more searing pain in his hand, which seemed to throb in time to his pulse. Past the awareness of pain came the awareness of hard stone under him and of something metal around his wrists holding them in place. None of these things was particularly new to him on their own, but having them all together to the chorus of a shouting woman threatening violence on an elf was new.

"You were the only ones found at the Breach!" she shouted, leaning over an injured elf and the healer tending to his leg. "Even if I believe you had nothing to do with it, you would have seen something!"

There was something familiar about that elf. And about that healer. Right, they were Cullen's strange friends from the Anderfels.

"Has something happened?" Adaar asked, sitting up as best he could with bound hands. He regretted it the next moment when that brought the shouting woman's attention his way. He held up his hands, palm out. "Never mind. Forget I said anything. Carry on shouting." He trailed off, noticing the green glow of one hand, the one throbbing painfully. He turned his hands over. "Oh, what the fuck is this?"

"If it were spewing demons, I would venture it was a smaller version of that thing in the sky." Fen'Din looked into his own hand, squinting at the light. "I have seen similar things. To the one in the sky, not this. After that unfortunate decision on Uldred's part, the cellars were never quite the same."

"You say this is blood magic, then?" Cassandra demanded, leaning over the healer holding the elf's leg.

"Seeker, if you lean over me one more time, I will not be held responsible for my actions. It is a great deal of effort that is better expended on my work, not to put you on the other side of me." Cormac sounded substantially more calm than was at all reasonable under the circumstances, but years of living with Carver and Anton had prepared him for worse than this.

"You are a mage. I can relieve you of that power," Cassandra replied, dismissively, returning her attention to the prisoners.

"I don't need magic for that." Cormac focused again on the leg in his hands -- just a little more and the bone might be stable enough to walk on.

"Blood magic," Cassandra demanded again, pointing at the elf.

"I would assume it, yes," Fen'Din replied. "I have only seen anything like it once before, and... I'm sure you can ask Cullen about that. I'm afraid I was in the cellars, keeping the spirits from rioting. But, the cellars developed leaks. The kingdoms of other demons leaked through -- their whims, if not
their agents. It was more than we could handle alone. Solona had to come back and help us again -- not a surprise; she was Irving's favourite. Other favourite."

"What the Blight are you all talking about?" Adaar asked in desperation. Making sure his good ear was turned towards them hadn't helped this make any more sense. He rubbed at his head, where damage to one of his horns was radiating the pain. "Were there blood mages at the Conclave? Did my people miss them? Is that what this is about?"

"Your people are likely dead, Adaar," Leliana said, more gently than Cassandra would have, "along with the rest of the Conclave."

Adaar forgot to breathe for a moment. "Oh," he said. His people were mercenaries, and they were used to losses, but all of them? Shokrakar was going to kill him. "Wait, the whole Conclave? What happened?"

"We were hoping you and your companion could tell us," Cassandra said, glaring at him as though she planned to bore holes in his skull with her stare alone.

"My...?" Adaar looked around before he realized this woman was referring to the elf. "I don't even know this mage!"

"And yet, you know he is a mage," Cassandra pointed out.

Fen'Din sighed. "Cullen introduced us, a few days ago. This is ... someone on the security team." He gestured to Adaar. "Regardless of whether there was blood magic, there are demons. Demons are... Some of them can be saved, but some have been changed too long. Some may always have been. But, a hole that large? Something is trying to come through from elsewhere in the Fade, and it is very large. It is probably also very old and set in its ways. It is very likely the lord of its realm, to be wielding this kind of power, but I... I can't say whether this would have been possible without help from someone in our kingdom. And with a tear that large in the fabric of our kingdom, I don't know why it wouldn't have already come through, unless it is still trying to widen the gate. In that case, we may be in very serious trouble."

"How can you possibly know all this?" Cassandra demanded, wobbling as she stepped on Cormac's foot.

"I have studied spirits under First Enchanter Irving, who has left this kingdom for another. When he was with us, he studied and taught travelling between our kingdom and others -- the traversal of the Fade. Apparently we had an enchanter who used those studies to further his own agenda, to seize control of this kingdom with an army of demons from another, but he was struck down and his demons banished. None remained here." Fen'Din's face contorted in an exhausted approximation of surprise. "If I were less sure of how much damage had been done to him, I might think this was Uldred trying again. It has been ten years since he stood in this kingdom."

"Uldred is long dead, I can assure you," Leliana said, folding her arms across her chest. "But right now, our main concern is less with figuring out who did this and more with figuring out how to stop it. As of just minutes ago, the rift in the sky was still expanding, more demons falling out of it every hour."

Adaar's eyes widened. "Demons?" he echoed. "As in, actual demons, from the Fade? And they're nearby?"

"And gaining strength," Leliana added.
Adaar considered telling her that he wasn't getting paid to fight demons, but then it occurred to him that he probably wasn't going to get paid at all. "Ah, shit," he sighed. "If you give me back my arms and my ... other arms, I might be able to do something about those numbers. But I'm a bit useless to you here, like this." He held up his manacled wrists.

"Some of them may be here by accident," Fen'Din pointed out, "and those I may be able to restore."

"We don't want to restore them!" Cassandra barked. "We want to kill them! They are demons!"

"Some may only be demons for a little while. I may be able to make them not demons." Fen'Din offered what might have been a snide smile under circumstances in which his face did a better job obeying his wishes. "Though I would advise shouting at them less, in questioning, if you would like them to stay not-demons."

"I've seen him do it," Cormac volunteered. "It's... I don't think I've ever seen anything like it. You think you know demons, but ... sometimes they turn into spirits of virtue."

"That is ridiculous," Cassandra insisted.

"It may not be," Leliana ventured, thinking of the hunt for Witherfang. "I have seen spirits change. I have seen spirits change the people and the world around them, and when they have been restored, the things they have changed are, as well."

"Okay, you need a lot of potions and about ten hours down," Cormac said, pointing at Fen'Din and pulling a few healing potions out of his bag. He glanced up at Adaar, as he counted them. "And you ... don't look nearly as bad, but either you have something wrong with you or that is the worst face the gods granted anyone. Healer? Potions?"

"Clearly you have never looked into a mirror," Adaar grumbled, even as he prodded at his face, wincing at bruises and cuts that had settled into one uniform ache. "A potion might be safe."

Adaar reached out to take one, when the green hole in his hand flared to life again, sending him curling back around his hand. The pain was blinding, like something inside his hand was trying to stretch it apart.

"Can you do something about healing this?" he gritted out through his teeth, his breathing rough and ragged until the flare-up passed. When it did, he was left panting, in a cold sweat. He glared at the elf with a similar mark, who didn't seem at all affected by it.

"I wouldn't know where to start with that." Cormac shook his head and handed over a potion. "Jan might have some thoughts, though. I'm really only good for cuts and minor breaks. Healing was not my thing, much to my family's lasting regret."

"Your ... family?" Cassandra's focus shifted to the healer. "What Circle do you come from, that you know your family?"

Leliana twitched an eyebrow at Cormac in disbelief. "He is likely from Rivain, to look at him. You know things are different in Rivain."

"My father was a Rivaini mercenary," Cormac confirmed, not answering the question at all. "Point is, the good healer is the Warden, upstairs -- the one working on the rest of the survivors, alone."
Adaar wasn't sure if he would call it sense or insanity, but eventually they -- he and the broken elf -- had convinced Cassandra that keeping them chained up would do no one any good. The elf, at least, seemed to have some idea of what was going on, which led to Cassandra herding him, the elf, and his healer towards the Breach.

All their talk hadn't quite prepared him for it, the hole in the sky, and even towering among these humans and elves, Adaar had never felt so very small.

"You know," he said to Cassandra, looking around him nervously at the lightning flashes of green, "when I said I could fend off any demons, I meant with my sword, not my bare hands. Punching a demon would make for a great story, but I prefer stories where the hero doesn't die in the end."

"You expect I should arm you?" Cassandra scoffed, shaking her head as she fended off another small rage demon with her sword, until Cormac shot an ice spell through it.

"I think he's the only person here who's not armed," Cormac pointed out. "Staves or not, Fen'Din and I are hardly helpless."

The elf in question limped past Cassandra and crouched in the snow, singing wordlessly to the approaching black mist that drifted down the next hill toward them.

"And if we can't find something for him to lean on, I'm going to have to give him my glaive." Cormac pointed up toward the temple. "There's no way he's making it up there without some sort of walking stick. Not with that leg still screwed up. Jan needs to take another look, because I can't fix that, and he shouldn't be limping, by now."

The black mist swirled around Fen'Din, darting and churning, and he rocked under the pressure, but didn't break his strangely atonal song. Parts of the mist started to look a greyish blue, where it swept along his arms.

Adaar didn't understand how the rest of them could be so calm about this. These were demons. Demons. When one sprang up out of the ground next to him, tall and spiny, shrieking through more teeth than was strictly necessary, Adaar screamed back at it. He turned that scream into a battle roar the next moment and headbutted the creature, bowling it over, likely due more to its surprise than his strength.

"This is ridiculous!" Adaar shouted, backing away before the demon could get back up. He managed to put an obstacle in its way, an abandoned cart that was smashed on one side. He was about to continue moving when a glint of metal caught his eye. "Oh, hello."

A sword! One much smaller than what he was used to carrying, but he would take it. This time, when the shrieking creature reached for him, Adaar cut off its talons with a blunt sweep of his sword.
Much better.

Around Fen'Din, the air had thickened with wraiths and shades, many of them looking a great deal less malicious than when they had appeared. Several took up the song he was singing, reproducing it in clear, chiming tones with a low rumbling rhythm beneath.

Something with way too many teeth considered Fen'Din for a long moment, and then turned on Cormac, who split it from lower chest to chin, and then clenched his hand, fighting to compress it into a small, raging lump. After cleaving and crushing his way through a few more demons of sorts he hadn’t met in Kirkwall, Cormac made it over to the cart Adaar had found the sword in, and dug through it, hoping for something to help Fen'Din -- a cane or a crutch if possible, a quarterstaff if nothing better offered itself. Finally, he settled on a pole meant to hold a banner, that had a crosspiece at the right height for a hand. The bottom was sharp, which might offer a better grip on the icy mountainside. Driving it into the ground beside him, he turned to help Adaar with another demon unconvinced by the song.

Adaar offered Cormac a smirk and a nod, ducking under the demon's arm as it made a grab for him. He swung his sword, two-handed as he came back up, slicing the demon across its stomach and spilling its entrails. There was something almost comforting in that, in knowing that a blade could hurt a demon as easily as it hurt anything else. But he was reminded again of just how unnatural they were when the demon's dying body disintegrated into dust.

Adaar looked around, sword at the ready, but the only demons left around them were clustered by Fen'Din, singing along to a song that would haunt his dreams. "I'm just not even going to ask about that," he muttered, deciding he was done being surprised.

"They are demons," Cassandra said, hovering around the makeshift chorus but staying just out of their reach. "We should kill them before they attack us again!"

"I don't think so," Cormac said, shaking his head and picking up the banner pole again. "I think what we do is get behind them."

"What?" Cassandra looked at Cormac like he'd lost his mind. "I do not know how they do things in Rivain--"

"He's distracting them, and the more of them he gathers, the more they collectively catch. I think we can use these spirits to force the rest back toward the temple, and also to strip down the bulk of their forces." Cormac paused, looking for a way to explain it. "Look, you know how no matter where you go, there are dogs in the street? Except the Anderfels. Not a lot of dogs in the Anderfels. But, the dogs all think you're going to hurt them, so they snap and bark. But, if you throw them some meat and just hang around and don't kick them, they'll come up and be friendly. Well, most of them, anyway. Some will still try to rip your hand off. But, if you take one of the nice ones home, and feed it and pet it, you wind up with a cool new friend who only occasionally freaks out and tries to bite the neighbours. If your dog finds its old pack again, it might bring them home to get food and petting, too. It's the same principle, here. He's comforting them, and they're spreading that. We have a small battalion of partially recovered spirits, and it would be completely idiotic not to march them up this hill, to protect us from the demons at the top."

"I'm a friend of Justice," he assured a spirit, as he ducked past to put the pole in Fen'Din's hands. It flickered at him, at the violence that still clung to him, but it kept singing that strange chiming song.

"That is the most Fereldan thing I have ever heard in my life," Cassandra complained to Adaar, behind the backs of the mages.
Adaar shrugged helplessly. "I draw the line at letting demons on the furniture."

Cassandra gave him a flat look before dropping her gaze to the sword in his hand. "I suppose that is more effective than headbutting any other demons," she said reluctantly. "Do not make me regret this."

Adaar gestured at the singing elf and his half-demon entourage. "Lady, if you don't have regrets by now, I don't know what to tell you."

Cassandra scoffed, taking up the rearguard to keep an eye on all of them.

Farther down the trail, they came across the sounds of battle, the screech of demons and the hum of magic. Cassandra encouraged them to pick up the pace, recognising the two men surrounded by demons, a bald elf apostate and a clean-shaven dwarf with the most curious crossbow.

"Varric!" Cormac called out, spotting his friend. "Step to the left!"

Varric stepped to the side, putting another crossbow bolt into some unspeakable horror, as he did, and then looked behind him, prepared to crack some joke at Cormac's expense. And then he saw the spirit chorus moving up the path, their voices resolving into something other than the sound of ice tinkling in the tree branches. "By the bones of the Ancestors, I have never, and I hope never to see this again. Is this Justice's doing?"

"Let me introduce you to Enchanter Crazypants, out of Kinloch Hold," Cormac replied, bracing himself against a demon that seemed unaffected by the chorus. "Apparently everybody out of that place has some kind of spirit ... thing."

The bald elf at Varric's side cast a long look at Fen'Din, then a curious look at Cormac's face, and then grabbed for Adaar, who stood closer to him. "Quickly, before more come through!" he shouted, hauling on the qunari's glowing hand, until he could press it to the gaping rift.

The smaller rift in front of them sparked, and Adaar's hand responded in kind, until the sparks became one beam of green energy tethering them to each other. He felt a build of pressure, a ringing in his good ear, and then the connection snapped, the rift sealing itself shut.

Adaar pulled his hand away, flexing his fingers through the ache. "What the fuck was that?"

The elf nodded as though confirming something to himself. "Whatever magic opened the Breach in the sky also placed that mark upon your hand." He gestured at Adaar's glowing hand. "I theorised the mark might be able to close the rifts that have opened in the Breach's wake -- and it seems I was correct."

Adaar glanced back at Fen'Din, at the matching mark upon his hand. "I take it his could do the same thing? Well. Good to know I have a use for this other than a light source."

"So this could close the Breach itself?" Cassandra asked, giving Adaar a considering look.

The strange elf -- the strange bald elf, that is -- shrugged. "Possibly. It seems you hold the key to our salvation."

"Good to know," Varric started, sass getting the better of him. "And here I thought we'd be ass-deep in demons forever."

"Aren't you ... from Kirkwall?" Cormac retorted. "I'd think that would be par for the course."
Varric ignored Cormac, elbowing his way around the mage to introduce himself to the towering qunari. "Varric Tethras: rogue, storyteller, absolutely not here because I want to be."

"Oh, come on, you'd have set your own ass on fire for a crack at this story and you know it." Cormac playfully shoved the back of Varric's shoulder.

"You have me confused with Hahren Shem-Tamer and his infamous sword of things I'm not talking about in public. Or in private. Or, you know, ever thinking about again." Varric held out a hand to the qunari. "Sorry about Messere Buttercream, over here. He's always like that. I don't know the elf, though. Or the other elf, really. And I can only hope the Seeker didn't threaten to jangle your jingle with a knife, because that is an experience I wouldn't wish on anyone."

"I think it was a sword, actually," Adaar said slowly, shaking Varric's hand, "but, you know. Qunari." The dwarf talked fast, and Adaar made sure his ear was facing him. He was already fairly certain he had misheard that 'Messere Buttercream'.

"If you had just given me a straight answer, I wouldn't have had to threaten," Cassandra grated out.

"So why are you here, then?" Adaar asked Varric, also throwing a glance at the unnamed elf. "You don't exactly look like a member of the Chantry."

Solas scoffed while Varric shot a wry look at Cassandra. "I'm a writer," Varric said with a shrug. "This seemed like it could be the story of the century, and I figured someone should write it down. Can't say this is the story I had planned on, going in."

Fen'Din broke off his singing, once he was sure the spirits would go on without him. With the rift closed, they seemed more sure of themselves and each other. "It's good to meet you, Varric." His voice sounded a bit ragged and he carefully crouched to grab a handful of snow to swallow.

The other elf snorted. "You may reconsider that stance in time."

"Aw, I'm sure we'll become great friends in the valley, Chuckles." Varric waved a hand dismissively.

"Absolutely not." Cassandra declared, stepping forward to tower over Varric, who shot a look at the much larger qunari. "Your help has been appreciated, Varric, but..."

"Have you been in the valley, lately, Seeker? Your soldiers aren't in control any more. You need me." The corner of Varric's mouth turned up triumphantly, and Cassandra turned away with a disgusted noise.

"Varric, Cullen's down there." Cormac became very still.

"Oh, shit." Varric pointed at Cormac. "If we lose him, you're telling Anton."

"We're not losing him. Get me a vantage point where I can see into the valley, and --" Cormac looked around himself and swore. "I don't have enough mages for this. We'll make it work, but I need to be able to see. There's not enough of us to just go charging in there blind and expect it to end well."

"How many mages do you need?" the bald elf asked. "My name is Solas, if there are to be introductions, and I am glad to see survivors -- particularly those two. How did you keep the marks from killing them?"

"I'm used to working with at least three mages," Cormac explained, nodding at Solas. "And I didn't
do it. Jan did. You'll have to ask him once we get out of this disaster."

"The healer." Solas nodded. "I saw his work as I came in to offer my assistance to survivors of this lavish ruination."

"We are unlikely to find and help any more survivors if we just stand here talking," Cassandra said. She walked to the edge of the ruins they'd found themselves in and peered down the pathway, leading them by more demons and an iced-over pond. "I see another rift." She pointed at the glowing green tear up ahead, out of which spilled more demons. "If we can close it, it might give our soldiers a break from the fighting."

Adaar flexed the fingers of his glowing hand. "Let's hope this thing works again. Let's go. I'm starting to get the hang of this demon killing business."

"Well, now you're all set if you ever spend a weekend in Kirkwall," Varric said, needing to crane his neck back to look at the qunari's face. Or his chin, mostly.

Adaar wondered why this dwarf kept mentioning demons and Kirkwall in the same breath, only to decide he probably didn't want to know.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Not everyone is happy with the survivors. The Grand Chancellor, for example, would rather be eaten by demons than let them pass.

Fen'Din's spirit army took the lead as they charged, with Cassandra and Adaar close behind, swords in hand and a battle roar on their lips, leaving the mages and Varric behind to shoot the creatures at a distance.

Cormac reached out to raise a barrier around the wounded soldiers below them. "Mage?" he asked Solas.

"I am," Solas confirmed, cutting off the advance of more demons with a wall of ice.

"Work with me, here. Channel them from the rift into a narrow path toward our warriors." Cormac waved Varric forward with one hand and brought up his own wall of ice with the other. "Varric, I need you putting holes in them before they get to the end of that path. Hit things with teeth. The shades are Fen'Din's problem." He paused, watching the flow of magic and demons, below, and then gestured broadly from where Fen'Din and his chorus stood to the side of the ice channel Solas was maintaining. "Elfhole! To the side!"

As Fen'Din brought the spirits around to sing along the wall, some began to grey with the terror and despair of those tumbling out of the rift, but the strength of the song began to pull at the weaker demons, and song and light rose from between creatures of teeth and talons.

"Where did you study?" Solas asked, subtly adjusting the width of the channel to better accommodate the changes in the trapped spirits.

"With my father, but don't tell Cassandra that." Cormac chuckled and shielded one of the changed spirits against a demon that lashed a razor-taloned hand toward it.

"You think he's something, you should see his sister. I'm almost sad she's not here. Those demons would take one look at her and go home with their tails between their legs." Varric put a few more bolts into a demon that had made it over the wall, and the soldiers below finished it off.

"What about you? You're not Dalish with a face like that." Cormac raised a barrier around Cassandra, at the same time Solas did the same. "Sorry."

"My apologies. I am unaccustomed to working with other mages after so long." Solas went back to moving ice, as Cormac raised and lowered shields and barriers across the battlefield. "I studied outside the Circle, as you have. My travels have allowed me to learn much of the Fade, far beyond what I expected to find in any Circle mage, but that one has a talent."

"He's got a whole lot more than that," Cormac replied, catching something with too many arms and too many teeth as it came down the hill from somewhere further ahead. It collapsed under the shrinking barrier. He whistled sharply, until he drew attention from below, pointed at his hand, and then gestured to indicate a path that would lead around the back of the rift. "Be ready to let them
Adaar hadn't known what he expected from a group so hastily thrown together, but what he hadn't expected was for the battle to go so smoothly. He had worked with mages before, had worked well with the mages in the Valo-Kas, but that had been after weeks of nearly stepping in someone's fireball. But this? This he could work with.

Adaar cut down a few more demons, even headbutted another one just because, and when he saw an opening, he ran for the path Cormac had indicated. "Cover me!" he called out as he switched his sword to his left hand and prayed this worked. He held up his hand, palm out the way Solas had showed him, and felt again that building of energy. He focused on keeping his footing on the icy ground and trusted Cassandra to beat back the demon closing in on his right.

Then the connection snapped, and this rift closed over too, leaving nothing but a fading green glow in its place.

"Nothing's ever boring with you around, Shouty." Varric chuckled as he put another bolt into the last demon standing. "That should've been my clue -- I showed up in the tavern, and you were already there. Should've got right back on a boat."

"It's not too late to go home, Varric." Cormac let go of the barriers and took a deep breath as the strain left his shoulders.

"Yes, it is. Elaiodora would put my ass out on the street if I came home without a story -- without this story, in particular." Varric chuffed a laugh and started looking for a way down. "It's my house, too."

"You did leave her in charge when you went running off to Antiva for a year. I heard all about that from your cousin Mae, at the wedding." Cormac eyed a couple of angles and laid down a smooth ice slope. "Ah, winter in Ferelden," he sighed, crouching down and strengthening his shields, before he kicked off and shot down the slope into the battle-trampled snow, below.

"He's out of his entire mind," Varric told Solas. "You want to find the right way down?"

"I suspect that he already did."

Cassandra walked up to Adaar, wiping the sweat from her brow with her sleeve. Her breastplate and shield were covered in demon gore. "I don't understand it," she said, looking him up and down. "You were right there fighting the demons with me, and yet your clothing is still so... pristine. How is that possible?"

Adaar shrugged. "Really good reflexes?"

"Or maybe he was just using you as a shield and you didn't know it," Varric said, finally reaching them. "He probably could, too. He has the reach for it."

Cassandra threw up her hands and went to check on the wounded soldiers. "Mage. Healer," she called out, looking at Cormac. "Can you help them?"

Cormac was already on his feet, dusting snow out of the clinking bag of potions at his side. "No idea, but I'll try." He glanced toward where Fen'Din sat in the middle of a cloud of spirits ringing with the song he'd begun three fights ago. It sounded better from them than it did from him. He fished a potion out of the bag and held it out. "One of you make him drink something. Preferably this. He can't tell he's screwed up his throat."
Solas plucked the potion out of Cormac's hand and made his way over to the other elf. "You need to stop your singing now, at least until you take a drink. The healer thinks this potion, here, will help you. I know the song; it used to ring from every hill and flowing stream, and if you need it, I can sing it for you."

Fen'Din's eyes gleamed with amusement. "Thank you," he replied, raspily, taking the potion and falling sideways into the snow, as he took his hands off the banner pole to open it. After a bit of a struggle, he rolled off his own robes and propped himself up long enough to drink.

Above him, Solas sang to the spirits as if it were a perfectly normal thing to do, though his voice clung somewhat closer to the sounds of the spirits than the song Fen'Din managed.

"They know you," Fen'Din observed, watching the swirl and flicker.

Solas widened his eyes and shrugged, a gesture clearly meant to convey that he knew damn well what was going on, but wouldn't explain. At least, not yet.

Voices rang out in unintelligible argument, from further ahead, and Cormac tried to ignore them as he practised a few of the more dangerous stunts Anders had shown him -- ways to make repairs far beyond his skill, by applying potions in inadvisable ways and channelling magic through them. He was going to leave scars, but at least these people would be alive to complain about it.

While Cormac tended the wounded and Solas tended the spirits, Adaar and Cassandra scouted ahead. A calm had settled over their part of the mountain, no demons popping out of the ground, and the path was clear to the bridge, where a few soldiers had set up a defence. The voices arguing came from that direction.

Cassandra snorted. "That sounds like Leliana."

"How the Blight did she make it here before us?"

"I do not know, but I suspect it involved less headbutting of demons." Cassandra arched an eyebrow at Adaar.

Adaar offered her his sweetest smile. "Now, Seeker, did you just make a joke? I think you're warming up to me."

Cassandra met his grin with a scoff. "No. I was merely stating fact." She pushed her way into the camp set up on the bridge, and Adaar followed just behind her, meeting the stares that came his way with a smile and a wave. Leliana was indeed there, next to a man in Chantry robes, whose voice cut through the air.

"Take them to Val Royeaux to be executed! It is I who hold the highest title, here, with the deaths of all at the Conclave aside from those ... criminals!" the man snapped, still facing Leliana.

"That is open to debate." Cassandra's voice cut across the space between them, like a hot knife through the icy air, and behind her she could hear the sound of the chorus, and hopefully the mages, approaching.

The man turned around, and Cormac thought that whoever he was, he wore those robes poorly.

"Ah! Here they come," the man said.

"You made it." Leliana sounded relieved as she stepped around the edge of the table to greet Cassandra. "Chancellor Roderick, this is--"
"I know who he is. As Grand Chancellor of the Chantry, I order you to take this criminal and the one behind him to Val Royeaux to face execution." The man, apparently Chancellor Roderick, lifted his chin as he spoke, his eyes gleaming with rage.

"'Order me'? You are a glorified clerk. A bureaucrat," Cassandra sneered, setting her shoulders in her blood and ichor-spattered armour.

"And you are a thug, but a thug who supposedly serves the Chantry," Roderick snapped.

"We serve the Most Holy, Chancellor, as you well know." Leliana turned her gaze from Roderick to Cassandra.

"Justinia is dead!" Roderick shouted, hands flashing by his face to draw attention to the words. "We must elect a replacement and obey her orders on the matter!"

"Look, Chancellor whatever the fuck your name is because I wasn't listening, you want to step out of the way of the singing multitude behind me, or there's not going to be an election, because we're all going to be dead," Varric pointed out.

"Excuse me?" Roderick snapped. "Who are you to speak to me in such a--AHH!" Roderick finally looked past Varric to where he was pointing, noting the singing swarm of spirits. He stumbled back, knocking over a banner standing just behind him and clutching a hand to his chest. "Maker preserve me! Cassandra, do something!" He tried to duck behind Leliana who just sidestepped out of his way.

"Oh yeah," Adaar drawled. "If he's the Chantry's leadership, this looks real promising."

"Well, you killed everyone else!" Roderick shouted, still backing away. "Cassandra!"

"What would you have me do?" Cassandra shot back. "If you have not noticed, they are not attacking. Or perhaps you would prefer a different 'thug' to serve your needs?"

"This is... Get whatever that is out of here!" Roderick gestured angrily at the spirits. "This is why we should be arresting them, Cassandra! They summon the demons, and now the demons do their bidding!"

"Hey," Adaar protested. "The only interaction I've had with demons today is of the stabbing variety. You're not the only one who's lost people today, so how about you cut the crap?"

Solas approached, at the head of a swirling mass of spirits still centred on Fen'Din and Cormac, and addressed Roderick from slightly behind Adaar's elbow. "Has anyone mentioned that fear frequently causes demons? It's a truth discovered across centuries of study, interacting with spirits and the Fade. If anyone should leave this place, it is you, before you draw more of them down on us."

"Is he fucking kidding me? Somebody tell me he's kidding me." Varric shot Solas a nervous look.

"He does claim to be an expert on spirits and demons," Cassandra said, with a shrug, casting a glance at Leliana, before turning her eyes back to Roderick. "The elf may be right. Maybe you should go back to Haven, while the thugs clean up this mess. You wouldn't want to get any demon ichor on your dainty shoes. What do they have you men wearing these days, anyway?"

"The heels would be higher, if he were younger," Leliana offered, after a moment. "Just to accent the curve along the back of the leg. Still, I think if those legs carried you here, Chancellor, they might serve to carry you away."

"You must call a retreat, Seeker. Follow me back, and chain these criminals behind you. You will
not survive long enough to make it to the temple, even with all your soldiers," Roderick entreated, knowing he'd lost at least part of the argument.

"Call the soldiers back," Solas suggested, gesturing behind him to the spirits following. "We can fight what he cannot turn. The most damage is done by the lesser demons, is it not? Each does so little damage, but there are so uncountably many. He can remove them from the fight entirely. There is no need to sacrifice as deeply as you expect."

"That is perhaps somewhat overconfident," Cassandra countered, holding up her hands. "Do not call them back, but let us even the odds."

"If Chuckles and Crazypants can do half of what I've seen them do so far, it'll be a massacre, only we'll be winning." Varric aimed Bianca off the side of the bridge, then adjusted one of the sights.

"We could charge straight in," Leliana said, "but there is another way to the temple, through the mountains. It is faster and safer. Perhaps we could send a smaller group through the mountains while the rest of our soldiers act as a distraction."

"Safer?" Cassandra scoffed. "We lost an entire squad on that mountain!"

Adaar flexed his glowing hand and glanced back at the crazy elf, the one with the matching mark. "Seems like there are two routes and two of us with the mark. I'm not the best at maths, but that seems like a simple equation. Only one of us needs to get to the temple, right?" The question started off rhetorical, but he turned to Solas after a moment anyway.

"Unless you plan to seal the rift with a handshake, one should be enough," Solas answered with a shrug.

"Now, see, that just sounds cool," Varric complained.

"Then I'll charge with the soldiers," Adaar said, turning back to Fen'Din, "and you will... Shit." He considered the staff in Fen'Din's hand, which he was using more like a cane than anything. "And you will forget what I just said. I'll climb the... mountain." Adaar shuddered just thinking about that, the height and the cold. "Unless you can use that staff to magically pole-vault to the other side."

Fen'Din shook his head, a hint of amusement in his eye as he accepted another potion from Cormac and sipped it. "Take Solas," he said, firmly, the spirits still singing without his lead. "And take some of the spirits."

"Go with them, Varric," Cormac said, after a moment. "They need another mage, but you'll have to do."

"Bianca may be special, but she's not magic. I leave that to people with concerns over the shape of their ears." Varric shook his head as he counted his bolts with one hand. "Anybody got crossbow bolts around here? I'd hate to run out before we get to the inevitable pit of churning evil at the centre of it all."

Leliana gestured to a crate by the damaged edge of the bridge. "That is marked as bolts and arrows."

"So, I am to trust the two of you to take the front path alone?" Cassandra asked, her eyebrows arching up in exasperated amazement.

"Not just us. Cullen's there. We've fought together before." Cormac didn't quite manage a smile. "Compared to the last fight we were in, this'll be cake and tea with the queen."
Chapter Summary

Our heroes rescue Cullen and push on to the temple, to begin the first assault on the Breach.

Adaar was relieved when they made the climb to the mines without any of the rickety ladders breaking. Those things had not been made to hold qunari, and he'd held his breath a few times, certain he was about to plummet to his death. Stone. Stone underfoot was much more solid and reasonable.

The demons, on the other hand, were anything but. Inside the mines, they were scattered, at least, allowing the four of them to concentrate their efforts on one or two demons at a time.

"Why so few?" Adaar made the mistake of asking, getting his answer when they came out the other side of the mines and into sunlight filtered green by a nearby rift. Beyond it came the sound of fighting, the screech of demons and the ring of metal.

"Some of the scouts are alive!" Cassandra exclaimed, all but lunging forward into the battle.

"Our priority must be the breach," Solas insisted at her charging back. "Unless we seal it soon, no one is safe."

"I'm leaving that to the man with the glowing hand," Varric replied, scouting for a spot not too close to the combat, where he could pick off demons from a distance.

Solas tried to repeat Cormac's approach from earlier, trusting the fenced overlook that may once have held a statue to serve as a natural barrier to the back, as he tried to drive the demons away from the soldiers with walls of ice. Around him the few spirits he'd drawn away from the elven enchanter still sang the song that pulled at his very essence, and it called to some of the demons tumbling through the rift, as well. As the spirits around him looked like they might be overcome, he picked up the song, as well, cacophonous against the mountain winds. On the whole, it seemed surprisingly effective, as within mere minutes, the demons lay either converted or struck down and only the rift remained, pulsing like an infected wound in the flesh of the world.

Adaar wasted no time closing this rift, pausing afterwards to shake out his hand.

"You are becoming quite proficient at this," Solas said with a crooked smile.

"Shutting out demons by closing tears in the Veil with my glowy hand..." Adaar shook his head. "That is a skillset I never thought I'd have."

"Just consider it practice for the big one," Varric said, indicating the massive Breach glowing ominously above.

"I'm not sure my hand is big enough for that one." Adaar gave Varric a wry look before joining Cassandra, who was checking in with the scouts. They were all a bit worse for wear, but at least they were alive.
"Thank the Maker you finally arrived, Cassandra," said the scout nearest Cassandra. She was standing at an angle, holding a hand to her side. "I don't think we could have held out much longer."

Cassandra looked back over her shoulder at Adaar, who just smiled back at her. "Thank our prisoner. He insisted we come this way."

"Prisoner...?" The scout just looked confused.

Adaar shrugged. "I've been called worse. Glad someone's still alive to make all that climbing worthwhile."

"Well, you have my sincere gratitude," the scout said, and that wasn't something Adaar had heard from too many humans.

Cassandra instructed the scouts to go back into the valley while the way was clear of demons. They could only hope the path ahead would be as demon-free.

The path ahead lay wide and straight, and for that Cormac was grateful. Hastily-erected barricades narrowed the way, and for that, he found, he was also grateful. Beside him, Fen'Din limped steadily onward, his standard clinking against the stones of the road, his song nearly unceasing and echoing off the mountains around them. The demons could hear it. Everything in the valley could probably hear it, all the way back to Haven, at this point, but the demons knew it and chased it, some changing as they drew closer, others held off by occasional flashes of barrier, until Cormac could dispatch them through some combination of crushing and freezing.

As they closed in on the soldiers still holding back the demons pouring out of a rift, Cormac raised a barrier around as many soldiers as he could cover, waiting for the ringing chorus to draw the last of the demons away from the easy targets.

"The demons are mine. You get the rift, and then we'll find Cullen," he told Fen'Din, hands flashing as he crushed something tall and green into a tiny demonic snowball.

Fen'Din moved through the ranks of demons without the least fear, watching the rift turn to open toward him, as he approached, whether drawn by the glowing mark on his hand or the song of the chorus. He had watched the last rift close. This one couldn't be difficult. Just hold his hand up and...

The flash of power caught him off-guard, the sudden push and pull as the light from his palm met the rift knocked him to his knees, and the standard clattered beside him. Around him, he could see the demons pressing into the horde of spirits, some changing all the way, others stopping in confusion, and yet more picked off one at a time by Cormac's magic, as the rift pulled closed, leaving only a faint glow, that faded after a few moments.

"Maker's Breath," murmured a familiar voice, Cullen's voice, as the last of the glow disappeared. He clapped Cormac on the shoulder. "It's good to have you at my back. We were hard pressed for a while there. But what the Blight is he doing back here?" Cullen pointed at Fen'Din. "I saw the state of that leg!"

"Closing rifts. And limping. Mostly limping." Cormac sighed and scratched at his chin, where his beard used to be. "Anders got it set, but I was in a rush to finish repairing the bone, because he was in a rush to come out here and get to the breach, and... honestly, he'd be fine if Anders had done the work. It's going to be ugly fixing that again."

"Back up to the closing rifts part," Cullen stepped closer to Fen'Din but stopped at the mob of spirits,
as one turned to look at him, and he realised what he was seeing. He backed up again, putting himself firmly on the other side of Cormac. "And the cloud of tamed demons."

"Spirits," Cormac corrected, absently. "They're only demons if... I don't quite understand the conditions, to be honest, but there's something about pain and fear. They reflect human suffering, or something, so he's distracting them."

"But, they were demons," Cullen confirmed, watching Cormac out of the corner of his eye as he stared over the man's shoulder at the chiming chorus.

"And they may be again, but right now, they're not. Right now they're one of the best weapons we have against what comes out of those rifts. Something about that song changes them back, and-- you know what? Ask me about that later. Ask him about that, later, too. Once we're out of here." Cormac shook his head and looked back to where Fen'Din was struggling to stand up from the icy ground. "Right now, we have to get him and your qunari -- who went the other way -- into the temple, so they can close that breach, and the spirits... maybe they'll stop panicking. I don't know. I'm sure it will help people stop panicking, at the least."

"Adaar?" Cullen asked in surprise. "So it is something with their glowing hands, then." Cullen open and closed his mouth a couple of times before shaking his head. "I have... far too many questions, right now, and what you are doing is far more important than indulging my curiosity. If a clear path is what you need, the way to the temple should be clear from here. I will leave some of my soldiers here to guard the way, but the two of you are not going in there alone. Even with the... band of spirits."

Cullen doubled back for a moment to give orders to his lieutenant and to make sure the wounded were being properly seen to, and then he rejoined the mages, walking close to Fen'Din's side in case he toppled over again.

"Thank you, Commander," Fen'Din rasped, taking another sip of his potion, before he started to sing, again, as they made their way toward the temple.

"This is where we found you," Cullen said, as they passed a pile of rubble he recognised. "We saw a woman behind you, in the rift you fell out of, but I didn't recognise her and neither did Cassandra."

"People are saying it was Andraste," Cormac mentioned, as they approached the entrance.

"People are probably wrong," Fen'Din ventured, an eye on how the spirits fared when he didn't sing with them. "Andraste is painted blond, like the Ciriane, but legend has her ginger-haired like the Clayne. What do people always cite?"

"People have different ideas of what they think Andraste would look like," Cullen replied with a shrug, picking his way through rubble and trying not to look too closely at the charred remains they passed. "Usually, they like to think she looks like them. But I couldn't tell you what the woman behind you looked like. All we could see was her silhouette."

Cullen did not know what to think, personally, but when they passed through what was left of the temple's entryway to find the breach looming over them, the thought of Andraste being on their side was a comfort he needed. Directly below the breach was another rift, a large one, vomiting yet more demons.

"You made it!" came a voice from the right, and Cullen turned to see Cassandra with Adaar, Varric, and... he was only vaguely familiar with the bald elf. Adaar beamed at them, waving his glowing hand.
"We brought reinforcements," Cormac joked cocking a thumb at Cullen.

"We must be enough." The smile was finally gone from Solas's face.

Varric tipped his head back to take in the gaping hole in the sky. "The breach is a long way up."

"You're here!" Leliana darted out from a side passage, trailing archers.

"Have your men take up positions around the temple," Cassandra ordered.

Cormac exchanged a glance with Solas. "They're too spread out. We can't cover them."

"We don't have to cover them, if we can contain the demons," Solas reminded him, and Cormac nodded.

"Do it."

"This is your chance to end this," Cassandra said, gazing first at Fen'Din and then at Adaar. "Are you ready?"

"I may be a bit short for this," Fen'Din decided, gazing upward. "But, we can get the small one for certain."

"I'll let you stand on my shoulders," Adaar suggested.

"This rift is the first, and it is the key," Solas replied, looking between Fen'Din and Adaar, then past the railing to the rift that hovered over a lower floor. "Seal it, and perhaps we seal the breach."

No need to try to reach the monster above, then. He didn't know about Fen'Din, but Adaar was always better with monsters on the ground. Adaar drew his sword.

"How do you feel about getting a little closer, Crazy?" Adaar asked Fen'Din, eyeing his injured leg. "I don't think we can touch the rift from up here."

"Stairs," Fen'Din sighed. "Can I sit on your shoulders?"

Adaar looked the skinny elf up and down and shrugged. "Sure, as long as you hold on and don't tug too hard on the horns." He handed his sword to a bewildered Cassandra and picked Fen'Din up by the waist, setting the elf on his shoulders as easily as if he were a child. "Thank you, Cassandra," he said, taking sword back and flashing her another beaming smile. Holding his sword above his head, he roared, "Let's do this!" and took off running.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The assault on the Breach begins, our heroes leading the charge against the lower rift.

"Varric, Solas, with me!" Cormac called, racing toward the edge of the balcony, trying to decide how best to position them around the rift -- above the rift and the demons below. "Cullen, take the Seeker and go with them! They need you to protect them, because we can't. Not... effectively, if they need to be able to touch that thing."

Cullen nodded and clapped Cassandra on the back as he ran after Adaar, and Cassandra followed after a stern, if uncertain, look at Cormac.

Part of the chorus peeled off to follow Fen'Din, now moving much faster than they were accustomed to, but the rest hung back, chiming and wavering around Solas.

"Yes, hello, I've missed you too." Solas smiled and laughed as the spirits brushed against his sides. "I don't know how to send you home. The gate up there seems to only lead the wrong way."

A few spirits along the edge leaned down toward the demons below, the edges of their shapes purpling with the intensity rising up. Solas sang softly to them, as he began to raise walls of ice to separate the demons from their team. Leliana was quick to pick up on the tactics at hand, and her archers laid down a volley as soon as they could be certain of only hitting demons.

"Varric? I need you to do something stupid. If anything else comes out of that rift, piss it off, before it hits the ground. I want it focused on us, not on them," Cormac directed, crushing something large and ugly that got too close to the elf-bearing qunari, still sprinting downward.

"Now why would you ask me for that honour?" Varric asked between shots. "Is this your way of telling me I'm good at annoying people? I'm hurt, Cormac." His next bolt took a demon between the eyes. "Well. Not as hurt as that guy is."

As they circled around towards the rift, Adaar's hand flickered in sympathy, the pain sudden enough to nearly make him lose his grip on his sword but not so bad that he couldn't push past it. There was a sound overhead, like rumbling thunder, Adaar thought at first, until he tilted his head and realized they were words.

"Now is the hour of our victory. Bring forth the sacrifice."

There was something familiar about that voice, a memory that felt like spiders crawling over his skin, but Adaar pushed that aside, focusing on the demon shrieking in his face and the hole his sword carved in its chest.

"What are we hearing?" Cassandra asked to his side, and that was a relief, knowing that Adaar wasn't the only one hearing voices.

"Memories," Fen'Din answered, squinting into the breach, and then at the colour and shape of the spirits around him. "I just don't know whose. There's history, here, and assuming this is a temple built for Andraste's ashes, it's a thousand years old. Genitivi's book mentioned a cult with unusual
practices, a decade ago, but before that... who knows what went on up here?" He began to sing again, the rhythm disrupted by the bounce every time Adaar's feet struck the floor.

"Or, since we're pretty sure this is blood magic, it's the memory of whoever made that sacrifice," Cullen suggested, as he tried to decide if looking at the demons was worse than trying to pretend they weren't there until he was in striking range. "Still, the red lyrium is making me very nervous. No one touch that. That wasn't here, the last walkthrough before the Conclave began, and I've only seen it in one other place."

"Commander Meredith," Cassandra filled in, for the other two. "But, we are not in the Vimmarks. This is not Sundermount. Why is it here?"

"Blood magic and lyrium," Fen'Din said, after a moment. "I don't know about red lyrium, but blood magic and lyrium and bone, probably from a dragon, were how Hessian says the Fade was opened before the Blight. Canticle of Silence. And while I would never advise taking the Canticle of Silence too literally..." He let go of one of Adaar's horns to gesture to the red lyrium crystals. "We definitely have sacrifice and lyrium."

"That was the height of the Tevinter Imperium!" Cassandra protested, horrified at the idea. "No one could do that now!"

"Someone may have tried," Cullen said, pointing up toward the breach, with the hand not clenched around his sword.

Adaar tried not to look up, tried not to think about what was hanging over their heads. This was so far above his paygrade. "We don't need to do any blood sacrifices to close the thing, do we?" he asked, only half joking. On his next swing, his sword got stuck halfway through the demon, and he paused to punch the creature before tearing it back out.

"Well, it won't be the first thing we try," Cullen assured him.

"Keep the sacrifice still," that memory-voice boomed as they ran on.

Then came another voice, a woman's voice. "Someone, help me!"

Cassandra faltered, only just barely bringing her shield up to block the claws aimed for her face. "That is Divine Justinia's voice!" she said, her own voice shaking.

"I don't like the sound of this," Cullen murmured, looking ill.

Green light spilled over them as they turned a corner, and finally they were there, at the bottom of the rubble, staring up at another pulsing rift. Justinia's voice called out to them again, begging for help.

Adaar flexed his wrist and turned his head slightly to address his passenger. "Think you can focus on closing that thing while I stab... the other things?"

"That sounds reasonable," Fen'Din said, eyeing the spirits around them. As they moved closer to the rift, he'd lost some, but the archers seemed to have solved that problem. A pity, really, but probably necessary. He might not be able to compete with the shrieking clamour pouring out of that hole and its demons.

Two more voices echoed through the wreckage in the temple.

"What's going on here?"
"Excuse me, do you know where--"

Cassandra's eyes settled on the elf and the qunari beneath him. "Those were your voices! Most Holy called out to you, but..."

Above them, the breach shifted and the spirits swirled. Divine Justinia hung in the air, in a flash of light. "Run while you can! Warn them!"

"We have intruders." A black swirl of flame sprouted red eyes. "Slay them!"

"You were there! Who attacked? And the Divine, is she...? Was this vision true? What are we seeing?" Cassandra demanded, rapid fire questions hammering out as the breach flashed and swirled blindingly above.

"I don't know, and now is not the time!" Fen'Din tried to keep himself balanced with one hand on Adaar's horns and stretched toward the smaller rift ahead of them with the other.

Adaar tried not to let himself be distracted by the balancing elf, had to trust him to get the job done as more demons spilled out of the rift. Arrows and magic flew overhead to meet the demons, and at any other moment, the display might have been festive. Adaar appreciated them, regardless, shattering a frozen demon with a great swing of his sword. He had to remind himself not to headbutt anything while there was an elf on his shoulders.

He could feel the build-up of power above his head, the mark on his hand flickering and stinging in sympathy before flaring brightly, and the force of that connection snapping sent Adaar staggering a few steps. He held one of the elf's knees to keep him in place.

"I don't think it's closed," Cullen said, eyes wide as the rift, rather than sealing shut and fading away, widened and spat out a demon larger than the ones they had been fighting, a towering, angry Pride demon. "In fact, I think that is the opposite of closed."

"Elf, what did you do?" Adaar asked uncertainly as the spiny demon turned in their direction.

"I was going to ask you the same," Fen'Din replied, gazing into the rift in unperturbed confusion.

"I don't think it's closed," Cullen said, eyes wide as the rift, rather than sealing shut and fading away, widened and spat out a demon larger than the ones they had been fighting, a towering, angry Pride demon. "In fact, I think that is the opposite of closed."

"I was going to ask you the same," Fen'Din replied, gazing into the rift in unperturbed confusion.

As the demon's roar drew the attention of the outer edge of the chorus, he stopped trying to calm the beast -- useless with Cullen and Cassandra hacking at its legs -- and lashed out with a hex he hadn't used in decades, his decision reflected instantly, as the demon stumbled and caught a talon on its own chest, ichor fountaining from it. On the next strike, Cassandra tripped the demon, and Cullen laid a smite on it, as it tried to cast something that raised the hair on the back of his neck.

"Close the rift!" Cassandra shouted over the howling of the demon and the omnipresent chiming of the chorus.

"Yes, that is the idea," Fen'Din retorted, hand still raised toward it. The hole pulled at him, like it might draw him in again, but he held firm to Adaar's horns and pulled back. Like closing a bag by the strings, he thought, except that there were irate spirits trying to hold the bag open.

"Just... keep trying," Adaar said, unsure what else to suggest while there was a massive demon trying to squash the humans underfoot. It barely seemed to feel the arrows, shaking off a sheet of ice like it was nothing. Adaar darted around behind the demon while Cullen and Cassandra distracted it, finding a soft spot between ridges at the back of its knee and making a clean cut, forcing the towering creature onto one knee, closer to his level. The other knee went next.

All the while, Adaar's mark kept flickering and flaring, the ache making it harder to grip his sword
properly. "Whatever you're doing back there is making my hand unhappy," he said over his shoulder, shaking out his hand before joining Cullen and Cassandra in finishing off the Pride demon.

"Bring your hand up here and help me with this," Fen'Din suggested. "There's something wrong with this one, and I can't get it to--"

The rift suddenly flickered out of existence, a searing path of green energy arcing between where it had been and Fen'Din's hand. The spirits pressed closer as he suddenly twisted back and nearly toppled off Adaar's shoulders.

"Or don't. It's... well, this one's closed, but I don't know about that one." Fen'Din stared up into the swirling, green sky. "Something's..."

He glanced at the spirit beside him -- Strength, maybe? -- and then saw nothing.

"Fen'Din?" Cullen asked, walking towards them as he saw the elf start to slip, then running when the qunari keeled over too. "Adaar!"
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Awkward situations, all around, Cullen in the midst of most.

Anders shook the last few drops of a stamina potion onto his tongue. He was wrung out, exhausted, but when Cullen trotted in, he stood up to meet him. The look of guilt on Cullen’s face had Anders fearing the worst.

"The rift at the temple has been closed," Cullen said, opening with the entirely wrong set of information. "However, the breach is--"

"Where's Fen'Din?"

"Ah. Yes. They're wheeling in him and Adaar as we speak. Alive," Cullen was quick to add. "Closing the rift rendered them both unconscious. We are unsure what happened. Well, expect for the part where Adaar fell on Fen'Din's already injured leg. That we are sure of."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Cullen," Anders groaned, rubbing one hand over his eyes as Justice pressed against the inside of his skull. "Do we have any Nevarran roast? Go and find me a cup of coffee and some more lyrium potions. And a blanket. Because as soon as I'm sure they're not going to die or do anything else I'm going to regret, I am taking a nap. I'm not thirty any more. I can't do non-stop disaster recovery, alone, for three days straight." He yawned. "Well, no. I can, but I really would rather not, if I can help it."

"Look, Anders, I ... I have to ask you something." Cullen rubbed an ichor-stained gauntlet over his face and sighed. "It's going to bother me if I don't. The last time I saw you, there was a giant fireball and the entire Kirkwall Chantry fell into a hole. This time--"

He didn't step out of the way fast enough, and Anders's fist caught him full in the cheek.

"HOW DARE YOU?" Justice boomed, and Anders struggled to convince himself that letting Justice have this one wasn't the best choice. "THOUSANDS DIED HERE IN AN INCOMPARABLE SACRIFICE FOR SOME DARK PURPOSE. IS THIS WHAT YOU EXPECT OF ME?"

"Of course not!" Cullen said, backing away and cupping his bruising cheek. He resisted the instinctive reaction to reach for his sword or a smite. "But the parallels are just... I had to ask." When Anders's eyes continued to burn blue, Cullen blew out a sigh and added, "For the Maker's sake, if I had actually believed that, do you think I would have just waltzed up and asked you?" He paused to flex his aching jaw. "And also, ow."

Justice still simmered, but he let Anders reel him in. The blue left his eyes, and Anders sagged, returned to his tired self. "Now you definitely owe me that Nevarran roast," he sighed.

Cullen nodded, some of the tenseness leaving his shoulders. "I'll see what I can do."

Anders called him back when Cullen turned to leave. "Wait. Let me see your face." His hand glowed blue, but with healing, not Justice.
"I suppose it's a face worth seeing more than once," Cullen teased, a crooked smile lifting his cheek under Anders's hand. Healing washed over him, taking away the ache and replacing it with warmth, soothing other minor aches he'd incurred in the battle. "Thank you."

"Just don't make me punch you again."

"Let me tell you, it's nice to have some real healers around," the apothecary said, as Solas scratched out instructions for a very specific potion and Anders nicked another lyrium potion for himself. "I'm damned tired of dealing with people who can't just come in, buy a potion, and leave."

Anders laughed, tiredly. "You're going to love me, then. I can handle the blood and guts as long as you can keep me supplied. And thanks for that. We wouldn't have been able to save so many people without you out here brewing non-stop."

"Saved me the trouble of administering it." The apothecary chuckled and turned down the flame under a copper pot.

"Adan, do you think you can get royal elfroot?" Solas asked, looking up from his writing. "I need something that will last."

"Not around here." Adan shook his head. "It's too damned cold up here, for that. I've got a little prophet's laurel, if that'd help."

"Embrium and prophet's laurel can probably be used to substitute, don't you think?" Anders glanced over Solas's shoulder at the list.

"We'll have to try it. Unfortunately, the herbs once used by my people were mostly lost to the Blights, so although I know some things that would likely help with this ... unusual situation, I don't know if we can actually produce them." Solas blinked and shrugged, offering an irritated smile.

"'Unusual situation'," Anders repeated with a tired laugh. "We're not even sure what the situation is, entirely. How can we treat what we don't understand?" He wiped a hand over his face. He was no longer used to working these long hours, and it was starting to take its toll.

"We have some information," Solas assured him. "Just not all of it. What we have here is a start."

Anders wanted to say that wasn't good enough, but he knew Solas was right. The mark was killing both of them, Fen'Din and Adaar, and they were running out of time. "I'm still not entirely sure what's hurting them," Anders said. "Around the mark, I don't see much physical damage."

"Not yet," Solas replied, looking down the page one more time before he passed it to Adan. "It's going to happen, as the mark spreads. Still, I'm hoping we can control it, contain it. I don't know that it can be fixed. I do know it should've been instantly fatal, and I'm truly uncertain how either of them survived."

"Then what is it?" Anders demanded, Justice's glow flickering to life around his hands as he gestured exasperatedly.

"Theoretically? It looks as though when they came in to the ritual meant to tear the Veil, one or both of them managed to get a hand in. They touched something that was being used and the opening breach scarred them, too. It isn't just the sky that has been opened." Solas shook his head and shrugged, still smiling, faintly.

"So... No, it's not a rift. If it was a rift, they'd be covered in demons. Or possessed," Anders argued,
pouring the contents of Adan's copper pot into a nearby beaker and topping it with half a stamina potion. "Karl, if you can see me now, I'm a hypocrite and I know it," he muttered, taking a long swig.

"It's not a rift. It's the magic that created the rifts. I'm not sure how, but it's embedded itself into their bodies." Solas eyed the beaker with unrestrained disgust. "That would be why they can control the rifts -- close the rifts."

"Not even in the height of the Imperium--" Anders started, voice thin and sharp with frustration.

"I have reason to suspect the magic used predates the Imperium by a very long time."

Cullen had a hard time sitting in his chair. He hated the waiting, hated the helplessness, but Fen'Din and Adaar were taking their precious time waking up. There was only so much time he could spend listening to their breathing before he had to get up and pace.

"If you're trying to wake them up with your stomping, it doesn't seem to be working." At the other half of the room sat Kinnon, cheek propped up on his hand as he occasionally dozed.

And that was something else that bothered Cullen. He knew the man, had been able to match a face to a name, but there was something about looking at him that made Cullen feel uncomfortable. That wasn't an instinct Cullen was about to ignore, but he wasn't sure what to do with it either.

"And you keep staring. I thought you had free mages in Kirkwall," Kinnon teased, tipping his head back to yawn. "Unless it's my stunning Fereldan good looks, in which case you're out of luck. I've got enough Templar to last me a long time."

Cullen watched Kinnon stretch and yawn, that expression reminding him of-- "Oh. I-- That is-- You're--!

"Tall? Handsome? On fire?" Kinnon looked down at himself. "I'd better not be on fire."

"With Solona..." Cullen cleared his throat and stared at the ceiling as the flush spread across his cheeks and ran down his neck.

"I was wondering how long it would take you to figure it out. That or I thought you'd gotten over it." Kinnon snorted and yawned again.

"... In my defence, you look different with pants on." Cullen muttered.

"I'm still not wearing pants, Cullen. It's just a different cut of robe."

"You're wearing more of it!" Cullen groaned and turned away. "I'm just going to stand over here and look at things that aren't you."

Kinnon laughed, watching Cullen in amazement. "I heard you were married. I'd have thought you'd gotten over this, by now. Aren't you like... thirty and banging the Viscount of Kirkwall, now?"

"Consider that I walked in on you having sex with my husband's cousin. It's a bit awkward." Cullen watched the door, instead of the patients, hoping someone would come through it. "But, you and a Templar, now? Really? Do they allow that in Hossberg?"

"I'm not living in Hossberg," Kinnon said, and Cullen caught the shift in tone, mildly defensive. "And there are... some things Peryn doesn't need to know just yet." This time it was Kinnon who
avoided looking at Cullen.

"You mean he doesn't know you're a mage?" Cullen blurted before he took a step back, reining himself in. He rubbed the bridge of his nose, thinking of how things had started between him and Anton, how many secrets Anton and his family had kept from him. Yet, even though those secrets had come with reasonable justifications, they had all stung. "The longer you keep that a secret, the harder it's going to be."

Kinnon's laugh was bitter. "I don't think there's any point at which that would go over well."

"I think you're right," Cullen agreed, with a pointed look. "Still, how does he not know?"

Kinnon shrugged. "Beer, runes, and some really good luck. I thought I was done for, when he dropped that smite on all of us, but half the village flinched. I think he doesn't want to know. Please don't tell him, Cullen. I know it'll come out eventually, but it's better if he finds out from me. I wasn't planning on any of this, but maybe if I save his life from rampaging demons, it'll go over a little better."

"Having been saved from rampaging demons by a mage I cared quite a bit for, let me tell you it doesn't help at all." Cullen snorted and rubbed the back of his neck, feeling another headache starting on top of the one he had. "And I already knew she was a mage, too."

"For what it's worth, I had some second thoughts about Solona's decision to save you, but they've mostly passed given what I've heard about Kirkwall. Mostly. You scared the shit out of some poor kids half my age." Kinnon caught Cullen's gaze and held it.

"I was wrong. I hope I'm less wrong, now." Cullen looked away. "This is what I'm afraid of, with these rifts. That what happened to me is going to happen to other people, and we'll never see the changes from Kirkwall enacted anywhere else, because everyone's going to be terrified of mages, because of demons. The things I saw in Kirkwall... you don't even need a mage."

"Sometimes you don't even need a demon," Kinnon muttered, "but they certainly don't help."
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Kinnon and Peryn decide to enjoy the quiet, while they wait for Adaar and Fen'Din to wake. Which they do. Suddenly.

Kinnon tried not to think too much about Cullen's words. They weren't really all that different from what Kinnon kept telling himself, but somehow, from the mouth of a Templar, they had sounded more damming. They were also distracting in moments like now, with Kinnon pinned to the wall by another Templar, his Templar, the scrape of stubble rough against his neck.

Adaar and Fen'Din were still as motionless as the dead, and Kinnon doubted they would mind that he had found a way to break the monotony of watching them. Or that Peryn had. Peryn often had good ideas.

The end table wobbled as they knocked against it, and Peryn stilled long enough to make sure they hadn't knocked anything over. "I am not going out for more coffee," Peryn said, teasingly scolding. "Let us try not to knock it over." Not that the coffee would be anything but cold by the time they got to it.

"Oh, I'm sure you'll find another way to keep me warm," Kinnon teased, sliding his hands under the layers of fur Peryn wore over his robes, to stay warm in the inhospitable climate of a Ferelden winter. "Look at all this fur! That's definitely warm."

Peryn could feel the chill of Kinnon's hands, through his robes. "And you are not. I thought it was just your nose, but you are cold all over! It will take much more than just coffee to warm you." He shouldered his cloak forward to drape along Kinnon's sides, providing warm air before he tugged up the bottom of Kinnon's robes until he could reach taut thigh muscle, bare-handed. "I know you are from Ferelden, but this seems a bit much. You are wearing nearly nothing in all this cold!"

Kinnon laughed and tipped his head back against the wall, giving Peryn room to get closer under his chin. "Nearly nothing, and you're still taking it off me. But, you're warm. I didn't have that in--" 'in the tower', he almost said. "-- the last time I was in Ferelden. Just cold stone and a crap blanket."

"I do not think crap is a good thing to make a blanket with," Peryn joked, kneading Kinnon's legs.

Kinnon's laugh was a huff of breath across Peryn's cheek. "This is true. Especially Fereldan dog crap. Keeps you warm, but at what cost?"

Kinnon pulled Peryn as close as space would allow, trying to hook a leg around Peryn's without knocking them both over or dislodging the cloak. The end table wobbled again, but this time Peryn didn't spare it a glance. Skin warmed skin as Peryn hiked Kinnon's robes higher, his hands finding Kinnon's ass and making sure it was thoroughly warmed as well.

Yes, Cullen's words were distracting, but Peryn was good at being distracting too. He was also good at leaving stubble burn behind on Kinnon's neck, but Kinnon didn't mind that in the moment.

Tugging at Peryn's robes, Kinnon eventually found more warm skin to press himself against, which
almost made up for the chill of the wall behind him. "This is definitely better than any of the options I had the last time I was in Ferelden," he breathed, dizzily, knowing he was very lucky Candles wasn't there to hear him.

"I would not wish to see a Fereldan winter with anything less than a great heap of furs and a handsome Fereldan to share them with. It is good I have both these things."

As Peryn's hand slipped between his legs, cupping and gently squeezing, Kinnon wondered if that warm hand would still be on him, if Peryn knew he was a mage. He chased the thought away, before it could ruin the mood, and wrapped his somewhat less chilly fingers around Peryn's knob, which had clearly taken an interest in the proceedings far sooner than his own. Kinnon would blame the cold -- that was probably even accurate.

"See?" Kinnon purred, pressing into Peryn's quickly warming fingers. "Who needs coffee, when I have you to keep me warm?" He tried to focus on those fingers, on what was happening now rather than what could happen then. He had never expected anything permanent anyway, he reminded himself.

"Can you not have both?" Peryn teased, if a bit breathlessly. Kinnon could feel his shaky breaths against the side of his neck.

"Well, not at the same time," Kinnon replied without really focusing on the words. "That would get messy." Words were, he decided, overrated compared to touch, but that didn't stop them from pouring out of his mouth.

"Well, you could. We could. But, I think it would need dwarfwork." There was more air than sound, but Peryn's humour came through easily.

"We should bathe in it. A hot pool of Cumberland roast, and you and me in it." Kinnon started to drift out into the overwhelming sensation of warmth, fur, and Peryn's hands on his skin. "I'd lick it off you. I wish I could. I wish I could taste you, put my tongue on your skin, nibble at your lips, suck on your tongue. I wish I could lick the sweat from right here." His free hand traced a damp line down Peryn's neck. "I want that. I want you. I'll find a way--"

A loud, irritated groan from the direction of the beds interrupted him. "Shut up, Roundear! I'm trying to sleep! Do that later, so I can draw it!"

Peryn leapt back, crashing into the table and knocking the coffee onto the floor, but not the potions, as he pulled his cloak tight around himself and tried to pretend he hadn't just been trying to figure out how much more he could take off without getting a chill. As the coffee splashed across the floor, he shot a horrified look at Kinnon, whom he'd left half-bare and leaning on the wall and was now struggling to pull his robes, caught on his knob, down to cover himself.

A second, less coherent groan came from the other bed as Adaar shifted, horns catching on his pillow. He sat up groggily, blinking at the two men scrambling to cover themselves. He looked down.

"Why is there coffee on the floor?" he asked, voice rough.

"Haha!" Kinnon said a bit too loudly, still plucking at his robes to straighten them. "What coffee? There is no coffee! And we're not here either! You are dreaming, and this is the Fade!"

"What does that make you?" Adaar drawled. "The Demon of Bad Lying?" He eyed the bundle of fur until it stopped rustling, only then certain that there was, in fact, a man underneath it. "I don't
want to know what kind of demon he is."

"That makes me getting the fuck out of here, and taking the desire demon with me." Kinnon grinned awkwardly, grabbing the cups and herding Peryn toward the door, which swung open just in time to catch Peryn's shoulder.

"That seemed quite a bit of noise for two unconscious people," Solas observed with a wry smile at the blushing duo. "Have they woken?"

"Just now. Just coming to get you. And Jan. Definitely Jan," Kinnon sputtered, trying to figure out how to untangle the door from Solas and Peryn so he could exit the building more quickly. "Coffee. I'm just getting coffee."

"There's already coffee. I can smell it." Fen'Din accused from the bed, a pillow pressed firmly over his face. "And bring eggs! Eggs and honey and those murder peppers you can't eat."

"If you can't eat them...?" Solas started, but Kinnon cut him off.

"No, I can't eat them. He eats them just fine."

"I like them, a little bit," Peryn admitted. "Did we bring any?"

"I don't know, but now's a great time to find out. I'm going to go get Anders. And death peppers. And coffee." Kinnon finally managed to wrest the door free of the tangle of people around it and burst out into the snow, warm mist gathering around him in the cold air.

Adaar never did see any of the promised death peppers. After the healers were finished poking and prodding at them, Cullen dropped in before they had a moment of rest.

"It is good to see you both awake," he said. "You had us terribly worried for a few days."

Adaar suspected he was more referring to the strange elf, who seemed to know so many of the people here, but he could appreciate the thought. "Good to be awake," he said, "despite what I woke to, anyway."

"If Kinnon was involved, I am sure I don't want to know the details," Cullen said, grimacing and shaking his head. "Anyway, I am here to take you both to Cassandra. She seemed adamant that you come see her right away."

Fen'Din picked up another boiled egg, rolling it between his palms and then quickly peeling it, as he spoke. "She honestly believes she's in charge here, doesn't she?"

"She has a large sword and a short temper, so in effect, she is," Cullen pointed out, with a stern look.

"I've met worse. I survived you, didn't I?" Fen'Din stuffed the entire egg in his mouth, before getting out of bed to find something more substantial to wear than the linen nightrobes he and Adaar had been changed into at some point. A faint clinking sound could be heard as he stood and made his way to the chest on the other side of the room.

"That is hardly even relevant. I am not--! I was not--!" Cullen sputtered, knowing even as he did that Fen'Din had seen the worst of him.

"You were. You seem much calmer, now." Fen'Din crouched to open the chest, and the sound of metal on metal could be heard again. "I hope there's something worth wearing, in here. What
"What, this?" Fen'Din asked, twitching his hips as he pulled the robes over his head and then reached for the belt. The chiming became muffled as the cloth settled. "Oh, I had to prove my worth to an Avvar tribe, somewhere along the journey. I wonder if we're anywhere near Hawk Hold, here. I might want to drop in and see how they're doing, while I'm stuck in the freezing mountains of legend. Can't let my people get eaten by demons because I didn't drop in for drinks."

Adaar made a small, high-pitched sound of pain. "You did that on purpose?" He stared at the tiny elf in something between amazement and concern. "I suddenly have a newfound fear and respect for elves."

"He'll keep reinforcing that fear part the longer you know him," Cullen said. "Though mostly of just him, not elves in general."

Adaar reached into the chest next, just grabbing up the first thing that fit him, plus a long jacket he was surprised fit over his arms.

"Thank you for not jingling too," Cullen drawled as he led them out into the street.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

The Inquisition is reborn!

The sun was bright, reflecting off the thin sheet of snow that still covered the ground in wide patches, and the air was sharp in a way it only was in winter. Cullen led them down the road, nodding in greeting to those they passed, though Adaar noticed their stares lingering long after.

"Ah, good, here's Adan," Cullen tipped his chin toward the bearded man lurking at the edge of the crowd. "He's the one who made all those potions and the coffee."

"I'll have to tell the elf he was right about the substitutions," Adan remarked, nodding as they passed him. "Tall and crazy's gonna be happy you're finally awake. I finally had to sneak a sleeping draught into his tea. He'll be up later."

"Have you seen Harritt?" Cullen asked, glancing around at the crowd.

"Harritt's up talking to Threnn, last I saw. She's trying to rally everything we can pull together in a hurry to put weapons in people's hands and armour on their backs. We don't have an army, here -- we've just got a bunch of terrified merchants and some people lucky enough not to have gotten a seat at the main event, but if whoever or whatever did that comes back to finish the job..." Adan shrugged and shook his head. "Well, it'll probably succeed, whether or not she gets her requisitions, but I'd like to think we'd at least look good dying if she does."

"Remember: death is not the end -- it's merely a transition between one point and another. It's change, not an ending, but what an investment to leave behind..." Fen'Din attempted a smile, though it wasn't one of his best.

Adan offered him a weak smile, as if unsure whether that was supposed to be comforting. "That's one way to put it," he said. "Anyway, I believe I saw them up closer to the gates not too long ago."

"Thank you, Adan," Cullen said, dipping his head respectfully. "Keep up the good work."

"I always do," he said, waving them on.

People were lining the streets now, just to stare and whisper as they walked past. It was getting harder to pretend they weren't there.

"Is there a parade happening no one told me about?" Adaar asked, looking around.

"Apparently they think we are," Cullen drawled. "Or you two, more specifically."

They must have made quite the sight, the towering qunari with the slight elf in enchanter's robes, with matching glowing hands.

"Well, we did just save them from a horde of demons," Fen'Din reasoned, raising his non-glowing hand in greeting, as they passed yet more people. "I don't remember leaving the temple. Is the rest of the team all right? Did the archers come out uninjured?"
"Anders and... Mack are fine. Most of the archers, too, except a few who are having the worst nightmares. I can't blame them. Varric's... well, Varric. Have you met him before? And then there's Solas, who I understand we are to thank for your recovery, though I have no end of questions about how he seems to know so much about something we all thought impossible." Cullen shook his head and sighed. "Every time I think I understand the world... He's fine, too. Or if he's not, only the healers know."

"That's good." Fen'Din nodded, eyeing a woman arguing with a large man over a table full of paperwork held down with rocks. "So, who is this Harritt?"

"Harritt's a blacksmith. The man does good work, and now that you're standing, you'll want to go get fitted for something before you wade back into demons." Cullen pointed to the man in the argument. "That's him, there. And the other one's Threnn, our quartermaster. She's... got some unpopular politics, particularly where Harritt's concerned. She stood with Loghain right to the end, and she'll say it even now. Harritt's village was destroyed in the first surge after Ostagar. She thinks he's holding out on her, because he hates Loghain -- which, to be entirely fair, he does, and with good reason, but the problem is she's asking for the impossible, and even I know it. I'd let Cassandra deal with her, but as far as she's concerned Cassandra's Orlesian." He threw his hands up.

"Sounds like a headache," Adaar said, committing their faces to memory. "Now, what was this about wading back into demons? I thought we were done with the demons."

"Ah," Cullen said, rubbing the back of his neck as he led them up the hill. "Well, the breach is still open. It has stopped growing, like I said, but it's still there, still causing rifts and wreaking havoc. I suspect that is what Cassandra wishes to talk to you about."

Right. Because there were demons, and apparently only he and the crazy elf were equipped to plug the leaks in the Veil. It wasn't like he could just pack up and say, "no thanks". These people didn't have another option. "This was supposed to be a quick, easy commission," Adaar sighed.

"Come on, what's a few more demons?" Cullen asked, putting on a grin. "Didn't I hear you bragging in the tavern about taking down a dragon?"

Adaar straightened. "Yes. Yes, I did."

"The legends say dragons once ruled the skies," Fen'Din opined, whipping open one door of the chantry with his glowing hand. "What might they know, if we could only speak to them? Tevinter once spoke to them, but took them as gods. That is rarely a wise decision. So many things are warped by the desire for greatness, and even by the desire of others to be led. Still, I hope to meet a dragon, some day."

"Having also fought a dragon, I feel that I should point out the beast was incoherent and tried to eat both me and Varric, as well as the others we were travelling with. That said, they make for some excellent steaks." Cullen chuckled and followed Fen'Din in, taking the lead as they approached the room at the end of the corridor, from which shouting could be heard through the heavy wooden door. "Give it up, Roderick," he muttered, reaching for that door.

"Chain them!" Roderick commanded, as the door swung open, and he could see the glowing-handed duo. "I want them prepared for travel to the capital for trial."

"And I want a villa on the Fields of Ghislain," Cassandra retorted. "We can't always have what we want. Disregard that, Ser Cullen."

"I'd intended to." Cullen admitted, letting the other two enter before him, in the hope that anyone
attempting to enforce Roderick's wishes would have to get through him and the doorway, first.

Roderick's lips pursed like he had tasted something sour. "You walk a dangerous line, Seeker," he said with an imperiousness he wasn't quite pulling off.

Cassandra met his irritation with her own cold stare. "The breach is stable, but it is still a threat," she said, walking right up into his space until he took a tiny step backwards. "I will not ignore it."

"Bit hard to ignore something like that," Adaar said, scratching at the corner of his jaw as he turned to Roderick. "Or at least, not as easy to ignore as the fact that Crazy and me nearly died trying to close the thing. If you want us to prove our loyalty, I'm really not sure how we could top that. Short of actually dying, that is, which, sorry, but you're not worth it."

"But you didn't die," Roderick said, and it was the first time Cullen had ever seen a human try to look down their nose at a qunari. Roderick was just setting himself up for neck pain, later. "Terribly convenient, don't you think?"

Adaar blinked down at him. "Well... yes, I do generally find living convenient. You, on the other hand, I find annoying."

"Have a care, Chancellor. The breach is not the only threat we face," Cassandra cut in, face as firm as her blade.

"Someone was behind the explosion at the Conclave. Someone Most Holy did not expect," Leliana explained, making her way around the desk to do so directly to Roderick's face.

"Well, I'm not sure she was expecting either of us, but we're still not responsible," Fen'Din offered, patting at his waist and realising he'd left all his gear wherever it had been put when Anders took it off him. Which meant he had neither a sketchbook nor any jerky.

"Still, your survival does not implicate you as firmly as Roderick would like to think. The responsible party may have died with the others -- or have allies who yet live." Leliana's gaze hardened, and she leaned accusingly toward Roderick.

"I am a suspect?" Roderick looked amazed, then offended, as he breathed in, puffing his chest like a threatened bird.

"Well, you have conveniently been attempting to seize power since almost immediately after the explosion. It doesn't look good." Cullen offered a shrug and a faintly grim smile.

"You and many others," Leliana said, diplomatically.

"But not the prisoner?" Roderick huffed.

"I heard the voices in the temple," Cassandra said, as much to the others as to Roderick. "The Divine called to them for help." There was something dangerously close to awe in her voice.

"Voices?" Roderick scoffed. "That's what we're basing this off of?"

"I heard them too," Cullen said, stepping to the other side of Roderick so that he and Cassandra flanked him. Roderick looked between them nervously. "If you think it's a delusion, it is a shared one."

"So their survival," Roderick snapped, stepping back from them both, "those marks on their hands -- all a coincidence?" He all but spat the last word.
"Providence," Cassandra corrected with a conviction Adaar wished he felt. "The Maker sent them to us in our darkest hour."

Adaar didn't quite manage to choke back a laugh, though he tried to turn it into a cough when Cassandra's stare fell on him. "You honestly think the Maker sent us? A Vashoth and an elf?" He gestured with a thumb between him and Fen'Din.

"The Maker does as He wills," Cassandra said with a shrug. "It is not for me to say. Humans are not the only ones with an interest in the fate of the world."

"That's the most reasonable thing I've heard all day," Fen'Din said, with a glance at Adaar. "That may not be saying much considering how the day started."

"The breach remains, and those marks are still our only hope of closing it," Leliana pointed out.

"That is not for you to decide!" Roderick declared, his shoulders rising as he made a grand gesture of negation with his arms.

Cassandra slammed a book on the table. "Do you know what this is, Chancellor?"

"If it's the next Hard in Hightown, Ser Peryn's going to want to borrow it," Fen'Din joked, reaching again for the sketchbook that wasn't there.

Cassandra went on as though he had said nothing, stabbing the book with a finger. "This is a writ from the Divine, granting us the authority to act." She stood back, squared her shoulders, and proclaimed, "As of this moment, I declare the Inquisition reborn."

Adaar understood from the faces around him that this was a great pronouncement, but he leaned towards Fen'Din and asked in a loud whisper, "The what?"

"I sincerely hope she's joking," Fen'Din replied. "The Inquisition were merciless mage-hunters, according to the histories."

"Oh," said Adaar, still in that loud whisper. "That does not sound very nice."

"That is not the goal of this Inquisition," Cassandra assured them. "We will close the breach, we will find those responsible, and we will restore order." She tossed a glare at Roderick. "With or without your approval."

Adaar wondered if she had been rehearsing this speech.

Roderick's face turned red with anger, but he clamped his jaw shut and stormed out the door. Probably the smartest thing he'd done all day. When the door slammed behind him, Cassandra's steely confidence slipped, shoulders slumping as she sighed, reaching up to rub the back of her neck.

"This is the Divine's directive:" Leliana explained, gesturing to the book, "Rebuild the Inquisition of old. Find those who will stand against the chaos. We aren't ready. We have no leader, no numbers, and now no Chantry support."

"But, we have no choice; we must act now, with you at our side." Cassandra spoke firmly, but the way she swayed from foot to foot revealed she was just as unsure.

"What exactly do you intend to achieve with this?" Fen'Din asked, eyes sharp, spell lingering at his fingertips as a few skeletal mice scurried out of the walls to gather around his feet. "The Divine could not have known what we face, unless she was complicit in her own death. And yet, she left orders
"The Inquisition preceded the Chantry. People who banded together to restore order in a world gone mad," Leliana explained without explaining anything.

"After, they laid down their banner and formed the Templar Order. But, the Templars have lost their way," Cassandra filled in.

"Well, I'm glad we can agree on that, though I think it's more than just 'lost their way' at this point." Fen'Din jabbed a finger at Cullen. "I know you know exactly what I'm talking about. I know you saw what happened down there."

"I was too young to be of any help," Cullen said, quietly, "but I do know, and I will not stand for it in Kirkwall. I would not stand for it anywhere, now that I can stop it."

"And that is why he is here with us. We need those who can do what must be done united under a single banner, once more," Cassandra went on.

"All right," said Adaar, running a hand back over one of his horns. "You want us to close rifts and kill demons, I can understand that. But it sounds to me like you just dragged me -- dragged us -- into something political." He glanced back at the door through which Roderick had left. "I don't much like being used as a pawn, particularly to the Chantry."

Cassandra laughed weakly and gestured at that same door. "Does that seem like we're part of the Chantry?"

"The Chantry will take time to find a new Divine," Leliana explained. "And then it will wait for her direction."

"But we cannot wait," Cassandra, leaping onto Leliana's words. "So many grand clerics died at the Conclave. No, we are on our own. Perhaps forever."

"You need to work on your recruitment pitch," Adaar said. "So, you're not the Chantry, but you more or less want to take over its duties. I can't imagine the Chantry being thrilled with that, even if they're leaderless right now."

"Because this isn't going to end in an Exalted March!" Fen'Din cast an exasperated look at Cullen, or thought he did, until he realised he'd forgotten to move his face. Well, he'd looked at Cullen, anyway. "You know what happened after the last schism, and Ferelden is a great deal closer than Tevinter. Add the animosity of the last century, and you're going to start a war. A holy war, of exactly the sort Calenhad was trying to hold off by allowing the Chantry into Ferelden in the first place."

"We are already at war," Cassandra insisted. "You are already involved. Its mark is upon you. As to whether it is a holy war... that depends on what we discover."

"And what if we tell you that you can go fuck yourselves, and set off to solve this problem without the hand of the Maker lingering over our every decision?" Fen'Din asked, eyes meeting Cassandra's. "I think I speak for us both when I say we are not Andrastian."

"You may go if you wish," Leliana was quick to assure them.

"You should know that while some believe you chosen, others still think you guilty," Cassandra warned. "The Inquisition can only protect you if you are with us."
"We can also help you," Leliana offered.

"Your help sounds a lot like coercion," Adaar grumbled, arms folded across his chest. The small elf, for all his craziness, had spoken well.

Cassandra sighed, her demeanour softening into something closer to pleading. "It will not be easy if you stay," she admitted, "but you cannot pretend this has not changed you."

"Changed me into a mercenary who's not taking any more Chantry contracts," Adaar replied. He blew out a sigh and rubbed his forehead between his horns. For all his grouding, he knew when he was backed into a corner. A Tal Vashoth was already rarely welcome in these lands.

"The plan is just to restore order," Cullen assured them. "Close rifts, kill demons... maybe resolve some of the Mage-Templar issue where the Chantry itself has failed."

Adaar didn't know why he should care about mages or Templars.

"Help us fix this," Cassandra begged, "before it's too late."

"I will fix this, because it must be done. The lord of this place has been overthrown, and whether or not we have enjoyed our time in this kingdom, what I see is only worse, if we cannot take hold of this place for ourselves and wrench it away from the demon lords. In time, perhaps we, too, will become demons, but for now let it not be said I refused to undertake such a sacrifice for the good of this kingdom." Fen'Din drew up his shoulders and reached again for things he wasn't carrying. "I do not trust you, but if you are what I must take on to see this through, so be it. I cannot speak for Adaar, but I will be the lord this kingdom needs to hold itself together, until I turn and I must be struck down. Everyone turns, in the end. It is why the Maker is impossible."

He raised his eyes to Adaar. "Do you wish to assist in stabilising the boundaries of this kingdom, once held by demons, and securing it for those who live in it, or shall I be of assistance in getting you off this mountain before someone decides you're responsible for this disaster?"

"I... what?" Adaar sputtered, still trying to piece together what Fen'Din had said. Beyond him, Cassandra was giving Cullen her own confused look, and Cullen just shook his head and motioned for her not to ask. Adaar ran his hand over one of his horns again, pressing his thumb against the tip. "I think you're asking about the rifts, and just... sure." Adaar threw up his hands in defeat. "I'm apparently exactly one of two people who can do this, and leaving it just to you is... well, it would be interesting, I'm sure, but not really fair, I guess."

Behind Fen'Din, Cullen nodded.

"I don't know what the fuck we're inquisiting, but fine," Adaar went on. "It's not like it can get crazier than this, right?"
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Bees, mice, and elves! An introduction to the weirder shit.

"Does it matter?" Fen'Din asked, stretching muslin in a barrel, while bees crawled all over him. "You believe this is a place separate to the Fade. I believe we are within the Fade. Either way, there is a concerted assault on the place -- what we have come to think of as 'our' world -- by some powerful demon lord and its thousands of minions. No one has seen to the reinforcement of the defences of this kingdom in so long that I do not even know how that would be accomplished, and now we are paying for having lost that knowledge."

"You clearly have the essence of the situation well in hand, but I have wandered in the Fade and this is not it," Solas replied, fishing a bee out of his drink and holding it while it dried its wings. "You make the point, and it is true, that demons seek to overrun our home, but I may yet have a solution -- whether this is the Fade or the material plane, there once were wards meant to restrain the forces of the 'kingdom' now invading."

"I assume you have no idea where they are, or I expect we wouldn't be having this problem. You seem the sort driven by solutions." Fen'Din observed, picking up an auger and taking it to the lid of the barrel.

"Whose First were you?" came a voice from a short distance off, just far enough not to be beset with bees.

"First?" Fen'Din glanced over his shoulder to find an elven woman looking back at him.

"Your vallaslin. You were obviously old enough to get them, before the Circle. I heard you were a Senior Enchanter..." the woman trailed off.

"She thinks you're Dalish," Solas filled in.

"I'm only Dalish in the most technical sense. Halamshiral was the first city of the Dales, was it not?" Fen'Din tried to smile, aiming for reassuring or maybe apologetic. He missed both, but gestured at his face. "This is my own work. I'm dead, you see. We're all dead, but most people don't realise it. So, I marked myself like the followers of Falon'din, the Dalish god of the dead, so the demons couldn't make me forget."

"I... see," said the woman, looking like she wasn't sure if entering this conversation was the best idea. "It is good work, regardless. I never received my vallaslin." Her full lips twisted in an unhappy smile. "I am Minaeve, head creature researcher. I would shake your hand, but it is covered in bees."

Solas bit back a chuckle. "Your face is the better for it without vallaslin, I assure you. As your hand is probably better for it for not being covered in bees."

"In fairness, it has been covered in worse things, in my line of work," Minaeve said with a crooked smile, "which I hope will serve the Inquisition. My work, that is, not whatever my hands are covered in."
Behind her, Adaar walked by on the way to the tavern. He spared them a glance and kept walking, only to stop and turn to make sure he had seen what he thought he had. He stared at Fen'Din and the insects crawling all over him. He threw up his hands. "Bees?"

"There's not enough honey for the cooks, and if there's not enough for them, there's definitely not enough for me." Fen'Din gestured into the barrel with one arm, which returned with far fewer bees on it. "With honey and cream, I will have only the best lunches. And you, I suppose. If you want some. Can't do much about the cream, but I can always solve the honey problem."

"How did you get so many bees to follow you?" Minaeve asked, curiously, edging closer to the barrel.

"I didn't. I summoned them. I was always garbage at Creation, except for the summoning part. Much easier to work with things that are already there." Fen'Din studied the bees along his arms and then waved more of them into the barrel. "The mice, on the other hand. I was always good with the mice." A small group of skeletal rodents skittered around from the far side of the barrel. "Stability, Control, Humour, and... Common Sense, I believe. It answers to 'Sense'."

If pressed, Adaar would deny that he screeched at the sight of a line of undead rodents, but unfortunately for him, there were witnesses who could confirm that he did. Once he realized they were Fen'Din's, Adaar coughed and tried to regain his composure. "Okay, when you say 'mice', most people picture the ones with fur. 'Undead mice' would have been a more helpful descriptor."

"Those are interesting names for mice," Solas said knowingly, watching them scurry by, matching the names to each one.

"Perhaps." Fen'Din looked between Solas and Adaar, seeking some sort of meaning. "But, I'm not sure the distinction is all that meaningful, and 'Solas' is a strange name for an elf, isn't it?"

Minaeve blinked. "You've named them for virtues. Like spirits. But, if they're undead... Do wisps have virtue, or is this simply the odd humour of necromancers?"

"Wisps? You credit me with far more control of them than they would. These are spirits. They came out of the hole in the sky." Fen'Din crouched and extended a bee-covered hand to the mice, one of whom ran forward and carefully lifted a bee, gently patting it. "They just need someone to remind them of what they are. Our kingdom frightens them. They are not with me because I command them. They are with me because I reward their virtue with faith -- and it's easier for them not to forget, if they take native bodies to help them."

"But, necromancers work with wisps!" Minaeve looked a bit confused at the revelation. "Are you sure these are spirits? Can a mouse contain a whole spirit?"

"A cat can contain a demon, as we were displeased to learn," Fen'Din remarked, gesturing into the barrel and watching the mouse reluctantly release the bee. "I assure you, even the smallest thing is enough to offer the needed stability." One of the mice chittered. "Yes, you are. Which is why I needed your help. Thank you," he told it.

"Okay," said Adaar, rubbing his forehead. "So, not only are the mice actually undead mice, but they are possessed by spirits? And this just... They just follow you?" He looked around at the three elves. At least Minaeve still looked puzzled too.

One of the mice wandered over to Adaar, its skull twitching as though it were sniffing around him, and Adaar had to admit they were kind of cute in a creepy way. "I think it's safe to assume you're not Common Sense," he said to the mouse sniffing at his toes. He shifted his weight, and the mouse
skittered away again.

"I think they are curious about the mark on your hand," Solas said. "You smell like the Fade to them, if perhaps, not so much as Fen'Din."

"Great," Adaar sighed, glaring at his hand.

"I'd put this in my next book, but no one would ever believe me." Varric stopped on his way up to the chantry, a pint of ale in one hand and a loaf of stuffed bread in the other. "Elves and qunari gather together over dead rats and bees."

"They're mice, Varric. If they were rats, they'd be much bigger." Fen'Din continued to examine his arms for the correct bee. He was sure there was a queen somewhere in the swarm, and if he could just get her into the barrel... One of the mice climbed up the barrel and chittered, pointing at his shoulder. "Thank you, Control. I knew you'd be good at this."

"If my editor is crazy enough to let this into print, I'm quoting you," Varric threatened. "Herald of Andraste says, 'If they were rats, they'd be much bigger.'"

"I'm sure your readers also know the difference, particularly if they're living by the docks. You get rats by the docks and mice in the fields." Fen'Din crouched so the mouse could take the bee off his shoulder and run into the barrel with it. Most of the other bees followed.

"He's right," Minaeve said, after a moment. "And then there are the tower mice, which look like they've got stilts and these huge ears. I always wondered if they were left behind by Tevinter, but no one wanted to fund the research."

Adaar gave the dwarf a wry look. "Thank you, Varric, for reminding me what I was about to do before I got sidetracked by elves, bees, and mice: drink." He offered them all a salute and took off back down the road.

"I'd've thought the elves, bees, and mice would have been reminder enough," Varric drawled.
A couple of hours later, Adaar stumbled out of the tavern just to hear more talk of bees. "I clearly did not drink enough," he mumbled to himself and to the glowing mark on his hand, the mark he kept hoping would disappear if he ignored it for long enough. No luck this time.

"I understand that the... bees... are important," Cassandra was saying to Fen'Din as Adaar shuffled closer, half crouched in a battle posture as though she could stab the bees into submission. Then again, if anyone could, it was probably Cassandra. "But Lady Montilyet is allergic, so if we could please leave them out here while we meet with your advisors, I would greatly appreciate it."

"Is she allergic to undead mice, too?" Adaar asked, rubbing his ridged forehead.

"I hope not. That would make things unduly difficult." Fen'Din rose from where he sat, watching the makeshift hive. "Control, keep an eye on the bees for me. Just remember they'll only listen to the queen." He dusted himself off and gestured for Cassandra to lead.

"Are those marks causing the two of you any trouble?" Cassandra asked, as they came up on the Chantry.

"Trouble? I suppose it's a little disruptive when I'm drawing. The lighting is impossible, when everything is glowing green." Fen'Din gazed at the hole in his palm. "I suppose I'll get used to that."

Adaar stared down at the elf as they walked. Lighting. That was his main complaint. When Cassandra turned to him, he said, "It feels like there are tiny elves inside my hand trying to saw it off from the inside, but, you know. Yeah, the lighting is a pain. Fun to watch it move after a couple of shots, though."

Cassandra looked back and forth between them, looking every bit as concerned as she probably should. "Well, at least they are stable now," she said. "As is the breach. Closing the rift at the temple has bought us some time, and Solas believes a second attempt at closing the breach might succeed -- provided your marks have more power."

"How much 'power'?" Adaar asked warily.

"The same amount of power used to open the breach in the first place. That is not easy to come by."

"Not with the majority of the senior enchanters in southern Thedas dead, anyway," Fen'Din agreed, leaning back to make strange chirping sounds at something behind Cassandra's back. "I assume we'll be trying to avoid mass blood sacrifice, this time? I'd rather not have to wash the blood of thousands out of my robes."

"I can never tell if you're joking," Cassandra said, after a moment.

"The apprentices used to make bets about it." This time, Fen'Din remembered to smile, however
slightly.

Cassandra made an exasperated sound and hauled open the door to the war room. "You know Commander Cullen, obviously."

"You look ill, Ser Cullen," Fen'Din pointed out.

"I just need a nap, but I'll take another cup of Cumberland roast with elfroot sprinkled on it." Cullen laughed wryly. "Good to see you're both still alive."

"Good to be alive," Adaar said, but with a tone that said it might not actually be.

Cassandra drew their attention to a dark-haired woman dressed in gold and blue, the soft candlelight bringing out the satin's sheen. "This is Lady Josephine Montilyet," Cassandra said, "our ambassador and chief diplomat."

Josephine greeted them both with a smile and a poised pen. "Shanedan," she said to Adaar with a respectful dip of her head.

Adaar tilted his head, the sweep of his horns exaggerating the motion. "You speak Qunlat?"

Josephine offered a sheepish laugh. "You have just heard the entirety of it, I'm afraid."

"Remind me to teach you some of the more fun words," Adaar replied with a crooked smile.

"Andaran atish'an," Josephine greeted Fen'Din.

He paused and cocked his head, thoughtfully. "I'm afraid I don't speak Antivan."

"Antivan? Well, I suppose I should work on my pronunciation." Josephine laughed, easily. "That was supposed to be Elvish!"

"Oh!" Fen'Din nodded with certainty. "That would be the problem. I don't speak Elvish, either."

"Aren't you...? My mistake." Josephine offered a small, apologetic bow.

"Halamshiral was the great city of the Dales. I was born in Halamshiral. That, I'm afraid, is the extent of my Dalishness."

Cassandra gestured to Leliana in the next awkward pause. "And of course you know Sister Leliana."

"My position here involves a certain degree of..." Leliana paused, looking for the most tactful way of putting it.

"She is our spymaster," Cassandra filled in, firmly.

"Yes. Tactfully put, Cassandra." Leliana shot the seeker a sharp look.

"Jan speaks highly of you," Fen'Din said. "Which is saying a great deal. Jan doesn't speak highly of much."

"Pleased to meet everyone," Adaar said politely. "Cassandra here was telling us about a plan, or... an idea, I guess. About our marks needing more 'power'?" There was a headache pressing in at his temples, and he was starting to regret that last round.

"Yes," Leliana said, stepping forward authoritatively. "We must approach the rebel mages for help."
"I still disagree," Cullen said, shaking his head. "The Templars could serve just as well and would likely be safer."

Cassandra huffed out an irritated breath. "We need power, Commander," she said. "Enough magic poured into their marks --"

"Might destroy us all," Cullen cut in. "Templars could suppress the breach, weaken it so--"

"Purely speculation," Leliana interrupted, shaking her head.

"I think the Commander, of all of us, knows what a Templar is capable of," Fen'Din pointed out. "And with that in mind, is there any reason we can't do both of these things? Surely, if the breach can be weakened, we would need less power -- which would be less dangerous -- to close it. Speaking as a senior enchanter, I do know what mages are capable of." He pinned Cullen with a look, daring him to argue.

"Unfortunately, neither group will speak to us yet. The Chantry has denounced the Inquisition -- and the two of you, specifically." Josephine punctuated the sentence with a jab of her pen.

"Clearly, they wasted no time," Fen'Din drawled. "But, there are two of us, and we have an advantage. Regardless of whether the rebel mages will speak with me, First Enchanter Torrin will. We do have some leverage, there, and I believe Commander Cullen may grant us a similar advantage with the Templars. We can get through to at least some people -- the ones who already know us."

"Shouldn't the Chantry be too busy arguing over who should become the new Divine?" Cullen scoffed. "Still, Enchanter Fen'Din may have a point."

Josephine shook her head. "Point aside, some are calling these two the 'Heralds of Andraste'. That frightens the Chantry hierarchy, or what of it remains. The remaining clerics have declared it blasphemy, and we heretics for harbouring you."

"Chancellor Roderick's doing, no doubt." Cassandra looked entirely unimpressed with the idea.

"Had we simply kicked him down a well, with so many dead, would anyone really have noticed?" Fen'Din muttered.

"Andraste sure has some weird taste in heralds," Adaar said with a helpless laugh.

"Regardless of whose fault it is, it limits our options," Josephine said. "Approaching the mages or Templars for help is currently out of the question."

"You'd think they would be more concerned about the giant hole in the sky," Adaar groused.

"Oh, they know it's there," Cullen said with a weary smile. "They just don't think we can do anything about it."

"The Chantry is telling everyone you will make it worse," Josephine added, making a note of something on her pad.

Adaar glanced down at Fen'Din and shrugged. "Great, so what can we do, then?"

"There is something," Leliana said. "A Chantry cleric by the name of Mother Giselle has asked to speak to you. Both of you. She is not far, and she knows those involved better than I. Her assistance could be invaluable."
"Oh, because that doesn't sound like a trap!" Fen'Din's irritation was nearly invisible, but clearly audible.

"I understand she is a reasonable sort. Perhaps she does not agree with her sisters?" Leliana was quick to suggest.

"If you go to this meeting, you won't go alone," Cullen assured the glowing duo, leaning heavily on the table, under the guise of studying the map, which he tapped. "You'll go with an entourage, and I can have a small team in place, before you arrive. We've got a scout from the area I have no doubt can get things checked out and prepared for you."

"You will find Mother Giselle tending to the wounded in the Hinterlands, near Redcliffe," Leliana explained, gesturing to the same part of the map, as she talked.

"I used to know a boy from Redcliffe," Fen'Din remarked, "and I always wondered what the place was like."

"And now you will have the opportunity to visit," Josephine said, with a smile. "We need agents to extend our reach beyond this valley, and the two of you are better suited than anyone to recruit people to our cause, with your fame and your rift-closing powers, so keep your eye on the locals."

Adaar tried to turn his laugh into a cough. "We're... the best suited?" he asked, gesturing between him and Fen'Din. "You have had a full conversation with us, and you still think that? Never mind the fact that the locals were, the last time I checked, human?"

"You are each more than any one race now," Cassandra said. "You are a symbol. The mark on the hand, what you accomplished at the temple have made it so."

"Yeah?" Adaar drawled. "Because the horns on my head kind of make me a symbol of something else to a few people."

"We did not say it would be easy," Leliana replied, "only that you are our best chance."

Adaar considered telling them that meant they were fucked, but he couldn't, not when these idiot humans were all looking at them so hopefully. "Well, at the very least I should be able to charm a few ladies over to our side." He nudged Fen'Din gently in the side. "Want to go hiking?"

"Not in these shoes."
The Hinterlands

Chapter Summary

Down into the Hinterlands, we go, into the midst of the war.

"Oh, it's the one road, it may be the wrong road it's the road to fuck knows where!" Anders belted out, at the top of his lungs, as the procession came around a curve in the road.

"Jan, what are you doing?" Varric asked, shooting nervous glances into the woods. "It's a war zone."

"Let them come," Anders hissed between verses.

"Man's got a point. We have shields, and we've done this before. Better whoever's out here should come after us than the locals." Cormac stretched and unshouldered his glaive. "He's bait. Normally, I wouldn't approve, because you shouldn't use the healer for bait, but we've handled worse than this. Oh no, bandits. Maybe bandits with magic. At the worst, bandits with smite. I've thrown bandits off cliffs, before breakfast."

"We are here to help people, not incite more violence!" Cassandra protested, scanning their surroundings. She caught sight of the Inquisition banner raised above the forward scout team's camp and pointed.

"We are here to become heroes in the eyes of the people, so they will trust and help us," Fen'Din pointed out, perched on Adaar's shoulders. "Generally, one can become a hero by distracting an opposing force from preying on the people you wish to convert. Works all the time, in the histories. And if you can then subdue that force? All the better."

"Except that we have two opposing forces with the people caught in the middle," Adaar pointed out, turning his head just enough to address Fen'Din without poking him with his horns. "We're going to either need to pick a side or take care of them both at once. Either way, I'd rather we get to the camp and talk to the scouts before we start bringing these people down on our, and their, heads."

"That's just his way of telling you that your singing is scaring the wildlife," Varric said to Anders in a loud whisper.

"That too," Adaar agreed.

They found the camp tucked in among the trees, overlooking a cliff that gave them an excellent view of the crossroads below. The scouts went about their business, but many of them kept pausing to stare at Adaar and Fen'Din, whispering to each other behind their hands. For a bunch of scouts, they were a bit terrible at being stealthy.

"The Heralds of Andraste!" a voice called out to them, and Adaar looked down and down some more to find a pretty dwarf woman with a round face and a bow at her back. "I've heard the stories! Everyone has. We know what you did at the breach."

"Passed out for three days and fell on the floor?" Fen'Din teased, waving a hand for Anders to come help him down. "Because that was definitely the exciting part. I'm told we also closed several minor rifts and did away with an assortment of demons along the way, but anyone would.'
The dwarf choked on an unexpected laugh, as Anders brought Fen'Din back to ground level.

"You're funny! I wasn't expecting that. Of course, I wasn't expecting a qunari and an elf to care too much about what happened to anyone else, but you'll get no back talk here. That's a promise." She paused. "Inquisition Scout Harding, at your service. I -- all of us, here -- we'll do whatever we can to help."

Varric looked contemplative. "Harding, huh? You ever been to Kirkwall's Hightown?"

Anders guffawed, burying his face in Cormac's hair as he laughed.

"I can't say I have," Harding said, tilting her head in confusion. "Why?"

"You'd be Harding in..." Varric trailed off, giving up with a wave of his hand. "Never mind. At least these two idiots got it." He pointed a thumb over his shoulder at Anders and Cormac.

Next to them, Cassandra made a disgusted noise and shook her head.

"Do I want to know about the stories you have heard?" Adaar asked with a crooked smile. "Any good ones?"

Harding laughed sheepishly. "Well, I guess that depends on what your definition of good is. Essentially they're all just about how you two are the last great hope for Thedas."

"No pressure," Varric said.

"Remind me to tell you some better stories later," Adaar told her, his smile only a bit manic.

"I swear," Cassandra sighed, "if you tell the one about the dragon again..."

"Dragon?" Harding asked, eyes going round.

Adaar straightened, puffing out his chest. "Oh, it's not important. Just slew a dragon. I have the jawbone back at Haven to prove it."

"A dragonslayer in good company, I've heard," Fen'Din said, pointing to Cormac, who pointed to Varric.

"Cullen's the one who got the last shot in," Varric noted. "Ser Cullen, Knight-Dragonslayer. He was the talk of Kirkwall for months."

"We're here to help, whatever you've heard," Anders cut in.

"Well, the Hinterlands are a good a place as any to start fixing things," Harding told them. "We came to secure horses from Redcliffe's old horsemaster. I grew up here, and people always said that Dennet's herds were the strongest and fastest, this side of the Frostbacks."

"You grew up here? No shit, so did I!" Cormac laughed and held out a hand. "Well, a lot of places near here, anyway. Lothering, Honnleath, Sothmere."

Harding shook the proffered hand. "Redcliffe all the way." She sighed. "Still, with the fighting going on, we couldn't get to Dennet. Maker only knows if he's even still alive. Mother Giselle -- that's who you came to see, right? She's down at the Crossroads helping refugees and the wounded. Our latest reports say the war's spread there, too."

"We brought healers," Fen'Din assured her. "Jan is probably the best Thedas has to offer."
"It's a good thing. People are dying down there." Harding glanced over her shoulder toward the cliff. "Corporal Vale and our men are doing what they can to protect the people, but they won't be able to hold out long."

"The reinforcements have arrived," Cormac declared, straightening the wrap that held his hair off his face. "We paralyse or stun everything in the way, and then figure out what we're doing about it. If nothing else, it provides a minute or two to tie people up and blindfold the mages."

"Blindfold?" Cassandra asked, looking confused.

"Most of these mages aren't combat trained, unless they took that up again, after the Blight." Anders offered a lopsided grin. "I'm with him. They probably can't hit what they can't see."

"'Probably' is not the most reassuring word, where mages are concerned," Adaar said with a tilt of his head.

"I can think of quite a few worse ones," Varric countered. "I've probably heard and seen most of them at this point." He shot a wry look back at Anders and the one Hawke in attendance.

"Well, it seems like you have it all well in hand," Harding said. Shouts carried up to them from the road, and she turned towards the sound. "Sounds like they could use a little help down there."

"That's what we're here for," Anders said with a grin. After all that time farming in the Anderfels, Justice was pleased to be back in the thrill of battle, fighting for something, for a cause, for people.

Adaar drew his greatsword and led them down the hill, in the direction of the shouting and the sounds of battle.

Cormac followed with Anders and Fen'Din, who held up a hand as Cassandra tried to jockey to the front.

"Don't get in front of us, Seeker. We're not going to be able to exclude you, just because you're on our side."

The fighting was everywhere, as they came around a bend and the rocky sides of the road spread out and down to reveal a small village. Cormac darted ahead of Adaar and swept his hand across the nearest combatants, who staggered, dazed, some of them falling. Anders took the next shot, over his head, and the ground lit a subtle green, everyone within the circle suddenly frozen, as Fen'Din started picking off anyone who seemed inclined to take a swing at the stunned portions of the crowd, and they stilled, too.

The three mages waded in, until the first smite struck, taking Cormac's magic. Apparently, Fen'Din's spell had missed a Templar, who was now raising his sword.

"No," Cormac said, and punched the Templar square on the point of the jaw, knocking the man, dazed, to the ground just as effectively as any spell.

Beside them, Anders lit in crackling blue, as Justice stepped forward to fill in where the smite had hit him, too, and another much wider glyph spread across the ground in front of him.

Adaar rested his sword on his shoulder and shrugged at Cassandra. "I suppose that's more effective than just running in and stabbing everything," he said as those Templars caught in Anders's glyph froze in place.

In short order, the mages had all hostiles either rooted in place or knocked out on the ground. Adaar
wasn't used to mages acting so aggressively, but he wasn't about to complain. Instead, he walked up to the edge of one glyph, careful to stay out of its green glow, and simply loomed, glaring down at a couple frozen Templars he knew could see him.

"This is lunacy," Cassandra spat as she walked up to another Templar and began to pace out of range of the spells. "You are Templars, yet you attack us like bandits!" He gestured behind her at the Inquisition scouts who had called out for help in the first place. "Do they look like apostates to you?"

The Templars weren't in a position to answer, until the spell began to wear off. "Armed," one of them managed. "Come to kill us, because of the Chantry."

Cormac rubbed the feeling back into his hands, as his magic started to return. Keeping outside the edges of the glyphs, he dragged the few mages out of the Templar occupied glyphs and shoved them into the mage side, before they could recover.

"Because of the Chantry? The Chantry is not exactly pleased with the Inquisition, right now, but the Chantry is also not pleased with you," Cassandra bellowed, stopping herself just before she stepped into a glyph. She took a large step back and just cleared the barrier that came up around the Templar group. "I am the Divine's own right hand, and let me explain to you how displeased the Chantry truly is with your decisions and has been since before we came to require an Inquisition! Your duty is to protect the people of Thedas from demons and uncontrolled magic, from magic used in the service of evil deeds. Instead, you have beset the town where the Queen of Ferelden has transferred the mages of Ferelden, while their new tower is finished! These are not apostates!"

"Maybe, but they are!" One of the Templars jabbed a finger at the equally-contained mages on the other side of Cassandra, and looked surprised when his arm moved.

Behind Cassandra, Anders shooed Cormac away, before any of the Templars could smite him again.

"And you!" Anders addressed the mages, eyes still glowing with Justice's power. "The scouts say you are no better than bandits! That you are robbing travellers and stealing food from this village! What have you to say for yourselves?"

The mages shifted uncomfortably. "We haven't got anything to eat!" one protested.

"Do you think we can buy a pint of cream from someone?" Fen'Din asked Adaar, eyes still on the scene unfolding before them. "Because a show like this deserves a frozen custard."

"I like the way you think, Crazy," Adaar said, turning his head to address Fen'Din but still watching Anders harangue the mages. "I say we add that to the requisitions list when we get back, for moments like these."

"No one's going to have anything to eat, if you keep robbing people and ruining their fields!" Anders barked. His eyes flared blue. "You have to earn your keep! Maybe if you help them and prove yourselves useful, they would help you in return. Have you seen the demons roaming around? Some magic protection would be a great way to start!"

"Apostates would just draw more demons," one of the Templars complained, and Cassandra stalked up to him to glare in his face, the curled fists at her sides as much a threat as that glare.

"The demons are already here, mages or no," she said. "Pointing fingers does not help."

"They brought them here!" one Templar argued, petulantly.

"No they didn't," Fen'Din chimed in, stepping well into range of any forthcoming smite. "I know
where this began. I was there." He held up his glowing hand. "But, the problem is widespread and needs to be addressed, so why don't you do what you're best at, and kill demons, so I and this horned gentleman behind me, can get in and make sure there will be no more demons?"

"Abomination!" a Templar shouted, levelling a smite across Fen'Din and the surrounding area.

"Enough!" Cassandra shouted back. "He is not possessed! He is -- they are -- the survivors of the Conclave! They were touched by the magic that unleashed these demons, and now they can stop them from entering our world."
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Healers for the Hinterlands and work for idle hands.

"Dispatch said the Herald of Andraste had come, but all I'm seeing is some Dalish in a Circle robe and a giant cow. Where's this Herald we heard about?"

"Excuse me, Ser, I don't actually give a fuck who you are, even for posterity," Varric started, easing Cassandra out of his way, "but if I ever hear you talk like that again, the next word in the conversation will be coming from Bianca." He patted the crossbow reverently. "I don't know about this Herald crap, but those two are what came out of the Fade in front of Holy Whoever-that-was, and you can take it or leave it -- I'm inclined to leave it; never been much for that Andraste business - - but you don't get to doubt them because they're not human, or something even more practical, like dwarves."

Adaar walked up beside Varric, his walk and posture meant to highlight just how very broad and very tall he was. "Right now, we are the only ones who can close these rifts. Right now, we are your only hope for closing the breach." He pointed up, with his glowing hand, where the scar in the sky was still visible. "Pissing us off is really not in your best interest. Helping us is. Unless you really want to see what happens the next time you throw a smite at the elf." He glared at the Templar who already had and watched him visibly swallow.

Adaar turned to address both groups. "Right now you're all just making life harder for the villagers. Why don't you help us out and make it a bit harder for the demons?"

"Is someone going to make sure we have food? And warm clothes?" a mage asked, absently rubbing her arms.

"If you can make yourselves useful, we'll see what we can do," Cassandra offered. "Perhaps you are all best served joining under our banner, to help fight the demons all across Ferelden?"

"Look, if the Chantry's pissed with you, the last thing we need is to make more trouble." A mage folded his arms, tucking his hands up his sleeves, and other mages muttered in agreement.

"Where have you been living? Not directions, just conditions," Cormac called over, from where he still stood out of range.

"In caves, mostly," one of the mages replied. "There's a lot of stuff left over from Tevinter just like, right out, sitting around, so we moved in where we could find it. If it was good enough for them, it should be good enough for us, right?"

"Except it's not," another mage complained. "It's wet and dark and it smells funny."

"What about you?" Cormac asked, gesturing to the Templars.

"Camping in the fields. We've got experience doing that. It's part of our training. You don't go off chasing apostates if you can't put up a pavilion." That Templar looked terribly smug, after hearing the mages complaints. "Still, food's been hard for us, too. There's only so far one sheep will go with
this many men."

"So, what I'm hearing is you'll need us to teach you how to put up houses -- don't worry, it's fast with magic -- and how to feed yourselves. Once you've got that down, helping the village will be easy. And you do need to help them. You've robbed and killed people who had nothing to do with your problems, and you're lucky we're not going to send you to Denerim and make you some poor magistrate's problem."

"You can't," a Templar argued. "We all fall under the Chantry's jurisdiction."

"Then you're extremely fortunate we're not going to kill you all and cut you up for stew meat, aren't you?" Cormac gestured back toward the village at the crossroads. "The people have to eat something, and you've already stolen most of their food. I don't think they'd ask too many questions about a gift of butchered meat."

Adaar considered making a joke about human meat being delicious, only to decide that that probably wouldn't help his image problem as a qunari.

"We are offering to help you help yourselves," Cassandra said, "and only asking that you do so. It really is a simple decision."

Aдааr could tell from the distrustful faces around them that they hadn't quite won them over, but at least they had put a stop to the fighting, even if only temporarily. It would buy them, and the villagers, some time.

Varric nudged him in the side, pointing out a few more people coming down the path, all armoured, if not as heavily as the Templars.

"Are you with the Inquisition?" called out the man in front. He eyed the mages and Templars as he approached, as though expecting them to turn hostile again at any moment. Not an unreasonable fear, considering.

"Yes," Cassandra answered. "And you are?"

"Corporal Vale," the man replied, finally moving close enough to offer Cassandra his hand. "Thanks for your help. The Templars and mages don't seem to care who gets caught in their war. The refugees here are in dire need of help, and if the war doesn't kill them, cold or starvation will."

Cassandra took the man's hand in hers, giving it a firm squeeze. "It is good to meet you, Corporal. Do you mind repeating what you said about the refugees, but louder? I would like to be certain our new acquaintances have heard it from someone else, as well."

Vale gave her an odd look, but did so.

"It's Scout Harding's home and mine you're fucking up, here, and I'll have you out for it, if you don't clean up this mess!" Cormac reminded the assembled combatants, still trapped in their barriers. The nice thing about barriers was that they deflected all kinds of damage fairly well, so even if someone was dumb enough to start lobbing smites or spells at the other side, they'd never get through.

"Maker, does he not sound exactly like Raddick?" one of the mages joked, elbowing another.

"What other troubles do these refugees face?" Cassandra asked.

"We've got some injuries that go beyond stitches and elfroot," Vale told her, shaking his head, sadly. "I know healers are in short supply, but--"
"Bullshit." Fen'Din's voice rang out. "We brought two. There may be more in this crowd. Tell them where you need them."

"Go into the village and tell them you're healers. They'll know who needs help. I know there's a healer in Redcliffe, as well," Vale went on, "who might be a more permanent solution -- assuming you can get through to Redcliffe. We'll take what you've got, for now, though. It'll save a lot of lives."

"We're happy to do it," Adaar assured him, pretending for the moment like he had any say in what these particular healers decided to do. "Speaking of... where's Solas?" He looked around but didn't see the elf's bald pate anywhere.

Cassandra let out an exasperated sigh. "I think we lost him in the woods a while back. I thought that the sounds of fighting would give him a clue where we had ended up."

"Sorry, were you looking for me?"

Adaar jumped, finding Solas at his elbow where he was certain no one was standing a moment ago. Solas just looked up at him expectantly, before looking around at the subdued mages and Templars.

"What did I miss?"

Adaar opened and closed his mouth a couple of times before he gave up and turned back to Corporal Vale. "I don't suppose you could tell us about Master Dennet? I heard he was supposed to be getting horses for the Inquisition, and I can only be a steed to one elf at a time."

"Dennet? He lives on a farm off to the west. Tough old fellow." Vale sounded a bit impressed. "We haven't heard from him. Best we can tell he's holed up until the mages and Templars finish killing each other."

Cassandra snorted, judgementally, crossing her arms as she eyed the assembled Templars.

"We didn't mean any trouble, Mistress Seeker Lady, ma'am," one of the younger Templars sputtered, quailing under her glare.

"Well you've certainly caused it, and now we have to figure out how to solve those problems. How you're going to solve those problems." The weight of Cassandra's glare was barely lifted when she turned her attention back to Vale. "You said something about the cold? The mages also had some complaints in that regard."

"Seeker, we're not twenty miles from the Wilds, where it starts snowing in Harvestmere. It's the middle of winter and people are dying of the cold. It's been unsafe to cut firewood with these idiots running around, murdering everything that moves." Vale shook his head and rolled his eyes. "I asked the Inquisition to send blankets, but you'd think I asked for a cart of raw lyrium."

"We're still trying to get enough for the wounded, in Haven," Cassandra told him. She paused and glanced at the groups still held in an increasingly tired-looking Cormac's barriers. "Archers!" she demanded, pointing at the Templars. "Bring all your archers forward. You're hunting sheep. I'll find a hunter in the village to take you out." The mages were next. "Give me your healers and anyone who can make fire! You will go to the village with Jan and do whatever he tells you."

Anders smiled and fluttered his fingers, and the barriers stayed up, until the groups began to sort themselves out, at which point Cormac made his way over to Anders and slipped a lyrium potion out of his bag.
"Elfhole, you're with us, because I don't trust you not to fall in a hole and break your leg." Anders laughed and rubbed his face, eyes finally no longer glowing. "Solas... Can I trust you to figure out what to do with the rest of these mages? You look like you know how to pitch a tent and clean a fish."

Solas gave her an amused look. "I am not sure what look one has when they can clean a fish, but yes." Solas waved over the rest of the mages, many of whom still looked wide-eyed and skittish.

They parcelled out jobs to as many of the mages and Templars as they could, keeping them separated but also keeping them busy. Vale looked grateful, if tired.

"Remind me not to get on your bad side, Seeker," Adaar told Cassandra.

She gave him a flat look and said, "Don't get on my bad side."

"I could have told you that," Varric mumbled.

The healers followed Cormac and Anders like a row of ducklings, and Anders wondered if this was what it was like for Solona, herding stray mages. But they were eager to help, he found, when they made it to the village, given permission to use their magic. Magic was something familiar to them, something they could control, unlike the wilds of the Hinterlands and a newfound freedom they didn't yet know how to use.

An elf rushed up and grabbed at Fen'Din's non-glowing hand. "Please, can you help? Are you a healer?"

"No, but they are." Fen'Din examined the assorted mages and discovered all of them were human. "You were hoping for an elf, instead of some thick-fingered barbarian, but Jan is the best healer in Thedas. He needs to see to the worst cases first, but the others appear competent. What's the trouble?"

"My daughter can't breathe without a potion my son used to make, but he's gone off somewhere and hasn't come home!" The man's words ran together as he spoke.

Fen'Din raised his voice very slightly. "Jan? Breathing trouble?"

"Depends on which kind, but try the pinkish potion with the oil on top. If you shake it, it'll mix again. If that doesn't help, I'll make something, but I can't leave this half-finished." Anders tipped his chin toward his bag, never taking his eyes off the spread flesh he poured antidotes and mild healing potions over, trying to chase out the infection that had nearly claimed a man's leg.

"Thank you, messere," the elf said, his hands shaking with this renewed hope as he pulled out the indicated potion and clutched it carefully to his chest. He paused then, his posture caught between leaving and staying, and Anders suspected he knew what the man wasn't asking.

"No payment," Anders assured him without looking up, because even at the clinic his patients always felt the need to give him something in return, even the poorer ones. Especially the poorer ones. "Just make sure that gets to her, and come back if it doesn't work."

"Thank you," the elf said again, and this time he darted away.

Anders knew some of the other mages were watching the exchange out of the corner of their eyes, but he kept working as though he didn't notice, his hands glowing blue as his healing chased what the potions had missed.
"That was really nice of you," one of the mages ventured, "but, nothing at all? Do you really think that shiny-headed elf and the lady with the Maker's hairy eyeball are going to be able to get enough for all of us?"

"Seeker Hairy Eyeball has got a pretty good sense about these things, I've noticed. She may not know what a situation wants, but once you tell her, she shouts threateningly until it appears. You know she's Nevarran? I'd have thought Fereldan, with a bark like that," Cormac joked from where his blood-spattered hands held another wound together, cleaning up minor damage and things that would only need a potion.

"You're going deaf in your old age," Anders teased. "That's definitely a Nevarran accent. I remember the first time Karl came back from Cumberland... only time, really, he spent a week swooning over that sound."

"I kept reading studies of reanimation and spiritual communications in the original Nevarran, just to watch him squirm," Fen'Din admitted. "I was easy on him, most of the time. He wasn't expecting it."

"Don't let him fool you with that small and scholarly bent, I don't think I've ever seen that elven asshole miss a punchline." Anders laughed at the thought, his hands slowly mending the flesh under them. "Did you put him out, or was it the pain?" he asked, after a moment, noticing his patient was unconscious, but still breathing.

"I thought he would be less trouble if I kept him asleep," Fen'Din admitted. "Should I not?"

"No, keep doing that. It's perfect."
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Little stories of effort exerted.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cassandra rubbed the middle of her forehead, sighing against her palm as she watched the sheep scatter again. She turned around to address the Templars.

"I did not think I needed to explain this," Cassandra said, making sure to keep her voice measured, "but when one person shoots at one sheep when they are all in a cluster, they will scatter and make our lives more difficult. Just like right now, you are making my life difficult."

"We're not used to hunting them in herds," one Templar said, fidgeting with the bow in his hand.

"They are fairly stupid creatures," Cassandra said. "Outsmarting them shouldn't be too hard. Look." She pointed to a few sheep who had stopped running and went back to grazing. "We need to hit them all at once. Pretend they are mages."

A Templar lieutenant coughed to hide a laugh. "I thought you wanted us to stop shooting at mages."

"I do. I want you to shoot at sheep, instead." Cassandra levelled a firm glare in his direction.

"You heard the lady. Form up and aim." The lieutenant gestured at the sheep in the narrow valley below them. "We're looking for a lot more meat than usual."

The muttering in the ranks stopped, as the Templars fell in line and aimed at the sheep below. As the lieutenant dropped his hand, the line fired and several sheep fell. A few more wouldn't make it far. They fired again, without being told, aiming for sheep already hit and falling behind, and this time, those sheep fell.

"How many did your man ask for?" the lieutenant asked, scratching his chin, as his men scrambled down to fetch the sheep and load them into a cart they'd borrowed from the village.

"Ten for the village, but we must also feed you and the mages. The skins will also keep a few people warm, but not enough." Cassandra cocked her head listening for the sound of metal on wood, where other Templars -- those more inclined to hacking at things -- were attempting to gather firewood.

The lieutenant counted the sheep as they were being moved, his lips forming each number. "A few more, then," he decided. To the sheep-hauling Templars, he called out, "Come on, hurry it up!" That drew him more than a few sour looks, but they obeyed, clearing the path and reaching again for their bows.

This time the sheep had run a bit further, so the lieutenant shifted their location, forming a line as before and shooting as one. Cassandra watched and nodded to herself. This was really much more efficient, though the Templars off chopping up firewood she was less sure about.
She left the lieutenant in charge of gathering the sheep and stalked off to check on the other Templars. Honestly. It was almost like babysitting.

Solas sat by the side of the river, freezing fish with one hand and tossing the icy blocks onto the bank with the other. Around him, other mages tried to do the same, though some seemed to have more success stealing the life from the fish. He couldn't fault them that -- those spells were meant to do moderate harm to people, and they'd kill a fish instantly, which was the entire purpose of this exercise.

"Shit!" one of the mages swore, as a dead fish slipped out of her grasp and sped down the river with the current.

"That is why we have a barrier," Solas reminded her, glancing at the two mages sustaining it. He could've done it, himself, but it was important for them to learn. "A foot above the bottom, or the river's going to flood," he reminded the mage on one side, as the water began to rise again.

Two other mages stood in the water, in front of the barrier -- force mages, as he recalled, so they wouldn't be knocked down by the rushing water -- and they threw missed fish to shore.

It had taken a bit to set up, but now they had fallen into a rhythm. The girl who had dropped the fish was more careful the next time, face scrunched in determination as she grabbed the next fish she'd killed, and this one made it into the basket with the others.

Solas watched them slip up, watched them trip, and watched them adjust, and he smiled to himself as the pile of fish slowly grew. These mages hadn't done this before, and after years of being locked up behind stone walls, they were finally getting a chance to learn how to take care of themselves. They were almost like children, but children with formidable gifts.

"So, eating fish is great and all, Enchanter, but what are we supposed to do the rest of the time? We've got nowhere decent to live, and there's Templars up our asses every day of the week." The mage grabbed another fish as it stopped moving and tossed it toward the growing pile.

"Enchanter? No." Solas shook his head, the smile still clinging to his lips. "I've seen the effects of your Circle, but I've never been inside a tower. It's why I know how to catch fish." Solas drew a knife and split open one of the fish from the pile, shaking out the entrails, before he spread it across his palms and took a fire spell to it. "But, this is only the first step. First, learn to find enough food for yourselves. When you have eaten, you will feel more whole, and ready to take on the next step."

"That is the most--!" The mage huffed, throwing another fish. "You sound like you've said something important, but I don't think you've said anything at all."

"And you make my point." Solas closed the fish and put a few more slices in it, before dragging a thick side of it right off the bones. "You need a good meal. Then we'll worry about finding you somewhere warm to sleep. I think the villagers may be feeling more giving, once the healers are through with them."

Since he had managed to avoid mage and Templar babysitting duty, Varric made his way to the Crossroads with Corporal Vale and the rest of the Inquisition. Places like this, caught between demons and a war, were bound to be full of stories, and it almost made him nostalgic for Kirkwall, back when it was constantly on fire. Almost.
Varric paused to talk to a few refugees, to a merchant who had set up shop at the edge of the road, but he paused quite a bit longer to talk to a mage woman named Ellendra, who he met at the edge of the Crossroads, standing apart from the rest and half-hidden under an overhang, as though hoping the villagers would forget she was there. Maybe not just the villagers, considering she wasn't with the rebel mages.

"Cosy spot you have here," Varric said, throwing on his best salesman grin.

"It's as good a place as any," she said with a shrug, eyeing him up and down, clearly wondering what he wanted.

"So, what's your story?" Varric asked, offering the woman a slice of the hard cheese he'd been cutting and eating with one hand. "You seem like maybe you're not part of this crowd."

"I am waiting for someone. Once he arrives, we will move on. I don't want any trouble. I'm not part of any of this." She eyed the dwarf and his cheese, before shaking her head, even as her stomach growled. "I am Enchanter Ellendra. I have heard about your 'Heralds of Andraste'. I hope you find a way to end this foolish war."

"As do I, Enchanter," Varric agreed, looking out across the grass outside the shallow cave. "You sure you don't want any cheese? I'm not taking anything for it. You just look hungry."

"Well, I..." Ellendra stared, but her stomach made another loud noise at the sight of Varric chewing. "Thank you."

"No problem. We've got more food coming in soon enough if Chuckles can teach these kids to fish. We'll have plenty to share with everyone," Varric assured her, cutting off a larger chunk and offering it.

They ate in silence, for a bit.

"Foolish war, huh? I mean, not like I disagree with the sentiment. War is, by its nature, foolish." Varric chewed a bit more. "I take it that means you don't count yourself among the rebels on either side?"

Ellendra took her time answering, as though weighing each word in her head first. "I have too many friends on either side to pick one side over the other. Abstaining seemed... the only reasonable choice."

"Friends on either side?" Varric repeated, eyebrows arching. "That's an unusual thing to hear from a Circle mage." He kept his tone kind, gently curious.

Ellendra blew out a sigh. "Mages and Templars live under the same roof," she said. "You put that many people together, relationships form, good or bad, just like anywhere else. So yes. Either side."

"I can understand that," Varric said with a nod. "I have friends on either side, too. I know one Templar who married into a family of mages. His husband isn't one, but his three siblings-in-law are. This foolish war screws everyone over, but I imagine it's especially tough for people like that."

"A Templar was allowed to marry? How long did he have to petition for that, and where?" Ellendra's eyes widened at the very idea.

"Kirkwall. He was the Knight-Captain, at the time, and his now-husband brought the Knight-Commander a goat, in what I understand is the Fereldan manner of proposing marriage. I think the goat just surprised the Commander into agreeing to it." Varric laughed and shook his head. "That or
the implied threat of leaving the goat in her office."

"I'll have to remember to suggest that, once the war is over. When in doubt, offer a goat to your superior. I wonder if it would work as well on the First Enchanter..." Ellendra sighed again. "Probably not. We are still mages, and our children would be considered just as dangerous whether or not we married. As if not marrying has made childbearing stop," she scoffed, casting a glare toward the sound of many footsteps approaching on the road.

"Sounds to me like you have someone in mind," Varric said. "Some sweetheart you'd like to goat-propose to? Or for, I guess, since the goat wouldn't be going to them."

"Perhaps," she said a bit wistfully, smoothing out the hem of her sleeve. "That is a nice fantasy, at least, one that I'm sure would amuse him."

"What's his name?" Varric asked, picturing another enchanter.

"Ser Mattrin."

And that put a whole new perspective on her story. "I see. Now I'm definitely getting the not-picking-sides thing."

"He's supposed to meet me here," Ellendra said, folding her arms tightly, as much to ward off the chill as to make herself small, Varric suspected. "Or he was supposed to, days ago."

That didn't sound good. "I'm sure he's okay," he lied.

"I hope you're right." Ellendra's hands clenched tightly at her elbows, as a group of Templars marched down the road, pulling a cart and carrying one man on their shoulders, singing loudly. Behind them came another cart, and then more men.

"Well, that looks like half our supper and the fire to cook it. Why don't you join us for a meal? I'm sure Crazy and Pointy -- er, our 'Heralds' -- aren't going to stand for any taking of sides over dinner, and if they don't care, Blondie and the Seeker sure do, and they're ... I think 'utterly terrifying' is the polite way of putting that." Varric chuckled to himself and squinted into the wood, looking for the mages. "Those two are why the fighting's stopped for the day, and everybody gets a free dinner."

"Not your Heralds?"

"Not to be rude, but I'm not sure I'd trust either of them to negotiate the purchase of a pint of ale in a tavern, never mind a peace settlement, however temporary. Don't get me wrong -- they're great at what they do, but that's not on the list."

Chapter End Notes

A fan of our work? This Saturday, 17 February, is our fan chat for the month, at 13:00 EST! Come join us on Discord for four hours of yelling about your favourite characters and everything that's not a spoiler!
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

A grand feast for the village, a meeting with Mother Giselle, and accusations against the Black Divine.

They treated it like a festival, when the carts rolled in. The people thrown together at the Crossroads joined in to prepare the meat and the fish, setting up makeshift tables and pulling out seating from their homes. The air was thick with the smell of roasting meat by the time Adaar caught back up with Fen'Din. The villagers were still eyeing the mages warily, but the healers at least had developed a rapport with some of them.

"I honestly didn't think they would pull it off," Adaar said, glancing back at where the Templars clustered, still mostly avoiding the mages but not outright attacking them either. Definitely progress.

"Both sides were desperate," Anders sighed. "Desperate people tend to do stupid things. Hungry people, too."

"As a hungry person, I can relate," Adaar drawled. He watched the crowd as he spoke, noting the sweep of a red and white Chantry mitre heading their way.

"Are you Mother Giselle?" Fen'Din asked, as the towering hat stopped beside him. He craned his neck and offered a thick slab of meat from the ram they'd roasted in the pit on his other side. "Or have we been misinformed about the number of rebel clerics loitering in the Hinterlands?"

"I am," the woman confirmed, looking down the line of fires stretching down the road, before she accepted the meat. "And you must be the one they're calling the Herald of Andratee."

Fen'Din glanced at his hand, before waving one of the mages over to take his spot serving meat. "I should start wearing gloves," he said, carving off a bit for himself as he led Giselle to the other side of the road, where Varric and Adaar stood. "And I am not the Herald of Andrate, but if you must call me that, then you should say it of both of us."

"Both...?" Mother Giselle looked at the others in front of her and quickly spotted the glow around the qunari's hand. "The news has been simplified, then, to give us one figure to rally around. Perhaps it is not a bad thing."

"It will become one, when they turn us both into a single human," Fen'Din retorted. "But, I am Senior Enchanter Fen'Din of Kinloch Hold, and this is Adaar, who fell from the sky with me."

"Kaaras Adaar," Adaar clarified, "recently of the Valo-kas mercenary group, but it looks like I am... headed in a different direction, at the moment." He said it tactfully, as though he had a say in all this. "We heard you were looking to meet with us? From what I understand, we're not exactly popular with the Chantry."

"You are not wrong," Mother Giselle said, an Orlesian accent thickening her words. She looked around her and kept her voice pitched low. "I know of the Chantry's denouncement, and I am familiar with those behind it."
Adaar paused to cut a slice of meat for himself. "We're listening."

"I won't lie to you," she said, looking between them, "some of them were grandstanding, hoping to increase their chances of becoming the new Divine. Some are simply terrified." She shook her head, looking tired beneath her distracting hat. "So many good people, senselessly taken from us..."

Between bites, Adaar cut in. "From where this is going, I assume you don't agree with the Chantry?"

"With no Divine, we are each left to our own conscience, and mine tells me this: Go to them. Convince the remaining clerics you are no demons to be feared." Mother Giselle's voice was strong, but soothing -- that of a woman accustomed to leading the uncertain. "They have heard only frightful tales of you. Give them something else to believe."

Fen'Din held up a finger until he could swallow. "First of all, that was not senseless. None of this has been 'senseless'. It made perfect sense to the person who did it. It was, and I doubt you got this in a dispatch, blood magic on a scale unseen since the height of the Imperium. Someone may be trying to recreate the journey of the magisters who travelled through the Veil, which by the Chantry's telling, is how we ended up with the Blight. Calling any of this 'senseless' is not crediting the responsible party with the motivation and intelligence clearly at work, here. This is not the work of a drunken man who catches his bottle aflame and throws it into the neighbour's barn, because he's too drunk to do otherwise -- this is someone with a very specific agenda, and one we may have interrupted, assuming the Breach is not the sign of their success." He held up his hands as Giselle opened her mouth. "And second, you're advising we go up and have a chat with people who are rather invested in having us executed. I can't say that's the best idea I've heard, today. Perhaps not the worst, given a few things I heard Solas trying to explain to a group of mages, but definitely not the wisest."

"You are no longer alone," Giselle said with no hint of doubt in her voice. "They cannot imprison or attack you."

"They could try," Adaar muttered around his mouthful.

Giselle smiled indulgently and tried a new tack. "Let me put it this way: you needn't convince them. You just need some of them to doubt. As numbers give you strength, their power is their unified voice. Take that from them, and you receive the time you need."

"I'm sure that will be easy," Adaar said. "I'll just walk up to them and have them shake my glowy hand."

"I honestly don't know if you have been touched by fate or sent to help us, but... I hope." She shrugged. "And hope is what we need now. The people will listen to your rallying call as they will listen to no other."

Adaar wasn't so sure about that, but judging from what they had accomplished today, they had, at the very least, managed to surround themselves with competent people. Bury themselves in enough competent people, and maybe they would look competent too.

"You could build the Inquisition into a force that will deliver us," Giselle murmured, "or destroy us."

"I would prefer not to destroy any more than we have to," Fen'Din noted, taking another bite that should have been far too large for his mouth, as he shot a glance at Anders, who glared back for a moment.

"I will go to Haven and bring Sister Leliana the names of those in the Chantry who would be amenable to a gathering," Mother Giselle offered. "It is not much, but I will do whatever I can."
"Don't travel alone, Mother," Varric advised, pausing in his writing. "We just came down that road, and while I've been on worse, you don't want demons or bandits to catch you on the way. Ask some of the scouts and some Templars to go with you."

"Thank you, but I had no intention of travelling alone." Mother Giselle smiled, pleasantly, before setting off to check on the villagers again.

"It's the Black Divine," Anders said suddenly.

"Who the what now?" Varric blinked up owlishly.

"The Conclave, the Breach, it's the Black Divine," Anders said, as though that explained everything. When no one looked less confused, he went on, counting on his fingers. "It's ancient blood magic in a Tevinter style, and it's incredibly powerful. It's been used to do something Tevinter is said to have done in the past. And it was used to destabilise the Orlesian Chantry and kill the White Divine. It's a setup for an Exalted March on Orlais."

"I can't express how much I hope you're wrong," Fen'Din muttered, trying to catch the shreds of meat that fell out of his mouth as he spoke.

Adaar frowned. "That would be a bold move," he said, sounding unconvinced. "Does Tevinter even have the kind of army that could back that up? They took out much of the Chantry hierarchy, sure, but that still leaves, you know... all of Orlais?"

"Orlais, which is currently embroiled in civil war," Anders pointed out. "As for an army, I'm not sure, but they do have Archon Radonis and his forty-seven cats."

Varric shrugged, tilting his head. "Yeah, you know, that might be enough to take out Orlais. But behind all that furry fury would be a boatload of mages. Powerful mages. Blondie and I here fought a magister in Kirkwall once, and it wasn't pretty."

"And you know what we have?" Adaar said. "More mages. Also?" He pointed across the way, past the feasting revellers to a cluster of Templars. "Southern-style Templars. Enough to make even a magister go limp, no matter how much blood magic he's slinging around."

"And a few people who've fought magisters, before," Varric noted, again. "So, sure, we can probably win it, if Blondie's right, but does anyone else know that? Probably not. Especially since the Templars seem to have all lost their marbles and gone running off into the wild, like their savage ancestors. What is it with you humans and the woods?" He shook his head. "Point is, last I checked, the first sin of Tevinter and everyone in it has always been pride, and this looks like the perfect time to move south, again."

"They've been pushing magisterial supremacy, down the Lattenfluss, the last couple of years," Anders said, remembering the pamphleteer. "Of course, it's the Anderfels, and the only thing that'll get you on everyone's shit list faster than being Orlesian is being Tevinter. I don't see them getting very far, unless they mount another invasion, and even then, I doubt they're actually prepared for that."

Cormac wandered over, carrying a plate piled with meats and vegetables. "They've got cabbage!"

"You're sleeping on the other side of the ridge, by yourself!" Anders smiled brightly.

"Aw, come on, maybe the stench will fend off the demons," Varric teased. "Of course, we'd have to survive it, for that to work."
"Even the spirits complain," Fen'Din noted, around a half-chewed mouthful.

"That is not true. Don't listen to him," Cormac jabbed a finger at Fen'Din. "But, I came over here because I heard there's a Warden lurking in the hills. I thought it might be somebody you knew from Amaranthine, so I offered to go find the guy. Can't hurt, right?"

"Oh?" Anders said, stealing a bite of vegetables off of Cormac's plate. "If it's Nate, that would just be his luck."

"You know, it might not be a bad idea to contact the Wardens," Adaar said with a shrug, even as he eyed Cormac's plate and considered going back for seconds. "They're a formidable group, and we could use formidable."

Anders hummed doubtfully, shaking his head. "They're not supposed to get involved in politics. Blah, blah, blah, they're outside that sort of thing."

"In fairness," Varric cut in, "telling them Tevinter's invading? Yeah, that's political. But what about rifts vomiting demons? They're not darkspawn, but they're the same kind of mindless threat."

"Not exactly the same," Anders said softly, face twisting like he had tasted something unpleasant. "But it's a thought." He was about due to send Solona another message anyway, just to remind her that he wasn't dead in the most annoying way he could think of.

Adaar turned to Cormac. "Do we know anything else about this Warden?"

"I'm pretty sure it's not Nate," Cormac said, offering an apologetic shrug. "Not unless he's turned to feral--" He shot a glance at Anders's beard. "Er, not unless he's suddenly got a taste for beards."

"Not on me, that's for sure." Anders laughed. "And I don't remember him ever wearing more than that spot on his chin, but you know, I knew him for what, six months?"

"But, whoever he is, there's talk that he's been fighting off bandits who've been trying to hit the outlying farms. So, whatever's been going on down here, he's already involved." Cormac shrugged. "You might want to send a letter to Solona, too -- see if she's got anything. Maybe I'll get to meet her, finally."

"Do not." Anders pointed a finger at Cormac and peered down his nose. "Zevran would have your head. Or your ass."

"And here I was hoping Zevran had enough of me the last time we met." Cormac laughed. "But, I don't think she's my type. Maybe your dwarf friend. She seems like a lot of fun."

"If she were your type, I would have concerns," Varric said out of the side of his mouth. "And the Gazette would probably have a new Page Six."

"Wait, Solona Amell?" Adaar said, eyes widening. "As in the Hero of Ferelden?"

"Yes, but try not to call her that to her face," Anders said around a sigh. "Her head's big enough already."

"You know her?" he asked before he was able to rein in the awestruck look on his face. He cleared his throat. "I mean, of course you know her. You're a Warden."

"Served with her in Amaranthine," Anders said, folding his arms and regarding the qunari with amusement. "And put up with her in the Circle long before that. The woman couldn't avoid me if she
tried, and I suspect she has."

"Given the things I've heard about you, I might not be surprised," Cormac teased, nudging Anders with his elbow.

"Everyone regarded you as such a menace, but you really weren't." Fen'Din shook his head, looking for something to wipe his greasy fingers on.

"No, I wasn't, because you were." Anders rolled his eyes. "The number of times I ended up in a closet with a Templar, because everyone assumed whatever it was, it was my fault... Still, better me than you."

"That's what Karl always said." Fen'Din settled for wiping his hands on Anders's leather bag. "Better you, because you'd stand up and let them think you did it, even if someone else confessed."

"I was not that bad. I'd never have stepped up for Frick. He could eat his own problems." Anders shuddered. "Sometimes more literally that I really like to think about."

"That sounds entirely terrifying, and like just the kind of thing I don't want to know too much about," Varric said, smiling widely. "But, you really think the Hero of Ferelden's going to come out for this? I've been hearing rumours through my vast network of sources that there are nearly no Wardens left in Orilais -- or not that anyone can find."

"Good thing we're in Ferelden, then." Anders rubbed his forehead. "I just wish I could figure out what's with these headaches. It's like getting punched in the inside of my head."

"Your, ah, glowier half versus the hole in the sky?" Cormac asked, reaching out to squeeze Anders's arm in sympathy. "Possibly the part where I haven't seen you work like this, since we left the Marches?"

Anders pressed his thumb and middle finger into his temples, the light pressure a distraction from the ache. "You're probably right. We're out of practice."

"I think this is the part where the healer takes his own advice and gets some rest," Varric said.

"I would say he's earned it," Adaar said, toasting Anders with the strip of meat he'd just cut himself. "Between him and Cassandra, the Templars and mages didn't stand a chance."

"That might have been mostly Cassandra," Anders said with a weak laugh. "That woman is terrifying."

"Yeah," Varric agreed. "She might almost be enough to take on Radonis and his forty-seven cats."

A detour to find assistance from an empire long fallen.

"I can read a map, you know," Anders complained, as Solas and Fen'Din took a turn off the road, in the entirely wrong direction, deep in conversation. "And I'm pretty sure if you'd hand it to me, I could prove that wandering through the woods is not going to help us get to the horsemaster's farm."

"The horsemaster can wait another hour," Fen'Din replied, flippantly. "Solas may have found a way to prevent more rifts."

"The spirits tell me an artefact of my people is nearby, and if I am correct about what type of artefact, we may be able to ensure that any rifts closed with those marks stay that way." Solas smiled back at the rest of the group around the dead bird on his shoulder.

"So, you believe there is some ... what, ancient magic for healing the veil?" Cassandra did not sound entirely convinced. "Why would we not be using it in places like Kirkwall?"

"I know nothing of Kirkwall." Solas shrugged, deftly picking out a path without watching where he was going. "I do know these creations have been lost for thousands of years, and if I am correct, reactivating them and seeing to regular maintenance of some kind should create strong wards against further damage to the Veil in the area. Once you have seen one, perhaps you will be able to identify them elsewhere in Thedas."

"Poking at ancient magic," Adaar muttered. "Oh yes. I'm sure nothing bad has ever come of that." He trailed off, tilting his head to better make out the sounds in the distance, the crackle of magic with the hiss of demons. The others had heard the same judging from the way their posture changed, hands hovering by weapons. "I'm really starting to hate demons."

"Congratulations," Varric drawled, unshouldering Bianca. "You're one of us now."

They saw the flash of magic among the ruins farther up the road, plus the unmistakeable flame-red bulk of a Rage demon. The mage, a Dalish elf they realized once they drew closer, was holding her own, deftly throwing waves of ice spells over the demon, who only moved at her slowly, joints frozen, steam rising from its body. She likely could have finished it off, but Solas saved her the trouble with a spell of his own, freezing the demon solid and watching its body crack and splinter into a million pieces.

The Dalish woman looked back at them in surprise, cheeks red and hair wild from exertion.

"You looked like you could use a hand," Anders said, waving with an uncast spell glimmering at his fingertips.

"Possibly several hands, if you are headed the way we are." Fen'Din was too distracted to bother with an expression.

"Andaran atishan. I did not expect to see another of Dalish blood here." The woman shot a relieved look at Fen'Din. "My name is Mihris. By your weapons, I see you come ready for battle. Perhaps we
face a common enemy in these demons."

"These demons are the enemy of all those native to this kingdom. Only an idiot would not consider them a common enemy. Or the individual who summoned them, assuming this effect is intentional." Fen'Din finally settled his eyes on Mihris. "Have you come to fight these demons alone?"

"Fighting the demons is pointless. There will always be more, and I have no way of closing the rifts," Mihris said, with a broad gesture of disgust.

"There will always be more because you have no way of closing the rifts. We, however, do," Fen'Din stopped sketching and shifted the charcoal into his other hand, before holding out his palm.

Mihris stared in amazement at the play of light spilling out of his hand. "I cannot begin to understand what that is," she said, "but if it does what you say it can, you are blessed." She chewed her lip and peered over her shoulder at some more ruins, what looked like a pair of collapsed columns blocking a cave. "If you are closing the rifts, then what I am after might interest you. I have heard of some elven artefacts that measure the Veil. They may tell us where new rifts will appear."

Adaar glanced back at Solas, who perked up. "Think they're the same thing?" Adaar asked.

"It is likely."

"There's one nearby," Mihris went on, throwing them a glance, "but I was not expecting so many demons. Can you help me reach it?"

Anders looked at Fen'Din and shrugged. "We're here anyway."

"It does seem to be where we are headed." Fen'Din nodded, as he remembered to, a moment late. "Do you happen to know how to operate the object we seek?"

"I am the First of my clan, and I am well-studied in the ancient magics," Mihris said, tipping up her chin. "I am certain it will be no trouble."

"What I'm hearing, here, is I've got no idea, but it can't be that hard!" Varric chimed in. "You don't happen to be related or married to anyone named 'Hawke', do you? Because I am sure I've heard that before."

"Amell," Anders corrected, as they made their way up the hill. "That is an Amell trait through and through, and I'm sure Solona said she had siblings, but I'm also pretty sure they were all human." He glanced behind him and paused. "I keep forgetting we left Mack to keep an eye on those idiots back at the Crossroads. I hope that was a good idea."

"He seems quite competent," Cassandra assured him. "And he is not alone, with Vale's men there."

"Thank you for joining me. I do not think I could have done this, alone." Mihris looked back over her shoulder at the group she led.

"Where is the rest of your clan? I did not pass them on the way here, but we are very close to human settlements. Are they camped farther out?" Fen'Din inquired, hoping for another group easily recruited into the battle to hold back the demon invasion.

Mihris' face fell, her shoulders slumping as one tired. "They were all killed," she told him with a sad smile. "By a demon our Keeper was foolish enough to summon. I am the only survivor of Clan Virnehn. I was searching for a clan that would take me in when the breach came. Now, I'm doing whatever I can to help with this madness."
Mihris led them up a set of crumbling steps over to those fallen columns.

"Well, that's one way to lock a door," Varric sighed. He gave Adaar a considering look.

"No, you are not using my head as a battering ram," Adaar said before Varric could even ask. "I don't think it would help. And even if it would help: no."

"Party pooper."

"Magic should be able to clear the way for us," Mihris said. She tipped her chin in Solas's direction. "You, flat-ear. Can you manage it?"

Solas paused in his tracks, and he turned a sharp smile her way. "Ma nuvenin, da'len," he said pleasantly.

Fen'Din looked curiously at the two of them, then watched as Solas rather dramatically cast a spell, lifting the pillars back into their original configuration.

"Is that force magic?" he asked Solas, lobbing a hex past him, into the oncoming rush of demons. The demons, however, could not be put to sleep. Beside him, Anders began to glow.

"Something like it," Solas replied, tersely. "Can you turn them?"

"They seem older," Fen'Din muttered, before bursting into loud, discordant song. The demons hung in the unblocked doorway, confused, but unchanging. Something roughly elf-shaped pushed its way to the front of the group and gave Solas a long look, before vanishing.

"Shades," Anders remarked, unwilling to cast until Fen'Din gave the word. "Angry people died here."

One of them finally drifted out and lunged at Fen'Din, meeting Solas's swiftly-raised barrier.

"They're too old and set in their ways," Fen'Din finally admitted. "I have nothing they remember."

"All right." Adaar brought out the massive sword strapped to his back, wrapping both hands around the hilt. "We're doing this the old-fashioned way." He grinned at Cassandra, who didn't quite share his enthusiasm.

Waiting for a lull in the magical barrage, Adaar bulled ahead. The shades recoiled from the sweep of his sword, clearing the path for him into the cave, where he pivoted, attacking them from behind and blocking any retreat. As the shades turned to address this new threat, the mages continued to throw lightning and fire their way, and Cassandra rushed in from the side, body-slamming a shade with her full weight behind her shield.

The shades didn't last long amid the onslaught, dissolving into black smoke and disappearing with an anguished shriek.

"I'm glad I brought you with me," Mihris said, nodding approvingly at their handiwork.

"It's dark in there," Varric observed. "C'mere, Blondie. Go glow in the hall, so we can see if there's any more of them."

"Didn't Mack ever tell you not to send the healer in first?" Anders protested, still glowing.

"Is that the same power? Does he also close rifts?" Mihris asked Fen'Din quietly, as Varric and Anders continued to argue, until Solas offered a shield.
"No. He has..." Fen'Din shot a glance at Cassandra. "...other talents."

"Most of them in bed," Anders muttered, sweeping around the two elves with his new shield. "Okay, we don't have any demons, but I see a torch and ... a really big statue with no head. Looks like it used to be somebody important."

Solas followed closely, watching Anders try to light the torch with fire spells.

"Either I have lost the ability to set things on fire, which I really doubt, or--"

"Veilfire." Solas cut him off and nudged him aside. "I believe it expects veilfire. I have heard of it, but never seen it. It is a form of sympathetic magic, a memory of flame that burns in this world where the veil is thin."

Fen'Din studied the torch intently, and after a moment, it burst into blue flame. "Thank you," he told the skeletal mouse on his shoulder. "That was very kind of you to explain."

Mihris gave him an odd look, but Adaar was starting to get past even noticing the weird.

"Don't ask," he told her. "His answers will just make you more confused."

Behind his shield, Anders led them further in, setting off the same blue glow as the veilfire. Past the headless statue was a crumbling set of steps that spilled out into a chamber that must have once been grand but was now in disrepair, columns toppled and roots creeping in through the ceiling. A green glow from the corner of the room told them they weren't alone, and as they approached, Anders could better make out the ghostly shapes heading towards them.

"Wraiths," Anders said, with Justice's growl under the words.

"You couldn't have found me something more solid to hit, Blondie?" Varric sighed, shooting a bolt clear through the head of one of the wraiths. It seemed to bother the creature, making it stagger, but it would have outright killed something living.

"Tell me about it," Adaar grumbled, hefting his sword.

This time, Fen'Din didn't bother to try to calm the spirits. Whoever they had once been, they obviously didn't remember any longer, and their presence seemed to make the spirits that followed him and Solas nervous. He whispered to the mouse on his shoulder, and the bones fell away, leaving a brilliant green swirl that wound around one of the wraiths, smothering it.

Solas cut an odd look in Fen'Din's direction, as he lashed out with ice, freezing the wraiths converging on Anders's brilliant glow. For Circle mages, these two had unusual talents, and he meant to have a much longer conversation with the two of them, once they were out of the range of more judgemental parties.

From behind him, which was an unusual place for her, Cassandra brought to bear a blinding pillar of light that drew the wraiths even as it scorched them. Fen'Din's spirit friend fled the light, taking back the mouse's bones and scurrying under his robes. Anders staggered back, gagging.

"A little warning, next time?" Anders choked out, as he hurled a bolt of lightning at one of the wraiths.

Cassandra looked at him in surprise. "That is only supposed to harm spirits," she said as she adjusted her grip on her shield.
"It was just ... really bright." Anders blinked as though trying to dissipate the spots in his vision. "Hard to aim a spell when I can't see!"

Justice was still reeling, the light spinning making his head hurt, but he pushed through it. Cassandra rushed past him with a blood-curdling cry, sword swinging for the nearest wraith. Even though the wraith screeched as though in pain, Cassandra had to adjust the weight behind her blows. Even when she scored a hit, her blade seemed to pass right through them, making Cassandra overbalance.

Across the way, Adaar had already adapted and was simply swinging his sword with wild abandon. Even when his swings didn't hit, it was enough to distract the wraiths and herd them back.

Mihris tried to edge along the wall, past the battle, toward what seemed to be an altar at the far end of the room. If the others could keep the demons distracted, perhaps she could activate the object. Maybe it would help.

A coil of ice wound through the wraiths, again, and Cassandra's sword rang off a frozen spike. The wraith she had been fighting faded into a curl of black smoke and drifted away.

"They'll come back," Fen'Din warned. "Maybe not now, but that seems to be their nature."

"Many of them forget," Solas argued, another wraith disintegrating in his hands. "It takes a great deal to return to sentience and more to recall what came before."

"Then the place draws others of similar intent." Fen'Din seemed entirely undisturbed by the battle raging on around him, as he unleashed a swarm of bees around the last wraith, distracting it from Adaar.

The bees managed to distract Adaar a bit too, but he recovered quickly, finishing off the last wraith with a brutal sweep of his sword. The wraith dissipated into nothing, leaving behind only the swarm of bees. Adaar took a wary step back.

"There is elven magic in this place," Solas said into the silence that fell.

Mihris brushed by him, looking around. "There," she said, pointing out a space off to the side, under the ominous presence of a looming sculpture.

"I think there's enough elven magic right here," Adaar grumbled, still eyeing the bees as they followed her.

"If we activate that crystal," Mihris went on excitedly, pointing out an odd, not quite spherical object on the floor, "it should react to the strength of the veil."

Solas crouched in front of the strange object, peering at it from multiple angles before nodding to himself. At his touch, a green glow suffused it, wrapping around it like a shield.

"Does that mean it is working?" Cassandra asked, peering curiously at the device.

"Yes, the wards are helping to strengthen the veil," Solas assured her, as he stood. "This area should be safer for travellers, now."

"Well, that should prove useful," Mihris agreed, distractedly, making her way toward something shiny beneath a broken column. "And it seems the ancestors left something for me, as well. Interesting." She bent down to fish the shining thing from under the rocks and shattered bones around it. "I believe our alliance is concluded. Go in peace, strangers."
Solas's head whipped around like it might roll off his neck, as her hand made contact with the object. "Ma halani. Ma glandival. Vir ensalin." His eyes gleamed with an intensity none of them had seen on him, before.

"I... Perhaps you are right. Take it." Mihris held out a tiny talisman in the shape of a wolf. "Go with Mythal's blessing."

"Ma serannas," Solas breathed as his hand closed around it. "Fen'Harel enaste."

Mihris looked at him very strangely, before making a quick exit.

"What is it?" Anders asked, leaning over Solas's shoulder and bringing more light.

"A Dread Wolf totem. I have been seeking it for a long time." Solas offered Anders a bland smile. "I see them in my dreams."

"A trickster to guide us," Fen'Din mused. "That seems terribly appropriate. And now, horses to carry us."

"Well," said Adaar with a crooked smile as he held out his hands in an offer to put Fen'Din on his shoulders, "I can't say that's the first time I've been compared to a horse. Oh, you mean the actual horses."

"I don't think he's quite interested in riding you that way," Anders said with a flat look.

Adaar made a face, not finding that idea particularly appealing, either. The crazy elf was tiny. That wouldn't end well anyway.

"So are we off to find a herd of noble qunari?" Varric asked. "I kind of like Crazy's style here, riding into battle on something that can wield a sword."

"I don't think even Ferelden breeds sword-wielding horses," Solas assured him. He'd tucked away the talisman somewhere.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

A matter of bears and corpses.

Cormac eased a folded piece of paper out of the pocket of the festering corpse he crouched beside, hoping it would give him some idea if this was the man he was looking for. One of the hunters had gone missing a few weeks ago, but it took time to notice, because a hunter being out for a couple of weeks was normal. Still, his friends had gotten worried, and Cormac offered to have a look around in the hills.

As the edge of the paper cleared the thankfully-leather pocket, he heard a sound behind him, and then a voice over his shoulder.

"Bears."

The barrier flashed up even as Cormac leapt up and over the corpse, away from the sound, and he could hear someone stumble back.

"Is this always how you greet your travelling companions?" Cassandra asked, clutching her nose, as Anders jogged up from further down the hill.

"Only the ones who scare the holy and complete fuck out of me," Cormac retorted, wild-eyed. "Did you say 'bears'?"

Anders raised an eyebrow and pointed at Cormac with one hand as he healed Cassandra's face with the other.

"Oh, no. Not me. Not this time. Wrong kind of bear." Cormac paused. "And I'm not a damned bear, no matter what Fenris has to say about it!"

Cassandra heaved a disgusted sigh, prodding at her healed nose. "Not you!" she said. "Actual bears, with fur." She looked Cormac up and down. "More fur. There are an inordinate number of them around."

"It looks like this poor asshole would agree," Anders said, indicating the corpse Cormac had been inspecting. "Those are pretty solid claw marks. He must have really pissed off that bear."

Varric caught up, stepping over a particularly annoying tree root to see what they were looking at. "Anyone we know?"

Cassandra stepped closer, holding her sleeve to her nose as she tried to get a good look at the dead man's face. "I do not recognise him," she said, shaking her head. "He might be one of the locals."

"That's what I'm here to find out," Cormac said, carefully unfolding the letter and letting the barrier fall. "I'm looking for a guy named -- ah, shit. This is him. -- Bergrit. He went out hunting bear claws and didn't come back. Looks like this has a map for the best spots to go bear hunting, if we ever need to know that."
"Give it to Blondie," Varric teased. "We all know what he likes."

"I'm not a bear!" Cormac protested.

"Doesn't anyone in this barbaric wilderness know how to handle a corpse?" Fen'Din snapped, as Adaar helped him down. "No wonder there are demon problems. And now there are going to be demons pretending to be your friends problems, too. Cand-- Andraste's tits aflame! Jan, can yo-- no, you can't, can you."

"I'd really rather not, if that sentence started with 'Candles'." Anders backed up a couple of steps.

"Let me get the rest of his stuff. His friends should have that, at least." Cormac crouched down again to pick through the man's pockets and remove his pouches and weapons. "And if you haven't got fire, I can take care of it, and then I'll have something else to give them."

"Maker's bleeding asshole, you're not going to--" Anders started to laugh. "You are, aren't you. Oh, that's going to be amazing."

"Well, you can't possess a rock, can you?" Cormac shrugged and wrapped the dead man's things in a piece of oilcloth, before tucking the bundle into the back of his belt.

"Not that I'm aware of..." Fen'Din stared at Cormac intently. "A rock?"

"Oh, shit," Varric said, as the spell took hold. "None of you want to see this and even less of you want to smell it."

Adaar looked around him suspiciously. "I am somewhere between curious and concerned right now."

"That is pretty much where you should be, right now," Varric said, "along with 'away from this', unless of course you want to know what your nightmares tonight are going to look like."

Adaar opened and closed his mouth a few times before side-stepping the corpse. "If you're saying that after spending all day killing demons, I'm going to start leaning more towards 'concerned'."

"Words of wisdom from the qunari," Solas said. "I, however, am still curious."

The body had long since folded in on itself and the barrier leaked foul fluids into the earth as the shape compressed into a smaller and smaller size, a faint hiss rising from where the heat of the rapid compression met the damp ground. "I've done this before," Cormac muttered, keeping a tight grip on the spell. "It'll all melt away into the dirt, except this. It's not ... well, I think it's only going to be about the size of my fist, because I don't want to take the time to bring it all the way down. Not here. Not if there's bears."

"Does that actually work?" Fen'Din asked, suddenly curious, as he crouched down on the other side of the shrinking barrier to get a closer look covering his mouth with his sleeve.

"Absolutely. You squeeze anything hard enough, with enough heat, and it'll turn into something else."

Anders cleared his throat.

"Not in front of company," Cormac sighed, before going back to his explanation. "Tevinter has probably experimented with this. Tevinter has a lot of slaves and a lot of dragonbone. I wouldn't be surprised to find out that parts of some temples used to be alive."
From the other side of a few trees, Adaar called back, "I can't see what you're doing, but it smells disgusting and the conversation isn't reassuring me either."

"Fascinating," said Solas, voice muffled by his sleeve. "I had not thought to use that spell in such a way."

"And yet it would be no less disgusting if you had," Varric cheerfully replied.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Our heroes find Master Dennet at last, but the quest for horses has just begun.

When they finally reached the farm, Fen'Din had to return to ground level, because even ducking wasn't going to help with getting both of them under a door frame built for humans. One of them, sure, even if Adaar's horns did still threaten the top.

Cormac wedged himself through the door at the same time as Cassandra, eager to finally meet the legendary horsemaster he'd heard about, so many years earlier, but he caught himself on her armour, and they fell to trying to untangle themselves so anyone else could come in behind them.

"Fen'Din, Senior Enchanter of Kinloch Hold and herald of the end of the demon invasion." Fen'Din held up his glowing hand. "And my partner in rift-sealing, Adaar."

The old man studied them both and glanced back at the two stuck in the door. "So, you're the Inquisition, eh? Hear you're trying to bring order back. High time someone did. Never thought it'd be one of these big brutes and a spellslinger, though." He cocked his head at Adaar. "Name's Dennet. I served Arl Eamon for thirty years as horsemaster. I hear your Inquisition's looking for mounts. Those two back there might be better wrapped in rugs and tossed in the back of a cart for everyone's safety, though."

"That's not the worst suggestion I've heard today," Adaar said, glancing back to find Cassandra and Cormac still trying to disentangle themselves, looking like a pair of seals trying to eat the same fish. "Can you help us? I mean, I'm not sure anything can help those two."

"Not at the moment," Dennet said with a regretful shrug. He gestured helplessly. "I can't just send a hundred of the finest horses in Ferelden down the road like you'd send a letter. Every bandit between here and Haven would be on them like flies on crap!"

"Bandits, huh?" Adaar said, exchanging a sidelong glance with Fen'Din. "You know, punting a few bandits might be a welcome break from stabbing demons."

"We could certainly use the help," Dennet said. "And you'll get my horses once I know they won't end up a cold winter's breakfast. Granted, I have no idea how a qunari rides without dragging his feet on the ground, but that's between you and the mount."

"If you have a problem with us, I'd like to know about it." Fen'Din slowly raised one eyebrow, the rest of his face inscrutable as always.

"What? Is this because I called you a spellslinger? I always wanted a proper mage around here, but the king wouldn't hear of it, and you know what happened in Redcliffe... That poor boy." Dennet shook his head. "But, we don't have one, so there's a few things probably harder for us than for you. My wife Elaina manages the farms, and Bron's in charge of my guards. They'll tell you what they need."

"Oh, look, not another Bran!" Anders drawled, as he pried Cormac out of the door, leaving a few
pulled threads on the sunburst on Cassandra's armour. "Are we really in the south? Perhaps we've fallen into the Fade!"

"Pity we didn't bring Peryn for this momentous occasion," Cormac murmured, holding back a laugh.

"I did know Connor. Unfortunately, he's still a bit ... poorly adjusted, but Jowan will have that effect on anyone." Fen'Din considered a grimace, before deciding it was too much effort to get right. Teeth made everything more prone to misinterpretation, and he'd never quite gotten the nuances without a mirror. "So, once we've ensured the roads are safe, you'll see to finding us something to ride?"

Dennet nodded. "I'll make sure you have nothing short of the best, provided you treat them right."

"And until then, we have Adaar," Anders said with a shrug.

Adaar threw him a narrowed look. "You're not climbing on my shoulders, Blondie."

"I almost want to take that as a challenge."

They found Dennet's wife out in the fields, her white hair catching the sun. It seemed bandits weren't the only problem around, and she told them about the crazed wolves scaring off the farmers.

"These beasts," she said. "It's like darkspawn during the Blight, or when the dead rose to attack us."

"It's like no one has ever heard of cremation!" Fen'Din hissed to Anders.

"I've lost too many men to the beasts," Elaina went on with a shake of her head. "I won't endanger more."

"Meaning, of course, that you'll endanger us," Varric muttered to Bianca. At Cassandra's scowl, Varric added, "Which we're fine with. That's kind of our thing."

"Right," sighed Adaar, running a hand over one of his horns, fingers pausing around a notch he'd gotten at the Temple of Sacred Ashes. "So, right now, we're contending with man-eating wolves, bandits, and bears. Any other Hinterlands murderous fauna I should be made aware of?"

"Man-eating nugs," Varric said, with a slow, solemn nod. "Depending on how close that Dalish clan was, maybe stampeding halla."

"Pity we didn't bring Lord Halla with us," Anders joked, and Cormac shot him a look that could have frozen an ocean.

"The man-eating nugs are unattested by modern scholarship, but so are so many things that obviously exist. One can never be sure about these things." Fen'Din looked faintly amused, to judge by the gleam in his eyes.

"Or the schleets," Anders added. "I knew a dwarf who swore he'd been chased by pants with no one inside them. Of course, then Solona told him they'd lay eggs in his eye sockets, and then I had to treat him for a head injury on top of everything else."

Adaar looked at Cassandra as though expecting her to add something. After a moment, she added, "And also spiders."

Adaar shook his head. "I am surrounded by assholes."

"Inquisition made of assholes." Varric spread his hands as if framing a headline. "Assquisition? Nah, that's terrible."
A stocky man came up on them, nodding to Elaina. "You must be the Inquisition. Master Dennet said you'd be about. He doesn't want me handing those refugees weapons until they've got any chance of defending themselves."

"I would have to agree with his decision. There is nothing more dangerous than an idiot with a sword, and those are most likely to be dangerous to themselves." Cassandra nodded and held out her hand. "Cassandra Pentaghast."

"Inquisitorial cat-herder," Varric filled in.

"Bron." The man shook her hand. "So, you're in charge?"

"Nobody's sure who's in charge, but she usually has good ideas. Except for putting me in a cell. That was a terrible idea," Fen'Din protested, glancing at Cassandra. "But, if you're Bron, Master Dennet has asked us to offer you our assistance. So far, the safety of the settlement seems to depend on us dealing with wolves, bears, and bandits. Have you anything to add to the list, or does that about cover it?"

"Well, I was thinking, if you put up a few watch towers, we'd all have more warning before the next attack."

"It's a good thing you have us around to do all this for you," Adaar said, almost managing to keep the sarcasm out of his tone.

"There are too many hills in these parts," Bron went on with a shrug, "good places for raiders and bandits to gather. Do you have a map? I could mark a few good spots for you."

Cassandra pulled a piece of cloth from her pouch, with rudimentary drawings of the Hinterlands' geography. She borrowed a stick of charcoal from Fen'Din, and though she found charcoal did not work so well on cloth, Bron was able to mark a few spots.

"There," said Bron, handing the materials back. "You set up those watchtowers, I'll talk to the master get your people weapons."

"We'll see to it," Cassandra promised.

"Stone and force mages," Anders said to Fen'Din. "Like we did the abbey?"

"Perhaps it's time to set the templars to patrol the roads, under the care of Corporal Vale?" Fen'Din replied, taking back his charcoal. "We can see if they're as able against bandits as they think they are against mages."

"As they are against mages," Cassandra corrected.

"You didn't know Frick and Sweeney, but you do know Jan and Mack." Fen'Din managed a smile. "They're delusional, if only because they're not expecting a physical fight. But, they'll get that on the roads."

Anders shuddered. "Can we not talk about Sweeney?"
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

A search for the missing, out in the hills.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They left Vale in charge of organizing patrols and helped the mages through constructing the first watchtower, before they set off, again, better fed and with the smiles of the villagers behind them. The changes they'd made in just a few days had gotten people healed and feeling safer, even if fights did still break out. It wasn't anything serious, at this point -- nothing Vale or a few scouts couldn't break up with a couple of punches and some sharp words. And the harder the mages worked, the more even the Templars came to appreciate them. And the Templars, in turn, brought back more food and firewood, every day.

Still, there were some things that had been stolen from the village that hadn't been found, and reports from both sides indicated there were more camps up in the hills, assuming the bandits hadn't gotten to them, and Cormac promised he'd at least try to find everything and everyone. He was big on reunions, even if they were just a way to ignore how much he missed his brother.

"Hang on." Anders raised his staff and tipped his chin toward something on the side of a hill. "Something up there. I just want to make sure it's not a corpse."

"I hope not," Adaar sighed, "I think I've hit my corpse-finding quota for the day. Plus I still have no idea what you did to that last corpse, but I know it will give me nightmares."

Anders gingerly poked around the poorly concealed lump, crouching in front of it to get a better look. "Guess what?" he called back to the rest of the group. "It's not a dead body!"

"Yay," Adaar said under his breath.

"Then what is it?" Varric called back. "Or are you going to make us guess? Is it a man-eating nug?"

"It is not a living creature," Anders assured him.

"Is it an undead man-eating nug?"

"Don't be giving him ideas," Cassandra said, pointing at Fen'Din. "The mice are bad enough."

Shaking his head in amusement, Anders into the lump and pulled out... a blanket? "It's a stash of blankets and coats. No nugs, though there might be some murderous pants in here somewhere."

Cassandra perked up. "The villagers could use that. Who put that there, do you think?"

"Hey! Get away from there!" a man shouted from the edge of where the path passed down into another valley. "That's private property!"

"This looks like some of the supplies the villagers reported stolen," Fen'Din observed, loudly,
looking slowly from a very distinctive quilt to the shouting man, who appeared to be dressed in Circle robes. "You must be--"

"We're not going back!" the man shouted, lobbing a fireball down the hill.

Anders shoved Fen'Din behind him as Cormac brought up a barrier between them and the angry mage who wasn't travelling with them.

"Knock it off!" Anders roared, blue flashing across his eyes as the ground flashed green under the other mage. "We're not here to hurt you!"

"It's not really believable when you glow in the dark, Blondie," Varric pointed out.

"Oh, fuck off, Varric. And grab those blankets." Anders tapped on the barrier and glanced at Cormac, who dispelled it without a word. "If he's here, there's probably a camp near here. We need to find them and let them know their friends are working with us in the village."

"I suspect they will be just as friendly as our new friend here," Cassandra said, tipping her head at the mage, now paralysed on Anders' glyph. She stood next to him in case the spell failed, fixing him with a glare that would have paralysed him without it.

"Then it's a good thing I have more where that came from." Anders's eyes flashed blue again.

"Some of these are pretty stylish," Varric said, picking up a coat and holding it against his body.

"The fur at the collar seems a little much," Solas said.

"You'll forgive me if I don't look to you for fashion advice, Chuckles."

Solas frowned down at his clothing while Varric started to use Adaar's horns as coat hangers.

"And now I'm a pack animal," Adaar sighed, head tipping back as Varric hooked another coat over his horns. "This is what my life has come to."

"Better you than me," Cormac said, shaking his head. He took down one of the coats. "Oh, that one would be nice, if I thought it would fit."

"Says the man dressed like a Chantry sister," Varric shot back. "Or am I wrong? Is that not what they wear up in the smouldering north?"

"That seems sacrilegious," Cassandra commented, giving Cormac a stern look. "I hope he is joking."

"He's not. Sisters' robes are made with more room in them where I need it. They just fit better." Cormac grinned and hung the coat he was holding on the top of Anders's staff. "Besides, you can't tell me I look anything but great in them. I used to wear the Marcher style, and those were even better, but I can't complain about the Ander robes."

"What is wrong with wearing trousers, like most people?" Cassandra asked, unsure she wanted an answer.

"Same thing that's wrong with them in the Circle," Anders replied, grinning wickedly. "You'd have to take them off."

"That's disgusting!" the still mostly-paralysed mage retorted.

"Sure, but it doesn't make it less true. Or maybe it did in your Circle, in which case I want to know
where that was. I'd say Kirkwall before the rebellion, but I know very few people have wanted to leave, since." Anders laughed and put an arm around Cormac. "But, the rest of your people have settled down in the Crossroads and they're building fortifications for the village, as we speak."

"Yeah, right," huffed the paralysed mage, frozen except for his face, which twisted into something as doubtful as his tone. "That's why they just completely disappeared, without a word."

"You think we're lying?" Varric asked, after finding the limit of just how many coats he could hang on Adaar's horns. "You think, what, we just killed them all and now we're making shit up to keep the peace? Sure. Let's go with that a moment. Now tell me why we didn't do the same thing with you. It would have been just as easy as dropping a glyph on your head."

"In case you haven't noticed," Adaar added, "a few of the crazy people I'm travelling with are mages too. We're not your enemies here." He wasn't sure how convincing he was with a pile of coats on his head, but his words were honest.

"Right, because the qunari have always been such great friends to mages," the paralysed mage drawled.

"Then perhaps you'll take my word for it." Fen'Din stepped to the edge of the glyph, eyes unsettling as they landed on the mage's face. "Senior Enchanter Fen'Din of Kinloch Hold. Perhaps you've heard of me."

"You're dead!" The paralysed mage looked surprised, which was a fair bit more than Fen'Din managed.

"Someone's finally noticed!" Fen'Din looked at Anders and pointed at the mage, his eyes glimmering with amusement.

"The tower fell on you and those other mages. We heard about that. So, obviously, that's not really you -- dead mages don't just get up and walk around!" the mage argued.

"I would seem to be the exception to that argument. Are they saying we were killed? Good. That's probably safer. I knew Torrin would think of something." Fen'Din studied the man, curiously. "But, no, in fact, the tower did not fall on me, though it may have hit a few Templars. I expect there were a good many broken toes. I was in the Anderfels, establishing a new home for some other mages -- likely the rest you heard had died in the collapse. Which is to say, yes, I'm dead, but that's not what killed me."

"You're confusing him," Anders hissed.

"The point is, I'm a Senior Enchanter and clearly one of the few currently still standing and speaking, to judge by what happened at the Conclave. I am a mage, and I am, if not in charge, certainly a party to what little structure has come of this mayhem. We have set the group of mages we found at the Crossroads to work defending the village against bandits and providing the people with food, in exchange for other necessities." Fen'Din shrugged. "It doesn't really matter if you believe it. They can be found raising watchtowers around the farms between the Crossroads and Redcliffe. Send scouts, if you don't want to walk in blind."

"There are also Templars patrolling the road, so watch out for that. They're only looking for bandits, in theory, but let's not give them an excuse," Anders sighed. "We've got some soldiers watching them."

The paralysed mage looked back and forth between them. He still looked sceptical but had lost much
of his defiance. "And what, exactly, do you want with me?"

"We want you to introduce us to your friends so that we can have a chat with them," Anders answered. "A perfectly friendly chat, provided they are friendly too."

"You're stealing our coats!" the captured mage protested. "How friendly do you expect us to be?"

"Coats that were already stolen," Adaar replied flatly. "Returning them to their owners is hardly an act of war."

"But--!"

"Let me rephrase my answer," Anders said, cutting him off. He placed himself squarely in front of his prisoner. "Either you agree to bring us to them, and we let you go, or we leave you here like this and try to find them on our own. Now, the spell will eventually wear off, of course, but the question is whether or not the bears will find you first."

"Bears?" the mage echoed weakly.

"With us, you only get the one bear," Anders added, pointing at Cormac, "and he, at least, is friendly and house-trained."

"Mostly," Cormac agreed. "The friendly part's true, but I've had some questions about the house training."

Cassandra's eyebrow arched smoothly upward.

"Lord Hawke's a little neurotic about the cleaning. He's convinced I was raised by wolves." Cormac shrugged.

"Has your Lord Hawke ever met any wolves?" Solas inquired.

"Met and married," Cormac replied, without thinking. "Anyway, you, are you coming along or are we leaving you for the less-friendly bears?"

"You're really not going to kill us?" the mage asked, eyeing Cassandra, nervously.

"There would have been much simpler ways to do that," Fen'Din assured him. "I don't even need to know where they are, if that's all I want. But if we're going to help them, we do need to find them, first."

"Seriously? That's your answer?"

"Nightmare. Death cloud. Inferno... You're a mage. You know I'm right."

Anders nodded and cocked his thumb at Fen'Din.

The mage sighed. "Fine. They're not going to be happy about this, though."

"Maybe not at first," Anders said, "but they will be."
As of Monday, 5 March, 2018, this series has been running for three years! *confetti*
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Bears and mages, mages and bears, and Varric meets another fan.

The mages' hideout was tucked away into the side of a cliff, in a place that seemed obvious now but that Anders doubted they would have been able to find without a guide. And their guide was still surly even after being freed, but he had kept his word.

"You should probably stay back for a bit," he said as they drew close. "They tend to throw fire first and ask questions later, which has been working well enough for us but wouldn't end well for you."

"We're kind of used to that by now," Adaar said with a shrug.

Still, they obeyed, staying back in the trees while their new mage friend went to greet his friends, praying that he hadn't just turned around and betrayed them. The last thing they needed right now was more bloodshed.

"Jeanine?" the mage called out across the frozen pond. "I found some other mages! There's one who says he's from Kinloch Hold -- do we have anyone from there?"

"What's left of Kinloch Hold is sealed up in Redcliffe, and they're not letting anyone else in." A tall woman in a heavy cloak stepped out of the cave. "Have they finally come to invite us?"

"They're saying the last raid we sent out has settled in the Crossroads, that the village is helping them."

"Well, that sounds like shit. Bring them somewhere neutral and we'll see. The next valley is--"

"They're right behind me. It was that or they'd feed me to the bears."

"Garrett, you idiot!" Jeanine sighed and called into the cave. "Barrier behind me!"

"This fucking moron, I swear," Varric muttered, stepping forward. "Hey, we're not bandits and we're not killing anybody. We promised your friends we'd come find you and make sure you got word."

"I'm sure," Jeanine said flatly, twisting the staff in her hand. Her other hand fidgeted at her side in the beginnings of a spell, Anders noticed, and he tensed, blue light flickering over his skin. "And who are you, exactly?"

"Varric Tethras from Kirkwall, at your service." Varric dipped into a dramatic bow. "I came south to record the Conclave and ended up with a bigger story than I bargained for."

Jeanine's fingers stopped twitching. "Hold on." She took a step forward, eyes narrowed. "Varric Tethras, did you say? From Kirkwall?"

"That's me!" Varric's grin turned a little uncertain.

"By Andraste," Jeanine breathed. Her whole face lit up. "I love your books!"
Adaar didn't quite bite back a snicker.

"Please tell me it's 'Hard in Hightown' and not 'Swords and Shields'." Varric grimaced, holding up one hand, defensively.

"'Hard in Hightown' was amazing, but 'The Tale of the Champion' was even better! All those mages! And they're even heroes!" Jeanine looked like she might swoon. "Is it really true? Did you get to meet them?"

"It's... let's say it's historical fiction. It's very definitely based on actual events, and the Champion and his brothers are all too real for my tastes, but I can assure you I was not present for most of the ... more intimate scenes. Most. And the rest I drank extensively after." Varric shook his head. "Really? You could get a copy wherever you were? I'm not sure whether I'm more surprised they'd let it into a Circle or that there were any copies left, by the time you got out."

"I still protest your depiction of the healer in those ... 'intimate scenes'," Anders called out, Cormac's shield settling onto him as he stepped between the trees. "As a man of Ander descent, I object to the idea that's an Ander trait. And more than that, if it were that big, he'd have passed out instead of getting laid."

"Sorry, Jannik, that one I saw for myself." Varric shuddered. "And no amount of drink is going to erase it from my memory."

Adaar leaned in towards Fen'Din. "He's not going to turn us into a book, is he?"

Jeanine noted the staff in Anders' hand and relaxed further, while Garrett just looked back and forth between them in confusion. "It's an honour to meet you in person," she said to Varric, stepping forward to shake his hand. "Please, you'll have to tell me all about the Champion and his family!"

"Oh, I suspect you've already read all the good stuff," Varric said.

Someone called out to Jeanine from the cave, on the other side of the barrier. "Are there any others with him?"

Varric glanced back over his shoulder, at the cluster of trees where he knew his friends were. "Oh, yeah. There are a few of us, but the rest are just waiting to make sure no one's gonna shoot them."

"Well, I'm probably not going to," Jeanine said. "If they don't start first. I thought Garrett said he was with mages, and yet..."

"Sparklefingers, Messere Buttercream, and the point-eared terrors are behind me. In fact, that's Sparklefingers protesting that I don't know how to write a knob." Varric rolled his eyes.

"Messere... Buttercream?" Jeanine's eyebrows inched upward.

"It's a very long story, and he's got way too much hair on his chest." Varric waved Anders forward. "Come and meet some people, Jan! I need to demonstrate that we're not evil."

Anders eyed the frozen pond, and the frost rose up around his boots with every step, just to be sure he wouldn't fall. "Jan Kasselmann," he said, offering the hand not holding his coat-draped staff to Jeanine. "Also a healer, which is why I know that description is utterly unreasonable."

"It is not. I saw it," Varric insisted.

"That looks like one of our coats," Jeanine said, squinting at the drape of fur and cloth hanging from
Anders's staff.

Anders glanced back at his staff as though forgetting it was there. "It is a coat," he hedged.

"That's where I found them," Garrett said, staying by Jeanine. "They found our cache and plan to take the coats and blankets back to the village."

Jeanine tightened her grip on her staff and turned a betrayed look on Varric.

"In fairness," said Varric, holding his hands up, palm out, "I believe those belonged to the villagers in the first place?"

"The villagers don't need them like we do!" Jeanine protested. She gestured behind her. "It's freezing, and we're living in a cave!"

"The villagers need them too," Anders pointed out.

"Then what else are we supposed to use?"

The growl of an irate bear interrupted the conversation, and Varric turned to see it rearing up to loom angrily above the group still in the trees.

"I think we have more serious problems, right now," he pointed out, loading a bolt and debating whether he could get a shot off without hitting anyone.

"That is enough!" Cassandra declared, as she turned, fist already rising, to drive her gauntlet straight into the bear's nose, driving it back and down with a sound of snapping bone.

A quick electrical strike from Cormac finished it off, leaving a slight burnt spot between the bear's eyes, and for a long moment, no one spoke.

Cassandra tried to scruff the dead bear and drag it, but it was awkwardly large, so she grabbed its front paws and draped it over her shoulders, dragging it out onto the frozen pond. "What will you wear? This. I have heard bear furs are very warm."

"And I've heard there's an awful lot of bears around here," Varric noted, stepping around the other side of Anders just not to be too close to Cassandra.

"Did she just...?" Garrett whispered, but Jeanine's jaw hung too low for her to answer.

"So the caves are cold, you say?" Anders said, letting the coat swing a little from his staff. "Maybe we could give you a hand with that."

Jeanine finally remembered to close her mouth, though she still kept staring at Cassandra and the bear.

Garrett leaned in closer. "Might as well let them in," he said out of the corner of his mouth. "She could probably punch her way through the barrier anyway."

Jeanine shook her head in amazement. "This is not how I expected my day to go," she said, turning back to the cave entrance.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

More bears, more corpses, a trinket that might be cursed.

"She said bandits, didn't she?" Solas asked, studying the ground as they came over another hill. "I'm not sure those are bandit footprints."

"She also said 'forest villa', which I am definitely seeing." Varric elbowed Solas and pointed across the valley. He paused and looked around. "Hey, wait, I know where we are."

"Have you even been to Ferelden before?" Anders squinted suspiciously at the dwarf.

"Doesn't matter. I've heard the song enough times. Arl Jacen's Ride? About the Arl of Redcliffe and his handsome bard lover and his extremely tolerant wife?" Varric kicked a stone down the hill, unmindful of the drop to one side of the path. A growl rose up from below, but he took it for thunder and looked up.

"It belongs to the Arl of Redcliffe?" Cassandra asked. "Where are his men? Should they not have dealt with these bandits?"

"Who knows if it still does, but it did." Anders remembered picking up the song in a tavern on one of his escapes. "They say he built this place, if this is really it, for his lover, and he rode out every night and back before dawn. His ass must have been sore all the time. How can anyone be as good an arl as they say he was when they're tired and can't sit down?"

"Are we sure it was his ass that was sore?" Adaar asked with a face-splitting grin.

"Well, if he's riding every night, I imagine he would--" Cassandra paused, closing her eyes as she realised what she was saying. Varric didn't quite hold back a snicker. "I meant riding a horse, but now I see what you meant."

"You can pretty much assume that's always what I meant," Adaar replied, nudging her arm with his elbow. She glared at the offending elbow like she might cut it off.

This time, the low growl from below came with the rustling of leaves, making it harder to ignore. Cassandra drew her sword before she even finished turning.

"Is that another bear?" she sighed.

"What?" asked Varric, turning towards the source of the sound. "Do you have a special bear sense or something?"

"If she did, he would be making things difficult," Anders said, pointing at Cormac.

"Now, now, we all know I make things harder, but I never make them more difficult," Cormac sighed, readying his glaive as he turned around, looking for bandits that might decide to beset them while they were distracted with a bear. Instead, he found more bears. "Oh, shit."
"I hope we're all wearing our brown pants, today," Varric remarked, Bianca clutched close to his chest as he waited to see if the bears would just move on.

"Oh, nevermind this," Fen'Din muttered, closing his eyes and spreading his hands, black wisps swirling around him and then expanding outward.

The spell clipped Cassandra, who flashed back to another fight in which she'd been outnumbered. There had been dragons, that time, and blood magic. With a powerful shout, she turned and drove her fist into what she was sure was the nearest attacker.

Cormac staggered, dropping his shields as the gauntleted fist slammed into his face, and giving up on staying upright in favour of casting the one spell he could imagine getting them out of this. The ground trembled beneath them, flames shooting up from where it split, ice and lightning driving downward from the gathering clouds above, as Cormac lay on the ground clutching his face. As a mage, he was fairly sure it didn't matter if he was standing. After a moment, he remembered to raise a barrier around himself and the rest of the team only to discover that he wasn't on fire because Solas had beaten him to it.

Cassandra blinked, eyes wild as she came back to herself and remembered where they were. She found the bears around them either dead or soon to be, a number of them still on fire.

Adaar let out a low whistle. "So, punching a bear results in a spell to take out the other bears? That's good to know."

"Please don't make it a habit of punching this particular bear," Anders said, sighing as he cast, blue healing coming to his fingers as he crouched over Cormac, examining the damage done to his broken nose. "I'm the one who has to put him back together."

"Sorry," Cassandra blurted after a moment. "That spell surprised me. Is he all right?"

"I'm great!" Cormac held up a thumb.

"You broke his nose," Anders said, wiping blood off Cormac's face.

"Never felt better!" Cormac insisted, as Anders held him down to finish the healing.

"That seems unlikely," Solas remarked, watching the two mages.

"He's studied a school of magic from before the birth of the Chantry, and it made him a little weird. The more you hit him, the more dangerous he gets," Anders rolled his eyes in exasperation, finally letting Cormac up. "I clean up after a lot, but it's great in bed."

"Lalala, I can't hear you." Varric turned in a circle, looking for anything else with an interest in fucking up their day.

"I said it's great in bed!" Anders raised his voice.

Cassandra's face twisted like she had tasted something sour. "Maybe I should take back my apology?"

"Maybe we should just pretend Jan didn't say anything," Varric suggested instead.

"Maybe we should move on before we attract more bears for Cassandra to punch," Solas suggested.

"All sound suggestions," Adaar said. "I'll scout ahead while Mack tries to remember where his feet
go. Catch up with me when everyone's standing."

Farther along the road, the ground leveled out, making it easier to see any bears before they could form an ambush. Or any demons. Adaar figured he was about due to run into some more of those, though his hand didn't have that bone-deep ache he associated with approaching a rift. Still, he wasn't surprised when he found the dead bodies to the side of the road. They didn't look like templar or mage, but they'd met a bloody end just the same.

"Guess your journey didn't go as planned," he said to the bodies with a sigh. "Sorry about this." He crouched to see if they had anything useful on their bodies.

Fen'Din followed shortly, muttering about irresponsible corpse disposal. "Mack, when you get your feet under you, there's some more corpses!" he called back up the hill, bending down to examine the bodies. "I think the bears got them. That seems to be what happens here. Are we certain there are even actual bandits, and not just angry bears?"

"I have yet to see bears occupy a noble villa, when more natural options are readily available," Cassandra pointed out, tipping her face up to get upwind of the stench.

"And I've yet to see mages live in caves when better accommodations exist." Fen'Din nodded toward the villa and sighed. "You are likely correct. They probably are bandits, and I have to wonder if they haven't had more trouble with the bears than the locals."

"Given the condition of the locals, I can guarantee the bears are a much bigger challenge," Anders replied, one arm around Cormac's shoulders as they came down the hill.

"Anything we can use?" Cormac asked, cocking his chin toward Adaar.

"Besides a bad joke about the bandits actually being bears?" Adaar asked. He held up a few gold pieces and an amulet with a red stone. "Some gold, something shiny we could sell for gold, unless one of you thinks this would look better with your outfit." He paused, tugging on a crumpled piece of paper sticking out of the pouch he'd pulled the coins from. He read the letter and barked out a laugh. "Or we could bring it back to who it belongs to and not end up cursed. That might be the best option."

Varric raised an eyebrow. "Cursed, huh?" Adaar handed him the letter. "Hmm. I'm not sure if this is a curse, or a lunatic just sending threats to get his property back."

Adaar shrugged. "It might be safe to assume 'curse' and go from there."

"It's been a while since we had anything cursed," Cormac remarked, skimming the letter over Varric's shoulder. "What was the last one? Something about ..." He stopped and swallowed. "... That poor bastard with the four fingers and the pride demon under Hightown, probably."

"Was that really cursed, though?" Anders asked, with a shrug. "I'm not sure it counts as cursed if it's an improperly bound demon."

"Angry spirits are something else, I think," Fen'Din said, catching Solas smiling at him over the corpse. "Still, you should take care of this. Or, you and I can take care of this if Jan goes on to help them put that thing wherever it goes. Are there directions?"

Varric shook his head and flipped the note over. "Nothing. Not even on the back. Whatever went on here, that guy was expected to know where he was bringing this thing."

Solas's eyes lit on Adaar, with some mild concern. "Has the artefact told you where to put it? If not,
perhaps the spell only affects the thief."

"Or it just takes longer to settle," Anders suggested, with a grimace. "Still, if it's pulling on you, we should get moving. Let these two take care of the corpse problem without us, right? No need to stand around and watch things burn."

Adaar chuffed. "I am sure there are plenty of other places we could do that," he said, turning the amulet over in his hand. "And it's not pulling on me. It's just a necklace with, um..." There was something there, in the red stone at its center. The longer Adaar stared at it, the more certain he was he could see a pair of eyes and hear a voice just at the edge of his hearing. He felt the tug then, a pull across the bridge down the road. Adaar shook his head and looked away. "Dammit. Okay, maybe it is pulling me."

"Yeah, you're cursed," Varric said even as Anders asked, "Which way?"

Adaar tipped his head down the road, his horns exaggerating the action. He was trying to decide if this was better or worse than the thing on his hand.

"Curse or spellbind?" Fen'Din murmured to Solas. "I'd put silver on spellbind."

"Far be it from me to wager against a man so certain," Solas replied, a faint chuckle following his words. "It is too soon to tell, but I would not take that bet."

"Five for curse," Varric said, pointing over his shoulder at Fen'Din, as they followed Adaar. "I'm standing by that one."

"Aren't you supposed to be helping Mack?" Anders asked, and Fen'Din grabbed his arm as he tried to turn and look back.

"I am. I'm keeping you out of trouble." Fen'Din kept one eye on the flames upwind from them as he led Anders away. "Don't make me tie your beard to your buttons, Roundear."

Anders huffed. "Elfhole."

"The one and only." Fen'Din replied, with a faint hint of amusement around his eyes.

"I might debate that." Varric cautiously stepped over a rock. "You haven't met Hahren Shem-Tamer and his epic poetry about asses."

"For which we are all thankful, I am certain." Cassandra made a disgusted noise, as she kicked a snake over a rock.

"Epic poetry about asses?" Adaar let out a laugh from his belly. He started walking where the amulet pulled him, holding it in the hand that didn't glow. "That reminds me this friend of mine, Kaariss. Except he wouldn't write epics so much as sonnets. And they weren't so much about asses as just... bad. Really, really bad."

Varric exchanged a look with Anders. "Well, I didn't exactly say Hahren Shem-Tamer's poems were particularly good either..."

"I don't know," Anders countered. "I think it's impressive how he just sort of... rolls them off. And the one about Lord Halla's ass are kind of catchy."

"Maybe he should be writing drinking songs instead of epics," Adaar suggested.
"I would certainly drink to that ass," Anders agreed.

"To that ass?" Fen'Din raised an eyebrow very far.

"Polite company," Anders replied, and Fen'Din grabbed him again, as he tried to look back for Cormac.

"Thank you." Varric sounded relieved. "I do not want to know."

"This is not what I expected from the man who wrote all those scenes in the Tale of the Champion," Cassandra teased, her eyes sweeping the landscape for bears and bandits.

"I can make up the most incredible shit. Any writer can. But, I find knowing too much about the characters, when the characters are people I have to sit next to during Wicked Grace, every week, is a little much."

"Remind me the next time I want to beat you at cards, I should tell a story about how much Mack likes a couple of spells in just the right places." Anders grinned wickedly.

"Even that wouldn't let you win, Blondie." Varric shook his head.

"Maybe it will if you tell it in poem form," Adaar suggested, earning him a groan from Varric.

"Trust me. Blondie here isn't a poet."

"At least I know it." Anders grinned at the pained look on Varric's face.

"Which is why it might help you win," Adaar said. "Look at the suffering on his face. He might let you win just to get you to stop."

Varric opened and closed his mouth but didn't deny that.

They walked through trees and over hills, across a landscape that all looked the same to Adaar, but he used the mark in one hand and the amulet in the other as his guides. When his glowing hand started to ache, Adaar knew they were within walking distance from a rift, but, thankfully, the amulet steered him in another direction.

"Demons that way," he said with a tip of his head anyway. "Much as I hate them, we might want to deal with that on the way back." He looked to Fen'Din to see if he felt it too.

"Perhaps I should go to them," Fen'Din suggested. "See if I could soothe them back into their right forms. Solas?"

"It seems unwise to go recklessly charging into demons, alone." Solas managed to look faintly amused, glancing around at the rest of the group. "If I accompany you, do you think they will fare as well, without us?"

"Hey, I got into it with one of the first darkspawn ever to walk the face of Thedas -- possibly two of them, if Howe's got his head on straight. I'm pretty sure I can handle whatever dinky angry spirit curse thing is going to come out of this amulet... speaking of which, there was that time on Sundermount, with this other amulet, and I swear to you..." Anders stopped talking, remembering he wasn't supposed to let on who he actually was. "Still, I'm more worried about you, than us."

"I am able to offer shielding. At the least, we will live long enough for you to come rescue us, if necessary." Solas offered a sly smile. "I doubt it will be necessary."
"I do not remember you in the Tale of the Champion," Cassandra said to Anders, as Fen'Din and Solas made their way toward the rift that pulled at the glowing duo's marks. "And I have read the ancient darkspawn chapters several times."

"Amaranthine, nine thirty-one," Anders corrected. "I was working with Commander Amell, during that unpleasant incident. You can ask her about Warden Buttz."

"I don't want to hear about Warden butts any more than I want to hear about anyone else's," Varric muttered.

Adaar considered another joke about butts and poems, but decided Varric had suffered enough. He turned instead to Fen'Din. "Are you sure about this, Crazy?"

"You have a very large sword. Do you expect it won't be enough to hold off whatever traps might be sprung? More bears, perhaps? I can stay, if you think you need me." Fen'Din's expressionless eyes set on Adaar.

Adaar huffed through a smile and reached down to tousle Fen'Din's hair. "Not worried about me, Crazy. Just you, running off with Baldy?" He paused to consider it. "No, you're right, the demons are fucked whether they like your singing or not. Just try not to get eaten by any bears." He waved them off and rejoined the rest of the group.

"You know," said Anders as they started walking again, watching the elves disappear into the trees, "I keep waiting for you to make a joke about having a 'large sword', and I'm not sure what that says about the company I usually keep."

"Because you're used to people commenting on 'large swords'?" Varric drawled.

"As I said, it is proportional, and that Ander stereotype is completely untrue!"

Varric hummed, unconvinced.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Stabbing some demons, singing to others.

They turned a bend, and the trees opened up, giving them a clear sightline to the fortress nestled among the rock and to the winding path that led to it. The amulet all but hummed in Adaar's hand.

"Uh, you know, if we're going in there to put this back, maybe we should at least wait for Messere Buttercream to rejoin us." Varric cast a nervous eye at the fortress.

"Varric, you are a man of little faith," Anders objected, primly. "On the other hand, yeah, that is a fortress, and I'm not sure the four of us are really equipped to take that on, alone. Do we know how many men?"

"She didn't know," Varric reminded him, "but it's more than she wants to deal with, either."

"Do we need to wait?" Cassandra asked, eyeing Adaar's trajectory. "I think we don't need to wait. We are not going in. We are going past."

"I still don't want to be close enough for boiling oil, or whatever the fashion is in fortress defences, these days." Anders shuddered. "That is a very nice place, though. If the stories are true, I wouldn't mind having some rich nobleman to build me a place like that."

"You could always ask Lord Halla," Varric suggested, with a look that made very clear what he thought of Anders implying he didn't have wealthy, landowning lovers.

Anders gave Varric a wry look. "Lord Halla would just tidy the place into oblivion. Granted, there are worse fates. Thanks for the suggestion."

"Your friends have such interesting names," Adaar said, glancing back at them over his shoulder. He veered off the path when he found himself in sight of the fortress's gates, following the amulet's pull up the hill, a sheer cliff-face blocking them from sight. "Hahren Shem-Tamer. Lord Halla. Elves, I assumed, but I don't know too many elf lords."

Varric snorted as Anders explained, "Hahren Shem-Tamer is an elf with an appreciation for shem... culture. Lord Halla is a shem with an appreciation for elf... culture."

Adaar wasn't sure what the dramatic pauses were about, but they made Varric smirk. "I see. Suddenly the epic ass poetry makes more sense."

"I am not sure it does," Cassandra sighed. She was on high-alert, looking around for bandits, but Adaar managed to skirt the fortress entirely.

"Where, exactly, are we going?" Anders asked, glancing around as if he expected something to leap out of the trees at any moment.

"I don't know, but I hope it has a hot tub." Varric held Bianca closer to his chest and let out a wistful sigh. "If there's one thing I don't regret about that Tevinter holiday, it's the hot tubs."
"You know, we have one, Mack and I." Anders grinned.

"Of course you do. You're mages. It's some kind of weirdo mage thing, but unlike most weirdo mage things, it's a good idea." Varric leaned to the side to see around Cassandra, who had stopped.

"There is some kind of ... pedestal in this clearing." Cassandra gestured toward it.

"Oh, because that doesn't have trap written all over it." Varric huffed and rolled his eyes, as he cocked his crossbow and stepped back.

"Tell me about it," Adaar sighed, turning the amulet over in his hand. It was practically singing now, letting him know in no uncertain terms that yes, here, this is where it goes. He drew his sword and held it in his glowing hand, green light reflecting off the blade. "Get ready, I guess. Who wants to take bets on what will happen? Maybe an explosion?"

"My bet's on demons, personally," Varric said. "But, you know, I'm from Kirkwall."

"A strong suggestion," Adaar said, nodding in approval. "Anyone else? Maybe some of those eyeball-eating pants?"

"Just get on with it," Cassandra sighed, flexing the arm holding her shield.

"I'm just going to assume your bet is 'bears'," Adaar said just as he set the amulet down on the pedestal. He leapt back, the mark on his hand throbbing, as a rage demon sprang out of the earth in a whorl of flame.

"Called it!" Varric shot a bolt into the creature's chest.

"Andraste's ass aflame!" an unexpected voice rang out from behind them. "I can't leave you alone for a moment!"

Anders turned, just not to be looking into the flames, and found Cormac already pushing past him, shields flaring. "I'm pretty sure that's not Andraste's ass," he teased, dredging up an ice spell to lay across the demon.

Cormac raised shields for the two warriors, at least enough to keep the heat down to an ugly summer, instead of a forest fire. "I'm just glad it's not your ass aflame. You're hot enough without the help."

Anders laughed and snapped a hand forward, hoping to stun the thing. He knocked it back, but it recovered far more quickly than a human opponent. "It's an old one," he warned, before realising Fen'Din wasn't there to take the hint.

Varric whipped something off his belt and lobbed it toward the creature, unfortunately just as Cassandra leapt forward, blade first. "Shit!" he exclaimed, hand stretched wide as if he could call it back.

The jar exploded against the ground, sending up billowing clouds of icy air, and Cassandra's blade snapped a chunk off the non-flame part of the demon, before she staggered back from the sudden wintery chill, armour squeaking in protest. The shield spell was definitely doing its duty.

"A little warning next time, dwarf!" Cassandra called back, shaking the frost from her hair. She nodded in thanks to Cormac, relieved that a little cold was all she felt.

Adaar came in swinging with a roar, the partly-frozen demon moving too slowly to dodge, and his sword sheared off one of its arms. It wheeled on him with an unearthly screech, but Anders hit it
with more ice, dousing the flames rising from its back.

Ice and smash. With one demon, it was fairly straight-forward, and Adaar wondered what it said about them that they knew how to handle creatures like this. He distracted the demon just long enough for Cassandra to set up an angle, then he jumped back out of her way as she came barrelling into the demon, shield-first. Chunks of ice sprayed out from the point of impact, and Adaar lifted a hand to shield his eyes.

Cormac traced a quick flare of fire across the path of the flying ice, and the rest of it clattered off his shields as he stood firm, in front of Anders. "Just like old times!" he called to Varric, clenching his fist and reducing what was left of the demon to a splintered heap of ice shards in a rapidly contracting barrier.

"You know, I was hoping if I left Kirkwall, it would mean less demons," Varric complained. "And that's twice, now, that hasn't worked out that way. Tell me, Seeker, if we supposedly have the highest rate of demons of anywhere in Thedas, why is it that I run into twice as many of them, when I leave town?"

Anders buried his face in Cormac's hair and laughed hysterically.

"Man's got a point," Cormac admitted, cocking his thumb at Varric.

Cassandra shrugged. "You are a dwarf. Demons in Kirkwall are probably ignoring you, because they are old enough to realise you will be no use to them."

"That does not explain the demons in Qarinus and Seheron." Varric insisted.

"It is Tevinter. You expected more of the magisters?" Cassandra laughed, brushing the ice off her sleeves.

"Maybe it's the other way around, Cassandra," Adaar suggested, brushing bits of ice from the folds of his clothes. "Maybe Varric here is just a demon magnet."

"Excuse me," Varric said, his laugh ruining the offended look he turned Adaar's way. "My hand doesn't have a glowing peephole into the demons' home!"

"It's not a peephole," Adaar huffed. "If you put your eye up to it, you're just going to get blinded by green and not see anything. Trust me, I've tried. Also? Before I met you I'd never seen a demon. The truth seems obvious to me."

"Varric Tethras: Demon Magnet," Anders said, gesturing as though placing the words in the air. "Sounds like a good premise for your next book."

"Have Theron turn it into a poem for you," Varric drawled.

"So, where'd you lose the spooky demon-singers?" Cormac asked, realising neither Solas nor Fen'Din were present.

"They decided they'd go close a rift, by themselves," Varric replied. "Probably for the best. The last thing we need is demons from both sides."

"We should retrieve them and ensure they have not fallen." Cassandra sheathed her sword and took a look around them. "I would rather we are as many as we can be, before we attempt to besiege a fortress full of bandits."
"I knew a guy who tried to sack a fortress alone. Didn't really end well for him. Great for me, though." Anders grinned and cocked a thumb in the direction Solas and Fen'Din had gone.

"What kind of idiot--" Varric started, heading off in something like the right direction.

"Howe," Cormac cut in. "I've heard this one. The guy's got stones, I'll give him that."

"A nice hefty pair," Anders said, his mouth curling into a sly smile.

"I'm gonna say it again -- I don't want to know about anybody else's culture, or poems about asses I know. I get enough of that from the Queen of Page Six." Varric shook his head. "And she's been sending things in, again, every time she's in port."

"And you haven't been sending me copies?" Anders said, pressing a hand to his chest. "I'm hurt, Varric!"

"I didn't say I was publishing them," Varric replied with a shake of his head. "Just that she's been sending them in. And I swear they keep getting worse."

"Sometimes, the bad ones are the best, though," Anders said.

Adaar stretched out his hand as they drew closer, trying to ease the ache forming there. The pain had settled back into a dull noise he could ignore, except for times like these when they were near open rifts. Then it was just annoying.

The discordant song ringing off the trees was also annoying, unless you were a spirit apparently. A scattering of burnt leaves and grass marked where a few demons had fallen, but a small horde of spirits pressed close around Solas, as Fen'Din focused on closing the rift. This one wasn't as simple as the ones before -- something on the other side was trying to hold it open, Fen'Din thought, and he'd had to stop singing to keep from drawing it through.

The ground around them was disturbed, and near-complete skeletons of small animals became obvious, as the rest of the group drew closer. A group of rodents of some kind pressed around Fen'Din's ankles and birds tugged excitedly at Solas's sleeves.

"You know, I'm never going to get used to that," Varric said, gesturing at the two elves. "Frolicking in the woods and singing to the animals, just like in all the stories from Orzammar. Daisy always said elves didn't frolic in the woods. I wish I could send her a picture of this."

Adaar gave Varric a sideways look. "Did the stories in Orzammar mention that the animals were all reanimated corpses? Because if so, your children's stories are so much more like ours than I realized."

Cassandra gave them both an odd look, pacing a safe distance away from the spirits and Solas. She looked unsure, like she wanted to jump in to help but didn't know what she was and wasn't supposed to attack.

Noting the way Fen'Din was struggling to close the rift, Adaar jogged up to him, sword in hand just in case. "Need a hand?" he asked, holding up his glowing palm. He paused to consider his words. "Heh, pun unintended. Seriously, though."

"Please." Fen'Din's face was utterly blank. He didn't have the effort to waste on it. "Something's fighting me, on the other side."

"That's definitely not the most encouraging thing I've heard today." Varric aimed his crossbow
straight through the rift. "You want me to see if I can hit it?"

"I don't think that works. It's like a brewer's barrel with a hole, except it's spraying demons instead of beer. I don't think you can get anything through it," Fen'Din warned, stepping aside, anyway, his hand still linked to the rift with a flickering beam of green light.

Solas choked on the next note, and the spirits around him wavered. He picked up quickly, though, and their attention remained on him.

Anders held Cormac back, with one hand, silently shaking his head. They couldn't help, unless the rift spit out more demons, but they could disrupt the tenuous balance.

Adaar lifted his hand towards the rift, wincing when its magic pulled at his hand. He knew what Fen'Din meant then as he felt resistance unlike what he was used to, like trying to close a door while someone else was pushing it open from the other side. But Adaar gritted his teeth and pushed back, and between the two of them, they were able to wrestle that door closed.

When the rift snapped shut, Adaar nearly overbalanced from the sudden loss of resistance, but he managed to only stumble a little.

"Another rift down," Varric said, staring up at the fading green scar the tear had left in the air. "How many are out there, do you think?"

"Too many," Cassandra answered, and Varric rolled his eyes.

"Thanks, Seeker. I couldn't have come to that conclusion without you."

"Should I relieve you?" Fen'Din asked Solas, breathing heavily and staring down at himself in blank-faced confusion. "I know they are difficult to hold, when they are so many and so new."

Solas shook his head, gesturing for Fen'Din to take a few deep breaths, and Anders waved a glowing hand to get his attention, raising an eyebrow, inquisitively. Solas tapped his throat and cocked his head, and a moment later, the spell landed. Closing his eyes, he nodded his thanks, and kept singing.

"How does he do it?" Cassandra hissed at Anders, after a moment. "This is not blood magic!"

"I'm so glad you can tell the difference," Anders drawled, giving her a flat look. "I don't know how - - well, no. I do. The song sounds very similar to something from before the Veil, and the spirits are drawn to the sound of it. I'd tell you more, but they don't know either."

"You speak to spirits? Like they do?"

"Me? No, I'm just a spirit healer. They actually talk to spirits. I just ... know things, sometimes." Anders shook his head and shrugged, dismissively.

"So, once Crazy's breathing again, we're ... what, sacking a fortress?" Varric asked, nodding in the direction of the villa.

"I'll say it again, dwarf, that is Senior Enchanter Crazypants, to you." Fen'Din straightened his spine. "And I can breathe perfectly well."

"Note that he hasn't corrected me all the times I've called him 'Crazy'," Adaar said to Varric, who stuck out his tongue in answer. He had his body turned so that his good ear was facing the conversation and not the singing. "And sacking a fortress sounds like a great way to round off the day."
"Bears, demons, and bandits?" Anders said. "Please, that barely sounds like a busy morning. I'm sure we can fit in more before supper."

"You say that like you're joking," Adaar said, squinting down at Anders, "but I'm not sure if you are."

Anders just smiled.

Adaar turned back to Fen'Din. "Need a ride?"

"Only if you don't mind the company." Fen'Din gestured to the assortment of skeletal animals still lingering pensively between himself and Solas.

Adaar considered the skeletal creatures in front of him, his face twisting. "You can walk."
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Actual bandits, at last!

They approached the villa, head on, warriors in the front, and spread behind them a swirling wall of spirits and skeletons, between the two singing elves. Varric and the other two mages brought up the rear. Anders watched the gates grow closer and dipped his fingers into a pouch, coming out with two silver pieces, marked with Ander griffons.

"Two silver says I can stop this fight before we even get up there."

"I love free money." Varric swiped the coins with a grin, as Anders made his way around to the front, long legs bringing him easily even with Adaar.

"You mind putting me in front for a bit?" Anders asked, a flash of blue spreading across one cheek. "I might have a less violent solution."

Adaar looked the mage up and down. If the man had survived being a friend of Fen'Din for this long, he had to have some tricks up his sleeve. Adaar shrugged. "Be my guest."

Irving, the gate guard of the fortress, had lost count of the number of times he'd almost nodded off during this shift. Since they'd taken the fortress, no one had been stupid enough to face them head-on, and, really, except for the occasional wildlife, guarding the gate was boring as shit. He'd heard rumours about demons wandering about, and once he thought he might have seen one in the distance, but that might have just been an old lady. Irving yawned into his fist and squinted up at the sun, trying to gauge how much longer he had to stand here.

When Irving looked down again, he was surprised to see movement on the path, and he straightened from where he'd been leaning against the wall, shading his eyes with one hand and trying to make sense of the shapes coming towards him. Then he rubbed his eyes, certain he wasn't seeing what he...

Except he was. A small army marched his way, their leader glowing blue from what looked like faultlines in his skin, glowing blue eyes trained on him. Oh Maker, was that a demon? Behind him came warriors armed to the teeth, and behind them still were--

Irving's piss was warm where it ran down his leg. He scrambled to get back inside the gate. "Demons!" he wailed. "Undead! Run for your lives! Run!"

Anders was quick with the paralysis glyphs and the fleeing bandits fled right into them, sticking where they landed, others running into and tripping over them, stuck where they fell. Laughing, Cormac moved up beside him, to pick off the few trying to inch around the edges, stunning them so they wobbled into the glyphs.

"This is great. I bet we don't have to kill people, today. Do you think we can bring them around to our side?" Cormac asked, a wide smile on his face as he raised a quick barrier against the first
arrows. "Shit. I forgot about the archers. I don't think I can reach them. Elfhole?"

Fen'Din squinted up at the balcony, breaking the song for a moment. "Get me closer. Get me to the gate."

Cormac shifted his focus to maintaining shields for everything that wasn't a spirit.

"Or I could just kill the archers!" Varric reminded them.

"The point was not to kill anyone, Varric!" Anders called back to him.

From the safety of Cormac's shield, Adaar looked back and forth between Fen'Din and the gate. "I can get you there," he decided, handing his sword to Varric long enough for him to pick up the small elf Enchanter and set him on his shoulders, as easily as though he were a doll.

"This thing is bigger than I am," Varric grumbled as Adaar took back his sword.

"Good to know," said Adaar, adjusting his weight to accommodate for his passenger. "If anything happens to this sword, I can use you as a backup weapon."

"Jan's not going to like that, you know," Fen'Din pointed out, getting comfortable. "Just don't trip, and I'll take care of the rest."

"Trip? Please. I am the image of grace."

And with that proclamation, Adaar barrelled for the gate, brandishing his sword and roaring like a crazed animal.

The frozen bandits panicked, unable to get out of the way of the charging qunari and several more were soon wearing darker trousers than they'd started in.

Fen'Din's fingertips swirled darkly, as he raised one hand, waiting until just the right moment to lay a line of hexes down the archers, whose shots all went awry, bowstrings snapping and arrows falling onto their comrades, below.

"That is why mages are feared," Varric said, pointing.

"Not even slightly," Anders replied, with a sly smile. "You know what's worse? Watching the dead and mortally wounded get back up, and not being quite sure which was which. That is something you should have concerns about, with the two of us on the field."

"I thought you were supposed to be encouraging me to think good things about mage rights and free mages," Varric scoffed, peering up at his towering friend.

"I am." Anders grinned. "We're on your side."

Adaar slowed to a stop just in front of one of the frozen bandits, holding his sword harmlessly to the side and only finishing his roar when he needed to stop for breath. The bandit stared at him with round eyes, and Adaar suspected he'd just seen his death flash before his eyes.

Adaar bared his teeth in a wide grin. "Hello."

The bandit whimpered.

Adaar looked around, finding no more arrows raining from the battlements, and even the bandits inside who weren't frozen by magic were frozen by terror.
"Oh, if you all think I'm scary, wait until you meet Cassandra."

They had already surrendered by the time they did, and she marched in front of them now, after they'd been stripped of their weapons and herded together, wearing the same look of disgust and profound disappointment she'd turned on the mages and Templars at the Crossroads.

"And what excuse do you have for this disgrace?" she asked, voice easily carrying to them all.

"Money, ser!" one of the bandits declared, looking around at his companions, who muttered in agreement.

"Our farms have been destroyed by all the fighting, and there's not much else we know how to do." Another bandit shrugged, also looking at everyone else, as he spoke. "But, when the dwarves came and told us they'd pay us if we'd pretend to be bandits and keep everyone off the road, that seemed simple enough. And we got to keep whatever they left behind, when we scared them off."

"Or killed them, but there wasn't much of that. Most people just ran," a third bandit was quick to explain. "It wasn't until the real soldiers came that we had to start killing people, and we didn't feel too good about it, but it's not like we've got a lot of choice. How else are we going to feed our families, or even ourselves?"

"Those are our soldiers," Cassandra pointed out, raising an eyebrow and her chin. "And I will tell you how you are going to feed your families. You will join with us. You will replace those soldiers and keep the roads safe from actual bandits."

"Ser, you'd better be offering a serious pay hike, because I do not want to make those dwarves angry," the second bandit protested. "Those were some scary bastards. Real rough sorts."

"The fucking Carta," Varric sighed, from somewhere behind Cassandra. "Just what we need."

"Oh great," Adaar mumbled. To the bandits, he straightened to his full height, puffed out his chest, and said, "You leave the dwarves to us." As though he had any idea how to do that. As though he had any right to speak for all of them.

Whatever. He was fighting demons alongside a bunch of possessed dead mice. Dwarves would be a piece of cake.

"We will take care of them," Cassandra agreed without missing a beat, and though the bandits still looked unsure, none of them dared to challenge that statement.

"Of course we will," Varric sighed, running a gloved hand over his hair.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

One missing Grey Warden is found.

Varric, of course, was none too keen on tackling the Carta, but it didn't take much to encourage Cassandra to set up patrols along the East and South Roads, to keep people away, until the Inquisition could gather more information about what, exactly, the Carta was up to, and how many dwarves were working on that mysterious operation. With word sent back to Leliana, there was little to do, besides continuing their search for the missing Warden.

"There's not an outpost down here. The nearest one's out past Ostagar," Anders pointed out, as they crested a hill and spotted what might be a lake, in the distance. "There's no real reason for him to have settled down, here, unless there's an exit from the Deep Roads, nearby. Darkspawn would be a good reason, but ... there aren't any. I'd know. Or if there are, they're a lot closer to him than they are to us."

"Of course there's an exit from the Deep Roads. The Carta's guarding something, down here, and it involves a trade road. I don't know what they're smuggling, but they have to be smuggling something. Probably lyrium, if you want to be real about it. There's wild, unchained Templars, out here, and you know what they like." Varric shrugged, Bianca an easy weight in his hands.

"I know more about what they like than anyone ever needed to," Anders retorted, rubbing his face and glancing around for any sign of a camp or a cabin.

"That there is an exit from the Deep Roads near here and he is the only Warden we have heard about is concerning," Cassandra said.

Anders shrugged. "The darkspawn can't be too much of a problem if the Carta are using that exit."

Solas squinted past him, through the trees. "There appears to be a cabin over there, on the other side of the lake," he said, pointing. "And I hear voices."

"I can't hear much of anything," Adaar mumbled. "But I believe you. Let's go check it out."

They skirted the edge of the lake, towards the cabin and the voices, or just one voice, they realised as they drew closer, one that spoke with the authority of an officer giving orders. As they came up beside the cabin, they were able to put a person to that voice, a solidly built man with a black beard and well-made armour. He was walking in front of a line of terrified young men, each of them holding an axe and trying to straighten his shoulders in determination. Farmers, Adaar would guess, from the way they were dressed.

Anders didn't feel that pull in the pit of his stomach, the gnawing in the back of his mind, but maybe this wasn't the Warden they were looking for. Or maybe he was just too close to the Joining to register, yet. Still, he watched the man give orders.

"Line there. And there. No gaps." The man strode to the end of the line and turned to face the youths again. "Remember how to carry your shields! You're not hiding, you're holding. Otherwise it's
"Excuse me," Anders called out, when they were still enough off not to be stabbed, if the man spooked. "We're looking for a Warden... Blackwall?"

"How do you know my name?" The man demanded, turning on them, and marching up to Anders, sword ready in his hand as he stood far too close. "Who sent--?"

They were interrupted by a shout, and an arrow slammed into the shield Blackwall raised, even as Cormac’s magic flashed to life around them.

"Sorry," Cormac muttered, eyes now on the trees from which the arrow came. "Not where I was expecting the problem from."

"Seriously?" Varric sighed, lining up Bianca with the archer in the trees. "Didn't we just do this?" The choked cry of pain that followed his shot said that his bolt had hit, though with the trunk of that tree, Cormac suspected it was only a grazing hit.

"That's it," Blackwall growled. He looked at Anders, lowering his shield. "Either help or get out. We're dealing with these idiots first!"

"Fine by me," Anders answered, hand already moving in a spell.

"Conscripts!" Blackwall called back to the line of axe-wielding farmers. "Here they come!" With a sweeping motion, he ushered them forward, sword out in front of him.

The farmers charged in behind him with battle roars, axes held high. As Anders dropped a paralysis glyph on a bandit, he just prayed these idiots didn't get themselves killed.

Cormac was right behind him with shields for the farmers -- not enough to keep them from getting hurt -- they'd never learn otherwise -- but more than enough to keep them alive, no matter how badly they fought. He'd once done the same for his own siblings, when they were still a family of farmers.

The bandits, barely more than farmers, themselves, went down easily under the assault of several seasoned fighters and a few farmers, and once they'd all fallen, Blackwall drove his sword into the soft earth and crouched beside one of the bodies.

"Sorry bastards." Blackwall rose and approached the farmers, still gathered together, blood on their axes. "Good work, conscripts, even if this should never have happened. They could've-- well, thieves are made, not born. Take back what they stole. Go back to your families. You saved yourselves."

Shaken but determined, the farmers nodded and went on their way. Blackwall watched them go before turning a wary look at the Inquisition.

"You're no farmers," he said, looking from one face to another before landing on Anders. "Why do you know my name? Who are you?"

"The name's Jannik Kasselmann," Anders said, offering his hand. "I am a Grey Warden like yourself, and I'm here with the Inquisition, investigating the disappearances of the other Wardens and making sure it has nothing to do with the Divine's murder."

Blackwall's eyebrows tipped upward at that. "Maker's balls!" he swore. "The Wardens and the Divine? You should know as well as I do that no Warden could have killed her."
"I know that Wardens are people," Anders countered, Justice simmering just under his skin. "I've known quite a few of them, in fact, and many of them are assholes. Thinking that they can't do bad things just because they're Wardens is dangerous. But I'm not saying I think they killed her, just that something isn't right, here."

"I haven't seen any Wardens for months. I travel alone, recruiting." Blackwall shook his head and shrugged. "Not much interest because the Archdemon is a decade dead, and no need to conscript because there's no Blight coming. Treaties give Wardens the right to take what we need. Who we need. These idiots forced this fight, so I 'conscripted' their victims. They had to do what I said, so I told them to stand. Next time they won't need me. Grey Wardens can inspire. Make you better than you think you are."

"You're not Fereldan, are you?" Anders raised an eyebrow and pointed at Blackwall. "I've worked with Commander Amell. I'm not sure 'inspire' is really what I got out of that. Terrify. Demand. Require. I'm definitely not the same man I was when we met, but I'm not sure I've heard her described as 'inspiring'."

"Marcher, originally," Blackwall said, shaking his head again.

"Hopefully, not under Larius," Cormac chimed in, not expecting much of a reaction to the name, but... just in case...

No hint of recognition crossed Blackwall's face. "Not a name I know. Working out of Orlais, now."

"So why haven't you disappeared with the rest of the Wardens?" Anders asked.

"Why haven't you?" Blackwall shot back, and Anders had to concede the point.

"I don't know."

"I don't know, either," Blackwall said in kind. "Maybe there was a new directive, but... a runner got lost or something. My job was to recruit on my own. Planned to stay that way for months. Years."

Adaar stepped in. "So do you have any idea where the Wardens would have gone?"

Blackwall looked between them, uncertain. "Maybe they returned to our stronghold in Weisshaupt?"

Anders snorted. "I just came from the Anderfels," he drawled. "You're the first Warden I've run into in months."

"Well, that's the best I've got." Blackwall scratched the corner of his jaw, thick brows knit in thought. "I can't imagine why they'd disappear all at once, let alone where they'd disappear to."

"You mentioned calling on the treaties," Anders said, after a moment's consideration. "I was under the impression we could only use those during a Blight. Solona had to go rescue the local copies from an old outpost past Ostagar, to get anyone to abide by them. You pour enough Antivan wine into her and she'll yell about it all night."

"We're a lot closer to the Fifth Blight than the Fifth was to the Fourth. Ferelden remembers, now." Blackwall tipped his head from side to side. "During the Blight, those treaties are binding. Outside a Blight, they're as binding as a clever tongue can make them."

Anders's eyes gleamed blue, and his jaw set like he'd bitten something he couldn't swallow.

"Thieves are made, not born, isn't that what you just told those farmers?" Cassandra cut in.
"I'm not stealing from peasants!" Blackwall barked. "I'm encouraging contributions to the ongoing recruitment efforts, from local lords. They can afford coin, or a sheep, or a sack of journeybread."

Anders cocked his head as Justice eased back. "As most likely the ranking Warden in Ferelden, right now, I'll allow it."

"Warden-Constable," Blackwall said, pointedly.

"Marcher," Anders retorted. "I'm a Specialist working for the Warden-Commander of Ferelden. Local authority's mine, unless you trip over her or Howe, and I know where Howe is -- which is not in Ferelden."

Blackwall squared his jaw, and Anders could see an argument forming there, behind his eyes. Yet in the end, he didn't say anything. Probably wise.

"It's been a pleasure, Warden Blackwall," Anders said, trying and failing to keep the sarcasm out of his voice, "but this didn't help at all."

Cassandra frowned in disappointment, but she indicated they move on with a tip of her head. As they were filing away from the cabin, Blackwall called out to them.

"Inquisition... agent, did you say? Hold a moment." Blackwall made his way over to them, again. "Listen, I'm sure you have bigger things to deal with, but if you're serious about finding out what's happened to the rest of the Wardens -- if they've really disappeared -- then maybe those of us who are left should stick together. I'll help you find the rest of us. And, you know, with that hole in the sky and everything... Maybe fighting demons from the sky isn't something I'm practised at, but show me someone who is."

"He's on the other side of the lake, singing to the spirits," Varric cut in, with a grimace. "And there's two of them."

Blackwall looked like he might not be sure what to do with that information. "I've got copies of the treaties. Maybe it's not a Blight, but it's bloody well a disaster. Some will honour them, under the circumstances. And I've got maps of the locations of some known Warden camps -- places we should be able to find, if not more Wardens, maybe an idea of where they went."

"Maps and resources," Cassandra murmured, eyeing Anders.

Anders nodded slowly. "Those might help."
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Josephine finds some letters Cullen didn't send. Kinnon helps out in the Hinterlands.

Josephine's laughter could be heard from the door of the Chantry, as Leliana came in, a raven on one arm and a message in her other hand. This was not the polite laugh so often used in meetings with the local nobles about who would be getting the demons out of the pastures, but a genuine howling cackle that echoed off the high ceiling. Glancing around, Leliana spotted Minaeve, documenting the features of a thankfully-deceased possessed druffalo someone had dragged in.

"What is so funny?" Leliana asked, peering conspiratorially at Josephine's open office door.

Minaeve followed the look and shrugged. "She's been cackling since she came back from the cellar with a stack of crumpled pages. Maybe it's Varric's next book?"

"We shall see," Leliana declared, stepping around the druffalo and the lovers under the statue of Andraste, making her way to the source of the hysterical giggling that followed.

When Leliana opened the door, Josephine tried to compose herself, turning her laugh into a cough and wiping at the tears in her eyes. She pursed her lips, but they still quivered.

"Maker's breath," Leliana huffed, "I could hear you from outside! What's so funny?"

Josephine cleared her throat, shuffling the papers in her hands. "Oh, it's nothing, really," she said, the mischievous glint in her eyes telling Leliana otherwise.

"Is that so?" Leliana narrowed her eyes, approaching Josephine's desk.

"Just some paperwork, Ser Cullen left..." She pursed her lips again to keep from laughing. "...left lying about." Josephine plucked up a bonbon from the plate on her desk and stuffed it in her mouth to stifle her laughter.

"Paperwork, you say?" Leliana stole first the paper and then a bonbon for herself. It was a letter. She read the first line as she chewed, covering her mouth to ask, "...who is this 'Ass-Bandit' he's writing to?"

Josephine rifled through the papers and handed another page to Leliana. "It looks like his husband. Isn't he married to Viscount Kirkwall?"

"I had heard rumours about the Hawke ass, but I wasn't of a mind to pursue them." Leliana murmured, amusedly, skimming the pages. "Maybe Isabela was right, and I should have!"

"You still could," Josephine pointed out, picking up another bonbon. "I've heard some interesting things about Lady Amell."

"Arl Solona and I are already acquainted," Leliana reminded her, pausing at a particular line. "'Let's see you call this blade but a dagger, when I plunge it into your waiting sheath, knave!' ... Is he quite serious?"
Josephine choked on her chocolate. "As far as I can tell, he is! He's thrown away so many drafts!"
She took a sip of tea, to rinse the chocolate off the back of her throat, and went on. "And not Arl
Solona, Princess-Consort Bethany of Starkhaven. There are some scandalous rumours circulating,
including some promising a particular sort of novel on the subject."

"Sebastian's going to burst into flames," Leliana predicted, eyes still on the page, as her raven
fluttered off to the top of a bookcase. "'And when I catch you, I shall plunder your booty, as you
have plundered so many before? This is terrible! This is like one of those appalling serials you can
pick up for two coppers from any merchant who's passed through Val Royeaux!"

Josephine giggled into her hand. "Perhaps we should pick one up for him in case he needs ideas."

"Or perhaps we could sell this for two coppers." Leliana kept reading, her eyebrows creeping up.
"'And do not think you will catch me off-guard; I know of your hidden dagger, and I will seize it
before you think to finish me'. Sweet Maker. Maybe one copper."

"In Orlais, maybe." Josephine grinned, biting her lip. "Around here? I am sure we could make a tidy
profit. And you should see his earlier drafts. There was something about 'meting vengeance upon
your meat', which he crossed off. I'm not even sure what that means."

"Maker willing, we never will." Leliana set down Cullen's letters and held out the ones she'd been
carrying. "The latest reports are in, from the Hinterlands. Cassandra's led our people out to find a
Grey Warden, but Vale's requesting that we send him Kinnon, for some help with the mages. It
sounds like things are starting to settle out, down there."

"Kinnon?" Josephine blinked and snatched the rolled paper from Leliana's hand. "No, you must be
misreading that. Are you sure he doesn't mean Peryn? Maybe Cullen? 'Help with the mages' sounds
like a Templar problem, not one you want to send a Chantry brother into."

"I'm led to understand he's very experienced in water diversion and irrigation. I believe they are
trying to construct homes for all those stuck in the wilds, in the hope of bringing about another
Conclave of sorts, once they're not all tearing each other's throats out over a loaf of bread and a
winter coat." Leliana glanced out the door, to where Kinnon and Peryn still stood beneath Andraste's
stone countenance, holding each other's hands and presumably whispering foolish endearments, to
judge from the momentary whispers and sappy smiles. "Do we want to send them both?"

"You can't send Peryn anywhere, until we can ensure a secure route for his lyrium. He's already
rationing more tightly, with the break in trade along the usual lines." Josephine gave the lovers a sad
glance. "But, look at them. Is there no one else we can send, instead?"

There was less snow at the Crossroads than at Haven, but plenty of mud after last night's rain. Now
Kinnon truly felt like he was back in Ferelden, and for a moment, he almost found himself missing
the wretched heat of the Anderfels.

But this was familiar, newly free mages who didn't know what to do with that freedom, unsure how
to feed or clothe themselves. That had been Kinnon not so long ago, and there were worse things he
could be doing besides helping them patch up their makeshift home and making it more comfortable.

He supposed there were better things he could be doing, too, but he would think of Peryn later. Right
now, he was more concerned with the woman in front of him, an Enchanter with bags under her
eyes, looking a bit damp where she huddled under an overhang.

"Not so friendly with the other mages? I'm pretty sure I can still work out a nice, solid place for you
to stay. Less wind and rain, for sure," Kinnon offered, tugging down the front of his hood against the
dribble of frosty runoff from the trees above him. Possibly the only reason to miss Val, but then he
remembered Gerda could also keep the water off. "Come on, you've got to be freezing, in there, even
with the fire spells. You can't keep doing it forever, you'll burn yourself out."

"No, it's all right. I won't be here much longer, I'm sure. I'm meeting with someone, and we'll go on
together," the woman assured him, as she'd assured everyone who'd come before. "I just don't know
what's taking so long..."

Kinnon drew a long, slow breath, wishing Anders was there, for this part. "Listen, there's a lot of
bodies, in the hills. The fighting was pretty serious, before the Inquisition came down and started
enforcing order. I'm not going to say your friend's dead, because I don't know, but I am going to say
that I have a lot of correspondence and journals from the bodies I've found. Someone had to give
them pyres, to keep the demons away and I tried to save as much as I could... I can check and see if
there's anything with a name you know."

The Enchanter nodded, cautiously, as if she were afraid too sudden a motion would take her head
right off. "His name is Mattrin. I'm Ellendra."

"Kinnon," he responded, reflexively, as he ducked under the overhang to get out of the water and
fished a pile of tattered papers out of his bag. "Shit," he sighed, in the middle of the stack, handing a
letter to Ellendra. "I'm sorry. I really am."

For a moment, Ellendra just blinked down at the letter in Kinnon's hand, as though she could reverse
its meaning if she never touched it. Then she sucked in a steadying breath and took the letter.

Kinnon almost couldn't watch her face as she read, jaw muscles quivering as she fought to keep her
composure, but a part of him felt like he had to bear witness to this.

Ellendra finished the letter with a huff of breath that tried to be a laugh. "This stupid war," she said,
blinking back tears. "He didn't deserve this." She started to crumple the letter, only to smooth it out
again.

Kinnon was seeing too much of that, people caught in the crossfire. "I'm sorry," he said again,
wanting to be a comfort, but unsure how he was supposed to do this for someone he'd only just met.
"Could you tell me about him?"

"Ah, Templars and mages. Natural enemies, they always say," Ellendra sighed.

"I would never." Kinnon raised his eyebrows, and Ellendra squinted at him, unsure if he was joking.

"As though you can keep healthy men and women close to each other for years without anyone
getting ideas." Ellendra stared into the distance, focused on nothing. "We were friends for many
years and lovers for many more. And now he is gone, because of this war."

"The war... I hate to call it necessary, because I don't think it had to be, and the Inquisition is proving
the point the Conclave could have made, if only it had happened sooner. There is no need to regard
every mage as a monster waiting to pounce. There is no need to regard every Templar as a killer
waiting for an excuse. Well, Kirkwall, but that was different. Things went very wrong in Kirkwall,
I've heard." Kinnon could hear the sharp edge to Val's voice, from here. The faint concern from
Anders.

"No, it wasn't necessary, but yours is an unusual view from a Chantry Brother. Weren't you taught
that magic is the Maker's curse, and it must be resisted?" Ellendra watched Kinnon curiously.
"They tried to teach me a lot of things. I like to think only the better parts stuck." Kinnon turned up his hand, first calling the stone to him, and then shaping a small dog's head with it, which he offered to Ellendra, with a lopsided smile. "Shh. The fewer who know, the more I can help."

Ellendra's mouth dropped open in a surprised, "Oh." She took the small sculpture and turned it over in her hands. "Apostate?"

"Technically we all are, now," Kinnon said with a shrug. "But I spent most of my life at Kinloch Hold, until this nutcase decided to tear a hole in the wall and marched right out. So I know what life is like in the Circle."

"Then it is, perhaps, your views on Templars which are surprising," Ellendra said, offering a lopsided smile of her own.

Kinnon let out a weak laugh. "Don't get me wrong, I've known Templars who deserve a punch in the throat, but." He shrugged. And here he was, thinking about Peryn when he'd been trying to distract himself from doing exactly that. "There are good ones, too."

"Oh, are there? Even for you?" Ellendra's smile spread a little more. "What's she like?"

"He's gorgeous. If I have to put up with a Templar for the rest of my life, let it be this one." Kinnon rubbed his eye with the back of his hand. "Of course, at this rate, that's not going to be a very long life. The war, the Templar, the demon-spewing holes in the sky..."

"If he's so wonderful, what are you worried about--" Ellendra's mouth rounded. "You're an apostate, now, and he's not from your Circle, is he? You didn't tell him?"

"What am I going to say? How do you tell someone that, when they've had no reason to know it? I mean, you don't just walk up to a Templar in the pub and say, 'oh, did you know, I'm an apostate?'. First it wasn't time, and now it's too late, and I'm pretty sure we didn't pass through the right time along the way!" Kinnon sighed and stared out across the wet clearing. "I thought I'd tell him after the Conclave, once the Divine made things right. Jan was so sure she would, and then..."

"This is going to be a hard thing to overcome, but the sooner you tell him, the less chance someone else will. Better he should hear it from you."

Kinnon sighed again. "I know. I've got mage friends that he... seems to be getting over. And we're with the Inquisition now, so the focus is on closing all the holes in the sky and shovelling out the demons. We were running errands for the apothecary, until I got called down here to help with arranging homes, drainage, and irrigation -- to clean up the damage from the war." He glanced at Ellendra. "You should join us. Help us make sure the fighting stays stopped, help out some people who got the wrong end of it. I offered you a house, and I wasn't kidding. There's a lot of good you could be doing, and you could do it a lot more comfortably."

"I..." Ellendra looked around, unsure. But all she had here was a little fire and a miserable alcove among the Fereldan damp. Worth dealing with for someone she loved, but now... "Very well," she said, sounding as much as though she were admitting defeat as accepting an offer, and Kinnon supposed that leaving would make it more real, that Mattrin was gone. "I want no part of the fighting, but helping people? That I can do. Just let me gather my things."

"We'd be lucky to have you," Kinnon said, beaming as he led her off to a new life and a new home.
"Are you sure we're going the right way?" Anders asked for what must've been the fifth time in an hour, glancing around to make sure they weren't being stalked by bears or bandits or Templars. It was the Templars that worried him, really.

"Of course we are going the right way!" Cassandra pointed down the road. "The road only goes two ways, the one we came from and the one we haven't gotten to. What is wrong with you?"

"Templars," Cormac cut in, one arm around Anders's waist, as he gestured for patience with the other hand. "I'd say he's touchy about them, because he didn't come from the most friendly of Circles, but I'm touchy about them, too, especially now that there's no one even nominally in charge."

"I am nominally in charge," Cassandra corrected. "And I have sent them back to the Crossroads, to assist the refugees. Corporal Vale's men will keep an eye on them."

"You're assuming they actually went back and didn't circle around," Anders said, watching the spaces between the trees. "You're travelling with mages. I've seen more convoluted logic than that used to justify--"

"Hey, Blondie?" Varric cut in. "You're with us. You're a Grey Warden. Nothing's going to happen to you, and definitely not because some tin can couldn't follow the directions."

"It is not often that you will hear me say this," Cassandra said, "but the dwarf -- this dwarf -- is right. You are under our protection, and if any Templar is foolish enough to attack a Seeker, then they deserve what follows."

Anders didn't look entirely convinced, but he nodded, trying to believe that. Justice lingered just under his skin, ready to step forward if they ran into any trouble.

Before trouble found them, another Inquisition scout did, a young man cursing under his breath and wringing his hands. He stilled when he saw them and greeted them with a wave.

"Is something the matter?" Cassandra asked, all business as they approached. She looked around for Templars too, even though she knew they wouldn't be a problem.

"Seeker," the scout greeted, glancing around at the others before focusing on her. "One of the other scouts, Ritts, hasn't reported back yet, and I'm concerned."

"What's Ritts supposed to be doing?" Adaar asked at Cassandra's shoulder.

"She was supposed to be checking on a few apostates, but she hasn't come back."

Anders's eyes flared blue before he could wrestle back Justice. "Templars," he hissed.
"Could be a lot of things, Blondie," Varric assured him.

Fen'Din sighed. "I'm going to have to burn more corpses, aren't I?"

"Don't mind him," Varric cut in. "He's got none of the finer social graces. Or... any of them, really. We'll find your friend. Gotta make sure nobody's hiding more bandits along this road, anyway."

Blackwall raised an eyebrow, surprised at how easily the dwarf cut in, but he followed suit. "Of course we will. It wouldn't be right to leave someone out there alone, even if they are a guard."

"Especially if they're a guard." Cormac grimaced, thinking of some of the things Aveline and Donnic had gotten themselves into.

The sound of Solas singing to the spirits drifted down from beyond the trees, where he'd wandered off to, once it became clear they were approaching someone on the road. His voice was starting to sound a little raw, and Anders knew it would soon be time to swap the elves again, so he could heal Solas's throat and give the man a break for a few hours.

"That's very kind of you." The scout nodded, eyeing the trees. "She'd be down this road, same way you're going. It's been quiet, though. I mean... there's not a lot down this way worth chasing after."

"There is now," Adaar said with a wink at Cassandra. When she just stared blankly at him, he cleared his throat and explained, "I'm implying that my ass is worth chasing after."

Cassandra rolled her eyes and walked by him in the appointed direction.

"As someone who's been about face level with your ass," Varric said, "I'd give it a solid four out of five."

Adaar considered it and shrugged. "I'll take it."

Blackwall looked back and forth between the lot of them, wondering what, exactly, he had gotten himself into. But helping a cornered scout out of danger was, at least, a goal he could get behind.

They didn't find Ritts on the road, so they widened their search. They were traipsing up a hill when they heard the shouts and the clang of metal. Justice flared to life in blue cracks along Anders's skin before they even crested the hill, before they even saw that there were, in fact, Templars with their swords drawn.

One of the Templars caught sight of the towering, intensely-glowing man charging toward them. "Abomination!"

"Demons!" shouted the other, before he took a solid punch to the head that twisted his helmet, from the scout in Inquisition wear, between the two heavily-armoured figures.

"Spirits," Solas corrected, barely above a whisper, as they flowed toward the Templars like a rising tide of the living Fade.

Fen'Din picked up the song, as the front line of spirits flickered purple against the Templars' terror, and the ground turned as the more stable spirits pulled up more bones. "No!" he barked, as if scolding a dog, when the nearby fresh corpse of a mage began to move. "No meat!"

Ritts was holding her own easily, with the distraction, and she slipped her spare bowstring around one distracted Templar's neck, as Anders grabbed the sword that fell from the Templar's panicked fingers and beheaded the other one, his whole body lit with Justice's bright blue displeasure.
The battle was brutal, but it was quick, the Templars outnumbered, outmatched, and caught off-guard. The scout -- who they could only assume was Ritts -- caught her breath, plucking at her cowl to give more air to her heated skin.

"Thank you," she said, recognizing them as Inquisition, even as she eyed Anders and the spirits with more than a little uncertainty. "Without you, I'd be dead." She eyed the crumpled mage's body with regret.

The dead mage laid across a worn piece of fabric, laid out like a blanket under a tree. When Adaar stepped closer, he saw an opened bottle of wine and some untouched food. He exchanged a glance with Varric.

"Looks like somebody was having a picnic."

"Uh, yes," Ritts said, twisting the bow in her hands she'd been using so deftly moments before. "The mage must have been hunting for... blood magic..."

"This mage," Cassandra said, pointing to the corpse.

"Uh, yeah. Eldredda. I think that was her name. At least I'd heard other apostates call her that."

"So, you just stumbled across this mage having a picnic, on her quest to hunt down blood mages, and... decided to try to protect her from Templars?" Cassandra didn't look convinced.

"So, the truth... I may have been, um... passing time with Eldredda." Ritts looked entirely uncomfortable, like she expected some punishment to befall her at the admission.

"Mages! Always a good choice for a good time." Anders offered what he hoped was a comforting grin as he slapped at a line of blue light creeping down his staff-hand. "I'm sorry we were too late for her."

"You were just trying to find a moment's peace, in the middle of this war," Varric said, looking like he was trying to fit the line into his next book. "Can't blame you for that. I'd be better for a moment's peace, too." He glared at Cassandra.

"We were... yes. At first she was just a mage who saw me and didn't attack. But later, we..." Ritts shifted uncomfortably. "Are you going to report me?"

"For what, having a girlfriend?" Cormac scoffed. "I'm pretty sure you're not the only scout with a life outside of work."

"I'd have been on time, I swear, but the Templars--"

"Fuck the Templars," Anders snapped, then gave it a moment's thought. "No, don't fuck the Templars. It's a terrible idea. But I swear to you, it must be seventy percent of the problems in Thedas are Templars, demons, or the Carta."

"Eighty," Varric agreed.

"Say the men who account for the other twenty percent," Cassandra drawled. At Varric's exaggeratedly offended look, she rolled her eyes and said, "That was a joke."

Varric turned back to Ritts, who still twisted her bow in her hands but didn't look quite so nervous. "Look, kid," he said, throwing up his hands, "if you can talk an apostate out of her pants in the middle of a war, you've got a gift." He glanced back at the others, and Anders wondered what he
was planning. "Use it. Make contact, get information, help the Inquisition. Do that, and our lips are sealed."

Ritts looked past him to the others, as though waiting for one of them to object. When they didn't, she nodded, slowly at first, then gaining in confidence. "All right. I can do that." She offered Varric a relieved smile. "Thanks for going easy on me."

"Easy," Anders scoffed. "That's a talent. Make good use of it, while you have it. Don't just do it for us; make sure you set yourself up, in case something goes wrong. Make sure you have somewhere to disappear to, someone you can trust."

Cormac nodded, gesturing to the dead Templars. "You never know when the shit's going to hit the fan. These tin buckets being a prime example. Look out for yourself, too."

Ritts's smile looked a bit sadder as she turned it on Cormac and Anders. "Yeah. I will. I know that, now. I just wish..." She gestured at Eldredda.

"We all wish," Varric assured her, reaching up to pat her back. "C'mon, let's get you back to your post, before your friend gets any more concerned. I'm sure we can spare someone to make sure you get back in one piece."

Blackwall patted his sword, as if making sure it was still there. "I can see the scout back to the outpost," he offered, knowing that was something simple that would be appreciated, as well as something that would get him away from the Mage-Warden, who made him very nervous.

"Thank you, Blackwall," Cassandra said, and as he and Ritts disappeared back down the hill, they continued on, finding the road again, which led to a fortress that dominated the landscape.

"Gates are closed," Adaar said, squinting into the distance and noting the lowered portcullis. "How much do you want to bet someone's home?"

"I doubt they'd invite us in for tea, whoever they are," Varric said, keeping Bianca handy.

"Likely more bandits," Cassandra sighed. "Were they on your list of eighty percent of Thedas's problems, Varric?"

"Carta was," Varric answered. "So yes."

Adaar glanced back over his shoulder, at the elves and the wall of spirits. He wondered what it said about him -- about them -- that he barely noticed they were there any more. That could be dangerous, he supposed.

When Solas's voice cracked, Adaar tensed, but Anders threw some healing his way as though he'd been expecting that.

Fen'Din nudged Solas in the direction of the rest of the group, but Solas shook his head and gestured for Fen'Din to step up, instead. After an exchange of gestures, Fen'Din finally rejoined the rest of them. "He says there's another one of those Veil machines, here. It may help us protect the road, if we can find it."

"That's..." Anders squinted at the fortress. "What are the chances the bandits already turned it on?"

"It's much more likely they've broken it," Fen'Din pointed out. "They are not the most obvious things to operate, particularly without magic."
"So, we're hoping for mages?" Varric asked, considering his life choices up to this point.

"I'm always hoping for mages," Anders admitted, and beside him, Cassandra huffed.

"Mages are not the solution to everything," she insisted.

"If they were, Tevinter would be a lot more popular, but they are the solution to a lot of things," Anders argued. "And anyway, it's not about whether they're a solution, it's about whether they're people due the same respect as anyone else -- a respect I'm usually inclined to offer, which makes them much less likely to turn violent than bandits."

"The man's got a point. He does have a way with mages." Varric nodded, amiably. "Still, we've gotta be ready for whatever is up there, not just what we're hoping for."

Adaar looked around. "Considering we're a small army with a line of spirits behind us, I would say we're prepared for most things, yeah."

"You say that now," Varric sighed, "but I'm warning you: these two attract Weird." He pointed a thumb at Anders and Cormac.

"Well, that explains why Crazy's here," Adaar said, gesturing at Fen'Din. He paused to consider his words. "Explains why I'm here."

Cassandra shook her head and began marching for the gates, trusting the rest of them to follow. She expected guards at the door, archers at the battlements, but what greeted them was a lone woman standing in front of the portcullis. She was staring past Cassandra to the qunari just behind her. She was sure Adaar got stares like that all the time in human settlements.

"I know you," the woman said, voice hushed in awe as she stared down at his glowing hand. "They call you the 'Herald of Andraste' for what you did at Haven." She squinted up into Adaar's face, the awe shifting to suspicion. "But are you? The Maker has not told me."

Fen'Din spread his hands and stepped out of Anders's shadow, the glow of his own hand casting an unearthly light up onto one side of his face. "We are at least the heralds of change. Some claim to have seen Andraste, when we fell from the sky. Was she there? Who knows?"

"He means he got hit really hard in the head," Anders cut in. "Both of them did. Can't remember a thing."

"As I suspected. Stories of you mastering the rifts are just blind heresy." The woman sighed and shook her head.

"No, we can do that." Fen'Din spread his fingers and turned his hand toward the woman. "As I said, we herald change that is long overdue. We come to seal the sky and prevent the invasion of our kingdom by the ... demons." He went with the easiest word, for a change, not really wanting to have to have that conversation for a second time, in one day.

"Then prove it," the woman demanded. "Show me that the rifts bend to your will, the will of the Maker. Show me the power you wield."

Anders swallowed, sucking his lips between his teeth, as he choked down a completely inappropriate response. Beside him, he heard Varric snort, quietly.

"So, I take it you're not a bandit," Adaar said, looking the woman up and down.
She blinked at him. "What?"

Adaar shrugged. "That was our big concern when we saw a fortress on a hill that looked like it was occupied." He squinted past her, between the portcullis's metal bars and saw people milling about in a courtyard, more than a few peeking their way curiously. "They don't look like bandits either. So how would you like us to, ahem, show you the 'power' we wield?" He fought to keep a straight face, but he could see Anders ducking his head out of the corner of his eye.

The woman looked over her shoulder. "There is a rift inside," she said. "The Maker has opened the sky. Let me see if the Maker will let you close it."

"The Maker is irrelevant," Fen'Din muttered under his breath. "There are powerful spirits at work."

But, the woman gave a sign, and the portcullis was raised for them, spirits and all, as Cormac caught up to them, hands still smelling of smoke.

"You all right?" he asked Solas, at the back of the group, spirits thick around him, and the elf nodded, gesturing for him to follow the rest of the group into the fortress.

Fen'Din studied his glowing hand and pointed straight through the fortress to where another entrance sloped down into a faintly green-lit passage. "Adaar, can you handle this one? With the spirits this close, and so many people, I should keep them occupied. If we add demons to this noise, demons are definitely what we'll get in return."

"Yeah, I'm fine without getting more demons," Adaar said. "And yes, I can handle this." He grinned. "You know, Handle."

Cassandra's disgusted noise told him his pun had landed perfectly. "Let's just get this over with."
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Another day, another rift. Yet more demons.

Adaar ducked under the portcullis, catching one of his horns on a metal bar before continuing on. They passed into a courtyard dominated by a sculpture, the plinth alone tall enough to reach Adaar's chest. Eyes followed them, words whispered behind hands.

Adaar's hand throbbed, and he flexed his fingers, trying to stretch through the stiffness. There was a rift near here, inside, like the woman had said, and once he had circled the sculpture, he could see it, the green glow coming from a cave at the far end of the structure.

"All these people, so close to that," Cassandra said under her breath. "Are they mad?"

"They're looking for proof of a mythical creator in the sky and signs of his will," Varric pointed out, adjusting Bianca's sights. "I'm not really sure where you've got room to talk, personally, but what do I know?"

"It makes some sense they would worship the Breach," Anders said, happy to finally not be the tallest person once again, as the portcullis missed his head by a good foot or more, "at least in the hope of appeasing it or whatever is on the other side."

"You know, with an attitude like that, Tevinter makes a lot more sense." Cormac snorted, raising shields, as they made their way through the fortress. "Worship what you fear, until you believe it serves you. Drag down the divine and piss your name on it for all eternity."

"If I find out you've pissed on the Divine--" Cassandra started, but both Varric and Cormac interrupted.

"There is no Divine," Varric reminded her.

"I think that's more my -- That's more Viscount Kirkwall's style than mine." Cormac shrugged and grinned broadly. "Did he tell you about the time he peed on a golem? That was an intensely unhappy self-motivated pile of rocks."

As they approached the cave, Fen'Din caught up with them, running. "I have to try," he panted. "I can't just abandon them all. Solas can take care of the others -- there's enough bones to keep them out of trouble. It's not their fault."

Adaar shrugged. "It's your call, Crazy, but you're going to have to work fast. There are idiot civilians hanging around, and if one of them gets kills while we're over there, I'm sure they'll find a way to make it our fault." His tone was perfectly cheerful, as though he were discussing the weather, and, really, this was not an unusual concern for Adaar in human territory. The demons, at least, were still relatively new.

The way his hand ached as they approached told him the rift was active, and he was still descending the steps down into the cave when he saw a demon tear itself free, its spiny body swathed in green light. Adaar drew his heavy sword but looked back at Fen'Din.
The song echoed through the cave, surprisingly loud from such a small elf, piercing and discordant, like the Chant just slightly off key, and the demon suddenly had eyes only for Fen'Din -- assuming it had eyes to begin with, which was difficult to tell, sometimes. He braced himself and did not falter, as it lunged at him, other lesser demons gathering around, as they sprung into being. The lesser ones fell to the song, easily, and the echoes of it began to make the larger one seem... malleable, somehow, as if its own will were no longer holding it together. The scythe-like arms and taloned hands burst in glowing light, as something seemed to tear itself out of the demon's skin.

"If this doesn't convince them these two are doing the Maker's will, I don't know what will," Anders muttered to Varric, dropping a healing spell on Fen'Din as another demon made it through the chorus of spirits and got in a shot, before it, too, forgot itself, in the song.

Adaar inched his way around the demons -- or spirits, at the moment, he guessed -- his sword still held defensively in front of him as he tried to get himself into position beneath the rift. He was just lifting his glowing hand when the rift birthed a pair of Terrors, those skeletal, spiny demons with the claws that Adaar really didn't like. One of Varric's bolts hit the first on in the eye, making it hiss and stagger, just enough of an opening for Adaar to bring around his sword.

Adaar lost track of the second Terror but kept his back to a wall as he fought off the first. That was the worst thing about Terrors: despite their size, they could disappear in the blink of an eye, seeming to melt into the earth, only to earn their title when they popped back up.

"Shit," Anders hissed through his teeth, throwing ice at the demon trying to corner Adaar. He kept an eye on the creatures caught up in Fen'Din's music in case they turned back. He thought he was covering all their bases, until the other Terror sprang up, not behind Adaar, but behind Fen'Din.

The singing continued, until the demon got its claws into Fen'Din's face, tearing open his cheek. Then the resonance shifted without the resistance, and the sound became garbled with blood. He saw the shield ripple into being around him, seconds too late, as he turned to the demon, slapping it with a shock of raw power. Around him the chorus burbled, some of them unable to hold their spirit forms with the fears and regrets of the people in the fortress pressing down on them.

His face knit back together, seamlessly, but slowly in the heat of battle. Too slowly for some of the spirits around him, and Cassandra lunged at one as it burst into demon form, talons reaching for whatever it could grab, which turned out to be the sword that plunged through it.

Cormac reached out with a Crushing Prison, but the shields wavered, and he had to let it go. There were too many of them, and his job was to keep them safe -- to keep them from ending up like the elf he hadn't shielded before the battle started, which had been stupid, but nothing had ever managed to attack Fen'Din, before this. Beside him, he saw Anders sweating over the repair to Fen'Din's cheek. At this distance, it took all of his concentration, but the singing was slowly -- too slowly -- returning to its usual tones.

Adaar finished tearing his sword through the next Terror, determined not to let this one disappear on him, and he paused long enough to sigh in relief when he heard Fen'Din's singing pick up again. He'd thought that was it for a moment, that the demons had taken down the crazy elf, leaving him to deal with demons and rifts and Cassandra alone.

But the elf had just kept singing, even with a hole in his cheek. It was a bit inspiring, Adaar supposed, as he came up under the rift again, raising a glowing hand. He hadn't noticed before, but he could see the shapes of his bones through his skin when his mark connected with the magic of the rift, turning white-hot.

With a sharp crack and a shower of green sparks, the rift snapped shut.
Anders rushed forward, elbowing his way through spirits that rippled in purple and green, where he touched them. "Your face-- I'm so sorry. Let me see!"

Fen'Din tipped his head putting his cheek in the dimmer natural light of the cave, the singing still piercing and atonal. His eyes were curious, but not offended, and Anders flooded his face with healing, smoothing out the scar that had formed on the first attempt.

"I didn't think you'd need one," Cormac apologised, a bit to the side of Anders. "They never reach you."

Fen'Din shrugged, unwilling to stop the song. He gestured at the spirits around him and pointed back toward the mouth of the cave, even as Anders still held his face in both hands. He had to get them out of this place. The larger group, outside, would keep them better balanced. The more spirits that sang the song with each other, the less necessary he and Solas were to maintaining the non-demon nature of the group. What they really needed, though, was more non-human skeletons.

"See, that's what Theron should be singing epics about," Varric said, shouldering Bianca and watching Anders work. "A demon to the face, and you keep singing."

Adaar hummed in agreement. "I would have at least stopped to swear at them between verses."

Anders prodded Fen'Din's cheek, checking the smoothness of the skin, and tried not to upset his singing too much. He was alive. He was whole, now. But the blood on his robes was a reminder of just how close that had been.

Past Fen'Din's shoulder, Anders saw that they had attracted a crowd, a ring of onlookers hanging around the cave entrance, eyes wide and awed as they whispered to each other.

"We should get these spirits away from so many people," Cassandra said, eyeing them with a hand on her sword, as though she expected them to change back into demons at any moment. "You!" she called out to the crowd. "Clear a path!" Those who didn't obey her words obeyed her glare as she gestured them aside.

Anders let Justice take the lead, as he followed the group of spirits Fen'Din led out of the fortress, hoping the closeness of a stable spirit would help to keep the others from changing, as they passed through the crowd. Around them, the people whispered.

"-- sent by the Maker --"

"-- controls demons--"

"--blood magic?"

"-- closed the hole --"

"-- no more demons --"

"-- possessed!"

At the last, Anders's blue-glowing eyes scanned the crowd, looking for the speaker, but the subject had moved on and the swirl of conversation was nearly impossible to pick through. Cormac remained at his side, one arm around him, both because the touch was welcome and to prove that Anders was still just a man, if a mage.

Varric nudged Adaar with one elbow, and pointed at Anders. "That you'll get used to. The singing
on the other hand, I don't know about that."

"I think I'd be more concerned if I did," Adaar replied, rubbing at his bad ear. Between Kaariss' poetry and Fen'Din's singing, Adaar didn't mind the hearing loss sometimes.

The woman they had spoken to at the gate ran to meet them as they approached. She pulled up short at the sight of the spirits, but she looked more awed than terrified. "Maker's Tears!" she breathed. "I was a fool to have doubted you." She paused, as though unsure if she should keep speaking while Fen'Din was singing. In the end, she plowed through. "How may we serve you, Heralds of Andraste?"

They still had an audience. If anything, they'd attracted an even larger group, with the spread of whispers and the sight of spirits tamed with a song. Adaar looked around, but everyone was looking at him and Fen'Din, and Crazy was occupied.

"Well." Adaar gestured at the structure around them. "You have a solid fortress and some able-bodied people. There are refugees not far from here who could use some help. That is the, uh, the Maker's will." He was probably laying it on too thick with that last sentence -- and that was ridiculous, a qunari invoking the Maker -- but the woman barely even blinked. He supposed people who worshipped a hole in the sky would more readily believe a qunari and an elf were Andraste's heralds.

"As you say, Herald of Andraste. Some few will stay here, and the rest will go forth to do your will." The woman bowed, shallowly, trying to keep her eyes on Adaar's face. "When the Maker calls you to your great purpose, remember that we served you."

"YOU HAVE CLAIMED TO SERVE THE MAKER'S WILL, AS WELL," Justice cut in, "WHICH I UNDERSTAND TO HAVE BEEN PUT FORTH IN THE CHANT. THE GUIDING PURPOSE OF THE CHANT IS COMPASSION AND JUSTICE, AND YET YOU HAVE NOT UNDERTAKEN THESE OF YOUR OWN WILL. HOW IS IT YOU WONDER WHY THERE ARE DEMONS? AND HOW ARE YOU TO BE TRUSTED TO DO HIS WILL, IF YOU CANNOT EVEN DO THIS?"

"Man's got a point," Varric agreed, in a much more reasonable tone.

"He speaks for the spirits," Cormac explained, lying through his teeth in the most flattering way he could manage. "I'd take what he says under advisement. And even if he didn't, I'd still take it under advisement, because he's right. The singing Herald explains it better than I do, but being an asshole is what makes demons, and there's an awful lot of the Fade bleeding into this place."

"And on that note, I'm going to take Glowy, Tactless, and the merry horde of spirits outside," Varric decided, herding Anders, Cormac, and Fen'Din toward the open portcullis, where he met Solas coming the other way.

"Can you handle them?" Solas asked Fen'Din, studying his expressionless face for some sign of distress, but Fen'Din only nodded and waved Solas past him, into the fortress.

"Mages," Cassandra said to the woman in charge, with a shrug. "I apologise. We have had a long day."

"Excuse me," Solas said, appearing at Cassandra's side, "but have you found any ... ancient machines, in this fortress? I believe I can help to ensure your protection, here, and that of the surrounding area."
The woman stared at him blankly. "Machines?"

"You know," said Adaar, "it looks sort of like..." He tried to pantomime the shape of the elven artefact Solas had led them to last time. Solas gave him a pained look, but the woman's eyes widened in understanding.

"Oh! Yes. We had wondered about that." She gestured for them to follow her, and she led them into the fortress.

"I don't know how that worked," Cassandra sighed in Adaar's direction, "but I should know by now not to question such things."

They found the artefact up a few floors, in the overgrown corner of a balcony. Solas bent over it, brows knit in concentration, long fingers delicately probing its surface and brushing aside bits of vegetation. When it hummed to life, a grin lit Solas's face.

"It is done," he said with a pleased nod.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Agent druffalo! Horses for everyone!

"Still feel bad for that noble so and so. That's the kind of reckless bullshit that comes out of reading too many romance novels with not enough sense." Varric shook his head. "Oh, darling, ditch your servants and bodyguards and run across a bear-infested moor to join me! He didn't have the sense not to ask and she didn't have the sense not to do it. Pair of idiots."

"He has gone back to his holdings, and has agreed to use his title to aid us, should we need it. Whatever he has lost, and whoever's fault it may have been, he has the chance to bring some stability to the world, in this troubled time." Cassandra eyed the dwarf, still not sure what to expect of him.

"Which would be less troubled if seventy-five percent of humanity weren't dedicated assholes," Anders muttered under his breath.

Cormac nudged Solas, who made an effort not to look at his face. "Is that druffalo following us?"

Solas followed Cormac's look to the shaggy-haired creature behind them. It plodded along on thick hooves, and it did seem to be following their trajectory. "It might just be a coincidence," Solas said. "It is likely simply wandering in the same direction as us. Why would a druffalo be following us?"

"At this point, I'm not putting anything past anybody," Adaar said, shaking his head. Still, Adaar kept glancing back over his shoulder, just to check. No matter which way they walked, the druffalo was still there, plodding along.

Varric noticed Adaar and Solas looking back over their shoulders. "Looks like the Inquisition has a new agent!"

"Agent Druffalo! Always ready for adventure and demons falling from the sky! Look at that thing, I think it'd put the fear of the Maker in just about anything." Anders laughed.

"I wonder if it's from one of the farms in the valley." Cormac rubbed his beardless chin. "Wild druffalo don't just follow people around, but the farm druffalo know that people mean food and a warm place to sleep. I used to work on some farms around here. Wouldn't surprise me at all."

"Well, if it follows us back to the Crossroads, someone should recognise it, right?" Anders studied the thing, trying to decide if it was more or less threatening than a feral camel.

"That's the idea." Cormac turned to face the druffalo and made a few very strange noises.

The creature lifted its ears at him and ambled closer. After a few moments of more weird noises, it was nosing at Cormac's face and nibbling at his hair.

"Yeah, that's a farm druffalo," Cormac said, trying to duck away from the nibbling.

Solas offered a fistful of dried grass, and the druffalo seemed appeased, for the moment.
"So, now we just... have this druffalo following us until we meet more people?" Adaar said, scratching his head between the horns.


"And what if we come across another rift?" Cassandra asked, crossing her arms. "Is it smart enough to keep away from the demons?"

"Well, it has so far," Varric said. "Then again, it now thinks following us is a good idea, so it can't be that smart. But what else are we going to do? Tell it to go away?"

Cassandra looked at the druffalo. It chewed its grass and looked back at her with big eyes.

"I could ride it into battle," Adaar suggested. From his inflection, it was difficult to tell if he was being serious or not.

"Absolutely not," Cassandra said, just in case he was.

"I don't think these men are going to be trouble again," Blackwall said to Vale and Kinnon. "They've been getting reckless without proper leadership -- they're used to a stable life with defined duties, and now they've got nothing they know, except hunting apostates, and... I don't think there's a mage alive who's not an apostate, given the situation. I'm sure they'll straighten out easy, now that they've got basic supplies and work that needs doing."

"Still," Kinnon watched one of the Templar teams splitting firewood for the village, "they're men like any others. There will be some who make trouble, because it makes them happy."

"You're a cynic, Brother Kinnon, but I can't fault you that." Vale shook his head and shouted an order over his shoulder, to a group of mages. "There will always be people who like making things difficult."

Blackwall's eyes strayed up the road to the approaching cloud of dust and boots. "Merchants, you think?"

"I think I see horns." Kinnon squinted. "I think that's Adaar and our guys."

And then the sound of spirits singing carried in with the wind, and the flash of light off Cassandra's armour as she forced a team of Templars back from their approach. At the front of the group, Cormac carried on an animated conversation with an enormous druffalo that bore Adaar on its shoulders and Fen'Din on its back. A swirling cloud of light and song blocked Varric, Anders, and Solas from view, but Solas's voice carried with the rest of the chorus.

Blackwall glanced back to see what he expected: Vale and Kinnon's jaws hanging low at the sight. Kinnon, at least, turned that look into an eye-roll a moment later, but Vale just stared like he wasn't sure if he should piss himself.

"Don't worry, Corporal," Blackwall said, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "They're on our side."

"No," he could hear Cassandra saying as they approached. "Just because it can carry you like this doesn't mean it can bear the stress of battle. So, yet again, no. I will not say it again."

"Now, if you will not say it again," Adaar pointed out, "that means the next time I ask I will get a different answer."
Cassandra's disgusted noise carried over the singing.

Blackwall cleared his throat. "Glad to see you're all in one piece." He eyed the spirits, some of them possessing mostly-whole skeletons. "Sort of."

"It's hard to find skeletons that aren't too new to be safe," Fen'Din sighed, following Blackwall's gaze. "I have to give them bones without memories, or they become... strange."

"Seconded," Anders chimed in, from behind the spirit curtain. "Bones with memories make spirits very strange." He could feel the implications dawn on Justice, and a small wave of offence blossomed in his chest.

"After everything I saw in Kirkwall, I'm going to have to agree." Varric nodded, still hidden behind swirling spirits. "Spirits in bodies with personalities attached just get weird." He looked wryly up at Anders, who stuck out his tongue in response.

"But, we're definitely in no more pieces than we left!" Cormac declared, giving the druffalo a few more pets on the head. "How are things here? Did you get everything sorted out with the watchtowers and the wolves?"

"While we are on the subject of possession," Kinnon sounded distinctly irritated, "do you remember a certain mouser of our acquaintance, Jan?"

Anders made his way forward, elbowing around a few spirits that clung to Justice. "Yeah, of course, why? ... Did you find another?"

"The wolves. A housecat can kill three Templars, if you give it a rage demon. Three full-grown wolves..." Kinnon's eyes were hard.

"Oh. Shit." Anders sagged, one hand tight on his staff and the other on Cormac's shoulder. "I should've stayed. I'm so sorry."

"Are you kidding? We pulled the Templars back and sent in mages. It was over in a few minutes." Kinnon shook his head and smiled mischievously. "Of course, there's still the guy in the first team who got bit something awful. Potions helped, but you probably want to take a look at him."

"Of course," Anders said, still looking regretful. "Where is he?"

"Come on, I'll show you," Kinnon said, tipping his head in the appropriate direction before walking that way.

Blackwall stroked his beard, eyeing the druffalo, then eyeing Adaar and Fen'Din. The druffalo seemed to eye his beard right back, perhaps wondering if it was as tasty as the grass it had had earlier. "It seems the Inquisition has a habit of picking up strays."

Adaar looked around at their motley crew and found he couldn't argue with that. He shrugged, scratching the druffalo behind the ear and reminding himself that he wasn't allowed to keep it. "Well, it's one way to recruit. Are we as fun as the Wardens, yet?"

Blackwall laughed uncomfortably as the druffalo started to nose at his face. He took a step back, but the druffalo followed. "There's certainly fewer darkspawn, if that counts."

"The watchtowers have been a success," Vale told them. "We've got much less trouble with bandits along the road, and definitely less in the village. If we could only get to Redcliff, I think we'd be all right, but the gates are sealed, and no one's getting in or out. Still, Master Dennet rode in, yesterday,
looking for you guys. I think he's finally ready to make a deal with us. I'd be ready to make a deal with us... look at this place! It's an actual town, now, but with mages in it and half a standing army."

"If you think you can keep them under control, we've probably hit most of the worst of it, out there," Cormac told him.

"Keep them engaged in the community," Blackwall advised. "If they have a stake, they'll all work to defend it."

Vale nodded. "Yeah, I think they're starting to catch on. We lost a Templar, the other night, to a demon out of the hills. I didn't know Templars could get possessed. I mean, I thought... I thought it was just mages, but then the wolves..."

"Anyone can be possessed, living or dead," Fen'Din explained, his face expressionless. "It's just that demons are drawn to power and suffering -- usually, that means mages, but once you remove the suffering, it starts to even out. They'll swing toward other kinds of power. Watch yourself, Corporal."

Vale turned an alarmed look Fen'Din's way. "Well, that's sobering," he said with a shudder. "You have twice my thanks, then, for helping with the demons. I've been hearing tales of the two of you closing rifts all over the place!"

"Well, if it were really 'all over the place'," Solas cut in, "there would be no rifts left, but that is a goal to strive for."

Adaar laughed weakly, flexing his glowing hand.

"Thank you, Corporal," Cassandra said with a nod of respect. "We have done what we could to help you, but you have done good work here." She turned back to the pair on the druffalo. "So could we now speak to Dennet about normal steeds?"

"For the rest of you? Certainly." Fen'Din nodded regally.

Dennet sat in front of his house, eating a sandwich and watching a handful of mages argue about the resilience of the existing irrigation ditches versus magical irrigation. "Elena tells me your men took care of those demon-cursed wolves. Should be safer for our farmers, now, and safer still with the watchtowers and men to hold them. You've managed a lot in just a few days, and I'm not sure how you've done it, but you've held up your end of the bargain."

Anders scoffed. "You doubted us."

"To be fair, Blondie, I doubted us." Varric shrugged.

Fen'Din looked faintly amused. "We are as good as our word, neither better nor lesser."

"Well, that alone is a sight better than most people," Dennet said. He paused to finish chewing, picking at his teeth with a fingernail. "But I'm as good as my word, too. You'll have my whole stable, and good hands to go with it."

Adaar quirked an eyebrow at the phrasing. "And what about you?"

"Well, I can't say I'm not tempted," Dennet said, as much to his sandwich as to the others. Then he looked past them, squinting at his sunlit fields. "Still... it feels wrong to abandon my land to go play horsemaster again."
Cormac cleared his throat, settling his tongue back into the dreadful Antivan accent he took on at Bethany's wedding. "Have you had the opportunity to work with Antivan racers? I understand that yet another house of Crows has had a turn of bad luck, and I am certain we can get a fine bargain on their steeds, at auction -- and perhaps on their horsemaster, as well, if he still lives. But, these fine horses could be yours..."

"You can get Antivans?" Dennet's eyes widened. "All right, Inquisition. I'll look to your horses myself. Let it never be said that Redcliffe gave less than the best. Just let me settle things here and say goodbye to my wife. I'll meet you in Haven."

"Don't," Anders said suddenly, and everyone looked. "Don't leave your wife. In a time like this..." He wrapped an arm around Cormac's waist.

"She'll be safer here, I think, with how well you've cleaned up." Dennet patted Anders's arm. "But, good for you, thinking it."
The shouting could be heard from the gate, as they returned to Haven.

"Your kind killed the most holy!"

"Lies! Your kind let her die!"

"I'm just going to be glad we got here before the new horsemaster," Varric sighed. "This is not the introduction to the Inquisition we really want to be giving people."

"Oh, we can't... this..." Kinnon looked meaningfully at Anders. "We have to stop this."

The shouting continued as Kinnon sprinted toward the Chantry.

"Shut your mouth, mage!" And then the sound of drawn steel.

"Enough!" Cullen's voice, and Kinnon had never been so glad to hear it. Especially after what Cullen had once been. Even now, he wasn't sure whether Cullen could quite be trusted, though his fairly easy tolerance of Anders spoke volumes.

"Knight-Commander--!" the shouting Templar started.

"That is not my title," Cullen said sharply. "We are not Templars any longer." He steadied himself with a breath as though only just realizing the weight of what he had just said. He thought back to Kirkwall and Anton, and wondered how that would sit with them. "We are all part of the Inquisition!" He glared at both Templars and mages, making sure they knew he was addressing them all.

Both sides backed down, still eyeing each other distrustfully, but no longer on the verge of a riot.

"And what does that mean, exactly?" another voice cut through the crowd as Kinnon caught up with them. He turned to see Chancellor Roderick, his chin at a haughty angle.

"Back already, Chancellor?" Cullen bit out. This was the last thing they needed right now. "Haven't you done enough?"

"I'm curious, Commander, as to how your Inquisition and its 'Heralds' will restore order, as you've promised." Roderick drew the words out, with mocking concern.

"Then just maybe you should ask the people of the Hinterlands," Kinnon snapped, letting his heavy fur cloak fall open to bare the golden sun embroidered on his robes. This was a dangerous move, playing his false vows against an actual ranking member of the Chantry. "The people who are now living in peace, with their needs met and the bandits off the roads? I'm sure they'd be glad to give you a full report of how we've restored order for them. How we've given them hope and the ability to care for themselves, again."
Cullen spread his hands and shrugged expressively, gesturing to Kinnon with his chin. "How indeed, Chancellor?" He looked out across the gathered crowd. "Back to your duties, all of you!"

Cullen spoke with an authority that Kinnon had trouble matching up with the nervous new recruit he’d known years ago. Kinnon was relieved when his commands were obeyed, mages and Templars eyeing each other as they backed away to opposite camps. Roderick remained, if only just to scowl at Cullen.

"Welcome back," Cullen said, offering them a tight smile, "and yes, it's been like this all week. They're already at war, but now mages and Templars are blaming each other for the Divine's death." He shook his head wearily.

"Which is why we require a proper authority to guide them back to order," Roderick said, speaking slowly in a way Cullen knew was meant to irritate him.

"Who, you?" Cullen scoffed. "Random clerics who weren't important enough to be at the Conclave?" He rubbed his temples where a headache throbbed, the sunlight bouncing off snow not doing him any favours.

"The rebel Inquisition, and its so-called 'Herald of Andraste'?" Roderick shot back, with a venom that said Cullen had struck a nerve with that last line. "I think not."

Blue flickered over Anders's skin before he could rein in Justice. "If the 'proper' authority hadn't completely failed," he said, "the Conclave wouldn't have been needed."

"So you suggest I blame the Chantry and exalt a murderer?" Roderick scoffed, recoiling from the aura of power that hung on Anders. "What of justice?"

"I mean, you could just as--" Cormac cut himself off, as he remembered that Justice would reveal Anders as ... perhaps even more dangerous than the Heralds were thought to be. Beside him, Anders struggled with the spirit.

"You would find it just to put two innocent men to death, to forward the cause of order?" Kinnon barked, putting himself between Anders and Roderick. He knew exactly what was going on behind him, and it wasn't something that needed too close an eye on it. "Because I can assure you the Maker would not. Has the power gone to your head, Chancellor? Are you so unable to conceive of the idea that perhaps these men were delivered to us to protect us from the ones who did that?" He pointed toward where the sky still swirled dangerously, at the top of the mountain. "That they were chosen, for reasons unknown, to receive the Maker's power, in some small way? Because I know no one else in all of Thedas who can close these rifts and stop the demons coming out of them from ever reaching us."

A song, from the lower path, drifted up toward the chantry, and the voices of the Chanters could be heard in it, beside voices that were anything but human.

"Order will never be restored to us as long as this rebellion is allowed to fester!" Roderick snapped.

"Because allowing demons to overrun us is the swifter way to order?" Kinnon's face turned a blotchy red with his anger at this idiocy. No wonder the Circle had suffered, if the minds at the top thought like this.

Peryn could hear Kinnon shouting from within the Chantry, and without thinking, he dashed out, a hand on his sword. Cullen put out a hand to hold him back just as he recognized the second yelling voice as Roderick's. He could understand why there was yelling then, if not what it was about.
"I'd say he's handling Roderick well enough on his own," Cullen said with a crooked smile. "Perhaps even better than I was, but I'm low on patience today."

Adaar leaned in to join their conversation, asking in a loud whisper, "Remind me why you're allowing the Chancellor to stay?"

"He's toothless," Cullen said as the shouting went on in front of him. "There's no point in turning him into a martyr simply because he runs at the mouth. The Chancellor is a good indication of what to expect at Val Royeaux, however," Cullen added with a pointed look at Adaar.

"Ik weet zeker dat hij veel seks met honden heeft," Peryn muttered, a bit less quietly than he'd thought. "Slecht. Slechte slet."

"Oh, because you're one to talk?" Anders choked out, between snorting laughs.

Peryn blushed brightly. "Honden, geen hond heren. Dog lords are something else entirely."

Kinnon's ears twitched, and he cast a baleful look in Peryn's direction. "Horse lord, thank you, and I'll get to you in just a moment, Ser Peryn."

"I'm curious," Cormac cut in. "how widespread is the war? When we left Kassel, it sounded like there was only fighting in Orlais!"

Cullen shook his head. "It's impossible to say, but with the strike against Dairsmuid..."

"They went after Rivain?" Cormac's face went ashen, before he remembered Gregson coming to tell them, what seemed like a lifetime ago. Isabela... He hoped she'd come out of that as well as she'd hoped.

"I'm told the Templar forces never made landfall," Cullen assured him, with a crinkle at the corner of his eyes that promised a story, later.

"Your organisation flouting the Chantry's authority will not help matters." Roderick's voice landed like a whiny lash.

"With the Conclave destroyed," Cullen bit back, "I imagine the war between mages and Templars has renewed. With interest."

"A lot of hope was pinned on that Conclave," Anders said, almost mournfully.

"All of this should be left to a new Divine," Roderick said, shaking his head. He squinted first a Fen'Din, then up at Adaar, trying his damnedest to look down his nose at someone who towered over him. "If these two are innocent, the Chantry will establish it as so."

"Or will be happy it's found a scapegoat," Anders muttered, keeping a tight leash on his temper and on Justice.

Roderick wheeled on him. "You think nobody cares about the truth?" Roderick snapped. "We all grieve Justinia's loss!"

"But you won't grieve if the Heralds of Andraste are swept under the carpet," Cullen sneered, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Well, let's hope we find solutions in Val Royeaux, and not a cathedral full of Chancellors," Kinnon muttered, angrily, shouldering past Roderick to get to Peryn.
"Don't let anyone riot, while we're gone." Fen'Din quipped, with an unsettling smile, before turning his gaze back down to the spirits still milling around Solas. "I need to do something about that, before they get upset with all the shouting. Excuse me, Chancellor, and do mind the mice." He bent down to pick up several skeletal rodents that had been scurrying around his feet and headed back down the hill.

"Mock if you will." Roderick's chin tipped up. "I'm certain the Maker is less amused."

Kinnon turned on him again, one arm still wrapped around Peryn's back. "You can ram that certainty up your ass with a broomstick. At least the people laughing are the people helping. What have you done for those suffering, this week, besides letting this pompous phlegm dribble out of your mouth every time you open it?"

Cullen stepped between them. "Go inside, Kinnon. Spend some time with Ser Peryn; he's missed you."

Kinnon considered protesting, but then he remembered that he had missed Peryn too, and rather badly. Wasting more time shouting at Roderick lost its appeal in the wake of a better option. "Fine. But only because he's better company." Kinnon shot a glare at Roderick even as Peryn steered him towards the door. "What was it you called him?" Kinnon asked before they disappeared. "'Slechte slet'?"

Roderick looked like he was about to start up again, when Cullen held up a hand. "Enough. This is achieving nothing except making my headache worse. Either move on, or move along, Chancellor."

Roderick huffed indignantly, but Cullen's stare was steady. He stalked off with pursed lips and clenched fists.

"The whole time we've been gone?" Anders asked, offering a glowing hand to Cullen.

Cullen made a long-suffering sound of disgust and smacked his forehead into Anders's palm. "Every day it's been something. The mages are crying about the lack of accommodations, the Templars are crying about the mages, Roderick's been yowling like someone stepped on a cat..."

"We should've stopped in Kirkwall and picked up Anton," Cormac teased, patting Cullen's shoulder.

"I cannot express to you how glad I am that Anton has missed all of this." Cullen sighed. "You know what he's like. He's... Maker, I'd be afraid of losing him, every day."

"You may have a point," Cormac admitted, after a moment. "He's never been the best at avoiding stupid situations. At least in Kirkwall he's got Bran and Aveline to look after him."

As the Chantry door swung shut behind them, Kinnon nudged Peryn back toward the alcove on one wall, hands sliding under his cloak. "Were you about to draw your sword for me, out there?"

Peryn considered the last few minutes. "Yes," he answered honestly, without doubt. "I heard you shouting, and you sounded as if in distress. Why would I not draw my sword?" His arms slid around Kinnon as he spoke, a slow smile curling his lips.

Maker, Kinnon had missed him. There was something warming about that, about knowing that Peryn would defend him without question. Kinnon wondered if he still would if he knew... No, Kinnon wasn't going to worry about that now. He thought of Ellendra, knew he should tell him, but not yet. They'd only just been reunited, after all.

"Well, Ser Peryn, you're welcome to draw your sword for me whenever you like." His eyebrow
waggle said he didn't mean the metal one.

They wound up in the cellar of the Chantry, amid crates of supplies stacked in what looked surprisingly like a dungeon, but all Kinnon could think of was Peryn's hands on him. Those hands. He'd never be over the way Peryn's hands felt on his body, so different to the touches of anyone else he'd been with. Peryn's hands were thick and heavy, but so very gentle, so very slow. Slow didn't come naturally to Kinnon, but once he had it, he craved it. Long nights wrapped in furs against the Fereldan winter, with those hands mapping every part of him, like Peryn wanted to remember it all. Slow, hot kisses that were just the touch of lips on lips, desperate breaths panted against each other's cheeks. Kinnon's hands were thin and quick, long fingers scrabbling and clutching, never still. Every time Peryn's lips pressed against his neck, his heart hammered like it might burst, and his hands fluttered and squeezed.

Sweat ran rivers where they pressed together, the reek of lust and lyrium heavy in the hot, humid pocket beneath the furs. And every night, endless stories of perfect futures cascaded from Kinnon's lips, as he unravelled in Peryn's hands, pressed against Peryn's soft, strong body. Words he'd never have dared to say, once, but he could almost believe them, now. Sweet, dim mornings that stretched long, like honey in snow. Waking up every day to Peryn curled up against his chest. Kisses before coffee and a hermit's shrine to Havard in the wood -- they couldn't keep a chapel, but they could keep a shrine. Spending their days bringing light to the world and every night in each other's arms. They weren't just whispers, Kinnon realised, at some point. It was what he wanted. A quiet life with this Templar.

The only things in their way were his magic and Peryn's need for lyrium, and those were, he knew, probably insurmountable, but he could still wish, he could still hold Peryn's quickening pulse in his hands, as he breathed those words, knowing Peryn dreamed of it, too.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

An invitation to Highever, an introduction to the Chargers, and one of Leliana's many regrets.

Varric shrugged and sighed under Leliana's firm gaze, as she sorted through a few notes Josephine had left on the war table. "Well, you know how it is. Do the least damage, bring the most people around to our way of thinking. But, we've walked into a little problem that it might be best to send someone other than our Heraldic Heroes to deal with."

"I'm listening." Leliana petted a raven's beak as she attached a missive to its leg.

"I guess there's a Carta smuggling operation in the Hinterlands. Somewhere pretty far south, but they've been paying people to pretend to be bandits to scare other people off the roads, so no one will see what they're moving. I got a bad feeling it's lyrium, and if it's not going to us, it's going somewhere..." Varric tried to look casual, but the worry was clear around his eyes.

Leliana released the bird from a window. "I have a Carta contact. She's been trying to move lyrium for us, so I would suppose this is either not her family, or we're having difficulty communicating with them. Perhaps they are rivals! That would be convenient. I will see to it." She leaned over the war table and made a note on one page, squinting at the metal figures on the map. "If you catch one of the runners, on your way out, tell them I want to see Malika, Ser Cullen, and Minaeve, in whatever order they can be found. I'll be back at the pavilion as soon as I finish this. So much to be done. So many stories yet to be told."

"That's what I'm here for!" Varric joked, backing out of the room.

Cullen sat on a windowsill behind the war table, eating one of the tiny frost apples that grew in the wood. "We've got a letter from Fergus Cousland. He'd like us to pay our respects at a vigil he's planning to commemorate Divine Justinia. I could probably peel off a detachment of our men and send them up the coast--"

"Fergus?" Anders laughed. "I know his sister. I think you know his sister. You remember Elissa, don't you? Let's just ride out -- it'll only be a couple of days. I need to ask her a few things, anyway."

"Elissa...?" Cullen's face drained of blood. "No, I will stay right here and keep an eye on things. Lady Cousland has an importunate desire to, as she puts it, 'juggle my oranges'."

Anders blinked a couple of times. "I'd let her juggle my oranges any day of the week."

Josephine cast a long look up and down Cullen's body. "Well, if this is the party I think it was, I don't think anyone had any doubts you were smuggling oranges, Commander. Though I might have called them tangerines."

Cullen's cheeks turned a lovely shade of red. "Please stop making citrus sound dirty. It's bad enough when Elissa does it."
"We're just preparing you for when you see her again," Anders said cheerfully, using Josephine's shoulder as an armrest. "You know, at the vigil."

"Preparing yourself, you mean," Cullen insisted, "since I'm not going. I have... things to do, anyway." Holding his apple with his teeth, Cullen gathered up the map he had been perusing. "Important things," he said around the apple, the fruit getting in the way of a few consonants, as he edged for the door.

"I am certain we can move around those 'important things'," Josephine said without a hint of mercy. "Nope." He took the apple out of his mouth as he backed through the doorway. "Too important!"

"You know the people we're going to see?" Fen'Din asked Anders, squinting, unconvinced, at the apple he held, as if it had somehow offended him.

"Old friend of an old friend. She's a lot of fun, but you might have to slap her hands a few times -- she's deeply attracted to power." Anders plucked the apple out of Fen'Din's hand and took half of it in a single bite. His face soured at the taste. "How does he eat these?"

"Practise," Josephine replied, tossing Anders a small orange from a basket on the edge of the table. "They're from Antiva. A gift."

"I know some Antivan oranges she'd probably like to juggle, too, and I don't mean these." Anders made his way toward the door of the Chantry, back out into the blistering cold, the orange juice clinging to his fingers as he peeled the fruit.

"Does your friend have a decent army? Highever, right? Can we borrow them, do you think?" Fen'Din asked, his eyes lighting on a young human man waiting for someone, at the bottom of the steps. "Messenger?" he asked, nudging Anders.

"Excuse me," the young man called out to them, waving them down as they passed. "I've got a message for the Inquisition, but I'm having a hard time getting anyone to talk to me."

"And who are you?" Anders asked, making note of the easy way the man moved in his armour. A warrior then, and likely a trained one.

"Cremisius Aclassi, with the Bull's Chargers mercenary company," the young man, Cremisius, answered. "We mostly work out of Orlais and Nevarra." Anders couldn't quite place the accent, but he didn't sound Orlesian or Nevarran. "We got word of some Tevinter mercenaries gathering out at the Storm Coast. My company commander, Iron Bull, offers the information free of charge."

"'Free', huh?" Anders asked, trying not to sound suspicious.

"Free," Cremisius assured him. He eyed Fen'Din's glowing palm. "If you'd like to see what the Chargers can do for the Inquisition, meet us there and watch us work."

"Iron Bull? That is an interesting name." Fen'Din remembered to raise an eyebrow a moment after it should have moved.

"Because the Dead Wolf of Halamshiral really has room to comment?" Anders teased, nudging Fen'Din a little harder than he would anyone else.

"You barely even have a name, Jan." Fen'Din rolled his eyes and reached up to tug on the end of Anders's hair, which was much closer to his hand than it had ever been in the tower. "But, tell us about your commander."
"Iron Bull? He's one of those qunari. Big dude with horns," Krem explained, as if they might not know any qunari. "He leads from the front, he pays well, and he's a lot smarter than the last bastard I worked for."

"We're bringing Adaar," Fen'Din decided. "Maybe they can bond over horn-care tips."

"Or swording. Probably swording, which makes me wonder if we shouldn't have Carver down. On the other hand, Mack and Cullen would kill me if I sent for him." Anders shrugged.

"You weren't finished," Fen'Din said to Krem, who still stood looking unsure if he was meant to continue.

"Best of all, he's professional. We accept contracts with whoever makes the first real offer. You're the first time he's gone out of his way to pick a side." Krem looked as if he were still surprised by that.

"Given that the other side is literal demons from the Fade, I'm not sure even this really counts as 'picking a side'," Anders pointed out.

"I think he meant the Chantry," Fen'Din said.

"Fuck the Chantry. They aren't even a side. They're too busy sitting on their hands and wailing to do anything." Anders shook his head and made a dismissive gesture. "As usual."

"Can't say I have an opinion either way," Krem said, "but I'm all for taking on demons and a few Tevinter assholes. We're loyal, we're tough, and we don't break contracts. Ask around Val Royeaux. We've got references."

Anders exchanged a look with Fen'Din. "We'll think about it," he said, not wanting to promise anything to someone he'd never even met.

"I appreciate it," Krem replied. "We're the best you'll find. Come to the Storm Coast, and you can see us in action." With a grin and a respectful nod, Krem backed away from them and turned to head back down the road.

"Well, he seems nice," Anders said, shrugging at Fen'Din.

"Isn't Highever on the Storm Coast?" Fen'Din tipped his head to the side and snatched an orange slice from Anders's fingers with his teeth. "We'll be right there."

Leliana did her best to keep the hundreds of pages of notes and maps from fluttering away in every chill breeze that whipped past her pavilion. Books and rocks were piled on everything, as she faced the messenger who'd brought the news.

"There were so many questions surrounding Farrier's death. Did he think we wouldn't notice?" Her voice was as sharp and chill as the wind. "He killed Farrier. One of my best agents. And he knows where the rest are." Leliana shook her head, lips tight, eyes down in disbelief. In cold horror. How could he do this to her? Why now? "You know what must be done. Make it quick. Painless, if you can. We were friends, once."

Adaar didn't even pretend not to be eavesdropping as he idled in front of Leliana's tent. He was sure it wasn't his business, but he could hear the regret in Leliana's voice, could see it too, when he turned to her.
"I'd hate to interrupt," Adaar cut in, "but... well, I'm interrupting. What are you doing?"

Leliana exchanged a glance with the messenger. "He betrayed us," she said, voice hard. "He murdered my agent."

"And you'd... kill him? Just like that? Someone who was a friend?" There was a reason Adaar was a mercenary, not an assassin. It just didn't sit right with him.

Leliana folded her arms across her chest and tilted her head. "You find fault in my decision?"

Even though he was the one at the entrance of the tent, Adaar felt backed into a corner. "I'm sure most of your decisions are fine," he said placatingly. "But that one? Seems a little extreme."

"Extreme?" Leliana scoffed, shaking her head in disbelief. She walked up to Adaar, standing in his space. "Butler's betrayal put our agents in danger. I condemn one man to save dozens." It occurred to Adaar that this was the first time he'd seen her agitated, cheeks red from her anger as much as the cold. "I may not like what I do, but it must be done. I cannot afford the luxury of ideals at a time like this."

Adaar shrugged, kept his posture calm and unthreatening to bring her back down. "Not to get preachy, but... that's what we're fighting for, isn't it? Those ideals? From where I'm standing, that's what separates us from the demons and whatever asshole brought them in. I mean, I'm still new to this whole 'fighting for a cause' thing, rather than fighting to put food on the table, but that's what I got out of it."

Leliana's eyes stayed on Adaar, cold and dark, even as she turned away. When her gaze finally broke, it was like stepping out of the wind. "That is certainly one way to put it," she said, voice surprisingly even. She sighed, leaning against a table, deep in thought. "Very well. I will think of another way to deal with this man." She paused, before looking up at the messenger. "Apprehend Butler. But, see that he lives."

With a bow, the messenger exited the pavilion, silently.

Leliana glanced over her shoulder at Adaar. "Now, if you're happy, I have more work to do."

"Happy is a strong word," he said to her back, "but thank you."
Chapter Summary

A visit to Highever, including some surprises for the Couslands.

The vigil had been long and sad, with a variety of people speaking to Justinia's good works, between parts of the Chant. Cassandra had taken the time to offer her own remembrances, and the gathered crowd had been eager to hear her speak. Still, she was glad it was over. Now, all that remained was to finish putting the Inquisition on Teyrn Cousland's Wintersend card list, and possibly gaining more noble support -- both political and practical.

"Oh, you don't want to hear the things I've heard about you," Anders laughed, landing a hand heavily on Fergus's back. "Nathaniel has a great many words on the subject and none of them were polite. Your sister is much more kind."

"Nathaniel is lucky he went back to the Marches," Fergus retorted. "I didn't think he'd have the stones to come back, and I'm glad to see he didn't have the stones to stay."

"Fergus, don't be a shit." Elissa gave her brother a sharp push. "He's a good man with a big--"

"It's not that big," Anders muttered.

"-- heart." Elissa shot Anders a look, obviously trying not to laugh.

"But, I understand you're continuing down the coast, is that correct?" Fergus asked Cassandra, taking a few quick steps to put himself a bit ahead of his sister and Anders.

"That is correct," Cassandra said, pretending she hadn't heard half of that conversation. "A mercenary company has expressed an interest in working with us, and we are going to see if they are worth the price. Have you heard anything about Tevinter mercenaries in the area?"

"Tevinter?" Fergus's eyebrows rose. "I can't say I have, at least not on this stretch of the coast. Is the company you are looking at Tevinter?"

"Oh!" Cassandra explained, "No. They work out of Orlais, but their messenger warned us of Tevinter mercenaries here as well."

"Wonderful," Fergus muttered. He glanced back over his shoulder to see his sister talking to the Inquisition's qunari. He allowed himself a moment to shake his head at her before turning back to Cassandra with a grace look on his face. "Tevinters haven't been a problem here yet, but what there have been reports of are darkspawn."

"Darkspawn? Well, fortunately, Warden Blackwall has been kind enough to join us on this journey." Cassandra waved him over from where he lurked beside Varric, at the back of the group. "Warden, what can you tell us about darkspawn around here? Do you know of any tunnels on the Coast? Teryn Cousland is hearing rumours of them."

"No, not since the Blight ended." Blackwall shook his head. "There shouldn't be any reason for them to surface, but they do live in the Deep Roads. Maybe the dwarves are driving them out, in which
case we'd catch them running. Do everyone a favour, if we took them out. But, you can't get too close to them. Don't get the blood on you. Warden Kasselmann and I can probably do some damage, though. We've done this kind of thing before."

"What a relief. I'd heard the Wardens all vanished after the sky opened up, and I feared the worst." Fergus put out his hand. "What did you say your name was? I'm Fergus, Teyrn Cousland."

"Gordon Blackwall, Warden-Constable." Blackwall took Fergus's hand and gave it a single, firm shake. "Many of the Wardens do seem to have vanished, but we’re looking into that. I can't rule out that they attempted to battle the demons -- some may still be holding them back. It's what I intended to do, if the Inquisition hadn't found me. They're not blighted, but they're just as dangerous to everyone in Thedas."

Fergus nodded gravely. "Maker knows we could use the Wardens' help against the things. We can kill as many as we like, but they just keep coming back, new rifts keep forming. It all felt a bit futile until your Inquisition. I hear you have a way to close the rifts?" He looked guardedly hopeful, and Cassandra suspected that was a look they were going to see often in their travels.

"We do," Cassandra assured him. She tipped her head at the qunari Fergus's sister was chatting up. "Adaar is our current rift-closer, and he has been getting a decent amount of practice." She gave Fergus a wry look and a shrug. "We would be happy to have him practise some more on any rifts we find around here."

Anders appeared as if summoned, having been nudged out of the other conversation. "Seeker! Don't talk about Elissa like that! She's a wonderful and very talented woman!"

Blackwall's eyes rounded, as he was facing away from the others. "Warden Kasselmann, it is you who are being rude! What would make you think--"

Anders grabbed his shoulders and spun him to face Adaar. "I'd put two silver on it, but I'd feel bad taking your money."

"But, she's--! And he's--!" Blackwall blinked a few times.

"She's gorgeous and he's a qunari?" Anders asked, leaning an elbow on Blackwall's shoulder. "Some women are into that, and given that I'm very familiar with a few of her favourite things, I'm... not wrong."

And he wasn't. Elissa made a subtle but unmistakeable gesture and cocked her head at the door. As her eyes skimmed over Anders, he fluttered his fingers at her, raised his eyebrows, and tapped his ear, with a nod. She rolled her eyes and winked.

"See? I'd feel bad taking your money." Anders leaned back a bit to address Fergus. "And I won't be sorry for putting that in your head, after everything you've said about Warden Howe."

"Warden Howe's continued existence is a disgrace to Ferelden," Fergus insisted.

"You just think that because he's boning your sister." Anders paused. "Excuse me, 'is engaged to' your sister. I've seen him do things you'll never have the stones for, and that's not a slight to you, but I don't see you being the sort to intentionally face off against something as tall as a house, with tentacles and six tits. You're a politician, Cousland. He could've been, too -- doing a good job of faking it in Starkhaven, I've heard -- but, then he decided he'd throw in against the darkspawn for a lark."

"'A lark',' Fergus repeated with an eyeroll. "That's one word for it, though not the one I would have
chosen. What you describe as his bravery sounds a bit like stupidity to me."

Blackwall straightened, beard twITCHING as he pursed his lips. "Grey Wardens give their lives to protect you. Without them, the Blight would have destroyed these lands. I would reconsider what you call 'stupidity'."

Fergus gave Blackwall a flat look. "And if I had been referring to all Grey Wardens, I would, but I was referring specifically to my future brother-in-law's own brand of stupidity. I have nothing but respect for the Order as a whole, though Nathaniel's presence has me questioning their standards."

Anders glanced back at Elissa and Adaar in time to see them slip through a door. Adaar was almost subtle, for a giant with horns. Anders smirked at Blackwall and mouthed, "see?"

"My presence should give you more pause than his." Anders snorted, glancing around for Cormac, whom he spotted pointing at something Varric was writing, with a buttercream-covered fork. "There's not a Warden alive who was righteous and well-regarded, before they joined up. Something about the Joining -- that is, the act of committing yourself to being a Warden -- changes people." Actually, it mostly killed people. "Or, you know, in Nathaniel's case it just reinforces what's already there. Stubborn fuck. But, like your sister says, a good man." If a little stupid, at times, not that Anders would give Fergus the pleasure of his agreement.

"I suspect we will never see eye-to-eye on the subject, Warden Kasselmann," Fergus admitted, attempting to politely divert the conversation. "But, you're willing to look into the troubles we're having along the coast?"

"Like any ranking Warden, I eat darkspawn for breakfast." Anders clapped Blackwall on the back. "Actually, I don't eat darkspawn. Eating darkspawn's bad for you. But, Warden Blackwall and I would be happy to go dispose of them and take care of wherever they're crawling out of. For the safety of all Thedas, of course."

"I cannot thank you enough." Fergus looked a bit relieved, both by the promise and by getting the conversation back onto reasonable grounds. "I trust your party will join us for supper, before you retire?"

"We'd be delighted!" Anders said, beaming as he clapped a hand on Blackwall's shoulders. "But I should warn you about Grey Warden appetites..."

The rain had stopped hours ago, but the skies were still an ominous grey, muddy earth sucking at their boots. Cassandra had slipped on more than her share of wet stones, her scowl as stormy as the weather still threatened to be.

"And I must say," she went on, though she wondered if Adaar was even paying attention, "you have an interesting idea of diplomacy, 'Herald', walking into the dinner late in such a state, wearing that stupid smirk, and..." She narrowed her eyes at Adaar, who continued walking without glancing her way, showing no reaction whatsoever. "Are you even listening?"

No response. Cassandra gritted her teeth, but then Varric nudged her from the other side.

"That's his deaf ear," Varric said in a loud whisper.

"Oh," Cassandra felt foolish... and then irritated again when she remembered Adaar deliberately walking around her to stand on that side. "Oh, you are an ass," she hissed. She stomped around behind Adaar to repeat the sentiment in his other ear.
Adaar finally turned to blink at her. "Sorry, did you say something?" he asked sweetly.

Varric wondered if Cassandra punched qunari as hard as she punched bears.

"Your concept of diplomacy is unsuitable for negotiations in ..." Cassandra gestured around herself, looking for the word. "... in human lands. You cannot simply take the Teyrn's sister to bed -- she is engaged to another man! -- and then walk into a state dinner looking like you've done so!"

"To be fair, I've taken the man she's engaged to to bed." Anders raised his hand and his voice, to make sure he'd be heard. "That's just Elissa. No one asks questions when she's involved. Might not work anywhere but Highever, but after the stories she's told, I'm pretty sure it does. And I hope you didn't say too much to her that wasn't dirty, Adaar, because everything you said goes straight back to Fergus. She's his spy, or I promise he'd have complained a lot more about you than even about Howe."

Cormac pointed at Anders. "He did take Warden Howe to ... I don't know if I'd call it 'bed'. And I got to watch." He jabbed a finger at Varric. "And don't you dare put that in a book, Varric."

"I'm not sure I'd want to," Varric muttered, even as he scribbled something down.

"Sorry," Adaar said without actually sounding sorry, "I still can't quite hear--ow." Cassandra punched his arm, hand still clenched in a fist in warning. Adaar held up his hands in defeat. "Look, it wasn't like I went there with... intentions, but Lady Cousland had questions that were best answered with a demonstration."

Cassandra's scowl only deepened.

"And if her feedback is anything to go by," Adaar said, returning Cassandra's stare unflinchingly, "I think my kind of 'diplomacy' may have worked in our favour."

"Worked in your favour, you mean," Cassandra muttered.

"Both," Adaar corrected. He took a moment to smooth down the shirt he'd already adjusted.

"He's not wrong," Varric said, looking up from his notes. "When you look at what Cousland was offering, versus what he actually gave us, I can't help but think Elissa had something to do with that. You said something or ... did things I don't need to know about, and we got more support from the third most important family in Ferelden. That's going to put some pressure on other people, and not just in Ferelden. Everyone's going to take notice."

"Either they are going to try to outdo each other to support us, or Orlais is going to engage in its finest anti-Ferelden sentiment and turn back to the Chantry." Cassandra grumbled, gesturing down the road. "But, we will see how long this lasts. Though, I do not think this is the kind of image the Inquisition should be cultivating."
The Storm Coast

Chapter Summary

And now, the rest of the Chargers!

The rain had come back by the time they caught up with the scouts, but Harding barely seemed to mind, water dripping down her cheeks and nose and weighing down her intricate bun.

"Your Worship!" Harding greeted, and Adaar glanced back over his shoulder, looking behind him, before he realized she was addressing him. "For what it's worth, welcome to the Storm Coast." She shrugged, a wry smile on her lips.

"Just 'Adaar', please," Adaar replied with a nervous laugh. "Giving me titles will just go to my head, and it's big enough, I think."

"I would say it's... proportional," Harding teased.

Anders bit his tongue against a comment about how 'proportional' other things probably were too. Maker knew such comments were usually aimed at him.

"I would have sent word sooner," Harding went on, all business again, "but our efforts have been... delayed."

"Delayed?" Cassandra repeated, arching one eyebrow.

"There's a group of bandits in the area," Harding replied, pausing to wipe the rain water from her face. "They know the terrain, and our small party has had trouble going up against them. Some of our soldiers went to speak with their leader. Haven't heard back, though." She kept her tone light, but Adaar could see her concern in the nervous way her hands fidgeted.

"We'll do what we can to find them," Cassandra said, leaving the others to nod in agreement.

"Thank you," Harding said, shoulders sagging with relief.

"I wonder if these are the Vints that guy, Krem, was talking about." Anders craned his neck to look down the path toward the sea. "Tevinter bandits, and we get to watch someone else handle them for us." He glanced at Varric. "Did you bring biccies? I should've brought biccies."

"Why don't you ask Messere Buttercream, over there?" Varric cocked his chin at Cormac.

"Messere Buttercream wasn't consorting with Fergus's patissier, just before we left Highever." Anders's chin tipped up just enough that he could still see Varric if he squinted down his cheek.

"That wasn't about biscuits," Varric said, setting off down the path, and letting the sentence hang in the air, for a few steps. "That was about some cakes for Josephine."

"What's this? Our dwarf buying cakes for a woman?" Cormac clapped a hand to his chest, grin already widening. "Who are you and what've you done with Varric?!"
"She's entertaining nobles, you lech," Varric huffed, the sparkle in his eye betraying his amusement. "And we don't have a pastry chef in Haven. I don't know if you've noticed, but it's basically a badly stocked and manned military camp, and we are not prepared for the kinds of luxuries those stuffed shirts expect. I said I'd see if I could make a deal, while I was in Highever, to have some things sent back."

"And you didn't think to request some biscuits for us while you had the chance?" Anders asked, putting a hand to his chest before deciding he needed it out for balance as the path turned steep. "For shame, Varric!"

"Sorry. If anyone's getting fancy biccies, it's me, and I'm not going to share."

The path opened up onto a beach, the rain tingeing everything with grey, fog obscuring structures in the distance. Through the storm, they could still see and hear the sounds of battle, however. It was hard to make out who was who at this distance, but the tall, horned silhouette of a qunari wielding a war hammer was difficult to miss.

"I think that's our guy," Varric called back to the others, shaking the rain from Bianca as Cassandra and Adaar went bowling past.

"Have I mentioned recently how much I dislike fog?" Anders groaned, squinting into it. "The one time I have a use for Val, and don't you dare tell him I said it."

"I'll write a letter all about it, as soon as we get back to Haven. 'Dear Valery, Jan was pining for you on the coasts of Ferelden--'" Cormac squawked as Anders pinched his side, but he stopped talking and threw shields around Cassandra and Adaar.

Anders finally shrugged. "Fuck it," he decided, charging in behind them and opening with a paralysis glyph that impartially stunned everything it hit.

"More Vints!" came a shout, and a finger pointed right at him. Well, that guy was on their side, or at least he had been until that last shot.

"Schijten op der hond," Anders swore loudly, "I do not look Tevinter!"

"It's the Inquisition!" shouted a familiar voice, and Anders turned to see Krem grinning at them before diving back into the fray, sword in hand.

The mercenaries -- the "Chargers" Krem had called them -- knew what they were doing. They had an odd mix of fighting styles they all understood and knew how to work around. Mostly, that meant keeping out of range of the qunari's -- Bull's -- hammer.

Adaar whistled in appreciation when Bull took out three Tevinter in one swing. There was power in that swing but a precision too, and Adaar took note of his technique even as he set to work on his own group of Tevinter, his sword cutting them down before they could scramble out of his way.

"There's another one," Cassandra muttered, mostly to herself, as she kept her distance from both qunari.

Varric's bolts glanced off the unusual armour, with the first couple of shots, until he spotted a few far easier and nearly unarmoured targets with huge shields that were busy deflecting blows from the melee fighters. Who sent someone into combat dressed like that, he wondered, before he realised that with Tevinter, one could never discount the presence of slaves. And in that case... again, who sent someone into combat dressed like that? It would be incredibly expensive if they had to be replaced.
Cormac kept the shields coming, for anyone he could be sure was on his side and needed one -- there were too many between the people he'd come with and the mercenaries to shield everyone, and he hoped he didn't make another mistake, like he had when he'd failed to shield Fen'Din.

The Iron Bull waded through the Vints, cracking heads with every swing, and cutting down the numbers far more quickly and dramatically than any of the others. Krem had clearly been serious about him taking the lead and standing to the front of the charge, Anders thought, as he watched, offering healing on one side and lightning strikes on the other.

Eventually, those left standing weren't attacking the Inquisition forces, though they continued eyeing them suspiciously, and Adaar had to hope that meant they were all with the Chargers. From the way they clustered around Iron Bull, it seemed a fair assumption.

"Chargers!" the qunari called out, an eye -- his only eye -- on Adaar as he approached, greatsword resting on his shoulder. "Stand down! Krem, how'd we do?" And then his attention was on his men as he looked them over.

"Five or six wounded, Chief," Krem reported. "None dead."

Bull greeted the news with a grin. "That's what I like to hear. Let the throatcutters finish up, then break out the casks." Once the Chargers were situated, Bull turned back to Adaar and to the group gathering behind him.

"You must be Iron Bull?" Adaar asked, and it was almost refreshing to not need to look down to have a conversation. Easier on his neck.

"The Iron Bull," was the correction, though the one-eyed qunari's grin only widened as laughter bubbled up from his chest. "And you must be the Herald of Andraste. Oh, the Chantry must love you!"

Adaar didn't need to look to picture Cassandra's scowl. "I think they're warming up to me."

"I assume you remember Cremissius Aclassi, my lieutenant." Bull pointed as Krem returned.

"Good to see you again." Krem nodded at Anders.

"Good to see you standing," Anders replied, looking out across the field. "Show me the wounded. I'm a healer." His hands glowed dimly and he offered them for inspection.

"Throatcutters are done, Chief," Krem told Iron Bull, holding up a finger to Anders.

"Already? Have 'em check again. I don't want any of those Tevinter bastards getting away. No offence, Krem." Bull's eye squinted ever so slightly in expectation of something.

"None taken. Least a bastard knows who his mother was. Puts him one up on you Qunari, right?" Krem shot back, casually, with a shrug, turning his upraised finger into a gesture for Anders to follow him. "I'm going to get the healer started, and I'll make sure those bastards are really dead."

Bull returned his attention to Adaar. "So... You've seen us fight. We're expensive, but we're worth it. And I'm sure the Inquisition can afford us."

Adaar darted a look at Cassandra. "How much is this going to cost us exactly?"

Bull took a seat on a nearby boulder, hardly seeming to mind the rain or the fact that that boulder was probably soaked. "It won't cost you anything personally," he said easily, as though they were having
this conversation in a sitting room somewhere, as though Adaar didn't have his sword still in his hand, "unless you wanna buy drinks later. Your ambassador -- what's her name -- Josephine? We'd go through her and get the payments set up. The gold will take care of itself. Don't worry about that. All that matters is we're worth it."

And this was more than a little weird, standing on this side of the negotiations. It was all the sort of thing he'd say to a potential client, if a little more bluntly.

"That's a great way to avoid saying an actual number," Adaar said with a crooked smile. "That expensive, huh?" Adaar bit his tongue against saying they could just hire his mercenary company.

"The Chargers seem like an excellent company," Cassandra said, hesitantly, debating, among other things, how many qunari they could handle before that became ammunition against the Inquisition, in itself.

"They are," Bull assured her. "But, you're not just getting the boys You're getting me. You need a frontline bodyguard, I'm your man. Whatever it is -- demons? dragons? The bigger the better." He stood up and took a few steps toward the rest of his company, before turning back to Adaar. "And there's one other thing. Might be useful. Might piss you off. Ever hear of the Ben Hassrath?"

Adaar's expression didn't change but something tightened in his shoulders. His mother had taught him that word, long ago. "I have heard of them, yes," he said. "They are the enforcers of the qunari, and the spies."

"That's them. Or, well, us." Bull rolled his eye self-consciously and settled it on Adaar's face, watching for a reaction. "The Ben-Hassrath are concerned about the Breach. Magic out of control like that could cause trouble everywhere. I've been ordered to join the Inquisition, get close to the people in charge, and send reports about what's happening. But, I also get reports from Ben-Hassrath agents all over Orlais. You sign me on, I'll share them with your people."

"You're a qunari spy, and you just told us?" Cassandra gaped at Iron Bull.

"They're like that," Cormac said, after a moment. "You know, Viscount Hawke used to have something of an understanding with the Arishok. There's more at stake here than what's between our people -- if this isn't stopped, there's not going to be any more people to carry on that disagreement, because there's only going to be demons left."

Iron Bull pointed at Cormac. "He knows what's going on. Whatever happened at that Conclave thing, it's bad. Someone needs to get that Breach closed. So, whatever I am, I'm on your side."

Adaar tilted his head, unsure what to make of this. "You still could have hidden what you are."

Bull huffed. "From something called the Inquisition? I've been tipped sooner or later. Better you hear it right up front from me."

Still, Adaar wondered if they would have been better off with his mercenary company. He wasn't a big fan of being spied on, even if said spy was being so casually open about it.

"What would you be reporting back?" Cassandra asked, as guarded as Adaar felt.

"Enough to keep my superiors happy," Bull said with a shrug of his massive shoulders. "Nothing that'll compromise your operations. The qunari want to know if they need to launch an invasion to stop the whole damn world from falling apart. You let me send word of what you're doing, and it will put some minds at ease. That's good for everyone."
"Great," Adaar muttered, rubbing his forehead at the space between his horns. There was a reason his parents left the Qun, and the last thing he wanted was to deal with it first hand.

"What is in the Ben-Hassrath reports you're offering to share?" Cassandra asked, with a calculating look.

"Enemy movements, suspicious activity, intriguing gossip. It's a bit of everything." Bull tipped his head, dismissively. "Alone, they're not much, but if your spymaster's worth a damn, she'll put 'em to good use."

"She?" Cassandra's eyebrow arched upward. How much did the qunari already know? And if they already knew about Leliana, would bringing them closer be safer or more dangerous, in the long run?

"I did a little research. Plus, I've always had a weakness for redheads." Bull said it like he said everything else, as if it were of no real consequence.

"What do you think?" Cassandra asked Adaar.

But, Varric answered. "I think if he's already that far up our asses, we're not gonna lose anything taking them on. But, we do gain a much larger spy network, and one that's looking at things we may not be."

Cormac tipped his head from side to side, considering something. "I've had dealings with qunari and the Qun, before. Spent some time in Kirkwall, right before all that went ass to the moons. I need to know you're not going to get in under us to encourage--" and here he drew quotes with his fingers "-conversion to the Qun, while we're trying to save the world. If you want to pick that fight, after we're done here, far be it from me to stop you. I'm not the Maker's biggest fan, myself, but we can't have you pulling at us on another front, if we're going to do this."

"People convert themselves." Bull shrugged. "I don't really have to encourage anything, except by answering stupid questions. Is that Avvar shit on your face then? I don't think I've ever seen something like that."

"Elf shit," Cormac corrected, with a self-conscious glance toward the sea. "And you haven't. It's a very long story."

"Uh huh," Bull said with a considering look. "I don't mind long stories myself, but usually only when there's drink involved."

"Oh, you're gonna need a lot of drink for that story," Varric muttered, lips twitching like he was trying not to laugh.

"I'm not sure if I should be intrigued or concerned," Adaar said, eyeing the two. To Bull, he shrugged, not quite managing to make it look as casual as he'd like. "Might as well keep you around. If nothing else a certain redhead can keep an eye on you."

Bull answered with a lecherous smirk. "As long as she doesn't mind me keeping an eye on her too."

"You only have the one," Cassandra pointed out acerbically.

"Yeah, and that seems like a pretty good use for it, I'd say." Bull's grin only broadened. He turned back to his men. "Krem! Tell the men to finish drinking on the road. The Chargers just got hired!"

"What about the casks, Chief?" Krem groaned. "We just opened them up! With axes!"
"Find some way to seal them," Bull called back. "You're Tevinter, right? Try blood magic."

"Do not." Anders raised his voice without yelling, from where he crouched over a wounded mercenary. "I am not cleaning up after blood magic!"

"He's got standards." Cormac cocked his head as if that were supposed to be funny, but only Varric snorted.

After a bit of muttering with Anders, Blackwall approached and offered Bull his hand. "Warden Blackwall," he introduced himself. "I've got a question for you, if you've been here a few days."

"Warden, huh? Good job on that last Blight. Knocked that down faster than I'd expect. Don't those things usually take a hundred years?" Bull's grip was entirely engulfing, his fingers reaching a third of the way up Blackwall's forearm.

"We were fortunate enough to be ready for the Archdemon, by the time he got to Denerim, but the whole thing could have been even faster, if we'd had a better presence at Ostagar." Blackwall shook his head and looked up... and up. "But, we've had some trouble tracking down too many Wardens, lately. It seems like the ones in Orlais have disappeared, and they're getting scarce in Ferelden, too. I heard a rumour we might find some of them here. Have you seen anyone?"

Bull's considering hum wasn't too promising. "Mostly just been seeing 'Vints around here," Bull answered with a shrug, "some of them almost as bad as Krem."

"Only almost, Chief?" Krem called back from where he was trying to finagle something with the wine casks.

"We did see a few folks setting up a camp not far from here a few days," Bull added, ignoring Krem. "Can't be sure it's them, though. And they're long gone by now."

"It's a start, at least," Blackwall said, his optimism clearly painted-on.

"It's not a bad idea, getting the Wardens involved," Bull admitted. "I can lead you up there if you like. Maybe we'll find something. Just let me get my boys on their way. Krem!"

"A bit busy with the wine, Chief!"

"Ha! Not too busy to eavesdrop, though." Bull grinned from horn to horn.

As Bull spoke to Krem, giving him instructions to head back to Haven while he stayed behind, Cassandra turned to Adaar. "There is also the matter of our missing scouts," she pointed out. "We have gotten rid of these bandits, yet I see no sign of them. That is worrying."

"Yeah, that doesn't exactly fill me with the warm and fuzzies," Adaar muttered.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Unexpected darkspawn. Just the thing to brighten any rainy afternoon.

As they made their way down the coast, the fog gave way to rain, which swirled back into fog a few steps later. It was like touching the fog made it weep, as they passed. Notable was the number of boats dragged up on the beach -- most of them Tevinter, obviously, but a few hung with Templar shields or other decorations. Obviously, there were local fishermen, and many of the boats would be theirs, but the coast had been hit hard by invasion.

Suddenly, Anders's shoulders straightened, and his head turned to look out into nothing, as if he were staring through the side of a cliff. "We have a problem, and it's right over there, somewhere, about ... I don't know. A storey or two down, at a guess. You hearing what I'm hearing, Gordo?"

"That's Warden Blackwall, thank you," Blackwall muttered under his breath, with a firm look of concentration. "Yes, of course. Darkspawn. I was just about to point it out, when we got a little closer, and I could be more sure of the distance."

"Shit," Anders grumbled, "I was hoping you'd have a better sense of the depth. I have trouble with down."

Blackwall cleared his throat, looking distinctly uncomfortable but hiding the discomfort behind a firm grip on his shield. "Well, it's been a while. Been on the surface too long, I guess."

Anders frowned. "Maybe that's what it is." Maybe he just hadn't spent enough time below ground? Just the idea made him shudder. But, no, Nathaniel hadn't had the same problem.

"How many?" Adaar asked, his heavy sword back in his hands.

Anders exchanged a look with Blackwall, who hesitated. "More than there should be, that's for sure," Blackwall answered. "If they're coming through a tunnel around here, we'd do best to find it and seal it off before more come." Though he spoke with authority, he kept glancing at Anders, as though making sure he agreed. Odd, considering Blackwall had more recent experience in this sort of thing.

"Agreed," Anders said. "Unlike with the demons, the darkspawn aren't just popping out of the sky." He paused to reflect on that. "I hope."

A path led upward, through hexagonal pillars of stone, dotted with dwarven statues gazing out over the sea, and Anders led them, following not just the path, but his instincts about the darkspawn.

"Oh, no wonder that seemed stupid. We have to go up, and then down." Anders rolled his eyes and pulled Varric up a step too tall, glancing at the back of yet another stone Paragon. "That's a lot of dwarf for outside. I mean, surfacers don't usually go in for Paragons."

"Believe it or not, there's stories of ancient shipbuilding thaigs. Besides, there's been trade with the surface forever. Gotta let people know where to find you, if you expect them to do business with you." Varric looked up at the even opening to the cave a bit further up. "That must've been
something important, to be up this high. That or there's a wicked high tide around here."

"Find out in a moment," Anders muttered under his breath, waving for Blackwall to join him at the front. "Okay, we're going in, but this is going to be extremely dangerous. Darkspawn aren't that smart, but they are that toxic. Don't get the blood on you, if you can help it. Especially not if we can't find the Wardens out here, because there's a way to save you, but the closest person I'm sure knows it is Amell, and I don't know where she is, right now."

"That's reassuring," Adaar mumbled. The entrance was plenty tall enough, but he ducked anyway automatically.

"Just do what damage you can at range," Blackwall suggested, exchanging a nod with Varric. "Let us Wardens worry about getting up close and personal."

Adaar supposed he had enough reach to stab things over Blackwall's shoulder.

The cave was dark, wet, and cold. Their only light source was daylight glinting off wet stone and Adaar's green-glowing mark, until blue light splintered across Anders's skin like magic fault-lines. He had gone tensely still again, head cocked to listen. "This way," he eventually decided. "Be on your guard."

"Is that campfire up ahead?" Cassandra asked, squinting at the glow of fire tucked into a corner of the cave. "The Wardens? Or do darkspawn make camps too?"

Blackwall didn't have an answer. "I don't see anyone next to it. Keep your guard up."

The swarm of deepstalkers caught them by surprise, but those were easily dispatched in a hail of crossbow and lightning bolts.

"That's not natural," Varric said, eyeing the hole in the wall on the other side of the campfire.

"When did you become an expert on caves?" Cormac teased, elbowing Varric in the shoulder. "I thought you were a Marcher, through and through, and none of that dwarfy shit for you!"

"I've been spending some time with Natia. Got an exposé on Orzammar coming up, you know. She's got stories you wouldn't believe -- well, he might." Varric tipped his chin at Anders, still looking at the hole. "But, look, it's not worn down at all, and there's these marks, here. Something dug through this. She showed me the difference, up in the mines."

"And is that the only thing she showed you?" Anders chuckled and raised an eyebrow at Varric.

"Hey, hey, I'm not the kind of dwarf to go off having an exotic rendezvous in a cave. No, no. Strictly above-ground, for me, thanks." Varric shook his head.

"I wish we'd brought Kinnon," Cormac muttered. "I can't do anything with this. I mean, fill it with ice, maybe, but that's not going to last long, and it's really not going to hold up against more digging. Keep things from coming up behind us, though."

Anders tugged at his beard, looking around for something, anything, they could use to plug in the hole, but it was much too big without a mage who could shape earth. They really should have brought Kinnon.

"It'll have to do for now," Anders said with a shrug. "We can come back with a more permanent solution now that we know where it is."
"I don't suppose waving your hand at it would help?" Blackwall drawled at Adaar.

Adaar half-heartedly waved his glowing hand in the air. "Nope."

"Too bad. The Wardens would love something like that."

As Blackwall spoke, Anders concentrated, his hands glowing an ice blue. The temperature dropped, their breath fogging the air, as ice spidered out from one edge of the hole across to the other. He continued to cast until the ice was too thick to see through.

Varric rubbed his arms and tugged at the collar of his jacket, trying to fold it in. "You know, if somebody had told me it was going to be this kind of cold, out here, I'd have worn something a little heavier."

"Why, Varric! Are you telling me that wearing your beard on your chest doesn't help with the chill?" Anders teased, shaking out his hands and tucking them under his arms.

"It's a fashion statement. I'm a famous author. Gotta flash some chest for the fans, but not if you're going to freeze my tits off," Varric huffed, his breath making a small cloud in the chilled room.

Blackwall looked around nervously, trying to seem like he was sure of what was yet to come. "That should hold them back for a little while. Let's make sure they haven't gotten into anything else."

Anders closed his eyes, and the blue glow of Justice cast a moderate light through the room. After a moment, he pointed. "Assuming this isn't a maze of collapsed passages and stupid turns -- which it probably is, because where in the Deep Roads is that not the case -- we're going that way. I'm putting you in front of me, Gordo, because you need to be able to reach, and I can cast just as well over your shoulder. Also, that platemail should be between both of us and anything that might come up a tunnel."

"Of course." Blackwall's shoulders squared. "But, stop calling me Gordo."

"Never." Anders fluttered his eyelashes. "Come on, it's Antivan for 'big'. Every man wants to be a big man."

"The further down we go, the worse he's going to get, just so you know," Cormac warned, as they entered the hall Anders had indicated. "He hates the Deep Roads. Not that I'm real fond of them, either, but with him, it's personal."

"And here I thought I was the only one!" Varric joked. "What about you, Gordo?"

Blackwall spared him a pained look. "Don't you start now too."

"Oh, I'm sure you've been called worse things," Varric said amiably, lowering his voice when Anders shushed him. Not that it mattered, since the intent was to draw out the darkspawn anyway. "Ancestors know I have!"

"You say it like it's a badge of honour," Cassandra sighed. The rest of her commentary petered out when Anders went still again, head cocked and a spell jumping to his fingertips.

"Darkspawn just ahead," he said.

Blackwall drew his sword, as they entered the next room, striking at the nearest hurlock with his shield and then his sword, taking it out as the others were still figuring out there was trouble. Anders laid ice across the room, next, pinning as many as he could, as Varric and Cormac picked them off
from a distance. A few well placed strikes against unmoving targets, and the room seemed empty, but for some ancient debris and fallen stone.

"I think that's the last of them," Blackwall said, nodding as he sheathed his sword, but as soon as his hand cleared it, Anders drew it again, eyes burning blue, as he turned around and plunged it through the throat of an axe-wielding hurlock lunging out of a hidden passage.

"CAN YOU NOT HEAR THEM?" Justice roared, Blackwall's sword in one hand and Anders's staff in the other.

"I thought that one was a little further out!" Blackwall staggered back from Justice in horror, eyes wide and uncertain exactly what he was looking at, but noting that no one else in the room seemed the least distressed by this change, aside from Varric's sudden squinting at the brighter glow.

Anders's eyes dimmed and he flipped the sword in his hand, slamming it flat against Blackwall's chest. "You're an idiot. And you're going to get us killed. And this is why I am the ranking Warden, here, in case you had questions about that."

Actually, Anders was starting to wonder if Blackwall might not be a fresh recruit claiming a higher title. It took a while for that sense to really settle in and take on meaning. Still, whatever Blackwall's problem was, it was Anders's problem, now, because they were in a darkspawn infested cavern much too close to surface settlements.

"Is that the last of them?" Adaar asked, eyeing the pair of Wardens. Blackwall looked shaken, and Jan looked pissed, flickers of blue still criss-crossing his skin.

Anders pulled his glare away from Blackwall and tilted his head as though listening. Adaar wondered what darkspawn sounded like to him.

"In this cave, yes, I believe so," Anders said after a while, gaining confidence as he spoke. "But... there are others still too close to the surface. I doubt this is their only way out of the Deep Roads around here."

"Wonderful," Cassandra muttered, still wiping darkspawn guts from her sword, careful not to let it touch her skin. "Like there aren't enough problems around here."

"The more problems we have, the greater opportunity to make a hero," Varric pointed out, adjusting Bianca's hardware, before they moved on.

"Or, you know, the greater opportunity for us all to die," Anders shot back, with a bright smile and a tight shrug. "Are we done here? Can we be done here? It's cold, it's wet, and I'm underground, and at least one of those things can be solved by going back the way we came."

Cormac stood from where he'd been prodding a skeleton with his glaive, and tossed something to Anders. "Hey, pretty thing! Catch!"

Anders snatched it out of the air and it unfolded from his fingers. "What--?" After a few attempts, he managed to get the wad of chainmail turned at a recognisable angle. "Is this a chainmail negligee?"

"More of a teddy, at a glance," Varric decided, one eyebrow hiking dramatically upward, as his ears set back.

"I'm pretty sure this isn't my size." Anders looked horrified at the thing in his hands.

"I'm pretty sure that's a terrible idea," Cassandra said, after a moment. "Chainmail pinches in some
very unpleasant ways."

"Which means I'm not getting one that fits, when we get home!" Anders looked at it one more time, starkly horrified and confused, before he poured it into one of his pouches. "Another reason to go out where the light is. That can't possibly be what I think it is."
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Warden journals, blood magic, and fire.

The rain came and went in starts, and the party was soaked by the time they trudged up to the remnants of another abandoned camp. Anders had heard no sign of darkspawn for a while, except for a distant droning in his ear he could forget was there if he stopped paying attention, and they'd had even fewer signs of the Wardens' presence.

Blackwall poked around the remains of a tent, mud sucking at his boots, and came up with a few wet sheets of paper. Some were smudged beyond repair, but under them he found a few pages that were legible.

"More pages of that journal," he called back over his shoulder. "Whoever has been keeping it should invest in a better notebook."

"Here, let me see?" Varric held out a hand, expectantly, until Blackwall put the pages in it, and he skimmed them. "They're looking for someone. Like, really looking. It sounds like this is where everyone's run off to. But, I can't tell who it is -- really anything about them."

"Do you think they are looking for the person who struck the Conclave? I know Wardens were lost, there. They came as a neutral party to keep the peace..." Cassandra rolled her eyes. "And we see how well that has worked."

"I'd believe it," Blackwall said, and Anders nodded. "It's the nature of Wardens to do what's best for the rest of Thedas, and with no Blight, this is the most serious situation we all face."

"He's right," Anders agreed. "This is exactly the sort of half-cocked chase Solona would have run off on. I talked her into a fair share of them. I should really send a letter and see if anyone's been able to reach her, yet. She'd tell me what was going on, if she knew I was here." He groaned. "She probably did tell me, and the letters are still waiting for me in Kassel."

"That... would be exactly it, wouldn't it?" Cormac rubbed his face. "I know it's not likely, but, you know, dreams."

"Do you really think the Wardens are treating this as though it were a Blight?" Cassandra asked, head tilted in curiosity.

Anders shrugged. "Hard to say, but all of them disappearing at the same time as all of this? Seems likely."
Adaar eyed Blackwall, remembering how he'd 'conscripted' those farmers. "And if we do find the Wardens, would the rest of us have to treat this like a Blight?"

"What do you mean?" Anders asked.

Adaar shrugged. "Conscriptions. Treaties. I don't know all that much about it, to be honest, but I've heard the stories about the Hero of Ferelden."

"Well, this is a time of crisis for all Thedas," Blackwall said, with a shrug. "As I've said, we can compel assistance from the sort of nobles who'd rather think about their treasuries than their people. With the Fifth Blight fresh in everyone's mind, still, it wouldn't take much."

"I'm not much for highway robbery, but until someone finds Solona, we're the ranking Wardens in Ferelden, and we've thrown in with the Inquisition." Anders closed his eyes and rubbed them with one hand. "We'd be correcting an injustice, by ensuring we have well-funded troops protecting the people from demons, until we can get one of these guys in to close the rifts -- probably for a bit after, too, just to clean up whatever got out and is still lurking. And we have evidence that the Wardens are already involved in tracking down whoever was responsible, so I don't think we're going to be stepping on Solona's toes, here." He nodded slowly and opened his eyes. "We can do this, for now. We can make the nobility protect their own people, if we have to -- and we will have to."

"Josephine would agree," Varric added, digging through papers and chests and blotting things dry, before he carefully put them away for later study. "She's trying to flatter these assholes into helping us, but I think she'd be grateful for a little more leverage."

"It's not a Blight, but it totally is. The difference, at least as far as I can tell, is that demons don't destroy farmland. They're still killing people and getting into them, changing them, turning them against their friends. That's what demons do. That's also what the taint will do. I'm not sure I see much of a difference, practically." Cormac shrugged, lips tight as he refrained from mentioning how he knew what the Blight did to things. Too many clues, and Cassandra would notice he was the missing Hawke.

Adaar scratched between his horns as he chewed this all over. "That is... giving the Inquisition quite a bit of power."

"Is that a bad thing?" Bull asked, looking more amused than speculative, but Adaar suspected he wore that look a lot.

"Down the line it could be," Adaar shot back, only to throw up his hands. "But right now? That's the sort of thing we need in order to make sure there is a later. So, sure, let's do that."

Varric nudged Anders with his elbow. "Still not sure how I feel about you being the ranking Warden," he teased. "What has Ferelden gotten itself into?"

"I have no idea," Anders cheerfully replied.

"Regardless," Blackwall cut in, "perhaps we could get out of this rain for a bit?" With a tip of his head, he indicated an abandoned cottage through the trees, just far enough away for Adaar not to notice it.

As they approached the cabin, so did someone else.

Varric saw the man first and shot a look at Anders, just to make sure. "Ah, that is ... some very familiar fashion sense. I used to know a guy, in Kirkwall, dressed just like that."
"What?" Anders glanced in the direction Varric was pointing and promptly tripped on Cormac. "That's a nice coat," he said, hoping he sounded as neutral as he meant to.

And then the man saw them.

"No! I did not come all the way out here to be harassed and put to the purge!" he shouted, raining down fire and lightning on them. "I came here to be left in peace!"

"We're not here to hurt you!" Anders insisted, raising his free hand plaintively, even as the flames sprung up around his feet. "Fire... it was always fire, in the end.

Cormac raised shields around them, throwing Anders over his shoulder and staggering out of the way, as Anders stopped moving and stared, dead-eyed into the flames. "Hey, we're here to help!" he hollered, but the lightning continued to rain down.

"Oh, what the shit?" Adaar muttered, skirting the edge of the magic field and trying to find a way through. Blackwall and Cassandra were similarly testing the waters, but Bull chose a more direct approach.

With a great roar, Iron Bull charged through the flames and lightning, trusting Cormac's shield to absorb enough damage to keep him going. As he swung his warhammer, he had a moment to appreciate the look of abject fear in the mage's eyes before the hammer connected with his skull.

The mess of fire and lightning slowly fizzled out, making the smoke rising from Bull's pants all the more noticeable. "Ow," he mumbled, wincing when moving stretched a patch of burned skin.

"I suppose that was one way to do it," Cassandra sighed, shrugging.

Anders still looked stunned, as Cormac set him down. His eyes didn't focus on anything, until they lit on Cormac's face. "It's-- it's--"

"Not you," Cormac promised, taking both of Anders's hands in his own. "It's not you, and it's over."

Colour slowly filtered back into Anders's face, and his eyes took in the destruction, and then the corpse and the blood covering Bull. "You didn't have to kill him!"

"He'd've killed us, Blondie. You were out, and Mack's hands were full." Varric kept his voice low and gentle. "The rest of us can't do things like that."

"He was afraid of us!" Anders barked, red rising in his cheeks and blue skittering across his skin. "Have you looked at yourself? He saw you and thought Templar! He didn't have to die!"

"No, he didn't," Cormac said, softly, "but he chose to. We told him we'd come to help, but he just kept coming. We could have done better, sure, but ..."

"One day somebody's going to say that about you," Anders snapped, snatching his hands back. "If we're going in there, I go in first. Alone. If anyone else is still alive, I want to keep them that way."

Adaar and Cassandra exchanged a look. There was something going on here that neither of them quite understood, but they were wise enough not to get in Anders's way when he was glowing like
"We do too," Adaar assured him in a placating tone. "We'll stay out here until you call us in." He hoped Cormac still had a shield on him.

Anders barely spared him a glance as he pushed through the door, staff tight in his hand. Except for some furniture thrown against the walls, the room was empty, dreary in the torchlight.

"Hello?" he called out, spotting a door to the back of the room. "If anyone's here, we mean you no harm." Anders kept his voice steady even if the rest of him wasn't. When there was no response, Anders tugged on the door handle, finding it locked.

Varric appeared at his elbow, holding a key. "I wanted to see if I could find out anything about him, but all he's got are a bunch of herbs I wouldn't know the names of, some dark stuff in a glowy vial, and this. It's probably for the door."

Anders took the key, with a sigh. "Didn't I tell you to wait outside?"

"I've never been any good at following the directions, Blondie. Thought you knew that." Varric winked and backed toward the front door. "Besides, your boyfriend's still got a shield on me."

"He's not my--" Anders started, irritatedly, and then gave up, shaking his head. "Thanks."

He unlocked the door and stepped in, taking in the scene before him. A table scattered with the detritus common to any mage at work, and stairs leading down to a cellar. Picking up a few loose pages, Anders glanced through them, recognising some of the experiments being done, by the ingredients -- things he'd seen mentioned in ancient Tevinter texts, that no one had been able to get working for centuries. Something about the names of herbs having shifted with time. The last page, he definitely recognised. It was a transcription of a page of his own manifesto, and he sat hard on the edge of the table, as that realisation echoed through him. An Isolationist with his manifesto, who hadn't recognised him. The man had just wanted peace.

Whatever the mage had been working on, Anders decided, perhaps he could finish it. He owed at least that much. It might help someone. The rest of the laboratory had to be in the cellar.

The stairs creaked under his feet, the wood warped, and a slice of sunlight filtered into the cellar through a gap between wood and earth. Anders spotted the chest between the supports, first, but as he made his way towards it, something crunched underfoot. He looked down, shifting so that he wasn't blocking the light, and there, under his boot, was the unmistakeable shape and colour of bone.

"Please don't be human," he breathed, turning to find more bones littered across the ground, whole skeletons half-buried in the dirt. Past them all was what looked like a shrine made of skulls.

Anders swallowed down his revulsion, stepping back and away from the remains.

"Jan?" Cormac's voice echoed from the front room. "You all right?"

"Yeah!" Anders's voice cracked, exactly the way he'd hoped it wouldn't. He wished Fen'Din had been with him. His instinct was that this was blood magic, but maybe it was just necromancy. Collected bodies, rather than people drained for their power. But, it felt wrong, and Justice stirred within him, at some malevolence in the air. "I'm coming back up. There's no one here. Just-- just wait for me."

"Something's wrong," Cassandra muttered, trying to elbow past Cormac, but his barrier filled the doorway around him.
"The man said wait. I'm waiting." Cormac shrugged, eyes locked on the open door inside.

"Are you sure we don't need to go in?" Blackwall asked, one hand on his sword. "That doesn't sound like he's fine."

"He's grieving. Let him have a moment," Varric said, hands fiddling with Bianca's knobs and dials.

"Grieving?" Blackwall's face turned outraged, teeth and eyes flashing, before it settled, just as quickly. "Maybe you're right. Maybe it's best someone still does. It keeps us human." He shot a look at Varric. "I mean..."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." Varric held up a hand and shook his head, as the barrier dropped and Anders appeared in the doorway, grey-faced and holding a thick pile of papers.

"Burn it," Anders said to Cormac, clutching the papers to his chest. "Bring him inside, and I'll do it, myself."

"You sure, sweet thing? We can get you out of here, and I'll come back--"

"Burn it all." Anders's eyes were hollow, his lips pressed tight. "No, let me. Let me do this."

"Find something nasty?" Varric asked, wondering what it would take for Anders to reach for fire of his own volition. Usually, it was an accident or a campfire.

"I don't want to talk about it." Grimly, Anders tucked the papers he held into the side of his potions bag and nudged Cormac out of the way, as he made for the corpse.

Anders didn't -- wouldn't -- say anything else as they helped him move the body into the cottage. When he reached for his fire, it was like water bursting through a dam, an inferno where those who didn't know him had expected a small flame. They all stumbled back in the wake of its heat.

"A reminder not to piss him off," Varric said in an aside to Blackwall, anything to ease the tension in the air.

"It's a good reason," Blackwall admitted, patting his beard to make sure none of it had been singed.

For a long while, Anders stared at the fire without seeming to see it. "Let's go," he said abruptly, voice tight as he turned on his heel, picking a direction, any direction, that would take them away from this place.
Haven

Chapter Summary

A fine line divides blood magic from necromancy.

The ride back to Haven was strained, with Anders staying to the back and Cormac beside him. Their conversations were a terrible kind of quiet, though Varric kept up loud patter with the rest of the group, spurring Blackwall into sharing a few songs of the sort one didn't generally sing in mixed company. From time to time, a flash of blue drew some eyes back, but no one asked, and they all rode on.

"Where's Fen'Din?" Anders asked, at the gates of Haven, swinging down off his horse as though he could still feel his legs.

"Ah! Jan!" Peryn caught sight of him, and ambled over, looking slightly concerned but no less friendly than usual. "I was thinking--"

Anders took Peryn's shoulders in both hands. "Fen'Din. Where is he?" He paused, closed his eyes. "I will be happy to have this conversation, whatever it is, in a few hours, but not right now. Right now, I have a problem."

"Of course. You look unwell." Peryn finally noticed the haggard look of Anders's face. "Enchanter Fen'Din is with the bees, at the side of the Chantry. Do you want help on the ice? I should get Adan?"

"No, I..." Anders laughed. "I'm a healer. I can ... I'll be all right. It's been a very long week. We'll have a beer, later, yeah?"

"Yes. Of course. After supper." Peryn nodded and watched Anders lope up the stairs, sprays of ice blooming around his feet.

"Darkspawn," Cormac said, clapping Peryn on the back. "He'll be fine. It's never easy."

"I see," Peryn said, eyebrows lifting and the concern not leaving his face. "They are bad enough on their own. But, with demons? It is unfair."

Anders made eye-contact with no one as he sped for the Chantry, not letting anyone slow him down, slowing only when he spotted Fen'Din, who was fussing with a clever contraption made of barrels and hay. The low hum of bees buzzing alerted him to their presence, and he kept a safe distance. It was a relief to see his friend, at least, even as he touched a hand to the papers he'd tucked into his potions bag.

"Was it stormy on the coast?" Fen'Din asked, without looking up. The shift in the bees' patterns let him know someone tall was behind him, and he thought there would be only one person so tall who would be here.

"... Elfhole," Anders muttered, pulling out the pages. "Yes. It was raining the whole time we were there. It is the one time in my life I might actually have missed Valery. But, that's not why I'm standing here."
"You smell of horses," Fen'Din said, shooing the bees back into their hive, as he made off with a loaded honeycomb. "This isn't just because you wanted to be sure I hadn't broken anything in your absence, is it?"

"Well, not just for that reason," Anders teased with a thin laugh, "but you haven't, have you?"

"Of course not. And if I had, there's an apothecary just down the hill and you know Kinnon wouldn't have let me walk there, myself." Fen'Din gave Anders a very intentional narrow-eyed look, before carving off a bit of the honeycomb and handing it to Anders, fresh honey dripping down his hand.

"I suppose that's a relief," Anders said as though he wasn't entirely sure, pausing to lick honey off his fingers before reaching into his potions bag. The papers were a little wet at the corners where he hadn't quite managed to shield them from the rain, but they were otherwise unharmed. "I... needed to ask someone about these. You, specifically. Preferably." He held the papers in his hand, hesitating. "I just need to know if this looks like necromancy to you. Because the alternative is blood magic, and I could do without that."

For all that Anders tried to keep his tone light, he knew he wasn't being convincing. Finally, he handed the papers over and gave the honey more of his attention.

Fen'Din licked the honey off his own hands, laying the rest of the comb aside on a table set with plates for that very purpose. Taking the papers, he studied the one on top, before laying those along the table, as well, holding them down with the plates and bowls of honey in varying stages of extraction. "Bones and corpses..." he murmured, tapping a sketch with a sticky finger. "The shrine looks almost like Nevarran work, but there's something not right... Non-traditional, at least. Did you see it built? Did it look like this?"

Anders nodded. "Pillar of skulls and what looked like an entire ossuary shaken out around it. The bodies were... fresher, near the stairs."

"Nevarra gets it from Tevinter, but I don't know Tevinter as well as you do. In the south, the line between necromancy and spirit magic is thin. In Tevinter, the line between blood magic and anything is thin." Fen'Din's attention moved from one page to the next. "The writer isn't raising anything, and I think you know that. Maker's staff can be used in preservation, though... What is this person doing?"

Anders winced, picturing it again, the impact of hammer to skull. "Not without some complicated necromancy on your part." He licked some more honey off his fingers and considered what he'd just said. "That wasn't me requesting you to do that, by the way."

"I get the sense that 'complicated' necromancy may be somewhat less complicated while the sky is leaking demons, but I have yet to perform a resurrection. It's said to be impossible, you know, and at the very least it would involve both of us. Still, that does make this a good deal less simple." Fen'Din
got to the last page, and after a moment's blank-eyed staring, picked it up. "The bowl. The bowl, the runes, the Maker's staff... Oh, someone was trying to trick a demon! Ethical blood magic! I never thought I'd see it with my own eyes! And the corpses are either for the demon or from the demon. You know as well as I do it depends on what kind of demon, but... How old were the bones? Bones, not the corpses. They're older than these notes, aren't they?"

"I think they'd have to be, yes," Anders said, brows knit as he looked at the sketches over Fen'Din's shoulders. "Very old, to be in the condition they were in. What was he planning to do with all this?"

"Preserved blood. Like in a phylactery -- if it dies, it doesn't know where it came from. I think this person, whoever they were, was trying to offer preserved blood as a component of blood magic, on the theory that it would never be exhausted. They're wrong, of course. It can't be done. Not on that order of magnitude, anyway. Phylacteries are magic with blood, not magic made of blood." Fen'Din picked up a few pages in one sticky hand and pointed where he'd been looking. "You see it? They're trying to placate the demon with a self-renewing source of fresh blood that will never die and doesn't need to be fed. Tevinter magic, without the slaves. It's impossible, but it's a good theory. It probably ended in disaster. I can't imagine the demon involved was pleased with this outcome. Pride, no doubt, or Hunger. Did you kill it, then?"

"Kill it?" Anders repeated distractedly. There hadn't been a demon... had there? He'd been a bit distracted after seeing "coat" and "fire", but the man had seemed human and they'd fought nothing else. "I don't think there was a demon. Not yet. He... Well, we didn't want to kill him, but he attacked us." Regret made his voice heavy.

"Defending his research, then. And for good reason -- even I might have pushed for this to stop. Incredibly unsafe, particularly now. Though I can see him believing it might protect people, if it worked." Fen'Din gathered the pages and ordered them, handing them back to Anders, before he picked up the plate with the punctured honeycomb. "You should eat something. Tell me about Highever. You know, we have a herd of druffalo, here, now. All bones, but the soldiers seem to like them. Good for morale, unless you're a Templar."
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Peryn asks a question that's been coming for a while.

By the fire, Anders could pretend that the tavern was warm. Used to the desert as he was, Anders had almost forgotten how damp and cold Ferelden could be, a problem shared by the Templar across from him, who kept his fingers tucked into his sleeves.

"All has gone well on the Coast?" Peryn asked across the table and a pair of full tankards. "You seemed..." He grappled for the right word, only to sigh and substitute something else. "...hurried, when I saw you." Surrounded by Fereldans, he'd forgotten for a moment that the man across from him spoke Ander too.

"Ah, that," Anders said with a thin smile. "That has... been resolved as much as it can be. But overall, I'd say we've been productive, yes, if not really any closer to finding Wardens other than Blackwall and that handsome fellow in the mirror."

"I still am not happy you did not heal my arm, when we met, Mage-Warden." Peryn shot Anders an annoyed look over his beer. "You are a Warden! What would I have done?"

"In my defence, I didn't know you weren't an asshole, at the time. I'd just come from Kirkwall, where we had to depose the Knight-Commander. I just didn't want to have to explain myself, again." Anders shrugged. "I can't say I've had the best experiences with most Templars. I like you, now. Most of the time I don't want to throw Cullen down the stairs, any more, but that was a while coming."

"Commander Cullen seems like a good and sensible man," Peryn said, eyes widening in surprise. "What kind of trouble did he make? What kind of Templars did you know?"

"You can ask Cullen about both of those things, but I'll say I was a lot more upset about the things he didn't do, than the things he did. Lucky for us both, he grew up to be reasonable and righteous. Fen'Din's got some horror stories about Cullen, though. I wasn't around for that." Anders shook his head, waving a hand dismissively.

"He tells me he served in Kinloch Hold. That is where Fen'Din is from. This is also where you know him? Two brothers sent to the same Circle, and not Hossberg?" Peryn looked curious, now. "And yet, you are a Warden, anyway."

Anders took a long sip of his beer to give himself time to think of the right response here. Peryn was a good man. He'd proven that countless times, and yet part of Anders still screamed 'Templar!' whenever he was around. But Anders shoved that part of himself back for the moment.

"Just the one brother sent to Kinloch Hold," he admitted. He watched Peryn blink, watched realization wash over his face. "If I'd used my own name, well, what I'd been called, the whole town would know I was a mage." And that he didn't have a name.

Peryn shook his head in amazement. "You are a Warden," he said again.
"Some fears don't go away just because you're a Warden. There are people who would only see the 'mage' part of the Mage-Warden." As heavy as his words were, Anders kept his tone light, as though this were a minor inconvenience and not something that followed him wherever he went.

"It is different! This is not Val Royeaux! It is Kassel!" Peryn insisted, shaking his head. "Every child dreams of becoming a Warden, even the mages! Wardens are a part of everything!"

"And yet, you only see them when there's a Blight," Anders reminded him. "Or when another town's been swallowed by the desert. Besides, I'm out of Amaranthine, not Weisshaupt. There's enough tension in there without me blatantly showing my face and adding to it."

"It is a good face on a righteous man. I see your work in the village. I see your work, here." Peryn studied Anders, over the table, considering his words. "And you ask for nothing."

"On the contrary. I ask for much more than anyone really wants to offer, but it doesn't stop me from helping them." Anders smiled blithely. "I ask that my people -- mages -- be treated the same as any others. You're good, Peryn, and I like you, but it's your job not to do that." He paused and pointed. "I do still feel a bit bad about the arm, though. I could have had it good as new, in a moment, but I did make sure it wouldn't cause you any trouble until you got back to your own healers. Couldn't let you go on suffering like that, even if you were a Templar."

Peryn made a sound that wasn't quite a laugh. "So, that is why your potions work so well?" His eyes widened as he thought of a possibility. "Or, you use potions to mask the spells you cast."

"Bit of both," Anders admitted. "My potions will get the job done, but, occasionally, yes, I will throw in a simple spell while I'm there to speed things along. Only when I'm sure they won't notice."

"A righteous man," Peryn repeated, pointing his finger decisively. "You do good things when no one watches." His expressive turned melancholic as he stared into his beer. "I am sorry that others you have known made you think you need to hide that."

"I'm sorry, too," Anders said gaze caught between Peryn's face and the fire beside them, unable to focus on either. "The world could be a better place, if we judged mages by their deeds, the same way we judge everyone else. I saw a woman with no magic in her family make a deal with a demon to feed her ambitions. I've known dwarves who could level a building in moments. Most of the things we're taught about the dangers of magic aren't even true. And the Circle -- at least in the south -- winds up making villains of people who want to help. A disaster happens, a healer volunteers, and that healer will not be allowed to go, because they've expressed a desire to leave the tower. They're not reluctantly waiting, hoping not to be assigned. Those of us who are now free? Most of us are very careful about who we'll share with, even if we're willing to help anyone, as soon as their backs are turned. We can't be seen helping. We can't show what we are."

"And this is sad, but what prevents Tevinter?" Peryn asked, sipping his beer. "It is good that you are a righteous man, but there are others who are not. What stands between them and making Magisters?"

"The law," Anders said, simply, a blue flicker lighting behind his eyes. "Most people don't commit crimes, because they don't want to break the law or to hurt other people. When they do, it's because something else is wrong. Crime is like those beetles the dwarven miners take out with them -- when the beetle dies, you run. When the people are driven to crime, you see what's poisoning them. Those few who do desire to break the law become career criminals, usually for love of power and money, and they're a problem for the guard, or sometimes, the army."

Holding up a hand, Anders took a swig of his beer, before he went on.
"In Kirkwall, the Templars serve beside the guard, now, so they can help out with the occasional drunk mage juggling lightning in the brothel. Lady Amell has a few terribly funny stories about that, though I've got questions what she was doing in the brothel, without me even in the city. Nothing I'm going to regret, I hope." He held up a finger. "But, unlike mages, you don't see anyone arguing that nobles can't be trusted because Loghain staged a coup instead of helping to prepare Ferelden for the Blight. When shitty people try to seize power, you stop them. I could remind you, here, that Commander Amell is also a mage, and she's the one who cut his fucking lying head off in front of the Landsmeet, in Denerim. I'm... it's a bit personal about Loghain. He pulled a lot of shit on a lot of people, including a few dear friends."

As he spoke, Peryn watched the blue lightning fork across his skin. That happened when he was agitated, he noticed, and there was something about it, about the way the lightning moved that struck him as familiar. Silly, Peryn knew, and he put that aside for now.

"I do not create the system," Peryn said gently. "Greater minds than mine decide the laws, and many were killed. I just try to make the laws work as they are meant to work. They are meant to help mages too, but, some forget." He shrugged helplessly.

Anders sighed, lightning slowly tapering off as his shoulders sagged, losing some of their tension. "I know. I thought I could put all that behind me in the Anderfels, quietly helping people, instead of..." He trailed off, knowing he couldn't go into detail there, at the end of that sentence. His smile twisted wryly. Maybe Justice wasn't finished down here after all.

"Things are different, now. What was, before... all of it is changing. I did not want it to change, like this, but I think you did not, too." Peryn held up his glass, making a decision, before he held it out for a toast. "It is good to work with you, Mage-Warden. I am sad that you did not feel safe. That will be a good change, too."

This time, Anders actually smiled, as he reached out and tapped his drink to Peryn's. "It will," he agreed. "I just hope we live long enough to see it."

"We have," Peryn corrected him. "Are you not a mage, and I, a Templar, am buying you a beer? Are you not a friend of Commander Cullen? It is already changing."

"I'm a Warden," Anders pointed out. "It's different. I'm not either of your problem." And he knew, even as he said it, that hadn't always been true, even if it was the law. "When you can sit down and have a drink with the average mage on the street, then maybe it'll be different."
Jowan's luck remains little changed.

Jowan noticed the change in texture the same time he noticed the change in temperature, or at least what he perceived as a change in temperature. The shifting shapes around them turned to walls of ice, to intricately carved columns and banisters, all glittering with the same cold light as a chill settled on his skin.

"We must be close to something," Niall said, arms folded around his stomach to conserve heat.

"'Something' is one word for it," Lily said distracted as she turned, looking around. It was like they had stepped into a beautifully carved block of ice, and she half expected to see it start to melt down around them.

"I don't like it," Brynn decided, glancing around them, as if demons might be lurking somewhere within the walls and spires of ice. "This is something's domain."

"You just hate the cold," Owain scoffed, scraping up enough frozen detritus to get a loose ball of slush that slapped against the back of Brynn's armour. "We've seen almost everything the Fade has to threaten us with. What's it really going to be, more demons? We can do demons."

"Pride," Jowan muttered into his fist, clearing his throat.

Asha and Grace conferred, quietly. "It may be a god," Asha said, finally. "Or, a spirit so strong there's no real difference. Like Mouse, but much more powerful. Of course, It might be a good spirit who just happens to like the ice -- Grace is still with us, here."

Lily edged closer to Grace, drawing silent strength from the spirit's presence.

Niall stomped his feet and tucked his hands up under his arms. "Well, we're not going to find out what it is just standing here. The faster we find out what it is, the faster we can leave, one way or the other."

"Somehow," Jowan said as he started carefully down a set of icy steps, "from you that sounds more ominous than encouraging."

Niall shot a flat look at the back of Jowan's head. "Ominous might be warranted, with our luck."

Asha laid a hand on his arm, as much to soothe him as to use him as a support as she descended after Jowan. Carefully, they all made their way down. The ice was slippery, and so much of it made for a confusing layout. Jowan wandered aimlessly but pretended he had an idea where he was going.

Something glimmered nearby, and Jowan approached it, trying to make out what shape it was. Something different usually meant something bad in the Fade, and when he realized that the glimmering shape was either human or elf, he had a feeling this was no exception.

Brynn and Owain stepped forward, circling the figure. There was no change. It remained unmoving,
arms spread and head tipped up as if it were holding up the sky.

"That's an elf. Or it was an elf." Brynn inched closer, until the man's features resolved. "I wonder who he is."

"I wonder if he's another one of those Fade explorer mages who got lost. You know, the ones there's all those stories about -- dangers of the Fade and why you should only be there if you're asleep, and all that stuff." Owain continued to hold his sword at the ready, eyes on the area around Brynn. "That's weird. There's a shadow around him. And he's looking --"

"Oh, shit." Niall's eyes darted up at the first suggestion that something might be above them, and the rest of his head followed. "That's not just a shadow."

Owain's gaze followed. "You... might want to step back a bit, Captain."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Jowan glared into the swirling green sky above the elf. "Is that Tevinter? I bet that's Tevinter."

"I don't care where it's from," Lily said in a small voice. "Either way, it's a dragon."

Brynn stepped back slowly, carefully, eyes fixed on the beast looming over them, specifically on its bared teeth. "I think we should go," he said softly.

As one, they turned and slip-skidded along the ice, bumping into and leaning on each other as they scrambled back for the stairs. They didn't dare look back to see if the dragon was following them, none of them pausing long enough to realize there were no sounds of pursuit. They didn't stop running until they were at the edge of the ice-walls where they bled back into the rest of the Fade. "So that's another 'no'," Niall said as they panted for breath.

"Redcliffe," Lily said, firmly. "We have to make the attempt. You've done it there, before!"

"That wasn't even me!" Jowan protested, as he slipped on the edge of the ice and tripped out into the fog. "That was a small child who made a deal with a demon. I'm still not going to Redcliffe."

"Wait, what?" Owain shot Jowan a strange look.

"I got hired to teach this kid magic. I wasn't very good at it, but the demons thing -- I had nothing to do with that. I just... wasn't prepared for it, when it happened." Jowan rubbed the back of his neck. "Come on, was I even twenty, then? Nobody's an enchanter by twenty. It was dumb, but I thought he'd do better with even a shitty apostate like me than by himself!"

"I'm not even sure if I can argue that point. On the one hand, any help is better than none. On the other hand, twenty-year-old you was kind of an idiot. It's a tough call." Niall weighed the options as if he held them in his hands and then shrugged. "Anyway, we're going to Redcliffe. If a small child could breach the Veil by accident, that sounds like exactly where we want to be."

Jowan opened his mouth to argue, only to find that he couldn't. That was a point, he had to grudgingly admit. Whatever happened to him in Redcliffe if he was recognized had to be better than this endless wandering. Certainly better than an... ice dragon, or whatever that was.

"All right," he said in defeat, running a hand through his hair. "If we're out of options."

"We are," Lily said with a firm nod.
Jowan wished he could summon up her enthusiasm for the idea. "Then I guess we're going to Redcliffe."
Letters from elsewhere. An invitation to Val Royeaux.

Josephine stepped out of her office, the sound of Leliana's sniggering following her out, followed shortly by a frustrated groan from Cullen, and turned to Minaeve, who was elbow-deep in dissecting another strange creature the soldiers had dragged in, mud and stone blocking the flow of foul blood across the floor of the Chantry. "Shouldn't you be doing that outside?"

"You could keep meat fresh for a year, if you left it outside," Minaeve muttered, measuring the curve of a talon. "In here, I can avoid freezing my toes off while I work, and I don't have to worry so much about chasing the birds away, before they get something I needed."

"If I give you a list of when we're expecting noble visitors, do you think you could get the blood out of the floor, before they show up?" Josephine continued to look around distractedly. "Have you seen Adaar? We have a letter for him..."

"Give me the list, and I'll see what I can do. You might have to settle for a curtain." Minaeve gestured toward the door with one bloody glove. "I think he's probably in the tavern. A letter, huh? Is that what those two are on about?" She nodded toward the office.

"Don't tell them I said so, but I think they're flirting. He's a Templar, she's a Sister with a sordid past - it's exactly the sort of thing they don't want you reading, in Orlais, but Andraste forgive us all, everyone does." Josephine made her way outside, pausing to call back her thanks, from the door.

The tavern was a sound guess, and that was where Josephine found him as she scraped the snow from the bottom of her fine slippers. Adaar was clearly a few drinks in to judge from the way he was focusing intently on Maryden, who strummed her lute she tried to teach him the lyrics of a song.

"Herald Adaar!" Josephine called out, sparing the other tavern patrons from Adaar's singing.

Adaar swung towards her, barely keeping his balance on the stool. "Josephine!" he called out, lifting his tankard high in a toast. "Come drink with us!"

"From the looks of it, you have been drinking enough for both of us," Josephine said, not quite able to rein in her smile. "Was the Storm Coast so ghastly?"

Adaar crinkled his nose. "How not-ghastly do you expect a place with the word 'storm' in its name to be?"

"Well, hopefully this will lift your, ah, spirits." Josephine held out a scroll to him. "A letter arrived for you today."

"A letter?" When Adaar tilted his head, his horns seemed to exaggerate the motion. He took the scroll from her, setting down his tankard, and looked first at the signature at the bottom of the letter. "...Shokrakar?" He didn't dare believe it at first, but he looked again and the name didn't change, neither did the handwriting, which was all too familiar to him.
"Your friend claims there are other members of your company who may have gotten lost in the mountains. Leliana and I can likely see to it that any who have been found are returned to us," Josephine assured him. "We may have to call in some favours, but your adventures in rift-sealing seem to have earned us no small number of those. Cullen has made a half-hearted offer to send a scout team to check for anyone still alive that no one has located, yet, but we'd like to see who's still missing, first."

Varric tipped his chair back, from a nearby table. "Let Chuckles and Crazypants handle that."

"Are you sure about that, Varric? That doesn't seem very safe. Neither of them is trained for this kind of work!" Josephine blinked and turned, wondering how long Varric had been listening. Of course, this was Varric, so the answer was probably 'as long as he'd been sitting there'.

"We have tens of dead druffalo, rotting fennecs, and skeletal halla milling around outside the gates. They've got to be good for something, and those two are the only ones they'll answer to." Varric shrugged and let his chair clack down again. "Just think about it. They're a lot more men than you can spare."

Adaar was still trying to process the idea that some of the company who'd come with him had survived, and relief mixed with guilt that he had given up on them so easily. It took him a moment to make sense of the argument Varric and Josephine were having.

"Oh, that sounds like a terrible idea," Adaar assured Varric, "which means we're probably going to do it. Though my people will likely see the skeletons and cut them down before anyone gets close enough to stop them. Reanimated corpses are not generally how you assure a bunch of Vashoth that you're not there to kill them. I'd send a couple of less squishy people with them in case that all goes to shit."

He wondered what Shokrakar would say if she saw the kind of company he was keeping. Probably that he must have hit his head too many times.

"Well, we don't have to decide who's going out, until we find out who's already been found," Josephine said, tactfully. "We'll bring them back -- as many of them as we can -- while you're in Val Royeaux... Oh. I didn't tell you that, did I? The two of you will need to travel to Val Royeaux -- with a full company, of course. You must be seen to have support. We've received word that there is to be an opportunity to refute the accusations against the Inquisition, and to address the concerns of the surviving Mothers."

Adaar gave her a pained look over the scroll. "You know what sobers a Vashoth up faster than Orlesians."

Varric gave his back a sympathetic pat.

"What do you mean, he won't sell us more because he thinks I took it!? What would I do with that much lyrium? I'm surrounded by Templars! If anyone was going to take it, it would've been them! But, they didn't take it, because it blew up!" A young dwarven woman gesticulated angrily at the man who'd brought the message, waving the rolled paper, as she shouted. "You tell Lantos I'm going to take care of this, but we need another supplier. Do you know what they look like when they don't get their lyrium? They sure as the blight don't look like the people who are going to save the world, I'll tell you that much. You tell him to make the deal with anyone selling, and I'll make sure it gets paid for. But, don't buy anything from Valammar! I just got back from there, and that's... not lyrium. Or it's not lyrium in any way we want to deal with. And you tell him nobody's getting paid for the lyrium that blew up, unless we find the guy who did it."
"That seems like a terrible weakness," a young elven woman said to Fen'Din, as they passed the argument. "Lyrium has its place, but the idea that it should be taken internally..." She shook her head. "Shemlen are so strange."

"Everyone is strange, it is simply a matter of type and degree," Fen'Din replied, humour in his voice. "Your Keeper would like us to 'release you' from your captivity, here." He held out a letter. "It came to me, because no one was sure who you were. 'Oh, give it to the elf; he must know all the other elves.' ... You may be right. It may be that roundears are stranger still."

"One would think the vallaslin would be a hint," she said, tattoos shifting as she smirked. "But, all shemlen look the same to me, so I suppose all elves look the same to them. My thanks," she added as she accepted the letter. "I am Ellana, by the way, of the Lavellan clan, as my Keeper has informed you. What clan do you hail from, Herald?"

Ellana stood a bit closer than was strictly necessary, making a point of studying Fen'Din's 'vallaslin'.

"Everyone keeps asking me that. I'm a senior enchanter of Kinloch Hold." Fen'Din tapped his face. "This is my own work -- a reminder not to let myself be trapped by the delusions of others. Yours is... vengeance, isn't it? Mine is a pun. Or perhaps it is my name that is a pun. Both."

There was the faintest look of disappointment when she realized he wasn't Dalish, but Ellana recovered quickly. "'The Dead Wolf'. I wonder what Fen'Harel would say to that. And your own work, you say? That is... impressive."

"It wasn't as if anyone else would do it for me. I asked the healer, but the best he'd do was clean up after it. He had all these reservations about sharp objects and my face. It may not have gone quite the way I anticipated, but I definitely did not live up to his worst expectations." Fen'Din remembered to shrug, punctuating the thought. "As to what Fen'Harel would think, I'd welcome his opinion if he could be bothered to offer it. Unfortunately, I don't think anyone's heard from him in centuries. And you? Was yours done in the traditional ceremony?"

"Yes, I'm afraid someone else did mine," Ellana replied, studying his vallaslin with renewed interest. "Which is probably for the best, considering I can't draw for shit. Yours is remarkably symmetrical though, and even." She shook her head in amazement, lifting a hand as though to touch the lines but holding back at the last moment, in case he minded that sort of thing. "I say again, impressive, to keep your hand so steady. You may not be Dalish, but you are no flat-ear, either."

"You can touch them. After this many years, they're probably not still leaking blood lotus, when I get warm." Fen'Din attempted a reassuring smile, but had no idea if he'd succeeded. "I only had suggestions about what would go into the dye -- Dalish texts aren't the most common thing, in the Circle, and they tend to assume a certain familiarity with particular components and methods. I had to resort to Tevinter sources. Some of those colloquialisms may not have been what I thought they were, either. Blood lotus and lyrium... and the rest is written down somewhere." He paused, glancing down at his hands. "And my hands are always steady, unless I've broken my arm. I'm not sure they know another way to be."

The corner of Ellana's lips twitched in a smirk as her fingers lightly traced the lines drawn onto Fen'Din's skin. "It is good you had a healer on hand, though I can appreciate a man with sure hands." She put a little more suggestion into her tone, though he didn't seem to be reacting to her touch. She withdrew her hand and held up the letter. "You have my thanks again, Herald. I will assure our Keeper that he was right to think so highly of the Inquisition."

"If this is 'highly', I have concerns about your Keeper thinking poorly of us." Fen'Din raised his eyebrows. "But, it is the terrible dawn of a new age -- metaphorically, I hope, the last thing we need
is a new calendar -- and you and your clan are as welcome with us as you wish to be. I will make sure of it. Come to me with any problems you may have. Right now, I need to go draw a picture of you and glue it to the wall in the messenger post. Possibly to the distribution master's face. No, I suppose that wouldn't help. He wouldn't be able to see it, so close. But, I'll tell him he needs to distinguish between elves, at least a little bit, or next time I'll be nailing the sketch to his palm." He smiled as politely as his face would manage and offered a hand to shake.

Ellana wasn't sure what to make of those last few sentences, but she could get behind nailing sketches of elves to the distribution master's hand. "That's one way to get the point across," she said with a crooked smile. She shook Fen'Din's hand with a firm grip, noting that he offered her the hand that wasn't glowing. "Best of luck in your endeavours, Herald. I am sure you will hear from us soon."
Chapter Summary

A meeting with the Chantry, rudely interrupted.

"Can you believe the nerve of some people?!" Anders shook his head, shifting in his saddle for not nearly the first time. Horses weren't nearly as pleasant a ride as camels, and he thought he might send for Harellan, if this kept up. "Sorry, I'm still not over the whole Lord Kildarn problem. I can only hope Ellana's team can put him in his place, without too many casualties."

"Look, he's human--" Varric started, but Anders cut him off.

"I'm human!"

"Yeah, but you're... different. You're not a nobleman." Varric held up a hand. "Don't. You weren't raised to be one. Everyone's less than these assholes, and elves are less than everyone else. And that's why we have Josephine to talk to them, so we don't give into our naughty urges to beat them all bloody, as soon as they open their mouths."

"We sent Kinnon with her. She'll be fine. He's diplomatic." Cormac leaned to the side until he could pat Anders's knee.

"He's going to faint, the instant someone gets stabbed," Fen'Din reminded him. "It's Kinnon."

"Yes, but we sent him so people wouldn't get stabbed," Cormac pointed out.

"Is it always this kind of fun, around here?" Bull asked Blackwall and Cassandra, his knees pulled up uncomfortably high in a saddle that wasn't designed for someone quite his size. Adaar had gotten a druffalo, somehow. He thought Jan might've gotten the same size saddle, considering his height. But, as the tallest and the newest member of the company, no one had quite managed one large enough for Iron Bull, yet. Maybe he could buy something in Val Royeaux.

They made quite the procession as they approached Val Royeaux's gates, masked faces turning to watch them before Whispering to each other behind gloved hands. They left their mounts with a stable-hand just outside the city, and the look on his face as he took the reins to Adaar's druffalo made the entire trip worth it. Bull was just pleased to be able to stretch his legs.

"The city still mourns," Cassandra said as they walked the surprisingly quiet streets.

"How can you tell through all the masks?" Varric muttered, offering a smile to a masked woman who stared after them, only to gasp sharply and run off. He sighed. "Just a guess, Seeker, but I think they all know who we are."

Adaar just shrugged. "Not the first time I've gotten that reaction, really. And I didn't even have a glowy hand to blame for it at the time."

A young woman jogged up to them, dropping to one knee. "My Lords Herald."

Cassandra recognised her instantly. "You're one of Leliana's people. What have you found?"
"The Chantry mothers await you," the woman was quick to assure them. "But, so do a great many Templars."

"There are Templars here?" Cassandra asked, and Anders tipped his head back and groaned.

"Can't we just wave Cullen at them, threateningly?"

"We did not bring Ser Cullen," Peryn reminded him, with a gentle pat on the shoulder. "But, if we had, I do not think he would wish to be waved. I am certain he can do his own waving."

"People seem to think the Templars will protect them from..." The woman looked up, apologetically. "... from the Inquisition! They're gathering on the other side of the market. I think that's where the Templars intend to meet you."

"Well, this is good, yes? Seeker Cassandra and I will set them right. We helped the people of Ferelden, and now we will help the people of Orlais. The Chantry will have the time to choose a new Divine, in peace." Peryn offered a friendly smile, but the way he adjusted his sword belt said he didn't expect it to be so easy.

Cassandra nodded, jaw tightening determinedly. "Only one thing to do, then," she said, leading them on. Past the gate, sculptures of Andrastian figures flanked them, but none of them were as stony as Cassandra's scowl. "I can't believe this," she grumbled. "They wish to protect the people? From us?"

"They can try," Adaar said, unimpressed, "which would be really very stupid on their part."

Cassandra shot him a look. "We don't want a pitched battle in the middle of Val Royeaux."

"That's not the problem," Adaar replied. "The problem is whether they want a pitched battle in the middle of Val Royeaux."

"You think the Order's retuned to the fold, maybe?" Varric suggested, walking just behind Cassandra. "To deal with us upstarts?"

"I know Lord Seeker Lucius," Cassandra said with conviction. "I can't imagine him coming to the Chantry's defence, not after all that's occurred." As she spoke, the walkway opened up into the Val Royeaux marketplace, the sunlight bright against blue walls. She turned to Leliana's agent. "Return to Haven. Someone will need to inform them if we are... delayed."

"As you say, my lady," the woman said before disappearing back out the gate.

"Orlais," Adaar sighed, as though that summed up everything.

Anders's face twisted in disgust, as they made their way down the aisle of statues. "Is it just me, or does everything smell like week-old piss? This is not what Val Royeaux smells like in any of those fancy novels that I was definitely not reading."

"One of the hazards of using this gate," Cassandra told him. "Half of the city uses the alcoves for toilets."

"This is one of the largest cities in Thedas," Blackwall protested. "Are you telling me the sanitation is that bad? I might expect that in Ferelden, but..."

"Do not mistake the propaganda for the reality. The decor is beautiful, but the foundations are rotten. There is more money spent on making things look good than on making sure they will last, which is often a sign of an empire's decay." Solas examined the chipped and weathered stone along the edge
of an alcove.

As they passed around the spire in the centre of the market, a group of guards turned to watch them.

"Stand wary, guardsmen. The Inquisition is here... along with their 'Herald of Andraste'," the one sneered, with enough venom to stun a gurn. "They say they found a knife-ear and a cow, covered in the Divine's blood."

"Let them pass!" another declared. "The Inquisition is the Templars' problem, and they'll fix it."

"Well, aren't you a charmer," Adaar said with a sarcastic smile at the guards, but Cassandra ushered him on.

A crowd had gathered in front of a dais, where Templars stood guard next to a few Chantry officials. Masked faces turned to the Inquisition as they passed, and the crowd parted around them, like water around the bow of a ship.

"Good people of Val Royeaux!" a woman wearing the Chantry's mitre called out, her hands outstretched. "Together we mourn our Divine. Her naive and beautiful heart silenced by treachery." Her gaze lingered on Adaar and Fen'Din. "You wonder what will become of her murderers. Well, wonder no more! Behold the so-called Heralds of Andraste! Claiming to rise where our beloved fell."

Adaar leaned in to Fen'Din. "I love how people keep thinking this whole thing was our idea. Honestly, they think I'm much more conniving than I am."

"We say they are false prophets! No servants of anything beyond their own selfish greed!" the Mother went on.

"You say quite a bit for someone who has never heard us speak." Fen'Din's voice was clear and pitched to be heard. After years spent instructing apprentices and interrupting Godwin, during meetings, he had quite the commanding tone. "We have never claimed to speak for Andraste. What we have claimed is that we are here to close the holes in the sky and to restore a normal life, relatively free of demons, to the people of Thedas."

"It's true!" Cassandra proclaimed, stepping up to Adaar's other side. "The Inquisition seeks only to end this madness, before it is too late!"

The Mother lifted her chin and held one hand out to the side. "It is already too late," she declared, as the Templars approached. "The Templars have returned to the Chantry! They will face this Inquisition, and the people will be safe once more!"

The leader of the Templars, a man with grizzled hair and a pockmarked face, walked past her with barely a glance. Then the Templar behind him punched her in the back of the head, hard enough to knock her out cold, her body hitting wood with a meaty thump. As satisfying as that was, Adaar eyed these Templars uncertainly.

The other Chantry brothers and sisters shrank away from them, only to be ignored. "Still yourself," the Templar leader told the younger Templar who had been standing guard. "She is beneath us."

And so, apparently, was the Inquisition, from the dismissive way he looked them over.

"Are we supposed to be impressed?" Adaar called out, tall enough to be seen clearly over the crowd. "You punched out an old lady. Well done."
"What are you doing!?” Peryn rushed forward, the Sword of Mercy clear on his robes as his thick Fereldan winter cloak flew back with the motion. "Have you no respect?” He crouched beside the Mother, checking to ensure she still lived, and the other Templars would no longer be able to reach her, except around him.

Blue sparks flickered across Anders's face, as he tried to keep a grip on Justice.

The young Templar guard eyed Peryn with relief, and they gazed back and forth, caught in a dance of eyebrows and confusion.

"I take it you are not here to "deal with" the Inquisition." Fen'Din's voice lashed out like a razor in the hand of a Coterie thug, a swift, clean cut through the babbling of the crowd.

"As if there were any reason to." The Templar leader's voice spilled into the void like wyvern venom in an open wound.

Cassandra made her way around the side of the platform. "Lord Seeker Lucius, it's imperative that we speak with y--"

"You will not address me," the Lord Seeker replied, finally named and descending the steps, as if he had no other care.

Cassandra lurched back as though slapped. "Lord Seeker?” she called out after him, trotting to catch up.

"This is the leader of the Seekers?” Bull asked Adaar out of the corner of his mouth, sounding as dubious as Adaar felt. They followed Cassandra, hands close to their weapons.

Lucius spun on Cassandra when she caught up to him. "Creating a heretical movement," he snapped, "raising up a puppet as Andraste's prophet. You should be ashamed."

"The man is either very brave or very stupid to talk to Cassandra like that," Varric muttered to no one in particular. He stood by Anders just the same, keeping a close eye on all the glowing. This was starting to look a bit more like Kirkwall than he would like.

"You should all be ashamed!" Lucius went on, raising his voice to address the gathered members of the Inquisition. "The Templars failed no one when they left the Chantry to purge the mages!"

Anders's blue-streaked hands clenched into fists. "You are the ones who have failed! You who'd leash our righteous swords with doubt and fear!"

"This is not righteousness!" Peryn roared, handing the fallen Mother off to the Sisters, nearby. His eyes blazed in the light of the day, as he struggled to find the words in Common.

"Who are you to define righteousness?” Lucius demanded. "If you came here to appeal to the Chantry, you are too late. The only destiny here that demands respect is mine."

"Brothers," Peryn called out to the assembled Templars, "the Knight-Commander of Kirkwall, himself, leads the Inquisition's forces! I stand at his side! Join me -- there is no need for this! We must fight against the demons from the sky, not each other!"

Lucius scoffed. "A staunch and loyal member of the Order, Commander Cullen. So loyal, he abandoned them for these false heralds. Proceedings have already been implemented to strip him of his post, after Kirkwall. He has let mages run wild in the streets!"

"And yet, there has never been less crime, in Kirkwall," Cassandra pointed out, with a shrug. "We
are to maintain balance, Lord Seeker. That is our duty."

"Lord Seeker," interjected the young Templar who had been by the Mother's side. "What if they really were sent by the Maker? What if--?"

He cut himself off at the cold looks he received from Lucius and his entourage.

"You are called to a higher purpose!" one of Lucius's followers replied. "Do not question!"

"The Maker has no use for blind followers," Peryn said, struggling with the words in his anger.

But Lucius ploughed on. "I will make the Templar Order a power that stands alone against the Void. We deserve recognition! Independence! You have shown me nothing, and the Inquisition... less than nothing!" He all but spat at their feet. "Templars!" he barked at the men and women behind him. "Val Royeaux is unworthy of our protection! We march!"

The young Templar who had questioned him looked torn, glancing back and forth between Lucius and Peryn, only to reluctantly follow Lucius.

"Charming fellow, isn't he?" Varric made his way over to where Cassandra stood.

"Has Lord Seeker Lucius gone mad?" Confused and angry, Cassandra stared after the man, before shaking her head and returning her attention to Varric.

"Do you know him well?" Fen'Din asked, he and Solas appearing at Cassandra's side, as if summoned.

"He took over the Seekers of Truth two years ago, after Lord Seeker Lambert's death," Cassandra explained, confusion lingering on her face. "He was always a decent man, never given to ambition and grandstanding. This is very bizarre."

"Then we go south, again, and I will make myself known in Redcliffe, whatever that takes. First Enchanter Torrin... well..." Fen'Din glanced back after Lucius. "I can only hope nothing has happened to Torrin, in these difficult times."

"I still wouldn't write the Templars off, so quickly. There must be more in the Order who see what he's become." The confusion on Cassandra's face gave way to grim certainty. "Either way, we must return to Haven and inform the others."

Anders paced in a tight circle, slowly wrestling back control, the blue pulse of light across his skin dying down to a flicker. He almost berated himself for his time spent in the Anderfels, with the evil growing down here, but corrupt Templars were nothing new.
Chapter Summary

An actual conversation with one of the Revered Mothers, and two invitations to very different sorts of events.

The Mother who'd been beaten down woke, stirring enough to prop herself up on an elbow and throw a glare at the Inquisition. "This victory must please you greatly, Seeker Cassandra," she said, voice shaky but no less cynical for it.

"We came here only to speak with the Mothers," Cassandra responded, not bothering to rein in her frustration. "This is not our doing, but yours!"

Anders took another deep breath and glided over to her, healing at his fingertips. For all that she hated them, she was still clearly in pain.

"And you had no part in forcing our hand? Do not delude yourself," the Mother spat, even as Anders healed her. "Now we have been shown up by our own Templars, in front of everyone!"

"The more time I spend in the South, the more I am led to understand your strong words about the Chantry, here," Peryn murmured, from behind Anders's shoulder. "Hossberg is not like this. You were right to come home."

"And my fellow clerics have scattered to the winds, along with their convictions!" The Mother's eyes lit on Fen'Din and Adaar. "Just tell me one thing: Do you truly believe you are the Maker's chosen?"

"Andraste's decisions, assuming she is still in a position to make them, which I have no particular reason to doubt, being deceased, myself, are opaque to me. I do not recall seeing her, but others claim to have done so. Whether it is the Maker's blessing or some force of nature, Master Adaar and I have been granted the ability to close the rifts spewing demons into the countryside, and we intend to continue to do so. You may take what time you need to select a new Divine, without concern for the situation, as we and the Inquisition will be addressing the problem. And I am sorry for the loss of Justinia; I was terribly fond of her policies, thus far, and wish I could have seen what she might have accomplished, given time." Fen'Din looked up at the towering qunari beside him. "What do you think?"

Adaar just shrugged his massive shoulders. "I have no fucking idea."

The Mother peered up at the two of them, the corners of her eyes still pinched with pain even as she relaxed under Anders's healing magic. "That is... more comforting than you might imagine."

Adaar wasn't sure what sane person would qualify either answer as 'comforting', but he wasn't about to correct a woman who'd just been punched in the head. She sat up, the Sister next to her reaching out a hand in support, but the Mother waved her away, gingerly touching her head where she'd been struck.

"I suppose it is out of our hands now," she went on. "We shall see what the Maker plans in days to come."
"You finally say something sensible," Anders muttered, glancing over his shoulder where the Templars had marched off.

"Do you know where the Templars are going?" Blackwall asked, not particularly directing his question.

"I can't begin to guess the Lord Seeker's mind. He could not have abandoned his intended role more completely," the Mother replied, slowly straightening her hat.

"There must be some sense to this we can't see!" Cassandra insisted, looking around her, for someone who might know, but Peryn only shook his head and shrugged.

"Must there? Rebellion seems popular in certain quarters, doesn't it, Seeker?" the Mother asked, settling on her knees and straightening her robes. "Is crafting the Templars into a new power any worse than declaring a rival to the Chantry itself?"

"Listen, lady, maybe you got hit in the head a little hard, but we're here to help you. Well, they're here to help you, and they're paying me, so... yeah, we're here to help you. I haven't heard one word out of these people about challenging the Chantry, just closing holes in the sky, saving people from demons, and giving you the time to choose a new leader. If you can take that as a challenge, the problem's with you, not them." Iron Bull glanced over at Cassandra. "Sorry. Just needed saying."

"I would like to believe that. I truly would," the Mother replied.

"Do you know how many Templars have gone with Lucius?" Anders asked, after a moment's contemplation.

The mother chuckled, despairingly. "They rebelled across Thedas. Some remained loyal, but not enough to call them the Order. The White Spire was the largest garrison, but it now stands empty. Perhaps more shall flock to the Lord Seeker's banner, now. How far has faith waned?"

Anders scratched his ear and looked at Peryn. "Not if we get to them first. You almost had that young one. If Lucius wasn't standing there, we probably would have had him."

Peryn nodded sombrely. "I wonder, how many more like him? Their leaders fail them, leading them on this path."

"At least we've given them an alternative," Anders said with a shrug. "Join the Inquisition, work under Cullen. We just need to prove we're the better option for their conscience."

"Prove?" Adaar asked tiredly. "How many more of those portal things do we need to close for that?"

He flexed his hand against a phantom ache.

Anders patted his arm consolingly. "I am not sure, but I suspect the answer is: 'more than you want to'."

Adaar groaned.

"Surely there must be a way to clean up this mess," Cassandra sighed.

Kneeling on the dais, the Mother's face was nearly level with hers. The Mother looked as tired as Cassandra felt. "I hope against hope that may be the case."

"We should return to Haven, to let everyone know what has changed, here," Cassandra said, looking around for Varric, who had wandered out into the crowd at some point. "Dwarves. You can never
"Sure you can, Seeker. It just has to be a crowd of dwarves." Still, Blackwall also turned around, looking for some sign the crowd had parted for their short friend.

"Down!" Cormac shouted, a barrier flashing into being around where Fen'Din and Adaar stood, snapping the arrow that slammed into it.

Fen'Din crouched, tapping on the inside of the barrier, as he studied the broken arrow. "There's a paper on it. I wonder if it's some angry manifesto against the Inquisition."

"It would be," Anders muttered, eyes high for archers as he backed toward the barrier to pick it up. "Red Jenny... Mack, don't you know a Red Jenny? Looks like she's brought friends."

Cormac smiled and took the paper from Anders's hands, thinking at once of his cousin Charade. "I should've known she wouldn't leave us stranded. Looks like a bit of a chase, but you remember what she put my sister through, last time." He lowered the barrier and cocked his head at Fen'Din. "Let's have a walk down by the Docks. See what our friend Jenny's brought us."

Varric, meanwhile, continued his exploration of the marketplace, letting the tide of the crowd move him as it wished, pretending to be interested in the wares on display as he turned an ear to the conversations around him.

Varric was appraising the apples at a fruit stall when the vendor approached him. "Excuse me," she said, barely louder than a whisper. Or he assumed it was her speaking, though it was hard to tell from her high, ruffled collar. "But... is what they're saying real? The Inquisition's going to fix the hole in the sky?"

Plucking up an apple, Varric offered her his most winsome smile. "That's the plan, as far as I know, but then I'm not usually invited to all the fun meetings."

The woman nodded in what Varric could only assume was enthusiasm. Between the collar, the hat, and the mask, Varric was lucky to even catch a glimpse of her eyes.

"No one is doing anything," she said, frustration boiling over. "The Chantry's useless, and the Templars... Andraste, I never thought they'd abandon us."

"Tell me about it," Varric grumbled around a sigh.

She bent down to make sure he heard her next words, soft as they were. "Listen, your camp will need food. I have contacts. We'll have deliveries there in days."

Varric rolled the apple in his hand, trying to get a read on her as best he could. "You want to help the Inquisition?"

"Never been part of something this big, before, but if your Inquisition's going to seal the sky, I want to help." The woman sounded certain of herself, even as her hands still wrung before her.

"This isn't even as big as it's going to get," Varric told her, pulling out his book. "Listen, I've got a feeling we might be here another couple of days, but our people in Haven definitely need the help. What's your name? I'll send you to Haven with a letter. You tell them you want to see Lady Josephine about a trade contract, and she'll get you all squared away. We need all the good people we can get."

"Call me Belle," she replied, leaning forward to read Varric's letter upside down, as he wrote it. "I
Cormac and Fen'Din were squinting over a scrap of parchment as they came back into the market.

"Should we go?" Fen'Din asked. "You know this 'Jenny', don't you?"

"I know a Jenny, but that might not be this Jenny." Cormac shrugged and fluffed the edge of his hair with his fingertips. "I think it's a trap, but I think there's something on the other side of the trap. Last time, my sister said there were thugs bent on murder and mayhem, but that's how we found my cousin. So, do I think we should go? Probably."

Anders's fingers glowed dully, as he watched what he hoped was a messenger jog across the market toward Adaar. He stepped out from behind Cormac, and in a few quick steps placed himself where he could react, if needed. He didn't much like Val Royeaux, he decided. Too many people trying to kill them.

"You are the Herald of Andraste, are you not?" the messenger called out, and Adaar turned as though only just noticing him. Before Adaar could correct him that he was part of a set, the messenger pressed a letter into his hand. "I have an invitation for you."

"Invitation?" Adaar repeated skeptically, but the messenger had already taken off. He shrugged and opened the letter while the others clustered around and looked. "Hey, Crazy, any interest in going to a 'salon'?" He said the last word with a bad Orlesian accent."Honestly, I don't even know what that is."

"It is some kind of fancy party," Cassandra filled in, "with a great many people who stand around talking about nothing, as if it is of the greatest importance."

"So, not a fan then?" Bull nodded, as if this confirmed something he'd already expected.

Fen'Din plucked the invitation from Adaar's hands, reading it. "Senior Enchanter Vivienne of Montsimmard is moving up in the world. First Enchanter, now, she says. I wonder if, being closer to Val Royeaux means she's been to see the Divine. After the massacre, I didn't think anyone would try. Another question to put to Torrin, when we visit him in Redcliffe."

"The question remains," Solas pointed out, reading over Fen'Din's much lower than a qunari shoulder, "will you go?"

"Getting drunk to ignore the endless hordes of offended Orlesians duelling over whether his sister is prettier than her husband, and which city has the most holy Revered Mother." Anders smiled like he wanted to be punched. "It'll be horrible. Let's all go. Bring Cullen." He paused. "Oh, definitely bring Cullen..."

"Send for Cullen," Fen'Din said, looking up from the letter and handing it on to Cassandra. "We have a few days." He looked up at Adaar. "Hopefully enough days to find some thing fashionable to wear. I don't think showing up in the clothes we rode across half of Thedas in is quite appropriate to the event. Certainly not from what Valery's said."

Anders made fart noises. "He's Orlesian, but he's still probably right. We are in Orlais. We should probably wear masks or something."

"I'm Orlesian," Fen'Din reminded him.

"And we forgive you," Adaar said, patting him on the shoulder. "A mask sounds fun. Bet no one would know who I was."
Behind him, Bull snorted a laugh.

"This Vivienne de Fer is likely up to something," Cassandra said, reading the invitation over twice, brows knit in concentration. "Or at least plotting something, to openly invite the Inquisition. We are not well-liked here, but..." She turned the letter over in her hand. "...maybe someone of her station could change that."

"As long as they don't serve more ham from the Anderfels, I'm in," Varric said with a shrug.

Peryn blinked down at him in confusion. "What is wrong with our ham?"

"Apparently the Orlesians find it depressing," Anders said. "'It tastes of despair' or something. Which is apparently a... good thing?"

Peryn stared at him blankly, wondering for a moment if he had mistranslated something. "I do not understand?"

"No one does," Blackwall muttered.

"Right, so, we need to dress up fancy so we can go party with the people no one understands." Bull nodded and clapped Blackwall on the back. "Sounds like a good time."

"But, first, we need to walk into a trap!" Fen'Din announced, gesturing to Cormac, who still held the scraps of paper indicating their other contact.

"Red Jenny wants to be friends." Cormac raised an eyebrow and held out the last scrap, which contained the directions. "We're probably going to have to distract some guards or something. I'm pretty sure we're bait for something bigger."

"Red Jenny is just a legend," Cassandra scoffed, shaking her head. "Bad things happen to the nobility and they blame it on Red Jenny."

"Red Jenny is a delightful young woman with a whole lot of very interesting friends," Anders countered, "and a taste for cheap wine and expensive cheese."

Varric shrugged. "I may have heard some interesting things out of Starkhaven, recently. Whoever she is, it seems like we'd be better off on her good side. Can't hurt, really. The only people who blame her for anything are people who have it coming, anyway."

Cassandra hummed like she wasn't sure if she should approve of this or not, but she didn't question further. "Very well. If we are to make this salon, we should head out and see to the necessary arrangements. Unless, of course, you would like to hang around the market until another arrow nearly kills somebody."
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

A third invitation, from an unexpected source. When in doubt, blame Tevinter.

Adaar was more than fine with leaving, and he led the charge back through the gates they’d used on the way in. Everyone moved out of the way of the looming qunari, opening an easy path for them.

"Excuse me," a woman's voice called out to Fen'Din as he passed. "If I might have a moment of your time?" The speaker, an elven woman with short hair and mage robes, stepped out from where she had been lurking in the shadows.

"Grand Enchanter! What a pleasure!" Fen'Din offered his hand. "I see you are still with us. I had my concerns, when I heard..."

"You are the leader of the rebellion? Is it not dangerous for you to be here?" Solas asked, with a look somewhere between curiosity and disapproval.

"I heard of this gathering and I wanted to see the famed Herald of Andraste with my own eyes." Fiona snorted in amusement, as she shook Fen'Din's hand firmly. "Imagine my surprise. If it's help with the Breach you seek, perhaps we mages are a better option than the alternatives, here."

"It was my very first thought, I assure you, but I have been unable to get a response from anyone in Redcliffe, where First Enchanter Torrin has taken refuge. The guards at the gates have been quite insistent they will not allow anyone to pass."

"I am going to kill that man," Fiona breathed. "Not Torrin. My apologies. We have attracted a great deal of attention in the move to Redcliffe, where First Enchanter Torrin and Arl Teagan have been most welcoming and considerate, but there are those among our ranks who insist we put out everyone who didn't walk in with us."

Anders edged further into the shadow between Adaar and Bull, unwilling to be seen, not that he thought he'd be recognised, but... just on the off chance.

"We will deal with that, when we return from our business, here," Fen'Din assured her. "Are you well? I am so pleased to find you were not at the Conclave. I feared you may have been drawn off into another place."

"I am as well as can be expected. No, the Lord Seeker and I were not there, as we sent negotiators in our stead, in case it was a trap." Fiona spread her arms and gave Fen'Din a loaded look. "Which..."

"It was a trap, just one none of us were expecting," Fen'Din replied. "We lost so many good people. I am glad you were not among them."

"It disgusts me to think the Templars will get away with it," she said, lip curling as she spoke. "I'm hoping you won't let them."

Adaar quirked an eyebrow. "You think the Templars killed the Divine?"
"Why wouldn't she?" Cassandra drawled.

"And I'm sure the Templars blame the mages." Adaar sighed, running a hand over one of his horns, thumbing a notch it had gotten at the curve. "This is a lovely mess."

"Lucius hardly seems broken up over his losses," Fiona insisted, voice hard, "if he's concerned about them at all. You heard him. You think he wouldn't happily kill the Divine to turn the people against us?"

Cassandra pursed her lips but stayed silent. The Lucius she knew wouldn't, but this man had seemed like another person entirely.

"So, yes," Fiona went on, "I think he did it. More than I think you did it, at any rate." She eyed Cassandra, Adaar, and those around him as she spoke, careful from her posture not to implicate Fen'Din. She had no such suspicions about him, it seemed.

"I'm not sure he did," Fen'Din replied, shaking his head. "I don't see the Lord Seeker being a candidate for blood magic involving mass sacrifice, which I have a certain amount of certainty is what happened there. As much as we disregard the Canticle of Silence, I think someone tried to recreate that story -- hundreds of people dead and red lyrium jutting from the ground all through the temple ruins. That's not the work of someone who isn't already a mage, and I don't think you're responsible, either. I think someone just took advantage of the largest remote gathering of that many people to set this up. I frankly suspect the Archon."

"Archon Radonis?" Fiona's eyes took on a distinctly concerned roundness, darting toward the gate. "You don't say. If you're right about the sacrifice, you're probably at least right about Tevinter. Destabilise the Chantry and distract the Templars, before mounting a new invasion, right?"

"You've read my mind." Fen'Din forced a smile.

"Consider this an invitation to Redcliffe. I'll see to it they actually let you past the gate, this time, if I have to wait for you, myself. An alliance could help us all." Fiona held out her hand, and Fen'Din took it.

"I'll definitely be down to see you, but we have some things to take care of, while we're still in Val Royeaux. We'll be ... maybe a week behind you?" Fen'Din glanced at Cassandra and Varric for confirmation, and Varric nodded. "Before you go, what are your thoughts on Vivienne of Montsimmard? She's invited us to pay her a visit, while we're in Orlais, and I'd like a second opinion."

"She is against everything I have stood for," Fiona said, shaking her head, "but, she is still alive, and I don't know that I would turn down any aid she offered, as long as you check it for strings, first. She is, above all else, very Orlesian."

Fen'Din nodded. "That was my impression of her."

"I hope to see you at Redcliffe," Fiona said. "Au revoir, my Lord Herald." A small smile accompanied the title, and she dipped her head as she disappeared back into the marketplace.

"Sounds like our Lords Herald are getting popular," Varric teased. "A salon at Ghislain, mage party at Redcliffe... It's almost rude that the Lord Seeker didn't give us an invitation to something."

"He's given me an invitation to punch him in the mouth," Adaar grumbled. Peryn caught the wordplay a beat later and nodded his approval.
"That I would pay to see," Anders replied, still standing at Adaar's shoulder for now.

"For the moment, however," Cassandra said as she adjusted her gloves, "we had best inform our people back at Haven, assuming Leliana does not already know what happened here."

"Wasn't that one of Leliana's people when we came in? Is she still around?" Bull glanced toward the gate, but saw nothing.

"She's miles out, by now." Blackwall shook his head. "We'll just have to pay another messenger."

"Let me handle it." Varric smiled slyly, waving a dismissive hand. "I've got someone who'll be in Haven with supplies in three days. I'll give her another letter for Josephine, and you know it'll get taken care of."

The bells of the Grand Cathedral rang out across the market, and Anders looked up. "Not joking about the bells, here."

"One more bell and we have somewhere else to be," Cormac pointed out.
"I wish Anton was here for this," Varric muttered, nudging open the door to the courtyard in which they were supposed to be meeting trouble. Or Red Jenny, but trouble first, more likely. As the gap spread wide enough to admit it, a fireball sailed over his head, obviously intended to hit a human or maybe an elf, and splashed against Cormac's shields.

"Heralds of Andraste!" A man in a gold mask with a ridiculous hat addressed the two glowing hands he could see in the dark beyond Varric. "How much did you expend to discover me? It must have weakened the Inquisition immeasurably!"

"Nothing at all," Fen'Din replied, easing past Varric, a spell hanging from his fingertips, black and purple twisting around his hand. "You were offered to us as a gift."

The masked man continued posturing, looking down his nose at the magic Fen'Din was clearly commanding. "My efforts will survive in victories against you elsewhere!"

He had barely finished speaking before there was the sound of a door slamming open, followed by the twang of a bowstring. All eyes followed the sound to see a masked guard collapsing to the ground, revealing an elf with choppy blonde hair, an arrow nocked on her bowstring and pointing at their new 'friend'.

"Just say 'what'!" the elf called out, sharpening her aim.

The masked stranger wheeled on her. "What is the--?" An arrow to the face cut that sentence and his life short, his body collapsing with a meaty thud.

"Eww," the elf said, nose crinkling as she made her way over to the Inquisition. "Squishy one, but you heard me, right? Just say "what". Rich tits always try for more than they deserve."

"Don't they, though?" Anders agreed, squeezing around Cormac and then Adaar to get into the courtyard.

The blonde elf nodded and gestured at Anders, appreciatively, as she walked over to retrieve her arrow from the corpse. "Blah, blah, blah. Obey me! Arrow in my face!" She looked the arrow over, making sure it was still usable, before she looked up at Fen'Din and Anders. "So, you followed the notes well enough. Glad to see you're... You're kind of plain, really. All that talk, and then you're just... a person."

"Me?" Anders stepped back and cocked his thumb at the group standing in the entry. "Oh, no, you want Adaar, not me. I'm just along for the ride. Nice shot, though."

Adaar waved his glowing hand awkwardly.

"Oh! Well, that's much more interesting. Never actually seen one of you cow-people before." She said it cheerfully, like she either wasn't trying to be offensive or knew she was being offensive and
didn't care. She spotted Bull lurking in the back. "Oh look, there's two of you!"

"Well, you know cows travel in herds," Adaar drawled, not bothering to glance back at Bull.

"I mean, it's all good, innit?" she replied. "The important thing is: you glow? You're the Herald thingy?" She shot another look at Anders and Fen'Din, almost missing the way Fen'Din's hand glowed in the same way. She pointed first at his hand, then at Adaar's. "You both glow? What, does that mean you're married in demon land or something?"

Anders nearly choked on his tongue.

"I hope not. I'd be a terrible husband." Fen'Din cocked his head, remembering to lift an amused eyebrow. "But, yes. We glow. We're ... certainly something. 'Herald thingy' is as likely as anything else."

Varric came forward, dropping to one knee beside the masked corpse and nudging open its vest, looking for anything that would lead them back to who and what had been going on here. "You killed this guy before we could find out who he worked for... or what he was doing. I'm assuming that's because you already know?"

"I killed him before he could shout magic!" The blonde elf shrugged cheerfully. "What? My people said the Inquisition would want him dead, and now he's dead!"

"If your people are who I think they are, I've met one of them." Anders nodded. "She had the most terrible taste in wine."

"What elves?" Blackwall asked, louder than he'd realised, as the echo from the passage around him carried his words across the courtyard. "I know plenty of elves."

The blonde elf laughed, leaning sideways around Anders. "Hah! No, people people." She shook her head as if dealing with an idiot.

"Don't mind him. He's not the brightest," Anders muttered, face angled so Blackwall wouldn't be able to read his lips.

"Name's Sera," she finally introduced herself, gesturing to a stack of boxes. "This is cover. Get round it, as many of you as'll fit, I guess. For the reinforcements. Don't worry. Someone tipped me their equipment shed. They've got no breeches!"

"Is that where all those pants came from?" Cormac asked, one hand on Anders's ass, as he led the man behind the crates. "Healer first. You're the most important."

"You have shields," Anders reminded him.

"Not enough for this many people. Warriors get shields. You and I get crates."

Bull and Adaar didn't even bother finding crates. There was too much of them and not enough of cover. Adaar caught Fen'Din's eye and indicated the crates with a tip of his head.

"Best get to cover, husband-dear." Not that he'd put it past the elf to take an arrow to the chest and keep on fighting, at this point.

"I'll be fine, my darling ox," Fen'Din replied, managing the sickly-sweetest smile Anders had ever seen on him.
Adaar noted the shimmer of one of Cormac's shields and didn't argue, though he paused to blow Fen'Din a kiss with his glowing hand. Drawing his sword, he lost Cassandra's scoff in the scrape of steel.

A set of masked and armoured Orlesian guards came stomping into the room with swords drawn and thighs bared to the moonlight. Varric nearly choked on his tongue trying not to laugh.

"Why didn't you take their weapons?" Cassandra asked in desperation.

"Because no breeches!" Sera called out from behind cover, cackling as she launched a flurry of arrows.

"Can't fault her logic," Anders said with a shrug.

"Butt! Butt! Butt!" Sera called out, putting arrows into three bare asses as they appeared on men otherwise dressed for combat.

"You know what I always like, when I've got no pants?" Cormac grinned, and his fingers glittered.

"Yes, but I'm not getting on my knees in the middle of this," Anders retorted, slapping a glowing green circle under a pantsless guard, as he lunged toward Varric.

Lightning cracked down from above, hitting three helmets. "That too, but we've got plenty of time for that later. I was thinking I liked the sparklefingers."

"Everyone likes the sparklefingers." Anders rolled his eyes and followed Cormac's strike with one of his own. "Except these guards. I just don't think they're having a good time at all."

"I know it's terrible, and I hate to ask it of you," Fen'Din said to the masked corpse, which slowly sat up, giving him a look of distinct distaste. "Thank you. You are too kind," he told it, as it lurched off in the direction of a pantsless guard.

"Yes," it responded, the word thick and sloppy, as if from someone unused to having a tongue.

"That... is some kind of creepy," Iron Bull said, staring after the undead creature.

"I'd say you get used to it," Varric called back, crossbow bolt nailing one of the guards right in the crotch, "but, well, no, it stays pretty damn creepy."

The room was chaos, but eventually the pantsless parade came to a stop, the guards falling to the most ignoble of injuries. Sera skipped around, plucking her arrows free from their exposed butts and inspecting the points.

"Friends really came through on that tip," she said around a giggle. "No breeches!" She looked around the motley crew around her, and for all her joking around, Adaar could tell she'd been taking their measure. She eyed Fen'Din and his undead with morbid curiosity. "So, Heralds of Andraste. You're a weird bunch. I'd like to join."

"You are exactly as much fun as Mack thought you'd be," Fen'Din said, brightly. "Under other circumstances, I might have offered the same." He followed her glance to the corpse standing behind him. "Thank you for your--"

"Wait!" Anders held up a hand. "Sorry, but Varric was right. We don't know who he was working for, but your friend does. That's part of what makes possession so hard to detect."
"Is it true?" Fen'Din asked, knowing that spirits often took on habits and gestures from bones too recently dead. "Do you know?"

"Victoire moves against you." The spirit's words sounded gummy.

"Thank you," Fen'Din said again, face unmovning. "Go, before you can't."

The corpse dropped to the ground, the spirit vanishing in a flash of light, to a faint haze that clung behind Fen'Din's shoulder.

"That's gross!" Sera sounded impressed. "How'd you do it?"

"Magic." Fen'Din shrugged.

Sera pranced back a few steps. "And that's just vile. Still gonna join, though. Gotta put somebody between the demons and everybody else, and they say you're the guys."

"Yeah, that's us," Adaar sighed. He could do without all the demons, honestly. "But I dunno. All we know about you and your group is that we followed a random trail into a trap. That's kind of a shitty way to meet someone, and I'm saying that as the person who met him--" he pointed at Fen'Din "--by falling on him. More or less."

"What trap?" Sera asked, shrugging. "You knocked, he crapped. It's... look, it's like this." She paused to take a deep breath. "I sent you a note to look for hidden stuff by my friends. The Friends of Red Jenny. That's me. Well, I'm one. So is a fence in Montfort, some woman in Kirkwall..."

Varric didn't quite manage to choke back a laugh. A glance at Anders biting his lip said he was being more subtle about his amusement. "Yeah, you could say we're acquainted. We're... more than a little familiar with Red Jenny."

"We are?" Adaar asked, quirking an eyebrow at Varric, then at Anders and Cormac when he noticed their expressions.

"Well, we are." Anders shrugged, utterly unapologetic. "Like I said, she has terrible taste in wine. And don't ask me who she is. I'm not talking about it."

"Not bad taste in some other things, given what Lady Amell has to say." Cormac grinned, elbowing Anders. "And given that you and Lady Amell apparently share some tastes there, you might--"

"No," Anders pointed at Cormac, his back stiffening, chin tipping up. "Absolutely not."

"He's my brother's age!" Cormac pointed out.

"He looks just like--" Anders stopped and looked around them. "Aannnd that's enough about that. Red Jennies are great by me."

"So, what exactly are you offering us?" Bull asked, peering over Anders's head at the elves on the other side of him. "Besides a damn fine archer."

"So, here's how it is," Sera explained, holding up her hands to demonstrate. "You 'important' people are all up here, shoving your cods around. 'Blah, blah, I'll crush you. I'll crush you!''' She paused to make kissing sounds, eyeing Cassandra. "'Oh, crush you."' She cleared her throat and went on. "Then you've got cloaks and spy-kings. Like this tit. Or was he one of the little knives, all serious with his... little knife. All those secrets, and what gave him up? Some houseboy who don't know shite, but knows a bad person when he sees one. So, I'm not Knifey Shivdark, all hidden. But, if you
don't listen down here, too, you risk your breeches. Like those guards. I stole their -- Look, do you need people or not? I want to get everything back to normal. Like you?"

Anders raised a hand. "I like her!"

Cormac nodded. "She's right. Especially the part where the two of you are now 'important'. That's what this guy cared about." He shoved the mask with his foot. "And that's a dangerous thing to be."

"She hits what she's aiming for, and you can't go wrong with more spies. Especially the invisible ones." Bull held up a hand in a gesture of acceptance.

"Says the most visible spy the qunari have ever had." Varric snorted and shook his head. "But, more eyes are always good. Especially if they're looking out."

"Did you just...?" Bull muttered, narrowing his one eye at Varric.

"I meant metaphorically."

Adaar looked around at the sea of pantsless dead and shook his head. He was beyond being surprised by anything any more. "Sure. You know what? I'd rather have you on my side than potentially against me, somehow." He was still wrapping his head around the whole 'being important' thing, and he looked to Cassandra and Fen'Din.

At that look, Cassandra just sighed and threw up her hands.

"As I said, in another time and place, I might be making you a similar offer." Fen'Din held out a hand. "I've always had a taste for making bad things happen to bad people."

Sera grinned and grabbed the hand. "If we find someone not so bad, maybe he'll end up not so dead."

"But, surely no less strained for standing in the way." Fen'Din's eyes gleamed with amusement. "I'll be pleased to have you and your friends with us."

"Plus extra breeches! Because I have all these... You have merchants who buy that pish, right? Got to be worth something." Sera let go of Fen'Din's hand and slapped him on the back.

"Financing the Inquisition with stolen guardsmen's breeches. Somehow, this makes misusing the Wardens' treaties seem like a good idea," Solas quipped, from behind Blackwall's shoulder.

"Haven, right? That's what they say. I'll see you--" Sera started, but Cormac held up a hand, a plan falling into place behind his eyes.

"We've still got business in Orlais. How would you like to go to an entire party full of these noble punters, on our silver, and tell us what you can find?" He smiled wickedly.

"How much fun do I get to have? Are you gonna be doing all the serious cod-shoving, there? I don't want a part in cod-shoving." Sera looked at the mismatched company arrayed around her.

"As much as you can manage and still make it look like an accident," Fen'Din replied, finding a smile that almost matched Cormac's. "I like the way you think, Mack."
Finding a tailor willing to handle two qunari, three elves, and a dwarf is not the simplest proposition, when it comes to this season's fashions in Val Royeaux.

When Adaar had to duck just to get into the tailor's shop, he wasn't filled with confidence. Neither was the tailor, to go by the way his thin lips twitched under the half-mask. Then the tailor caught sight of Bull as Adaar stepped aside to let the others in, and the twitching shifted to full-on grimacing.

"Good morning," Anders said brightly, only to pause, brow knitting. "I think it's still morning. Or is it afternoon?"

The tailor wrung his hands, elbows tucked in, as though to avoid any physical contact with them at all costs. "And what can I do for... such a gathering?" He still eyed the qunari warily.

"We are in need of formal wear," Cassandra answered, all business, "and little time in which to get it."

The tailor nearly choked. "All of you need formal wear?"

"I am at peace to dress in the traditional way of Ander Templars," Peryn volunteered, looking around him, and then peering curiously at the tailor.

"I am certain we will have no difficulty whatsoever fitting you with something fashionable," the tailor assured him, eyeing the two qunari and the elves. "But, maybe we can just put some feathers on your pet cows. And the servants will need something much simpler, but we don't do estate uniforms, here. There is a different shop that handles those sorts of things, on a little street closer to the Academie."

"Pet cows!" Bull laughed and leaned toward Adaar, whispering loudly. "I didn't know we were cute enough for that! Sure not little enough to be sitting in some duchess's lap, begging for treats. Though, the way things usually go with me and duchesses, they're the ones begging for treats."

"That is enough!" Cassandra stepped forward. "We are the Inquisition!"

"We are also rolling in dough, and absolutely willing to take it elsewhere," Varric lied, wondering where Josephine was going to find the money for all this.

"You are the Inquisition?" the tailor asked.

Adaar made eye-contact with the tailor, who was looking a little less snooty if no less frazzled, and said simply, "Moo."

"That's cow-speak for 'yes'," Bull said, trying to convey a wink with one eye.

The tailor looked at them like they were lunatics. He turned back to Cassandra, deeming her the figure of authority here. "I presume I am addressing the 'Herald of Andraste'?" Varric could almost
hear the quotations in his voice.

"Not when you are looking at me, you are not," Cassandra said, her tone decidedly chilly. "Can you dress us in time for Madame de Fer's salon, or should we look elsewhere?"

"Only if you are willing to be clothed in fabrics I already have on hand. There will not be time to order Antivan silks or velvet from Val Chevin." The tailor tipped his chin up, with a hint of defiance.

"We're going to end up wearing the curtains, aren't we," Anders hissed to Blackwall, who looked horrified.

"Show us what you have, and we will make that decision," Fen'Din offered, almost diplomatically, as he moved his sketchbook into his other hand, turning out the green glow in his palm. He looked from it to the tailor, pointedly.

"A halla rider, of course." The tailor rubbed where the mask sat against the bridge of his nose.

"Oh, it gets worse than that," Sera assured him, cocking a thumb at Adaar.

Adaar grinned and waved his glowing hand.

"And a cow?" the tailor all but wheezed. He lifted his hat to dab at the sweat on his forehead, muttering something in Orlesian under his breath.

"That is Herald Cow, remember," Adaar corrected. "And I expect to be the prettiest cow at the salon."

Bull threw out his hands.

"Sorry, Bull, but it's no contest," Adaar said without sounding sorry at all. "Isn't that right, Sweetums?" he asked Fen'Din.

"It's those cheeks, my darling ox. They're just so squeezable." Amusement gleamed in Fen'Din's eyes, even as his face remained expressionless. "Don't you think, Jan?"

"I've seen much more squeezable cheeks, but you're talking about the ones on his face, aren't you. Of course, at your height..." Anders shrugged casually and smiled, eyes drifting up toward a corner of the ceiling.

"It's like the Lords Glow-In-the-Dark say: you're supposed to make us look all fancy-like. And give Lord Cow a fancy ass." Sera grinned broadly. "You should put a lace heart on it."

"I'm not sure that's the image we want to present," Blackwall objected, shifting uncomfortably.

"It's Orlais! What happens in Val Royeaux is all over the nation by morning!" Anders slapped Blackwall's back hard enough to clank. "Do you have anything that would favour my legs?" he asked the tailor, hiking one side of his robes to the knee, to reveal trousers underneath.

Sera let out a saucy whistle. "Oooh, showing some ankle! Scandalous!"

"For the record," Adaar cut in before the tailor could process any of this, "my ass is already pretty fancy." He darted a look at Anders. "And squeezable."

The tailor rubbed at his temples. "Hold on, let me write this all down," he said, defeated.

"That Adaar's ass is squeezable?" Varric asked.
"It's worth noting," Anders said, letting his robes fall back down.

"I will need to take your measurements," the tailor said. He looked up, up at the qunari. "Assuming I can reach."

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In a roadside tavern, the night before the salon, Sera leaned on Anders's potion bag, with one elbow, paging through a book. "You should see this!" she said, flipping another page. "These sketches just look dirty. And I don't think he had anything nice to say, either."

"What are you reading?" Anders asked, looking down at her and resting his drink on Fen'Din's head.

"That fancy-making tailor guy made notes. I didn't take them 'til the end. I'm not stupid. But, I wanted to see what he wrote about us, because that was a lot more than 'He has a forty six inch chest and her legs are twenty seven inches long'." Sera stood straight, as she spoke, doing an impression of the tailor. "And I'm right, see. Here, this is you, right? It's either you or Wardo Gordo, over there, and I don't think it'd fit on him. 'I have never needed to design a codpiece in such a size, and while I may have expected it for the qunari, the Warden was a surprise.'" She paused. "Tell me that's just because you're tall.

"It's not," Fen'Din filled in, pressing a thumb into Anders's wrist and stealing the drink on his head.

"Blegh, oh now I'm picturing it," Sera said, nose crinkling. "Codpiece is a fun word, though, innit? Cod. Piece. A piece for your cod. Sounds like you're getting more than a piece, though. For your cod." She turned her attention back to the notes, whispering under her breath, "Still picturing it."

"What else did he write?" Anders asked, craning his neck to get a better look.

"Well, there is some tailory shite wedged up in here," Sera said, tilting the page, "but... heh. Yeah. A bit here about him being afraid the Seeker will go all stabby on everything."

"That's a valid fear," Varric said into his drink, earning a swat to the back from Cassandra.

"Well, it is!" Cormac defended Varric from the other side of the table. "You almost stabbed Varric, you almost stabbed Jan, you almost stabbed me! You just...stab things!"

Peryn muttered something into his drink in Ander, and Anders cackled like a loon.

"More like a merciless sword," Anders retorted. "Of course, given what Kinnon says about the two of you..."

"I have done him many mercies with my sword," Peryn said, solemnly, eyes sparkling above the rim of his glass as he went for another drink.

"Knife-ear!" Sera exclaimed in disgust, flinging the book into the air, where Bull snatched it down. "He called Baldy and Crazy 'thieving knife-ears'!"

"He also called you a thieving knife-ear," Bull pointed out, tipping his head to better read the handwritten page with only one eye.

"Well, that's different, innit? I lifted another one of those fiddly finny-fidget fuckets every time he said a nasty word to one of you." Sera reached into a pocket and tossed a golden fleur-de-lis ornament to Bull. "I think that one was 'blighted demon cow'. I mean, cow, sure, but I've seen demons, and you're not it."
Bull snorted, turning the thing over in his hands and squinting into its hollow base. Adaar watched him and, with a considering hum, reached over from where he sat by the fire and plucked it up, setting it on the tip of one of his horns. It was a little loose, but the upward curve of his horn kept it in place.

Adaar looked at Sera with a straight face and asked, "Am I the prettiest cow at the salon, yet?"

Sera buried an ugly snorting laugh against her drink. "Oh! Oh, now I have to go back and nick another one!"

"I don't think this is helping the Inquisition's image," Cassandra said with a long-suffering look. She paused, eyeing Adaar. "The stealing or the... ornamentation."

"Maybe he'll start a new trend," Anders suggested.

"It is Orlais," Fen'Din pointed out, "where the nobility dressed themselves in beetles for an entire season, I'm told. Qunari dressed like curtain-rods could easily be the next big thing."

"I think the biggest thing we've got going is Warden Stuffed Cod, over here." Sera flipped a hand disgustedly in Anders's direction, finally no longer leaning on him, and then stretched her arms out as if measuring something.

Fen'Din held up a finger and then put one hand on Sera's elbow and the other on her fist, considered the distance, and nodded.

"I've fit it," Sera said, after a moment's pause. "It could happen."

"That's-- You couldn't possibly!" Blackwall leaned forward to get a clearer look down the table to where Sera and Anders stood.

"Psh, says you. You've got big man-hands. Maybe you can't fit it," Sera retorted, looking at her fist. "But, this one time, I was in -- that's not important, what's important was she was right fit, and--"

Blackwall picked up the pitcher and poured himself more beer.
Ghislain

Chapter Summary

Our heroes arrive at the salon, to be met with a wide range of reactions.

To Adaar, it felt like they had walked into a palace, with the cathedral ceilings, the elegant architecture, and the way the marble floors were clean enough to let off their own light. He tried not to squirm, but his formal wear was stiff, the collar scratching at the back of his neck.

A sea of half-masked faces looked their way, though most were subtle about the way they stared.

"Think we've made a good enough entrance?" Adaar asked Fen'Din, who walked in next to him. A glance behind him assured him that their 'guards' had followed them, Peryn, Cassandra, and Cullen, all smartly dressed for the occasion.

"We'll see in a moment, won't we?" Fen'Din studied the eyes in the masks, looking for the familiar gleam of demons looking back at him.

The herald at the door of the ballroom glanced at them and read from his scroll. "Master Adaar of the Inquisition, and attendants."

"It's just because you're taller," Fen'Din said, looking up at Adaar, after a moment's wait to be announced. "Impossible to ignore, really."

Behind them, Cassandra hissed angrily at the herald, and Cullen studied the room as if he expected to lead a charge through it.

Adaar pursed his lips to keep from smirking. "As you say, small attendant." He threw a glance over his shoulder at Cassandra. "And take it easy there, stabby attendant."

Cassandra settled for trying to kill him with a look.

Light music filtered through the sounds of conversation, and they had barely entered when another pair of guests turned to address them. Adaar wasn't the biggest fan of the masks, of not being able to read everyone's intentions, but their posture seemed non-threatening enough.

"A pleasure, ser," the man said to Adaar, his 'attendants' all but invisible. Adaar found himself distracted by the man's masked golden point of a nose. "We so rarely have a chance to meet anyone new. It is always the same crowd at these parties. So, you must be here for Madame de Fer. Or are you here for Duke Bastien?"

Before Adaar could answer the woman next to the man with the pointy nose cut in with her own question. "Are you here on business? I have heard the most curious tales of you. I cannot imagine half of them are true."

"Oh, I can," Adaar said with a smirk, "even if I don't know what you've heard."

"If they involved falling from the sky and hordes of demons, they were probably true. If they involved naked moonlight orgies, those were probably also true, but not about us. I could swear I left
“Jan around here, somewhere.” Fen’Din smiled as impolitely as he could manage after years of watching Anders do it. “And it is the Iron Lady, herself, who invited us. I haven’t seen her since the last meeting of the College of Enchanters, but I’ve heard she’s moving up in the world. Duke Bastien, though, I do not know.”

“He hasn’t been seen at court much, lately,” the woman replied, her head taking on a sympathetic angle, amid the ring of ruffles that stopped just below her nose.

“His business with the Council of Heralds often takes him from home for long periods. It can’t be good for a man of his years,” the man went on, looking at the woman beside him.

“And there’s the civil war, of course. Bastien likely wants to distance himself from the actions of his one-time son-in-law.” The woman’s eyes travelled from her companion to study the unlikely pair before her.

“Tearing up the Dales in a foolish bid for power? Everyone knows it will end in disgrace for Gaspard.” The man rolled his eyes, barely visible behind the mask.

“As well it should,” Fen’Din replied drily.

“So what have you heard about us,” Adaar asked, “besides the moonlight orgies?”

The woman made a sound that could have been a giggle, but it was hard to tell, buried as it -- and she -- was in that ruffled collar. "Well, some say that when the Veil opened, Andrashe herself delivered you from the Fade."

"Yeah, I keep hearing that story," Adaar said with a weak laugh. "Those storytellers might have gotten a bit carried away."

That didn't seem to disappoint the woman. "But only for the best effect," she said, a smile in her voice, even if it was hidden. "The Inquisition is a ripe subject for wild tales."

"The Inquisition?" someone spat over their heads, and they looked up to see a man with a feathered hat sauntering down the stairs. "What a load of pig shit!"

Behind Adaar and Fen’Din, Templars and Seeker shifted subtly, just enough to put their hands closer to their weapons.

"Washed up sisters and crazed Seekers? No one can take them seriously," the behatted man went on, as he reached the bottom of the stairs, pausing before he walked between the Heralds and their conversation companions. "Everyone knows it's just an excuse for a bunch of political outcasts to grab power."

"Assume, for the moment, that power is already in the palms of our hands, no grabbing required." Fen’Din held up his glowing hand, amusement gleaming in the reflected light against his eyes. He pulled out a silver piece with the other hand and flipped it to the man in the hat. "Don't forget to send a runner, when you have demons in your front garden."

The man in the hat batted the coin to the floor and stepped up to loom intimidatingly over Fen’Din, cricking his neck up to look at Adaar, before changing his mind. "We know what your Inquisition truly is! If you were men of honour, you'd step outside and answer the charges."

"Is he actually stupid?" Fen’Din asked Adaar, gazing easily up the qunari's towering height, as the first flower of ice bloomed from the centre of the man's chest. "I think he's actually stupid."
Adaar was about to tell the man just how ready he was to face those charges, when he noticed the ice creeping around his body with spidery fingers. The idiot had a hand poised to reach for a weapon, only to be frozen in that position.

Adaar cut a look down at Fen'Din, amazed that he had cast so secretly, only for a woman's voice to interrupt the thought.

"My dear Marquis, how unkind of you to use such language in my house... to my guests."

Adaar followed the voice to the hand glowing pale blue with magic. In the space of a blink, he thought she was qunari, with the magnificent sweep of silver horns on top of her head, only to realise they were decorative, if no less attractive. She walked down the steps with the confidence and regal bearing of someone who knew she commanded the room, and Adaar found himself admiring the graceful swing of her hips, as frozen as the man in front of him, for different reasons.

She circled around the frozen man, her voice falsely sweet. "You know such rudeness is... intolerable."

"Madame Vivienne!" the unnamed marquis sputtered, "I humbly beg your pardon!"

"You should," the woman with the gleaming horns replied, still circling, until she paused and looked the frosted marquis right in the face. "Whatever am I going to do with you, my dear?"

After a long moment, she turned to Adaar. "My lord, you're the wounded party in this unfortunate affair. What would you have me do with this foolish, foolish man?"

"We are the wounded parties in this affair, Enchanter." Fen'Din edged out of Adaar's shadow, hand cupped around the glow in his palm. "It's been some years, hasn't it? But, if you put it to us, I think you'll find we're entirely capable of handling ourselves. If the man wants a duel, let him have it. He's welcome to the difficult choice, the more difficult choice, or both of us. Oh, but this is Orlais. Should I name a champion? Come, Seeker, he's called you crazed, and that was before he got to the rest of us." He glanced over his shoulder at Cassandra. "Everyone knows I'm the crazy one, here, isn't that right?"

"It seems the frozen marquis wishes that title for himself," Cassandra said, narrowing her eyes at said marquis. "But, I do not think he is worth our time."

Adaar's brain caught up with his eyes, and he blinked, realising he'd been staring at Lady Vivienne. He cleared his throat. "I agree, Cassandra," he said over his shoulder. "Let him go."

Vivienne didn't question the decision, didn't show any judgement at all as she snapped her fingers, the ice melting away as quickly as it had come. The marquis stumbled and gasped, remembering how to move and using that knowledge to glare up at Adaar. He drew in a breath, fists clenched as he wound up to snarl something. Adaar saved him the trouble and punched him in the face.

The marquis dropped like a stone, out cold. "We'll have someone clean that up for you," Adaar told Vivienne.

"Where did we leave the Iron Bull?" Fen'Din glanced around, winking surreptitiously at Sera, as he saw her appear with a tray of glasses. "Someone needs to take this garbage out."

"Oh, I'll get 'im, yer noble codship." Sera grinned wickedly and waved to someone else in servants' garb, passing off the tray before she grabbed the marquis by the wrists and started dragging.

"Tastefully!" Fen'Din cut in to the assortment of heaving sounds.
"I will do this," Peryn volunteered, crouching to help Sera lift the man's dead weight. "Where do you wish him?"

"Deposit him with the rest of the waste from this occasion. The servants can show you where. And do it quickly. We don't want him cluttering up the dance floor." Vivienne returned her gaze to Adaar. "I'm delighted you could attend this little gathering. I've so wanted to meet you."

"Because she's already met me." Fen'Din gazed up, and Vivienne looked at his face for the first time. He didn't think her spine could get any stiffer, but he was clearly incorrect.

"Enchanter Surana," Vivienne's words were as cold as her spells, but unfailingly polite. "Who have you come with?"

"The Inquisition, Enchanter Vivienne. You invited me, when you asked for the Heralds of Andraste." Fen'Din's smile was unsettling, as he opened his hand to reveal the glow. "You'll forgive me, if I stay close enough to keep an eye on the other Herald, as I think he's a bit less familiar with how these events work."

"I would say he is handling events quite well so far," Vivienne said, still coolly polite as she turned a smile on Adaar. If she was unsettled by Fen'Din's glowing palm, she hid it well behind her mask.

Adaar dipped his head in mock humility. "He keeps me out of trouble. He did not, however, tell me just how enchanting you were, uh... Enchanter." Not one of his smoother lines, but he kept his wince internal.

Behind him, Cassandra rolled her eyes and exchanged a look with Cullen, while Vivienne let out a surprised chuckle.

"That is very kind of you," Vivienne said, her lips pulling towards a smirk. "But, while I have you, allow me to show you around, my Lords Herald." She made for the stairs without waiting for a response, and Cullen and Cassandra exchanged awkward glances, unsure if that invitation was for them too.

"Allow me to introduce myself," Vivienne began, turning back from a window that overlooked the vast gardens below. "I am Vivienne, First Enchanter of Montsimmard and Enchantress to the Imperial Court."

"I didn't know anyone had been confirmed, since the slaughter, but this is Orlais. Have you had better fortune than Kinloch Hold, in that?" Fen'Din asked, watching Vivienne out of the corner of his eye, as he looked out the window, judging the distance to the ground below and how angry Anders would be if he tried to survive it.

"The Divine had been occupied with other matters. The confirmation is merely a ceremony, and will be performed once a new Divine is elected, and the war is over. The fact is that I have been elected, and so I hold the title." Vivienne's eyes cut like glass. "But, then, you never were very good at Circle politics, were you? I'll never understand how you were raised to Enchanter."

"Senior Enchanter," Fen'Din corrected. "Purely on the virtue of my skills."

Vivienne narrowed her eyes behind her mask, and Adaar cleared his throat awkwardly, wondering if he was going to have to step between the two mages.

"So, your salon is lovely," Adaar said, pointedly changing the topic as he glanced behind him. "I mean, what little I have seen of it so far. The terrified marquis was a nice touch."
"I'm glad to keep you entertained, my dear," Vivienne said with a pleased curl of her lips that had Adaar grinning like an idiot. To them both, she added, "I wanted to meet face to face. It is important to consider one's connections carefully." The flat look she sent Fen'Din said that maybe she wasn't considering those connections in his favour. "With Divine Justinia dead, the Chantry is in shambles. Only the Inquisition might restore sanity and order to our frightened people."

Adaar hid an uneasy laugh behind a cough. "Order, maybe, but sanity?"

"Sanity," Vivienne nodded gracefully. "One cannot underestimate the madness that follows in the wake of sudden disaster, or the madness that might ensue from poor leadership where strength and direction are needed." She cut a pointed look at Fen'Din, whose face remained impassive. "But, as the leader of the last loyal mages of Thedas, I feel it is only right that I lend my assistance to your cause."

"Loyalist mages, not loyal mages," Fen'Din pointed out, mildly. "The Libertarians are no less loyal to their cause."

"And look where that cause has gotten us! First Kirkwall, and then that entirely avoidable tragedy at the White Spire!" Vivienne returned her attention to Adaar, with an expectant gaze.

"Is your interest in the Inquisition, Madame de Fer," Adaar said, putting on his most charming smile, only partly to defuse their argument, "or is it more personal?"

Vivienne let out a soft laugh. "Aren't you charming?" she teased. "It's professional, of course."

But the crooked smile and the sidelong look she gave him had Adaar wondering if she was just toying with him. He wasn't sure he minded.

"Very well, then," Adaar said, toning down his flirtatious tone, if only a little. "Purely professionally, what can you do for the Inquisition?"

Vivienne began listing her answers as though this were a question she'd been preparing for. It probably was. "I am well versed in the politics of the Orlesian Empire," she said. "I know every member of the Imperial Court personally. I have all the resources remaining to the Circle at my disposal. And I am a mage of no small talent. Will that do?"

"It will certainly do something," Fen'Din replied, drily. "But, the eternal question remains: how does this benefit you? Would you not be better served cleaving to the Chantry and cursing our every move?"

Vivienne blinked, slowly, levelling her eyes at Fen'Din. "I get the same thing anyone gets fighting this chaos: The chance to meet my enemy, to decide my fate. I won't wait quietly for destruction. I was a great admirer of the late Justinia V. The Chantry, at its best, unites the disparate cultures of Thedas and looks after its most vulnerable. Had she lived, Justinia could have accomplished so much. But, without her, the clerics have fallen to infighting and obstinacy, and while I believe that greatness can be regained, it falls to your Inquisition to ensure the people of Thedas live to achieve that."

"You always did do politics well. Karl liked that about you." Fen'Din offered a measured nod, then looked up at Adaar. "She is, if nothing else, very Orlesian. If we are to turn Orlais in our favour, we could do far worse than someone who plays the Game as easily as she breathes, regardless of any personal opinions she may have on my choice of studies."

"You are aware the Chantry hasn't sanctioned this Inquisition?" Adaar checked. He had the feeling
that there was little going on that she wasn't aware of.

"The Chantry is leaderless," Vivienne said with a shrug. "They're in no position to officially sanction anything. Besides, my dear, if there is one virtue the Chant of Light teaches us, it is forgiveness. Once the Inquisition has sealed the Breach, I'm sure the new Divine will not care in the slightest about official permission."

Adaar could see what Fen'Din meant, about her grasp on politics. They could certainly use someone like her. That she was enjoyable to look at was an added bonus.

"The Inquisition will be happy to have you, Lady Vivienne," Adaar said with a formal dip of his head.

Behind her mask, Vivienne beamed. "Great things are beginning, my dear," she said to him. "I can promise you that."
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

Disposal and acquisition. The 'true virtues' of Grey Wardens expounded upon.

The last of the frost had melted off the marquis Adaar had levelled with a single fist, but he remained unconscious for a good few minutes, after Peryn and Sera dropped him by the edge of the garden.

"Oh, I got this," Sera assured Peryn, waving him off. "We'll just see what he's been stuffing his cod with."

"I do not think First Enchanter Vivienne would like it, if you cut him open," Peryn warned, watching her, cautiously.

"Cut 'im open? Eww. No. I'm not makin' him into parts. I'm not touching his parts, either." Sera flipped a hand, disgustedly, crouching down to open the nobleman's pouches, while he continued to lie at her feet, unconscious. "I'm just seeing if he's got anything good-like. Stuff we could use."

"Let it not be said that I am against using what we have for the betterment of all people in Thedas," came a voice from behind Sera.

"Piss!" Sera leapt up, nearly elbowing Solas in the face. "What are you doing sneaking around like that!"

"Isn't that what you asked me to do?" The corners of Solas's lips tugged like he might smile, but it never manifested.

"Sneak around them, not me!" Sera shuddered and crouched again. "Here, help me, he's waking up."

"Apologies. I have yet to master selective sneaking," Solas said in that level voice that Sera suspected meant he was laughing at her. Still, he crouched next to her and helped her fish out a few coins from suspicious hiding places.

"I am not sure I should be condoning this," Peryn said, turning and pretending not to notice what was going on behind him.

"Then don't condone it," Solas suggested. "Just deny witnessing it."

The man on the ground groaned, shifting sluggishly as he crawled his way to consciousness.

"Are you quite well, messere?" Solas asked him, all business and polite concern. Sera chuffed and went back to fishing through his pockets. "Do we need to call you a carriage?"

"Who--?" The marquis blinked at the blurry face leaning over him. "Duke de Ghislain will hear of this!"

"I'm certain he already has," Solas assured him, "though you may have some time before he gets back to you. Do you remember what happened?"
"My pockets--!" The man batted weakly at the hands on him.

"Well, we can't send you home if we don't know who you are, right?" Sera grinned cheerfully and held up one hand. "How many fingers 'm I holding up, then?"

"Fi-- four-- five-- Stop moving your thumb!" The man made a grab for Sera's hand, but she pulled it back, along with his ring. "Help me back inside! I would speak to Bastien at once!"

"That is going to be a problem," Peryn said, still not turning around. "Do you not recall? You were removed. I heard someone say you violated the Chevalier's code, and you were lucky to have lived."

The marquis started to sputter, his mask not quite hiding the angry flush rising to his cheeks. "Violated? Do you not know who I am?" He sat up, wobbling a bit. His hat and mask sat at an angle, threatening to fall off until he reached up to right them.

"No," Peryn said, his accent getting thicker in his agitation, "but I know what you are: no longer invited."

"Why, you--! You--!" The marquis steamed impotently, trying and failing to push himself up. Sera nudged his hat from behind so that it flopped over into his eyes, disorienting him just enough to send him toppling over again. She didn't quite manage to hide a snicker behind her hand.

"Why don't I call you that carriage?" Solas asked serenely.

"You are simply unimaginative." Cormac fluffed his hair with the tips of his fingers and smiled impolitely at the nobleman standing much too close to Anders, who loomed over him like a cat over a cockroach. The terrible Antivan accent had returned, full-force, for this event. "Of all the things one could ask about a Warden, you skip to this?"

"Every word of it is true." Anders put on his thickest mid-Lattenfluss accent and nodded proudly. "You have heard, yes, that we eat darkspawn for breakfast? This is also true. You may ask my companion, Warden Gordon! But, I am certain he would be more than pleased to introduce you to the true virtues of the Grey Wardens."

Cormac nudged the nobleman with his elbow and made an obscene gesture, nodding appreciatively.

"The true virtues of the Grey Wardens are boldness and sacrifice -- we put aside our lives to protect the people of Thedas at any cost to ourselves. It's not easy, but--" Blackwall began, but Anders cut him off.

"No, it's very, very hard." Anders shot a wicked smile at the nobleman.

"Oh my," the nobleman said as though thoroughly scandalised, even as his grin begged for more. "Orlesians.

Blackwall gave Anders a weary, unimpressed look. "Is that all you've gotten out of being a Warden?"

Anders's smile took on a sharp edge that warned Blackwall against that line of questioning. "No, I am simply mentioning the highlights. How long have you been a Warden, again?"

That drew Blackwall up short, and he gave Anders a considering look. "Not long enough, it seems," he said carefully.
"Oh, but you must tell me your stories," the nobleman said, somehow inching even closer, a touch on Anders's arm lingering a bit too long. "Everything you say sounds so very... exciting."

Blackwall rolled his eyes and looked longingly at the table with drinks.

"Jan has such terrible tales of fighting darkspawn underground!" Cormac enthused, tossing an arm around the nobleman's shoulders and tipping his own drink into the man's glass, in the distraction. "The time with the ancient darkspawn priest, the time with the other ancient darkspawn priest -- weren't you naked for that one? -- the time with the broodmother--"

"Not the broodmother." Anders shuddered, glancing around for drinks, himself. Where had Sera ended up? "But, you must have fine stories from the Marches, Warden Gordon. Caverns filled with genlocks and lyrium red like blood, ancient golems lined up for battles they never saw, the fortress in the mountains..."

"Well, you know, the Blight didn't really reach the Marches. Just the refugees. And all the darkspawn were moving south, because of the archdemon. Not very exciting, for the most part."

Blackwall cleared his throat, trying to figure out what was going on and whether Jan and Mack were serious about any of these things. "Just the occasional stabbing some hurlocks, really."

"Oh, he's being modest," Anders said to the nobleman in a loud whisper. To Blackwall, he added, "Come on! Every Warden has at least one good story!"

Blackwall cleared his throat, glancing at the drink table again. "Well," he said, a crooked smile lifting the corner of his beard. "Fighting demons, helping a theoretically heretical organisation save the world... I'd say I'm still in the middle of my 'one good story'."

Blackwall thought it was a rather good line, until Anders blew a raspberry and said, "Cheap excuse!"

"It's true!" Blackwall said defensively.

"Well, then fine. Don't tell us your 'one good' story, then. Tell us a bad story." With a suggestive smirk, Anders added, "Preferably a really bad story."

"Ooh!" Cormac cooed, clutching a hand over his heart. "Tell us something terrible! Something with a broodmother! Or a brothel!"

"There are no similarities between broodmothers and brothels, no matter what jokes you have heard," Anders assured the nobleman, who looked something between amused and concerned.

"What... is a broodmother?" the unfortunate man finally managed.

"Where do you think baby darkspawn come from?" Anders asked, straightening up as if shocked at the question.

"That's ridiculous! There aren't..." The nobleman trailed off as Anders and Cormac started nodding at him, and Blackwall caught up, a moment later. "I thought they sprung fully-formed from the earth!"


Blackwall nodded more certainly. "There are things we don't just tell people. Do nothing but scare them, and our job's to make people less scared, by getting between them and all the terrifying things the Blight has to offer. Of course, Warden Kasselmann has been drinking, and it seems to have loosened his tongue."
"You should see the things he can do when it really gets limber," Cormac teased, bumping the nobleman with his hip.

Anders grinned, then shrugged at Blackwall's long-suffering look. "What? I'm just doing my part to comfort the public."

"And I'm sure the public appreciates it," Blackwall drawled.

"I know I would," the nobleman said, voice heavy with suggestion. "I could use some comforting after all this talk of darkspawn and the Blight." He gave a theatrical shiver not even he believed.

"Well, then you're in luck," Anders purred, turning a smile on Blackwall that was as comforting as a knife at his throat. "I am sure our friend Wardo Gordo here--"

"Please don't call me that."

"--would be happy to comfort you." Anders gave the nobleman a subtle nudge in Blackwall's direction, and the nobleman hummed, giving Blackwall an appraising once-over.

"I'm not sure I can offer the sort of... 'comforts' you're looking for. Didn't I see you with your wife earlier in the evening...?" Blackwall glanced around, a bit nervously.

"It's Orlais," Cormac replied fluttering a hand in a flourish. "For the adventurous, but not quite as adventurous as Antiva, lovers! Antiva is... well, I'm sure you've heard, and every word of it true. Lady Josephine could tell you."

"He's not really... I'm a little more..." Blackwall gestured in front of his chest, absently, looking for a polite way to say what he was thinking.

"You're not that heavy, Gordo," Anders replied, gazing teasingly over the nobleman's head.

"Ah! You like the tits!" A wicked smile slashed across Cormac's face as he threw an arm around Blackwall's shoulders. "Well, I am sure that Lord Morrac could be a great tit, if you let him speak for more than a moment!"

"You say this as if he hasn't been, already!" Anders jovially slapped the nobleman on the back.

"I much prefer that they come in pairs." Blackwall turned a flat look on Cormac, before spotting Iron Bull heading toward them. He widened his eyes desperately at the qunari, looking for an exit.

"Ah! Just the one is not enough!" Cormac gestured broadly across the dance floor. "It is Orlais. They are all tits. We can find you another, yes? Yes."

"You say this as if he hasn't been, already!" Anders jovially slapped the nobleman on the back.

Iron Bull's ears pricked as he sidled closer, as much as one of his bulk could sidle. "What's this about finding tits?" he asked around a lecherous grin, nudging Blackwall with an elbow. "I'm pretty skilled at that, you know."

Blackwall let out a world-weary sigh. "Talk to these two about finding some tits. I'm off to find more wine." He wandered off -- escaped, really -- and Iron Bull stood comfortably in his place.

"So far, we only have the one tit," Anders said wryly, tipping his head at Lord Morrac, who was blinking furiously behind his mask, unsure whether or not he should be offended by all this.

Bull gave him a long, considering look up the length of his body. "One tit is all I need."

A choked squeak caught in Lord Morrac's throat as finally, he started to edge away. "I'm afraid I'm
not really.... ah... Wine was a good idea."

Bull held his arms out wide as the Orlesians started to skitter away. "What? You don't want to ride the Bull?"
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

"What is it with Orlais, and everyone's utter inability to keep their hands on the people they arrived with?" A pair of rescues.

Peryn made his way back into the hall, having left the marquis with the elves. Whatever he might think of their methods, he had no doubt that anything that came of the man would be well-deserved, particularly since Solas seemed to have ... some sense of reason and respectability. Hopefully enough for both of them.

As he looked around the room, Bull and Anders were easy to pick out, at their heights, particularly together, and the other two pairs of horns would be Adaar and Enchanter Vivienne. Cassandra had faded into the crowd, merging relatively easily with the well-dressed lesser nobles, but there! That would be Cullen, who looked particularly offended at something said by someone in a mask.

As he approached, easing through the group of nobles to come out behind Cullen, a hand suddenly pinched his bottom, and Peryn grabbed the wrist, turning to follow the arm up to a sputtering masked face. "No one told me it was going to be this kind of party! I should have worn a nicer codpiece."

He smiled ever so jovially, intercepting another hand, as he came up to Cullen's side. "The people at this place are very friendly, Commander. Maybe too much."

Cullen looked so very relieved, inching closer to Peryn and subtly using him as a shield. "I... generally prefer it if only my husband is this friendly. Then I only have to worry about fending off two hands and maybe a tongue. A leg, if he's feeling particularly creative or frisky." There was a nervous edge to the laugh that followed, the pinched look at the corner of his eyes betraying just how uncomfortable he was.

When another Orlesian hand got a little too friendly, Peryn shifted his weight subtly, so that it grabbed his hip instead of Cullen's ass, looking for all the world like he hadn't done it on purpose.

Peryn smiled at the masked faces around them, surreptitiously helping Cullen inch away from them. "It seems Orlesians -- or, perhaps just these Orlesians -- like blond Templars," Peryn observed. "They have good taste."

"I wonder if they'd like blond mages, too?" Cullen's smile looked like it belonged to someone else, it sat so poorly on his face.

"I think Jan has frightened them all away." Peryn turned to look for Anders, putting himself directly in the path of another hand. "So, they have the sense to save themselves, I think. Enchanter Vivienne's friends know what a Mage-Warden could do in a place like this, with no punishment due."

"That is a very good point," Cullen admitted, the light coming back into his eyes. "Let's go check on Jan, and see what he hasn't frightened off, yet."

"They are curious about the qunari." Peryn smiled almost innocently, pointing to where Anders and
Bull stood talking over the heads that only rose to Anders's shoulder. "I think we will be much less interesting, to them, unless you have some secrets you are hiding." He glanced down Cullen's body and then offered a wry smile.

"I'm not hiding a qunari in my pants, if that is what you mean," Cullen drawled. Still, his relief was palpable, now that they had a plan, a means for escape.

Peryn grinned. "That is good. I never know." He wrapped an arm around Cullen's shoulders and steered him towards the Warden, keeping himself between Cullen and the more lecherous Orlesians.

"Aha!" said Bull, grinning and waving them over when he spotted them. "Speaking of a pair of tits!"

Peryn blinked in confusion, glancing down at his chest as though to make sure it was as flat as he'd left it.

"A 'tit' is also..." Cullen started to explain, only to sigh. "Never mind."

Anders said something incomprehensible, and it took Cullen until Peryn laughed and nodded to realise it wasn't in Common.

"There are many jokes with that." Peryn looked amused. "Though I should maybe be offended."

"Only as offended as you want to be!" Bull grinned down at Peryn.

"So, too many hands for one pair of tits?" Anders guessed, eyeing Cullen.

Cullen nodded and sighed. "What is it with Orlais, and everyone's utter inability to keep their hands on the people they arrived with?"

Cassandra hadn't bothered to remember the man's name. She'd hardly heard it, in fact, distracted as she had been with making sure their Heralds didn't get themselves killed. Yet, somehow in all the fuss, Duke Whatever had managed to corner her between a banister and a table piled with pastries, rattling on about the mechanics of horse racing. Cassandra had no idea what that had to do with her, except for the occasional mention of a Nevarran breed he assumed she cared about.

"But, really, it is the Antivans who have mastered the art..." The duke gestured with a pastry in one hand, raining powdered sugar on her sleeve, which Cassandra dusted off with a grimace.

"Then perhaps you should be having this discussion with our own Antivan," Cassandra said, voice tight with impatience as she gestured in Cormac's direction. She wondered if she could escape under the table.

But the idiot just smiled and kept on. "Ah, but have you seen a true Antivan race horse up close, Seeker?"

Cassandra could feel her temper slipping through her fingers. With a hand on his chest, she pushed him back, giving her space to leave. "You know, you remind me of my uncle. He talked to dead people. Never any mind to whether they were listening."

"Do I need'ta kick him in his stuffed cod, Madame Seeker?" Sera appeared from nowhere, balancing a tray of crackers and assorted toppings, half of them missing the cheese they'd obviously once contained. "I mean, it looks a little understuffed. Unstuffed cod. Plain cod. Bare cod? Nah, too far. Kick him a little and maybe it'll swell up. Give him something to talk about."
There will be no kicking anyone in the cod, the jingles, the eggs, or the Imperial breakfast," Cassandra sighed, helping herself to a cracker with cheese and ... she hoped that was an olive, as she let Sera lead her away.

The duke tried to follow, still chattering about racing.

Sera turned, still walking. "Listen, Lord Forgot-to-stuff-my-cod, the lady's going to take care of some lady things. With other ladies. In the most ladylike way. Probably some fluttering and tittering, even. Why don't you go find some nice horses to impress?"

"Failing that, we have at least one Bull," Cassandra added, pointing over at the qunari between bites of cracker.

Behind his mask, the duke blinked, looking somewhere between affronted and confused, as though he could not comprehend why they would speak to him in such a manner. Thankfully, he stopped following.

"Thank you," Cassandra breathed, sagging with relief. "I hope he is not someone terribly important whom we have offended, but, I am not certain I care. Some aid for the Inquisition comes at too high a price."

"If it's price you're talking about, you'd be happy to know that Marquis du Frozen Nuts has decided to make a financial contribution. Most of it to me, but the Inquisition can have some. Maybe then we can afford some fancy cheeses too. What's the point of Inquisiting if you can't have some fancy-ass cheese now and then, right?" She plucked a cheese-and-cracker combo off her tray and shoved it in her mouth, chewing with her mouth open in a way that made Cassandra grimace.

"That was awfully nice of him," Cassandra said around a sigh.

"Well, he had some help with that decision, but after he made such an ass of himself, I guess he just wanted to buy his way back onto our good side. Not that he was ever on our good side... was he? I don't think he was. Somebody probably knows." Sera waved a hand dismissively, as she spotted Solas gazing awkwardly up at Bull. "Lookit! Is he flirting? I think he's flirting. ... Would that even fit? I bet not."

"Would what f--" Cassandra followed Sera's gaze. "That is ... unlikely. To be worth considering. I'm sure they are not flirting. Solas does not strike me as the flirting type."

"Which is why he looks like he's going to piss down his leg and follow it out of the room." Sera cackled.

Cassandra crinkled her nose at that visual, opened and closed her mouth a few times. "I am uncertain you are an improvement over Duke Horseman."

"What? Just because I'm talking about a different kind of riding? Now that is a sport I would watch! Solas as Bull's 'jockey'." Grinning, she went to nudge Cassandra with her elbow only to hit air. She turned to find Cassandra walking away from her, towards Fen'Din. "Oh come on! Come back! I have crackers and cheese! I have..." She glanced back at her tray. "...okay I have crackers!" When Cassandra kept walking, Sera huffed and shoved a few more crackers in her mouth. "Fine! No crackers for you, then!"
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

Servants and servicing. A brief concern about motivations.

"So, no difficulty with the noble asshole?" Bull murmured, drawing Solas closer with one hand that covered most of the elf's back.

"He was hardly worthy of concern, being as he could barely stand without assistance," Solas demurred, looking as uncomfortable as possible, with a tray of wine in one hand. "I assure you that if he had been, we were well-equipped to handle him."

"If anybody gets out of hand with you, you let me or Cassandra know. We'll set 'em straight." Bull nodded firmly and let go of Solas, turning his head to address the noblewoman on his other side. "No adventure in these elves! Not one of them wants to ride the Bull!"

Across the room, he watched Adaar emerge from a hidden servants' passage. "Maybe just because they got their fill of ox-meat somewhere else. You ask me, though, there's no such thing as too much of a good thing."

Adaar looked around, pausing when he spotted them to offer a wide, lopsided grin. He swaggered their way, plucking a glass of something off a servant's tray, after checking to make sure the 'servant' wasn't Sera.

"Enjoying ourselves, are we?" Solas drawled, toasting him with his glass.

"Now it's starting to feel more like a party!" Adaar said, throwing his arms out wide. Still, he looked over Solas' head as though searching for someone, his gaze finally pausing on the silver horns of Madame de Fer. His self-satisfied grin turned a little wistful. "Have you spoken with our fine hostess?"

"Our fine hostess is hardly one to be caught consorting with the servants," Solas pointed out. "She's made enough of a splash with you and Fen'Din... and I see someone else has mistaken him for one of the servants, again."

Bull sighed, taking a glass from Solas's tray. "Do I need to go rescue the crazy elf?"

"I think you may need to rescue the noblewomen." Solas's eyebrow crept upward as the two women who had apparently been lecturing Fen'Din staggered back as he opened his hand. "I don't know how they keep taking him for a servant. He looks Dalish. I understand no house in Orlais would try to hire from a Dalish clan."

"Not if they like living," Bull laughed and sipped his drink. "What is this? It's good."

"If it's pink, it's a northern Fereldan elderberry wine cut with Antivan champagne. If it's yellow, it's White Seleny." Solas remained still, holding the tray out, as he watched the drama unfold. "How have your diplomatic efforts been taken?" he asked Adaar.

Adaar cleared his throat, not quite biting back a smirk. "I would say they were taken pretty well, to
go by the reaction.” He arched his eyebrows suggestively and threw back his drink in one gulp. He set the empty glass on Solas's tray. "Thank you, goodly elf. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a husband to save."

Adaar parted the sea of masks and made a beeline for Fen'Din. The crowd of nobles were whispering about him behind their hands, only to pause and gape as Adaar came up behind Fen'Din and, with a much-practiced move, swept him up onto his shoulders.

"There. They're less likely to mistake you for a servant from up there.” The masks didn't hide the looks of confusion on the surrounding faces, and Adaar beamed back. "Good evening, everyone! And how are we enjoying the salon?"

As the crowd backed away, murmuring behind their fans, Fen'Din fluttered his fingers at the retreating faces.

"I was handling that," he muttered, "though this also works." He paused and sniffed. "You smell like ... an old friend. I trust you've left someone satisfied and thinking they've had the better deal?"

Adaar opened and closed his mouth, unsure if he wanted to ask about this 'old friend'. "Well, I left them both smiling, so I'd say so."

"It's good to be working with someone who can make the best of those deals. I had forgotten how convenient that was." Fen'Din hummed, thoughtfully. "What are your thoughts on our hostess, so far? I'd like the least contaminated opinion that can be mustered, in this crowd, and you seem to be in the right place to provide it. Obviously, she and I have something of a history, and I would hate to think of that clouding my judgement, however much I might need to rely on it, later."

Adaar's eyes sought her out again, and he paused to admire the graceful sweep of her walk. "I don't know much about mage or Circle politics, but I do know she's the type of person I'd want on my side rather than against it. Of course, she's too Orlesian not to have her own agenda, I'm sure."

"Everyone has their own agenda, Orlesian or not," Fen'Din pointed out, glancing down as Adaar's head turned and back up to follow his line of sight to Vivienne, who walked as if challenging the idea she hadn't the right -- the walk of a powerful mage in the company of those who might, at any time, start barking at her heels. "But, she likes you, for now. Whatever her goals, she's attached herself to you to achieve them, and we should very likely have Lady Josephine take a good look at those. I don't want to be surprised, later." He paused. "Not that I'm averse to helping her achieve any number of things, but there are a select few that I anticipate and see little good end in. I would like to be wrong."

Adaar frowned, trying to look up without moving his head too much. No need to accidentally stab his passenger. "Do you plan to share those 'select few' things?"

Fen'Din chuckled, quietly, trying to figure out if he could reach down far enough to get a drink, from here. "The one that causes me the most concern is that she has always had a particular distaste for the schools of Necromancy, Spirit Healing, and Entropy, pronouncing that we are but a single step from summoning demons, because we negotiate with native beings of the Fade. But, demons are often the result of strong emotion -- fear, hate, rage, lust -- or the use of force. A calm practitioner who respects the spirit's will has little to concern themselves about, and the most basic precautions should, and often do, ensure that the occasional accident is contained and resolved with little consequence. We have had the argument on more than one occasion, and she has been waiting for the opportunity to outlaw the practice of those schools, in the Circle. Ridiculous, really, and the number of senior enchanter who specialise in Entropy, particularly, has always been a notable foil, but with everyone dead... I cannot expect there are many of sufficient standing to counter such a move, particularly with
the Inquisition behind it."

Adaar hummed in consideration. "I can see where that would be a problem, yes. Granted, personally, I could do without your chain of spirits using corpse puppets, but the mice are cute."

As he was speaking, Adaar noticed Cassandra pushing her way towards them, face pinched in a way that said she needed a whole tray of drinks, and with the way she eyed Solas' tray as she passed, Adaar had expected her to take just that.

"We'll just leave any mage and Circle-related diplomacy to you, all right?" Adaar suggested to Fen'Din as he watched Cassandra. "Unless, of course, you find a situation in which my kind of diplomacy works better. Surviving, Seeker?"

"This is foolishness. All of it. I have not yet spoken to a single person I would not rather push off a balcony. Truly, no one comprehends the seriousness of what has happened. They all believe they can return to the cities for the season, and everything will be just as they left it, when they return!" Cassandra shrugged in exasperation.

"Are they wrong, though?" Fen'Din asked, waving to an elf with a tray of drinks. "That is the purpose in them paying us, isn't it? Give us the money to hire soldiers and feed our multitudes, and we will handle the demons, so you don't have to." He reached down to the tray upraised by Adaar's shoulder and picked something that looked fruity. "Thank you. Should it suit you to do something else with your time, you'd be welcome with the Inquisition. We can always use someone with a long history of working with ... nobles."

"Thank you, ser, but I'm not climbing any qunari, if that's what it takes. I'm good right here on the ground, thanks." The elf smiled nervously up at Fen'Din.

Adaar cackled. "You can do your inquisiting at ground level. A variety of perspectives is useful. But if you change your mind about climbing qunari later..." Adaar gave the elf a suggestive wink. She didn't look convinced.

"Adaar," Cassandra said reproachfully.

"What?" Adaar asked innocently, grabbing something off the tray as well before the elf shook her head with an amused smile and continued on. "Maybe she'd like to be taller too." He pointed up at Fen'Din.

Cassandra looked unimpressed, or at least Adaar thought she did. He was beginning to think that was just her face, with how often he received that look.

"I can see a great deal from up here," Fen'Din noted, "including the sudden shift in the trajectory of the ballroom. The first shift is heading out."

"I see you've done these before," the elf at ground level remarked.

"What? Oh, no. Never been to one. Suppers in the Circle, though. It's the same kind of motion, if you leave out the dancing." Fen'Din's eyes sparkled. "But, should you wish to do some work for us, I'm told we pay quite well. Consider it. Also consider climbing a qunari. The view is fantastic."
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

Serious concerns about darkspawn. More serious concerns about Anders.

On the way back, Sera entertained them with impersonations of Orlesian nobility, taking on an exaggerated accent that involved far more spitting than necessary, and Varric had a feeling that quite a few people would be offended by it. Yet he even noticed Blackwall laughing, lips pursed tight under his beard.

Varric's pony had to trot a little faster to keep up with the horses and Adaar's ridiculous druffalo -- a druffalo that Varric didn't want to be following directly behind, as he'd found out the hard way -- and Varric was resigned to needing to look up to talk to his friends even on pony-back. Granted, everyone needed to look up to talk to Anders, but when Varric glanced up at him, it was to see Anders looking distracted, the skin around his eyes tight in a way that spoke of pain.

Cullen could see it, too. Too long in the saddle, maybe? Certainly his own--

And then Anders fell, like a sack of jelly, his eyes rolling back the only sign of it, before the horse danced away, not to step on him and Cormac nearly toppled trying to grab him.

Cullen brought his horse around in seconds, tossing the reins to Cassandra as he dismounted next to Anders and Cormac. "What's happened?"

Cormac shook his head, hands glowing faintly with green light. "I don't know. He's been complaining about headaches since the Breach, but I wasn't expecting this. I don't even know what this is, but we have to get him out of the snow."

"Adaar!" Fen'Din called toward the front of the slowing procession. "Could you fit another two sackweight up there with you?"

Adaar dismounted, brows knit with concern as he hurried over. Anders was out cold, his skin waxy. "I think so. If not, I'll walk." He paused, careful not to interrupt any healing Cormac might be doing, before hefting Anders up in his arms and carrying him back to the front of the procession.

"Since the Breach, you say?" Cassandra asked.

Cormac nodded, following Adaar toward the druffalo. "We thought it was just the strain. That much healing that quickly, the disruption in the Fade -- he's a Spirit Healer, so the rush of demons makes that harder. And who is he going to tell? He's the healer. He's just... I really think he just needs a couple of days' sleep, but you try telling him that, with all the demons everywhere."

"I could make certain he sleeps," Fen'Din offered, the concern more obvious in his voice than on his face.

"I may accept that offer, once he wakes up and tells me he's fine. But, I want to make sure putting him under isn't going to kill him -- he did just fall off a horse and smack his head." Cormac rubbed his face and laughed, resigned. "Living with Jan is always an adventure. He forgets that humans have limits." He looked up at Blackwall. "Is that a Warden thing? I feel like that might be a Warden
thing."

Blackwall's face twisted almost sadly. "It's our job to do what most humans can't. So yes, I think it might be."

"Just don't go falling off any horses," Varric said, not quite able to keep the worry out of his joking tone. "We only have the one druffalo, and I'm sure Adaar would rather not have to strap you to his back."

"The dwarf speaks the truth," Adaar called back. The joking was hollow but helped eased some of their anxiety as he gently set Anders across the druffalo's back, climbing up after him and making sure he was secure. The druffalo made a weird rumbling noise but otherwise did not seem to mind or notice the extra weight.

Half a day further down the road, Anders woke in a panic, nearly falling off the druffalo, as he struggled to get up, one heavy qunari hand keeping him in place until he realised this wasn't a bed, but it also wasn't the Deep Roads.

"Roundear! Stay down, or I'll put you down!" Fen'Din barked, and his voice cut through the haze.

"What did I walk into?" Anders asked, suddenly too still. "I don't think anything's broken..."

"The ground," Cormac told him, coming up on the other side. "You passed out and fell off your horse. Sound familiar?"

"What about Blackwall?" Anders lifted his head, both hands holding onto the druffalo's fur. "I heard -- Never mind what I heard, but he should have heard it too. Warden thing. Is he all right? Let me down so I can see if he's injured."

"He's... fine," Adaar said, brows knitting as he glanced back over his shoulder. Blackwall was sitting up in his saddle, the picture of health, and at Adaar's look, Blackwall frowned and coaxed his horse forward to meet them.

"Is he all right?" Blackwall asked, tipping his head at Anders.

Anders craned his neck up at his voice. He couldn't get a clear view from this angle, but Blackwall had sounded fine, looked fine from what he could see. But Anders had heard... Cold fear shivered down his spine. No. It couldn't have been just him.

"Can you let me down, regardless?" Anders asked. Adaar slowed the druffalo to a stop, at least, but he looked to the mages on either side for an answer to that question.

"C'mere, pretty thing. You don't get to ride your own horse, just yet. I don't want you hitting your head or falling off a cliff, before we get back to Haven." Cormac reined in his horse and held out a hand. "I'll put my bags somewhere else. You'll ride with me, until we get home."

"I'm not going to fall off my horse!" Anders scoffed, sliding down from the druffalo. "What kind of idiot falls off a horse?"

"You." Cormac raised his eyebrow. "How hard did you hit your head?"

"And now I've had a bit of a nap, and I'm fine. Just tired. Weird nightmare." Anders shook his head, and shot a look at Blackwall. "You really didn't hear it?"

"You just said it was a nightmare." Blackwall shrugged. "Unless you're picking up a single
darkspawn somewhere around here -- or around where we were, and we're half a day out, and nothing attacked, so..."

"That was not a single darkspawn." Anders swallowed and rubbed healing into the back of his neck. "I'm too young for this," he muttered, staring intently into the snow, before he gave in, taking the bags from Cormac and moving them to the horse he wouldn't be riding.

"Sexy darkspawn time?" Cormac asked, putting the pieces together in a way he'd hoped they'd never fit.

"Andraste's tits, I hope not. But, if Wardo Gordo's not hearing another Blight rising in Orlais..."

Anders got up on the horse, wrapping his arms around Cormac. "I probably just hit my head and had a weird dream because everything smelled like druffalo." He wasn't thinking about that. Couldn't be true. He hadn't been a Warden that long, had he?

Adaar nodded sagely. "Druffalo stink can do that to you. Sorry, Betty." He patted his druffalo's side, still eyeing Anders and Blackwall in bemusement.

Blackwall's beard twitched as he frowned, his hands nervously twisting his reins. "It's been a long few days," he offered. "You might have just overexerted yourself. You don't... hear anything now?"

Anders rubbed his forehead, face still looking grey and pinched. Justice echoed his concern, and Anders wondered if that was it, if joining with Justice had messed something up and now he was getting his Calling early. He always thought he'd be dead before that happened. "Not right now, no." Which was a small relief. Perhaps it was just a fluke, as he kept assuring them.
Chapter Summary

Why pick sides, when you can have it all?

Anders slept, whether he wanted to or not, under a thick pile of furs, with a multitude of small, skeletal animals curled up on him. Fen'Din lay beside him, playing cards with Cormac and Peryn.

"I think you are cheating," Peryn said, squinting at Cormac.

"No, he's actually just that terrible at Diamondback," Fen'Din replied, tossing another chip of wax into the pot.

"I'm not that bad! At least I can win sometimes!" Cormac complained, his whining overpowering the squeak of the frozen hinges, as Cullen ducked in.

"Sorry to cut in--"

"We're not dealing you in until the end of this game." Fen'Din pointed at Cullen, still looking at the cards in play.

"No, I don't-- Don't deal me in." Cullen held up his hands and shook his head.

"Really, don't. The last time someone dealt him in, he left wearing a towel." Cormac laughed and played another card. "You come to check on Jan?"

"No, but I will, while I'm here. How is he?" Cullen moved curiously around the side of the bed, revealing the women standing behind him.

"Sleeping, thank the Creators." Cormac sighed. "I didn't think we'd get him to lie down ever again, after that. He'll... probably be all right. Assuming he's right about it just being nightmares brought on by Orlais and druffalo travel."

Cullen blinked, brow furrowing, clearly unsure what to make of that. "Considering Orlais is a nightmare, I would not be surprised. No offence to the Orlesians present."

Leliana arched an eyebrow, too amused to pull off a stern look. "Speaking of Orlais and nightmares, my agents informed us of your encounters with Lord Seeker Lucius and Grand Enchanter Fiona. It seems you are popular."

Cullen's expression darkened at the statement. "And it seems the Templars have abandoned their sense along with the capital," he muttered, a gloved hand rubbing his forehead. If he had been disgusted with the Order before, he was well beyond that now. And that made his chest ache, the knowledge that something he used to believe in so strongly could betray its own ideals like this, to this extent.

"I intend to meet with Fiona, once Jan is well enough to travel," Fen'Din assured them. "I know that Torrin is also in Redcliffe, though we couldn't get through, last time. We will have allies in our ventures against the Breach, regardless of whether the Templars can pull their heads out of their
asses. The Lord Seeker seems quite flexible, in that regard."

"He is a good man!" Cassandra insisted, but paused, lips tight. "Something has happened to him."

"He might be possessed," Cormac offered, shrugging. "We all think it's not going to happen to us, but I've seen possessed Templars, possessed noblewomen with no magical talent. Shit, you read the Tale of the Champion. Varric's got that story about the lady who tried to take Starkhaven and sacrificed her whole family to a desire demon. I'm not saying he summoned something or he did it on purpose. I'm just saying that in some places, you don't need to be a mage to wind up covered in demons. Kirkwall, in particular."

"How well did you know him?" Peryn asked, choosing his words carefully. "Are you sure this is not a... fake? An actor? If Tevinter is coming south, they would be smart to make people think the Templars have abandoned them -- to make the Templars abandon them. There are no real Templars, in Tevinter. We are dangerous."

"I..." Cassandra massaged her temples with her thumb and middle finger. "All I can tell you is that this is not like him. The Lucius I know is an honourable man. He..." She trailed off, teeth worrying her lip as she considered their suggestions, considered that the man they had met was not Lord Seek Lucius at all. "It is an... unsettling thought if a man of his position and integrity can be so easily replaced or... or possessed." She shuddered to think of it. "But I would not throw it out as a possibility."

"Wonderful," Cullen muttered under his breath. "Here I thought I would be getting away from all the talk about demons and possession after leaving Kirkwall."

"Right?" Varric replied, throwing out his hands. "I'm trying to figure out which one of us is the demon magnet here." He regretted the words the next moment at the way Cullen winced, remembering suddenly what Cullen had dealt with before even coming to Kirkwall. "Or maybe it's the druffalo."

"Leave Betty out of this!" Adaar scolded from where he sat, half asleep by the fire.

"Have you considered meeting with the Templars, as well?" Josephine asked, easing around Leliana to sit on the corner of Anders's bed. "We have Ser Cullen and Ser Peryn -- I'm sure they could win over those not entirely swayed by the Lord Seeker's decision. I'm certain Orlais would also be grateful to have the Order returned to its proper place."

"I should not be there." Fen'Din looked over his shoulder at Josephine. "Sending a senior enchanter to win back the Templars might be seen as... antagonistic. Fortunately, there are two of us. How do you feel about taking a nice holiday with Cullen and Peryn, Adaar? See how well your diplomatic excellence serves you with the Templars."

"A large group of mostly men, kept in close quarters, with a lot of... physical training. I think his diplomatic excellence will do a great job." Cormac laughed, then realised he was in a room with two Templars.

"I am-- That is not-- That--! No." Cullen folded his arms. "There has never been a time in my years with the Order that I would have considered... no."

"And yet, you married Viscount Kirkwall. I've heard rumours about the closets in that house."

Cormac smirked.

"There's no shame in it, Ser Cullen," Adaar assured him, chair creaking as he sat up properly. "I
mean, even back with the Valo-Kas mercenary group, sometimes a few of my kith were the only ones around. Oh, there was this one time, with Ashaad Three, before he left to join another company where he got promoted to Ashaad One... He and I--"

"I'm not sure any of us needs to hear this," Cullen said, frantically cutting his hands through the air.

"I do," said Josephine. She blinked, noted Cullen's scandalised stare, and touched her fingers to her lips. "Oh. Did I say that out loud?"

Leliana hid a laugh behind her cough. "Well, it is related to his, ah, 'diplomacy', and that is your area of expertise, Josie." Her smile was perfectly innocent.

"Anyway," Cullen cut back in. "Adaar speaking with the Templars while Fen'Din speaks with the mages seems like a solid plan."

"I do not trust Fiona's offer of safe passage," Cassandra muttered, trying to remain grateful that someone was going to check on Lucius.

"You think it's a trap?" Fen'Din asked, studying Cassandra's face. He'd try to draw that look, later. Ask Anders about it.

"I do. Did you see how nervous she looked, when you brought up Tevinter?" Cassandra crossed her arms against the elf's unwavering gaze.

"And she is the bait." Fen'Din paused, considering the problem. "We will go cautiously. I will not be travelling alone. If we are walking into a trap, they have already taken Torrin and the others. That or Torrin has not yet determined what is happening, and I will have unexpected assistance. Either way, I genuinely doubt we can be taken by surprise, particularly with Leliana's innumerable eyes. Thank you, Sister."

"She has only two eyes," Peryn pointed out, cocking his head curiously at Leliana.

Leliana's smile said she knew something he didn't. "Two is all I need. Redcliffe has been oddly cagey about letting people in, but I will see what I can find out. Regardless, we should be on our guard."

Cassandra frowned but nodded, mollified, if not completely convinced.

Adaar sat back in his chair, eyeing the lot of them before shrugging at Fen'Din. "Looks like you'll need to ride someone else's shoulders."

Fen'Din cocked a thumb at Anders and smiled a little too brightly, the expression looking nearly deranged on his somewhat unpractised face.

"Has Kinnon made it back from out east?" Cormac asked, suddenly, realising his mind had been wholly on Anders since he'd fallen, on the road.

Peryn nodded. "He is still conspiring with Mistress Lavellan. They are very wicked in the name of good ends."

"We've earned the full support of Bann Traft, for the Inquisition and the refugees." Leliana looked proud and Josephine even prouder. "Bann Kildarn, on the other hand, should be far more careful what he asks for."

"Brother Kinnon would make an excellent ... negotiator, if he desires work, when all this is over."
Josephine's sly smile said something even more, but it was largely incomprehensible. "Bann Kildarn does not even pretend to be pleased with the Inquisition or the terms we have arranged, but he is well-contained on all sides. Many of his knights have defected to Bann Traft's employ, in the wake of our intercession. It will be a very long time before Kildarn can raise the necessary force to oppose us, and most of Ferelden will continue to oppose him purely because no one wants to agree with him. I foresee some excellent alliances coming of this."

Cormac laughed.

"Sounds like Kinnon's been taking lessons in more than dancing from Jan," Fen'Din remarked, playing a card and drawing another.

"I believe most of the actual planning may have been Ellana's," Leliana suggested. "But, Kinnon made the best of being both human and a Chantry Brother for the actual negotiating part. They are a very good team. I suspect he has worked with elves, before."

Fen'Din cleared his throat and flicked the corner of his own ear. "Are you sure you don't want to play, Ser Cullen?"

Cormac raised a hand. "I'm sure I don't want to see Cullen in his smalls again!"

"I have... a great deal of work to attend to. Planning. Yes. If we're going to see the Lord Seeker, I should be prepared." Cullen backed toward the door. "Another time, perhaps."

Josephine watched Cullen stumble out into the cold, backward, before she winked at Fen'Din. "If you do get him playing, send a runner."
On the Road

Chapter Summary

Riding out to the east and south, in hope of finding something worth the trouble.

The few days across the bannorn were pleasant, despite the winter chill, as nothing was colder than Haven, high in the Frostbacks. A lowland winter seemed almost refreshing in comparison. Where Herald Adaar passed, rumours followed, as the villages left behind were far less plagued by demons. Truly, then, common wisdom had it, he must be sent by Andraste to protect them, though only the Maker knew why she'd picked a qunari -- perhaps to make the point they could be saved.

"There's nothing but fields out here. It's all... fieldy. What do these people even do? I mean, there's people, right? It's not just miles of fields with no one in?" Sera looked around, seeing nothing but acres of snow-dusted farmland.

"It's the sheep," Cullen said, with a wry smile. "The sheep tend the fields and bring the crops to market in town."

Varic choked on a laugh.

"Oh, see, now you're just being a shit." Sera laughed and grinned at Cullen. "'S a good look on you, shit."

Cullen looked dismayed and even Cassandra couldn't quite hold off a snort.

"Shitfaced might be better," Adaar said, stretching his shoulder muscles as he walked. "That's the look I plan to have when all this is done."

"I'll drink to that," Bull said with a smirk.

Adaar had to admit the stillness was a little unnerving after the constant excitement they'd had since... how long since he'd gotten his mark again? He looked down at his palm, which glowed green even through his gauntlet. He was almost getting used to the thing.

"But I'm with Cullen on the 'just sheep'," Adaar added. "No demons in the area, that I can tell." He waved his glowing hand.

"Thank the Maker for small mercies," Blackwall grumbled.

"So glad I got to come with the sensible people," Sera went on, looking at the group around her, before settling on Blackwall and pointing at Cassandra. "Even if she's got no sense of humour and you look like you've got a chipmunk stuck to your face. It's good! We're going to see the stabby guys --" She pantomimed stabbing something. "-- and none of that magic shite, yeah? Eugh. Magic. You know? Just... eugh."

Varic's eyes sparkled with mischief. "One could argue that Templars are magic, too. Drinking lyrium and getting freaky powers from it? Sounds pretty Tevinter, to me. But, what do I know? I'm a dwarf. It's all a bunch of guys in skirts having a pissing contest about dreams."
"You could, but it'd be a stupid argument." Sera stuck out her tongue and pointed at Cullen. "Tell him I'm right, Ser Shit! It's just drinking a potion! I can drink a potion and then nobody can set me on fire. Doesn't make me magic! It's just using normal things that come out of a bottle!"

Cullen shifted uncomfortably, the set of his shoulders stiff. "Not all, er, 'potions' are quite that simple." Just bringing it up reminded Cullen of the headache behind his eyes. For the most part, now, it was just background noise, a new baseline to measure other pain against. A part of him wished they'd brought Anders even as the rest of him knew that would have ended in disaster.

"Depends on whether or not you consider lyrium a 'normal thing'," Varric said dryly, shrugging at Sera. "After what I saw in Kirkwall, I'm leaning towards a hard 'no'."

Sera huffed and shook her head. "We're talking normal lyrium. You know, normal normal, blue and glowy. Not that red shite. Blech. Who'd drink that, anyway?"

Drinking red lyrium? Cullen shook his head, but thought back to Meredith. "No one, I hope. I'm sure it would be fatal." He held his tongue against any comments about the inherent issues with 'normal' lyrium. Now wasn't the time. That was a conversation for after they'd brought the Templars around -- he didn't want anyone on the team getting the wrong idea about what they were up against, or what it might be appropriate to mention.

"Corporal Vale!" Anders waved from the top of the hill, spotting the man standing at the crossroads, talking with some of the villagers.

Vale waved back, gesturing for Anders and his companions to join him, and within moments, they did, mounted on steeds anyone would be proud to ride.

"Warden. Enchanter." Vale nodded to both Anders and Fen'Din. "No qunari, today? A shame. There's some young women in the village who were looking forward to thanking him."

"And I am terribly certain he'd appreciate it." Fen'Din's eyes gleamed, amused. "But, no, Adaar has set off to handle something else. We're heading up to Redcliffe. I've got a meeting with the Grand Enchanter, and I very much look forward to seeing her and Torrin again. Is there anything we should know about the road, in that direction? Any trouble with bandits or demons?"

Vale shook his head. "You closed everything up, last time, and the bandits ... there aren't any who will come down here, with the roads full of Templars. It's like having an entire army to guard us. We're not aching for reinforcements, now, I'll tell you that much."

"Ah, it's good to see the evidence of our competence," Kinnon said brightly, looking around. He could see the difference in the people's faces. Life was still a struggle, and the weather was still terrible, but they smiled more easily.

Vivienne looked around curiously, her horned hat and finely tailored robes at odds with the grey, muddy atmosphere. "You will have to tell me the story here," she said, eyeing the smattering of Templars in bemusement.

"Corporal, while we have you..." Anders said, reaching into his potions bag, where he'd kept a few documents they had picked up over the course of their travels. He inspected a letter that had seen better days, nodded, and asked, "Do you know of anyone named 'Tanner' around here?"

"Tanner?" Vale shook his head, then nodded toward a small path that led out of the village proper. "There's a tanner, but his name's Heinrich. Keeps his house a little out of the village because of the
"smell, but ... no one named Tanner."

"Huh. Well, we'll ask in Redcliffe, I guess, and then I'll check in with Heinrich on the way back, if we don't find anything." Anders shrugged.

"And if you find someone who knows Ser Corran, we have some bad news. It looks like something caught him on the road." Cormac shook his head and gestured to the letter. "Tanner's the only name in his gear, so we were hoping... But, with all the Templars still here, someone has to be missing him."

"I'll ask. I'm glad you found him, whoever he is. You've done a lot of good work, letting people know what happened. We've lost a lot of people, but at least we know for sure." Vale nodded slowly, letting the words settle.

"Why are there so many Templars in this ... little hamlet?" Vivienne asked, this time turning expectant eyes on Kinnon. "You must know, Brother."

Kinnon let out an airy laugh. "Mostly because they got a good scolding from Cassandra." When Vivienne just gave him a blank look, Kinnon shrugged and said, "Mage rebellion. Templars fighting mages. It was a huge mess out here, with the people at the Crossroads caught in the, well, crossfire. We -- as in the Inquisition -- were able to convince both sides that the demons were the bigger problem, and now everyone is playing nice and helping the villagers."

"You mean there are apostates here as well?" Vivienne asked, her tone saying she was not sure she approved.

"Right now, we're all apostates," Solas reminded her, with an irritation born of the many 'friendly disagreements' they'd had on the road here.

"Except me!" Anders grinned a little too brightly. "As a Grey Warden, I can never be an apostate. I could, in theory, become a maleficar, but I can never be an apostate."

"I met one, once, as a child," Peryn reminisced. "A maleficar Warden. I begged the Sisters to put him out, but he had come for forgiveness. I do not know what he did, but I knew what he was. It makes them sticky, like being in a swamp. I do not think it ever goes away."

"It can," Solas assured him, quietly, "but not many are willing to try. They set foot on the path, and they follow it to the end. But, asking forgiveness may have been that one turning around. He may have tried to find his way back."

"I do not know." Peryn shrugged, shaking his head. "I never saw him again."

"But, we are not maleficars, as Peryn has been quick to notice," Fen'Din pointed out, with a sharp look at Vivienne. "And we are all apostates, even you, because the Circle has fallen and the Templars have fled. The Inquisition will happily take on those Templars who are willing to turn their swords to fighting demons, instead of slaying innocent mages, made apostate by circumstance. And we will take those mages, as well. It is time for something new."

Vivienne frowned, tipping her head in acknowledgement of his points, even as she countered, "The Circles are -- or were -- there for a reason. Changes need to be made, of course, but they exist for the safety of everyone, mages included. An untrained mage is a danger, particularly here, with so many demons around."

"Actually haven't had too many demon problems lately," Vale said, and Kinnon was relieved by the shift of subject, noting the flash of blue in Anders's eyes. "Not since you came through here last,
anyway. I'm not sure what it is you're doing to those rifts, but it seems to be working, thank the Maker. And thank you, I guess, Herald."

"You are very welcome, Corporal. Demons are bad for everyone, including themselves." Fen'Din could hear Vivienne scoff, behind him. "Stating the obvious, I suppose. Thank you again, for keeping these people settled. We will return, once we have seen to things in Redcliffe. If there's anything you need, send your requisitions on to Lady Josephine. I understand we're having some difficulties with our Requisitions Master, right this moment."

"Thank you again, Herald. Andraste mark your path." Vale saluted and stepped back from the road, waving the horses on, toward Redcliffe.
"So we're what, supposed to meet up with all these cod-shoving noble so-and-so's and then...? Have a fancy party where Herald Horny over there has a dance-off with the Lord Seeker, to impress his stabby crew? You know, like in that story about the fiddler and the pride demon, right?" Sera laughed at her own joke. "Except not a demon. There's no demons here, just stabby arseholes we've got to impress."

"Depends on what you mean by 'dance-off,'" Adaar said, waving his arms in a wait-a-minute gesture. "The Lord Seeker is, uh..."

"Like you wouldn't do it if it'd get us out of there faster, yeah?" Sera said with a crooked grin, nudging Adaar with her elbow.

Adaar opened and closed his mouth, head tilting in consideration. "For the Inquisition? Probably. Not sure I'm his type, though."

Cassandra sighed in exasperation at them both. "No dance parties," she explained, with the kind of irritation that said she had already explained this. "The nobles will come with us in a show of support and demand the Templars close the Breach. Even the Lord Seeker would find it difficult to ignore so many nobles on his doorstep."

"Especially when headed by the Herald of Andraste!" Blackwall chimed in.

"We've already seen what he thinks of the Herald," Varric reminded him. "We've already seen what the Herald thinks of Andraste, too."

"She's got nice tits in all the pictures," Sera added, looking thoughtful.

Cullen tipped his head to one side and then the other, trying to look as if he were weighing a thought rather than trying to get rid of a splitting headache. Just another thing he and Anders had in common. "Leliana says the rumours of our 'Heralds' being escorted from the Fade by Andraste, herself, have spread fairly deep into the Templar ranks. On the one hand, that makes things easier for us. On the other hand, I want to have a serious chat with whoever was responsible for training these men."

"You know that means Leliana's been spreading rumours, right?" Varric pointed out. "I have no doubt she's very convincing."

"Fair point," Cullen conceded.

"So yeah," Adaar added. "We're essentially throwing a tantrum in front of his gates, but loud enough that he can't ignore it. Works for me. As for being escorted from the Fade..." Adaar shook his head, his smile more incredulous than amused. "Well, if I have a growing reputation, we might as well use it."

"Yeah, I'm sure you have no problem using your growing 'reputation'," Sera said, her grin and the
cant of her eyebrows making the word lewd.

"On all the Templars?" Adaar drawled. "Hope someone brought some stamina potions."

"I am surrounded by children," Cassandra muttered. "However you do it, if we can move the Templars to question the Lord Seeker's orders, he may rethink his stance."

"Do we care what the Lord Seeker thinks?" Bull asked. "It's his Templars we're after, not him."

"Depending on how many we can turn, we may have to care." Varric cleaned an invisible fleck of dirt off Bianca, then checked the sights for the sixth time that hour. "If we take a few Templars, and he keeps the rest, we're going to have a serious fight on our hands, if he comes after us for heresy, or whatever they're calling it, this week."

"And if I punch him so hard his head comes off, we're probably still going to lose too many of them. Taking out the leadership helps break an army, but scaring the shit out of people you're trying to bring around to your side doesn't help much."

"So, we just have to make him sound like the bad guy, right? Doesn't seem hard. I heard about Val Royeaux, and Lord Seeker Lick-nuts sounds like a real prick. Should be easy enough to prove. He's wronged somebody who'll do more than just talk." Sera grinned broadly, excitement gleaming in her eyes. "So if he doesn't play nice, we rub his face in his own shit, and steal all his people! They'll want to leave, when we're done with him."

"And somehow find us the saner option," Cassandra said under her breath with a dubious look at Sera.

Soon Therinfal Redoubt loomed over them, grey stone against grey skies. Puddles pooled between stones on the bridge to the gate, just enough to loosen the mud from their boots as they approached the milling crowd of nobles arrayed outside. Varric squinted up at the battlements, Bianca leaning casually but ready against his shoulder, but he couldn't tell if anyone was up there.

"The Herald of Andraste!" a voice called out, and Adaar turned to find a masked Orlesian man walking their way, waving a gloved hand.

"Lord Esmeral Abernache," the Orlesian introduced himself, and Adaar gave him credit for not seeming fazed at the fact he was qunari. "It is not unlike the second dispersal of the reclaimed Dales!"

"Elf shit," Sera muttered, rolling her eyes and continuing on past the Orlesian.

"The Lord Seeker is willing to hear our petition about closing the Breach. A credit to our alliance with the Inquisition," Abernache went on, gesturing voluminously. "Care to mark the moment? Ten Orlesian houses walk with you."

"The Inquisition values this alliance, Lord Abernache." Cassandra nodded to the man. "The Templars must see reason. We can't let the Breach endanger us any longer."

"Oh, yes. Ghastly looking thing. The Lord Seeker can't think we're ignoring it." With a sweep of his hand, Abernache led the rest of the group toward the fortress, proper. "Speaking of which, I don't suppose you'd divulge what finally got their attention? Rumour will, if you won't."
"You mean why he's willing to see us after he was such a blazing cockfire in Val Royeaux?" Varric asked, with a faint chuckle.

Abernache hummed, not seeming to mind the mud on his fine shoes. "The Lord Seeker won't meet us until he greets the Inquisition 'in person'. Quite a surprise after that... 'blazing cockfire' as you so... colourfully put it."

Sera didn't quite hide her snicker at hearing that phrase in an Orlesian accent.

"That's news to me," Adaar said with a shrug. "The Inquisition only asks the Lord Seeker to help us close the Breach."

Abernache paused to walk a bit closer, speaking more conspiratorially. "Then it's all been arranged by your ambassador. Let the diplomats work their magic, if you trust them. Between you and I, the Chantry never took advantage of their Templars. Wiser heads should steer them."

"Whether or not the Chantry has, someone certainly did," Cullen pointed out. "Templar forces launched a failed assault on Dairsmuid, in Rivain, just a few months ago. At that time, I was still in Kirkwall, and we received no word from the Knight-Vigilant -- the Viscount had to tell me he'd heard it was coming from a raider captain. Whatever has happened to the Order, this is not what Templars are meant to be or to do, and I hope we can bring them back to their senses."

He hoped he could bring them much better than that, but it wasn't something he wanted to get into with a nobleman who would no doubt exploit anything he learned, for purposes that might not be to their benefit. He'd offer Dairsmuid, though. Those rumours might help turn things around.

"An assault?" Lord Abernache blinked. "Why would the Templars launch an attack against the capital of Rivain?"

"We still don't know, but the First Enchanter and their Knight-Commander have some thoughts on the matter. It's all propaganda, from what I can tell, about the Rivaini people being dangerous and consorting with demons. The Knight-Commander, there, assures me they've had far less trouble with apostacy and abominations than Kirkwall, and you don't see the same happening to us!" Cullen shook his head and then tipped his chin at the gate rising before them. "Something is wrong, and it is up to us to sort it out."

"Here we are!" Abernache said, gesturing at a more ominous set of gates, adorned with blood-red Templar banners.

Cassandra shook her head, lips pursed. "The Lord Seeker abandoned the White Spire to come here. I do not understand."

"Well, that's why we're here, right?" Adaar said with forced cheer. "To understand what's going on here, and to, you know... use my growing reputation on the Templars." This last was said with a straight face for Sera's benefit, and she let out a snorting cackle.

Abernache, thankfully, did not ask. "It appears they've sent some to greet you," he said, indicating the Templar stationed in front of the portcullis. "Present well. Everyone's a little tense for my liking."

"Guess we should probably say hello," Adaar said with a shrug.

A squire appeared to be in conversation with the Templar, as the group approached, and he stepped back to join Lord Abernache. "I present to you Knight-Templar Ser Delrin Barris, second son of Bann Jevrin Barris of Ferelden. Ser Barris, may I be so honoured as to present Lord Esmeral Abernache...?"
Barris looked between the two Orlesians until he spotted armour he recognised, and stepped forward to meet it, glancing around nervously. "Ser Cullen, Commander, I'm the one who sent word to you. You said the Inquisition works to close this Breach in the Veil. I didn't think you'd bring such lofty company."

"Well, you know how it is, Ser Barris." Cullen chuckled and pressed a hand to the back of his neck, trying to chase the headache that threatened to creep down and settle across his shoulders. "Let the diplomats have their way, and suddenly it's a party. It's good to meet you, finally. Where did you serve? I don't remember your face."

"Probably because you're frigging old, Cullen," Sera chimed in from behind him.

Barris shot a horrified glance past Cullen's shoulder. "Denerim, Ser. Trained in the cathedral."

Cullen nodded, prying his hand off his neck to hold it out, amiably. "That's it, then. I served in Kinloch Hold, before I transferred to Kirkwall." He watched Barris's eyes widen. "I'm sure only half of what you've heard was true."

Adaar squinted at the Templar's face, trying to match it with whatever memory it went to, nagging at the back of his brain. "You were at Val Royeaux, when..."

Barris winced, gaze dropping to the ground. Adaar remembered him, the young Templar who had tried to talk Lucius down, who had looked visibly torn. "It didn't sit right with me," he said in a low voice, and Adaar's nod said he understood.

"Can't say any of this has been sitting right with me, really," Adaar said, looking around him pointedly, including an obvious glance at the sky where the Breach burned out of sight. "Ser Barris, eh?"

"Herald," Barris said with a respectful dip of his head.

Abernache harrumphed. "Barris," he said dismissively, folding his arms across his chest and looking down his mask's pointed nose at the Templar, "moderate holdings, your family. And the second son?" He scoffed.

"Shove it up your arse, Haberdache!" Sera's voice was sharp, and only Bull's hand on her shoulder stopped her from lunging at the man with a kick just as sharp. "Or maybe stuff it in your cod. You look like you could use some stuffing, if you mean to be doing any cod-shoving here, which is what that is you know, cod-shoving. Can't just wave your flappy titled manbits around like we're supposed to give a shit, like this guy who's just trying to do the right thing's supposed to feel bad 'cause yours is bigger. Which it's not. Definitely need some stuffing, if you're going to play in these leagues." She cocked a thumb at Bull and then Adaar, in one smooth gesture.

Barris looked like he was waiting for the ground to swallow him whole, and he looked to Cullen for some reassurance, only to find the Commander trying to hide a smile behind his fist.

"It's... definitely about the title, though," Barris said after a moment's pause. "This promise of status has garnered interest from the Lord Seeker. Beyond sense. The sky burns with magic, but he ignores all calls to action, until your friends arrive."

"Should a Seeker lead the Templars like this?" Blackwall asked, suddenly. "I'm ... not really familiar with how that hierarchy works. I just go to the Chantry and pray, leave some coins for the poor."

"In an emergency, if there's no other recourse, but his goal should be to restore them to order," Cassandra answered, her voice heavy with concern and disapproval.
Barris squared his shoulders, but his face looked pained when he said, "He has taken command. Permanently."

"If he feels there is a holy mandate..." Cassandra trailed off, trying to wrap her mind around it.

"That is what the Lord Seeker claims," Barris said carefully, "and our commanders parrot him."

"Of course they do," Adaar muttered.

Barris sighed, shoulders sagging in frustration, and he edged closer, some of his stiff formality slipping away. "The Lord Seeker's actions make no sense. He promised to restore the Order's honour, then marched out here to wait?" He shook his head, squared his jaw as he looked at Cullen. "Templars should know their duty, even when kept from it."

Cullen nodded. "Too few understand that."

"Win over the Lord Seeker, and every able-bodied Knight will help the Inquisition seal the Breach," Barris promised, the sincerity clear in his eyes.

Cullen and Cassandra spoke at the same time.

"How many are no longer able?" Cullen asked, wishing he'd gotten Anders to come with them.

"If you believe we are right, abandon Lucius and help us!" Cassandra's frustration came through clearly in the forceful demand. "This is not like him. I know the man."

"We can't abandon our orders. Not while the officers who survived the Conclave still follow him."

Barris shot a look at Cullen, hoping for some reprieve, only to remember that Cullen had also survived the Conclave. "I'm sorry, ser, but there's one of you. And... most of us are still able, but... Some have been sick. Awful pains. There's rumours it's the lyrium, but a lot of them are young for that."

"If they live long enough, we have a healer, one of the best," Cullen assured him, wondering if Anders could've helped Samson, and wishing it wasn't already too late for that. "He's just tending to the wounded, elsewhere, now."

"Thank you, ser." Barris nodded and glanced back at Cassandra. "We've been asked to accept much, after that shameful display in Val Royeaux. Our truth changes on the hour."

"Don't keep your betters waiting, Barris," Abernache asked, looking down his mask's pointed nose at the Templar. He tapped his foot in an obnoxious and unnecessary show of impatience. "There's important work for those born to it."

"Yes," said Adaar, dropping a hand to Sera's shoulder pre-emptively, "our work is certainly important." He put a slight emphasis on the word 'our', implying the Inquisition and not a certain Orlesian noble present.

Barris pursed his lips but didn't argue, wearing the resigned frustration of someone used to -- and expecting -- this sort of treatment. Instead he turned and ordered the portcullis lifted, ushering them into the courtyard beyond. More of those ominous blood-red banners hung from the walls, and Adaar could feel eyes on him from all directions.

"The Lord Seeker has a... request, before you meet him," Barris said, leading the group through the courtyard, to face three of those banners.
Redcliffe

Chapter Summary

A rift sealed. A multitude of spirits given form.

The mages rode down toward Redcliffe, Kinnon grinning stupidly at the first sight of the windmill. "You know, Solona told us she broke into the castle through that windmill. I wonder if there's still a secret passage? Do you think we could sneak up on Arl Eamon, too?"

"Arl Teagan," Vivienne corrected. "Eamon passed the title to his younger brother, years ago."

"Ah, shit," Cormac sighed, pointing down the hill, to where a green glow burst between them and the village gates.

Fen'Din glanced at Solas. "It's just now opening. I think we can take all of them. They won't have time to fester."

"That might be easiest, yes," Solas said, mentally preparing himself.

"I have not seen one of these up close," Vivienne said with open fascination, unhooking the elegant staff strapped to her back. "They just appear like this, out of nowhere?" Frost glowed blue at her fingertips at the first sight of a spiny Terror demon.

But Solas held out a hand, warning her to stop. "Allow Fen'Din and myself to handle this first. If we fail, or if others get through, you may attack."

Vivienne cast him a curious look but let the spell fizzle out. She waited for some spell, some coordinated attack... but what she got was singing. "...what?"

Kinnon hung back, knowing he couldn't help. Peryn was with them, and however much he might want to help, Peryn couldn't know he was a mage. He could, however, explain. "This is something Enchanter Fen'Din developed years ago, during the attack on Kinloch Hold." He tucked his hands into their opposite sleeves, holding tight to his own wrists, so no one would see the shaking, when he thought about that time. "He can turn the demons back into spirits. The Chant says that it was mankind that polluted the Maker's first children, drove them to envy and worse, and he has found a way to return them to themselves. They are all around us, in Haven, and most of the time, they're friendly. Can't keep them too close -- the people upset them -- but they're much better than demons, I'll give them that."

"They are demons," Vivienne corrected. "He has simply tamed them, somehow." She shot a sharp look at Peryn. "And you allow this, Ser Peryn?"

Peryn shrugged, his eyes on the rift and the two elves beneath it. "The spirits do no harm. Isn't that how demons work? They hurt people, trick them, make them do bad things. These spirits wear animal bones and act like animals. If they turn again, I will strike them down, but I would not cut down an innocent."

Vivienne pressed her lips thin. "So you wait until after they have harmed someone? There are spirits such as these at Haven, you say, yet Fen'Din and Solas are both here. Is there anyone at Haven who..."
will keep them in check in this way?"

"Not... with the singing, no," Kinnon answered, watching the shapes of the demons change with the cadence of the song. When a demon sprang up nearby, he jerked, nearly pulling a spell to his fingers, but it then wavered, spikes softening, blurring, as it turned to the elves instead.

Vivienne shook her head in amazement, less at the spectacle in front of her and more at what she considered dangerous negligence. "You put quite a bit of trust into Enchanter Fen'Din. I pray it is not misplaced."

"My faith in him has never been misplaced, except when it comes to his personal safety." Anders's eyes never left the growing chorus at the bottom of the hill.

Fen'Din glanced at Solas and got the nod he'd been waiting for. They agreed the flow of demons had slowed, and now was the time to focus on the rift. He raised his glowing hand and let the Fade recoil from it, pulling the rift together as if with drawstrings.

Cormac reached back and grabbed Kinnon by the shoulder. "Bones," he said, cocking his head toward the woods that stretched along one side of the path.

"I don't have any skill in necromancy! How do you expect me to find them?" Kinnon shrugged, knowing that even if he had full use of his magic, it wouldn't help, here.

"A village this size is going to have a huge middens heap, and it's probably full of butchered bone. You take that side, I'll take this side. You'll smell it, before you see it," Cormac explained, before he took off at a jog, heading down the steeper side of the hill, off the road. It was more likely to be downhill, but downhill was also the lake, and if it was in the lake, things were bound to get more interesting. But, Redcliffe was too large for that, he thought. It would foul the waters.

"Oh, I just get all the fun jobs," Kinnon muttered, taking off in the appointed direction.

Peryn looked torn, glancing back and forth between Kinnon's retreating back and the newly-converted demons. "We may have tamed demons, but you should not wander alone."

"There are enough of us here to take care of things," Anders assured him, indicating Kinnon with a tip of his head. "Go ahead."

Peryn hesitated only a moment more before offering him a grateful smile and following Kinnon, a hand resting on his sword's hilt.

Vivienne eyed them as they left. "Ah yes, nothing says 'romance' like digging through a trash heap."

Anders shrugged. "It's how Mack found me."

"Why am I not surprised?" Vivienne drawled, looking Anders up and down.

Anders looked down at himself and tipped his head. "I'm much more fashionable, when I'm not freezing. But, I prefer leather. It doesn't hold the blood as badly."

"When you are not freezing. Are you not a mage? There is no reason for you to be cold, if you do not mean to be." Vivienne's eyes were disbelieving, her face still as chiselled ice.

"I'm a Warden." Anders flicked a hand dismissively. "It's a little different. I'm afraid I wouldn't expect you to understand." With an unapologetic shrug, he turned and swaggered down the hill, hips swishing the tail of his coat as he made his way toward the elves, a healing spell already in his hand.
Solas paused in his singing long enough to clear his throat and to point out, "This rift was different than the others. It altered the flow of time around itself. Most unexpected."

He went back to singing, offering Anders a grateful look when he smoothed healing magic into the elf’s throat.

"How could you tell?" Anders asked, looking up at the green scar the rift had left behind.

Solas didn’t answer, and Anders figured what he was doing was more important for the moment, though Solas’ words made him uneasy. Or maybe they just made Justice uneasy. It was hard to tell, the way the spirit was all but vibrating with agitation, but Anders generally just blamed it on the nearness of the Fade.

A guard appeared from the steep downward slope, Cormac behind him, arms filled with foul-smelling bones. "Maker have mercy! It's over!"

"Of course it is. These guys are very good at what they do." Cormac elbowed the guard amiably as he approached the cloud of spirits and set down the bones. "There's more of those around the wall. The pit's been in use for years," he told Fen'Din, who nodded, waiting for some of the spirits to take on the available bones.

Cormac watched one hobble around on two and a half legs. "Sorry, I found most of it, but... You can come back and look for the rest!"

"Open the gates!" the guard commanded, pounding on them.

"Don't!" Anders shouted from behind him. "Just let us finish sorting this out! Another moment, but do not open those gates, yet!"

Fen'Din nodded gratefully, as he began to lead the chorus of spirits around the village wall.

"But, there's nothing left to hurt us out here!" the guard protested, shooting a sad look at Anders.

"No, there's not, but we have to make sure that remains true. Those spirits ... they need something to hold on to, or the first jealous husband or frightened child they see is going to set them off again. I've seen them do this before. They can make this safe, but you need to give them a little longer." Anders leaned back and watched the group of skeletal animals frolicking by the lake grow larger. "They'll be fine, out here, as long as you leave them alone."

"This is madness," Vivienne muttered through her teeth, watching the ghoulisch display.

"It works," Solas replied, picking up the words she hadn’t meant anyone to hear. "And with quite a bit less bloodshed than outright attacking them would have brought." Solas waved her to be quiet before she could rise to argue, clearing his throat and resting his voice a moment before resuming the song with Fen'Din.

Peryn and Kinnon returned shortly after, a few bone-clad spirits hobbling up after them as they approached. Kinnon wiped his hands on his robes.

"Found a few bones but, uh." He pointed at the closest spirits. "Well, they called dibs."

"Bet those weren't the only bones you found," Anders said in a half-hearted attempt at a whisper.

Kinnon rolled his eyes, but Peryn was still too disconcerted by the spirits to register the comment.
"You look jumpy," Cormac noted, dropping a friendly hand on Peryn's shoulder, as Solas and Fen'Din dealt with the remaining spirits.

"This is... I am trained to face down demons and bad mages. Trained to resist demons and spirits and all sort of temptation." Peryn looked distraught, but Kinnon cleared his throat, pointedly, and the smile almost returned. "Yes, I was trained to resist you, too, but I decided I didn't want to. I like you. This... I do not know how to feel about this. I have never seen this before. But, these elves are not malefics, and I know that. I can feel that. Well, more Fen'Din. The other... he is not a maleficar, but I think he may almost have been, once."

"It's a choice we all make, at some point." Cormac shrugged. "Some people just have to try it, before they figure out it's not what they want. But, you're right. They're not using blood magic or summoning demons or even making deals with demons. They're trying to do something good. And I know it works really well, on a much smaller scale. Your guess is as good as mine if it's going to work with this many of them, especially if the people in town are... struggling. I don't know how it works. Spirits aren't my thing. But, I know they're overcome by... well, the one I got to see was... fear, maybe? Anger? And they turn into demons, if there's no one to stop them. Jan's father had a demon, for a little while, until Fen'Din took it away. I got to watch that happen, and it's... Like I said, I trust him on the small scale, but I don't know if this many spirits can be kept out of trouble. But, we'll watch them, right? And then we'll know."

Peryn nodded, brows knit as he thought this through, before turning to Jan. "I did not realise your father had a demon?" he asked with some concern, concern on Jan's behalf, he knew.

"Yes, it's..." Anders sighed. "It only partly explained why he's such an asshole, but it certainly didn't help." He offered Peryn a crooked smile and a shrug. "But now he's demon-free, like Mack said, and his assholery is all his own!"

Peryn chuckled like he wasn't sure he was supposed to, smile not quite reaching his eyes. Another spirit hobbled past him on a lopsided mess of limbs, and he shook his head in amazement.

Kinnon slipped an arm around his waist, and some of that tension eased from his shoulders.

Solas stopped singing again, pausing to clear his throat and waiting for Anders to throw him more healing before saying, "I suspect they are the best they can be, at the moment." Even with the healing, his voice still came out chewed at the edges.

"And, what, we are simply going to leave them out here to assault travellers along the road?" Vivienne's biting tone drew Solas's eye, but Fen'Din beat him to the answer.

"We are going to leave them by the lake. They can't drown and they're not tall enough to cause harm to any boats -- the docks are on the other side of the wall. There's very little they can hurt if it doesn't approach them. And with your attitude, I'm going to strongly advise not approaching them." He paused to smile, and managed something almost polite. "Open the gates!" he called, voice finally surrendering to a gravelly rasp, as he tried to raise it, and he coughed, giving Anders a pointed look.

"Don't you carry potions?" Anders asked, his hands glowing blue.

"Of course. But, you always told me not to use them unless it was an emergency and you weren't there."

Anders squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed at the headache starting between them. "Of course I did. Because you can't feel what's wrong, and there's a good chance a potion will heal something stupidly. New rule: If your throat is sore from singing, potions are probably safe as long as that's the..."
""This is foolish, and it is going to cost many lives," Vivienne insisted, eyeing the staggering skeletal herd by the shore, as they made their way through the gates.

"The bones are fresh enough to keep them out of trouble." Fen'Din lifted a hand, dismissively, a moment too late. "The bones remember what they were in life, and now the spirits do, too. There are no human bones -- those are dangerous. Deer and chipmunks are not. Even bears are safer than people, regardless of which people. They are animals, for now, with simple animal concerns. It gives them focus."

Vivienne knew enough to let the argument drop. There were eyes and ears trained on them now, and they needed to show a united front, no matter how much the skin at the back of Vivienne's neck prickled, knowing what was behind them.

On the other side of the portcullis, an agent from the Inquisition jogged up to meet them, his hood not quite hiding the grim set of his brows.

"We've spread word the Inquisition was coming," he was quick to tell Fen'Din, "but you should know that no one here was expecting us."

"No one?" Vivienne repeated, offence under her surprise. "Didn't Grand Enchanter Fiona ask us to come here?"

The agent shrugged helplessly. "If she did, she has not told anyone." He darted a look up the road and indicated a building down the way with a tip of his head. "We've arranged use of the tavern for negotiations."

An elf ran up, recognisably dressed in rustic-looking mage robes, but still with the feathered shoulders favoured by Tevinter fashions. "Agents of the Inquisition!" he greeted the group. "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 mean time."

"Magister?" Anders asked, drawing himself up to his full height, and trying to keep the glow out of his eyes.

"You don't think...?" Fen'Din peered up at Anders, only half paying attention.

"Oh, I do. Andraste's polished ass cheeks, do I ever. It's what I'd do."

"Well, shit," Cormac sighed, glancing around. He pointed at a guard. "We've left our horses at the top of the hill. Is there somewhere safe for them here? I'd assume, having a horsemaster, and all..."

"I'll handle it right away, ser," the guard replied, with a shaky smile. "Thanks for ... that. Out there. Saved us all."

"You're welcome," Solas replied, with a wry smile.

Before them, the elven messenger still waited.

"She's in the tavern, then?" Fen'Din asked, gesturing to the building the scout had indicated.

"She is," the unnamed elf confirmed, nodding.

"Tell her we'll be along, shortly. We must see to the horses, first." Fen'Din wanted a look at the
village, before he committed himself to entering any buildings. Something about the place didn't sit quite right with him.

"Of course." The messenger nodded and headed up the hill toward the tavern.

"The Veil is weaker here than in Haven," Solas said in a low voice, walking close to Fen'Din. "And not merely weak, but altered in a way I have not seen."

"Well, that sounds ominous," Kinnon muttered, looking around. Aside from the green scar left by the rift, nothing looked too out of the ordinary, but they knew better than to trust that.
Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

A healer for the Hinterlands found. A secret trade in lyrium co-opted.

Down the path, they came across the village proper, as it curled around the edge of Lake Calenhad, the water glittering in the sunlight in a way that was far too cheerful. In the distance, they could make out the gabled roof of The Gull and Lantern, but first they veered in the opposite direction.

"Didn't Vale tell us there was a healer in town?" Anders asked, looking around at the multitude of obvious mages just standing around, talking, as if they were anyone else. "Probably more than one. If Torrin brought people with him, do you think Flora's here?"

"Finn left after you did," Fen'Din told him. "Solona came back to talk to Eleni Zinovia, and she took him with her. Probably because she didn't have you, any longer. You'd gone back north, by then, I think."

"How long have you been without a healer?" Anders's eyes focused sharply on Fen'Din.

"I wasn't. We always had at least one." Fen'Din wouldn't name Petra, in front of Peryn. "And you know it. You just forget, sometimes."

"Oh. Right." Anders shook his head. "Long day. Headache. But, we should find the healer, here."

"The one who was here before us? She lives up top the hill, there." The mage gave Anders a conspiratorial look. "But, she's an elf, and she's not big on humans. You might send him to talk with her instead." The woman cocked her head at Solas.

"I suspect we have options," Solas said, hearing her and darting a wry look at Fen'Din. To Anders, he added, "Or perhaps she will listen to a fellow healer."

"Perhaps we should just talk to her and find out," Anders drawled.

Anders led them up the hill to a quasi-secluded hut among the trees. From the window, a pair of eyes peered out at them curiously, but when he went to knock, Anders found the door wide open. Inside the little round building were shelves upon shelves of potions, with the ingredients of a half-finished potion out on a side table. Nearby, working a mortar and pestle, stood an elf with blonde hair and tired eyes.

"Can I help you?" she asked, guarded, as she eyed up the members of the Inquisition spilling into her home.

Anders stepped forward, letting the silver and blue of his clothing speak before he opened his mouth. "I hope so. If you're the local healer, I've come to tell you there are refugees at the crossroads who would benefit from someone closer and more constant than they've had, so far."

"Of course they would. These attacks by the Templars have endangered countless innocent lives."
The woman squinted up at Anders, and behind him, Peryn shifted uncomfortably. "But, if I go to the crossroads, I might end up in danger, myself. I doubt those refugees would risk their lives for a knife-ear, so why should I risk mine for them?"

"Because the roads are clear, and it's a knife-ear who saved them all." Fen'Din tucked his hair behind his ear, expressionless. He offered his non-glowing hand. "Senior Enchanter Fen'Din, Kinloch Hold."

"Sile," she named herself, cautiously taking the offered hand. "What do you mean the roads are clear? We've had the gates locked against demons and rebel Templars for weeks."

"The rebel Templars are fighting bandits and demons, under the command of the Inquisition. The mages who were locked out of Redcliffe have been helping to restore the farms in the valley," Fen'Din explained, carefully working up a smile. "But, there are no healers among them, and we have only one. He is not enough to go around."

Anders glanced at Cormac, opened and closed his mouth but remembered their company and coughed instead of saying anything.

"You will be protected," Peryn added, hoping that a Templar saying that would reassure her and not alienate her. She looked him up and down with her tired eyes, and Peryn felt like he was being weighed and measured.

"All right," she finally said, nodding as much to herself as to them. "If the Inquisition soldiers are there, I might be safer, regardless. I'll see you at the crossroads soon, once I have gathered my things."

"Thank you," Anders said with a genuine smile. "You will be helping a great many people. Oh, and... while we're here, do you know of anyone by the name of 'Tanner' around here?"

"Tanner? Sure, there's a Sister Tanner. I think she stays at the Chantry, but I don't know where she'd be in the middle of the day." Sile laid bundles of herbs along strips of cloth and rolled them. "So many lives lost for want of herbs... I don't suppose--"

Anders reached into his bag and pulled out the rarest things first. "Embrium? Royal Elfroot? I was going to bring it back to Haven, but if you need it here, I can probably get more on the way back."

Kinnon piled spindleweed on the corner of the table, pulling it out of his sleeve. "I forgot to mention the other thing we found in the woods. You said something about needing some, yesterday, so I grabbed it, when I saw it."

Cormac rifled his own satchel. " Mostly elfroot for Brother Kinnon's nerves --" He laughed as Kinnon swatted him. "It's true! You're just as neurotic as my -- as Lord Hawke! And... Oh, here, I knew there was some crystal grace somewhere in here. It's not a lot, but it's much harder to come by, this time of year."

The healer watched them sort through the herbs. "This ... it's weeks of gathering! Are you sure?"

"Of course they are sure." Vivienne smiled benevolently. "The Inquisition has come to assist. Our own healer is obviously well-supplied, to make such a donation."

"Your own healer is easily distracted by plants on the side of the road," Anders admitted, chuckling. "We came down from the mountains. It's no trouble for me to stop for more, before we get back to Haven. It'll only cost a few hours, not like if you have to walk out for it."
"I haven't left Redcliffe since all this began," Sile said, bundling the new herbs. "The walls keep us in just as much as they keep everyone else out, and there's only so much that grows inside them. Once I reach the crossroads, it should be easier, but this will be a good start."

"Happy to help," Anders said and, watching her pack up, found himself missing his patients, missing his setup back in the Anderfels, even missing, to some extent, his clinic back in Kirkwall. Killing demons was rewarding in its own way, but it wasn't quite the same.

They wandered back out into the sun as Sile finished packing, and Peryn suggested they head towards the Chantry in search of this Sister Tanner. They passed a campsite by the road with a few bedraggled refugees, the red of Chantry robes catching their eye.

"Excuse me," Anders said, walking into the campsite, the eyes turning towards him glancing down at his blue and silver robes. He addressed the sisters. "Is one of you Sister Tanner, by any chance?"

They exchanged wary looks but one of them stepped forward, wringing her hands. "I am Sister Tanner. May I help you?"

"Bit surprised to find a Chantry Sister in the middle of all this," Anders said, digging through his bag for the note he thought he was carrying.

"I am a Lay Sister only. I work here to help the poor and extend the Maker's kindness to those who need it." Tanner's eyes caught on Kinnon's almost-familiar robes, where they weren't hidden under his thick cloak. "It is very busy work, especially in these times, but let me know if I can ever help you."

Kinnon nudged Anders and flashed the letter, before stepping around him, dropping a shoulder to let his cloak fall behind him. "You've been 'helping' someone. We found the letter you sent to Ser Corran."

Tanner's eyes widened. "What? Shit!" She took a step back. "You can't prove anything. A letter from a rogue Templar? No one is going to care."

Kinnon reached back with his empty hand and took Peryn's hand, tugging him forward, so the Sword of Mercy on his gear could be seen.

"So, what do you intend to do?" Tanner asked, eyeing the possibly-a-Templar curiously.

"Tell me what you're smuggling," Kinnon said, calmly, shooting a look at Fen'Din, "and we'll decide."

"Indeed. If the only thing that's made you leave the business is that you've been unable to get out of Redcliffe, we may have some business for you." Fen'Din didn't try for the smile. "It simply depends on what you can offer us. On the other hand, impersonating a Sister, dishonouring Chantry robes, smuggling..." He inhaled as he shrugged, hands parting to indicate he could go on.

Tanner watched him, face slowly falling in despair. She licked her lips, looked around her as though searching for the exits, but they all knew she was well and truly caught.

"And you'd keep quiet?" she asked. "Nobody else has to know?"

"Like I said," Kinnon answered, "that depends on what you're smuggling."

She winced but nodded, stepping closer so she could lower her voice. "Lyrium," she said, barely
loud enough to hear. "With the Chantry leaderless and the world gone mad, the lyrium trade is in shambles. I'm just... trying to fill in a few gaps." Tanner eyed Peryn as she spoke.

Still watching her, Anders leaned into Fen'Din's space. "I'd say lyrium is pretty useful. What do you think, Elfhole?"

Fen'Din held out a thin hand, then switched when he realised it was the glowing one. "I think we'll work well together."

Tanner took his hand and bowed over it, grateful.

"Here's the first thing I need: give me a written copy of your prices and the volume you're able to trade in, and I'll send it to the woman who will be paying you. You don't have to write what you're trading. I just need numbers to provide her. We're going to need quite a bit, if things work out as expected, and even if they don't, I'll need you to continue supplying Corran's camp, though Corran's gone and they've all moved to the crossroads. Can you do that?" Fen'Din asked, gold eyes unblinking.

"Yes, I can supply that camp and probably two more of that size, but... there's only so much I can get. If you need more, you're going to have to find a different source. No one has much, with Orzammar locked in trade with the Chantry and the Chantry no longer shipping it." Tanner shrugged. "But, if it's just two or three camps, I've got you covered."

Kinnon opened a hand full of gold pieces. "If you have some, now, I'll buy it from you. My friend is..." He tipped his head at Peryn.

"I would be grateful. I have come from the Anderfels, where we buy from Kal'Sharok, and it is not like this, but I did not expect the Chantry here would not provide." Peryn offered a weak smile, his nervous grip on Kinnon's hand almost crushing.

"Of course," said Sister Tanner, nearly tripping over herself as she sprang into action. "Just a moment..." She disappeared into one of the crude tents pitched around the fire, returning shortly with a bag that she pressed into Kinnon's hands. When he tried to hand her the coins, she waved them aside. "No, no. Just take it as a gesture of good faith for the Inquisition." Her smile was nervous, though genuine, and Kinnon wondered how terrified she was of them turning her in.

"Thank you," Kinnon said with honest relief, which Peryn echoed in a grateful nod.
In the Therinfal Redoubt courtyard, Adaar stared down a trio of red pennants while Templars watched in silent judgement from the gates.

"These are the standards," Barris explained when Adaar just stared at them blankly. "An honoured rite, centred on the people, the Maker, and the Order." He gestured at the pennants, and Adaar noted the symbols on each. Barris sighed, sounding almost resigned as he continued. "The Lord Seeker asks that you perform the rite so he may see the order in which you honour them."

"Or, you know, he could just ask me," Adaar griped. "If he's so interested in analysing the Inquisition, that is."

"It's not only the Inquisition he's interested in," Barris said, keeping eye-contact to make sure Adaar heard what he said next. "The Lord Seeker changed everything to meet you. Not the Inquisition -- you. By name."

"Well, you can tell him I'm flattered but really, next time he should just send me flowers."

Ser Barris' face twisted, like he was too caught off-guard to completely suppress his amusement. "I will... be sure to mention that to him."

"The Lord Seeker makes us shuffle flags around?" Abernache huffed, coming to stand next to Adaar with arms folded and pointed nose raised. "Refuse! Let's meet the man already!"

"You know, I think I actually agree with the man," Adaar said, brows knitting somewhere between surprise and concern. "Why the Blight should I bother with this?"

"Well..." Barris looked intensely uncomfortable, and then shook his head, waving for the Herald and his entourage to follow. "You're the Herald of Andraste! How is it you have no faith, if she saved your life?"

Bull cleared his throat. "From what I've heard, we don't know what saved his life, other than falling on an elf. Don't worry, the elf's... I was gonna say 'fine', but there's something seriously wrong with that guy."
"He's one of Jan's friends," Varric pointed out. "I think 'something wrong with that guy' is a given."

"So are you," Cassandra reminded him.

"Did I ever give you the impression there's not something wrong with me?" Varric laughed, stepping to the side to get a look around, as they came into a large candle-lit room with a table full of books and papers in the centre, and stacks of packed supplies along the walls.

Abernache continued to complain in Barris' direction, while Barris more quietly tried to argue about the ritual. Adaar ignored them until Barris chewed off the end of a sentence, looking at something past Abernache's shoulder.

"...Knight-Captain?"

Adaar turned to follow his gaze, spotting a trio of Templars walking into the room, fully armoured, helmets on and everything. Cullen straightened, stepping out next to Adaar to greet them.

"You were expecting the Lord Seeker," the Knight-Captain said, tone mockingly cheerful as he marched up to the desk they had gathered around. "He sent me to die for you."

Cassandra exchanged a look with Varric, whose eyebrows rose comically high.

Abernache looked him over, noting the mad glint in his eyes and the sheen of sweat on what little skin was exposed. "He is not well," he whispered, and Cullen nodded, frowning. The man looked like what Cullen's headaches felt like, and he wondered if their lyrium reserves were worse than he had guessed.

"Knight-Captain Denam, I brought the Inquisition's representatives. Will the Lord Seeker not see them?" Barris asked, gesturing at the group beside him.

"Denam, is it?" Cullen stepped forward. "Knight-Commander Cullen, of Kirkwall. I've come to make sure--"

"I didn't ask you, did I?" Denam's eyes gleamed dangerously, as he studied the group, before catching the glow of Adaar's hand. "So, this is the herald of change. You are why everything must be moved ahead."

Cullen caught Cassandra's eye, a vial of lyrium appearing between his fingers and then vanishing as he cocked his head at Denam -- a little trick he'd picked up from Anton -- and Cassandra nodded, slowly, as she came to the conclusion he had. The Templars, here, were suffering even more than their own, likely from the halted lyrium trade. They'd be unstable and insensible, but the Lord Seeker wasn't one of them -- he wouldn't be on the lyrium. And the Lord Seeker hadn't come down to meet them, this lyrium-addled Knight-Captain had come instead.

Adaar darted a look at Cullen without moving his head, spotted the grim sort of resignation of someone who knew what they were dealing with and hoped that he, at least, knew what to do with this.

Denam bowed his head, brows tight in pain. "I tried to make us ready. I thought I knew the way." There was something off in his tone, and it was like spider legs crawling down Adaar's spine.

"Knight-Captain," Barris said, approaching to better peer into his face, too nervous to hit the 'authoritative' tone he was aiming for. "I must know what's going on."

"You were all supposed to be changed!" Denam shouted in Barris' face. "Now we must purge the
questioning knights!"

"'Purge'?" Adaar repeated. "Oh, that is never a good word." He looked around, assessing threats and exit strategies, and spotted more Templars coming out of the woodwork. They all looked pale and sickly, with red veins marring their faces.

"The Elder One is coming. No one will leave Therinfal who is not stained red!" As Denam stepped back, archers picked off three Templars who lacked the red marks, and two of Abernache's servants fell to swords.

"Ah, Curly? Tell me you're not seeing what I'm seeing!" Varric called out, putting bolts through as many Templar eye-slits as he could. He'd fought this battle before, the waves of Templars, the gleaming red crystals. But, there had only been one of Meredith. And looking across these faces, there were suddenly a lot more of her.

"Meredith," was Cullen's entire response, his own face pale as the snow, the scar on his lip aching at the memory as he drew his sword and plunged it into a seam in a red-faced Templar's armour.

"Oh, shit, what?" Sera danced back from a hail of arrows, before responding with her own. "Fuck you! And you! And you! Right in the face, you pricks! Good arrows, though. Keeping those."

Cassandra heard Cullen's answer, eyes widening, but she was too focused on blocking the arrow coming for her face to comment.

"Find cover!" Adaar barked at Abernache and his servants, shoving the noble behind him with one hand and drawing his sword with the other. In the small space, he made for an unfortunately big target, and he hissed when something sharp grazed his leg, positioning himself directly in front of Denam if only to use him and his tower shield as a defense against the archers behind him while Varric and Sera took them out.

Adaar got a good view of Denam's glowing red eyes, and he rolled to the side in time to avoid getting that heavy shield slammed into his chest, retaliating with a hard slam of his pommel against the back of the Templar's head, the range too short for a proper swing. The helmet absorbed much of the blow, but it staggered Denam enough to thwart a swing of his longsword.

"Why are you glowing?" Adaar shouted at him.

"Can't just ask people that!" Sera sprung out of the way of another volley, and then fired three arrows in rapid succession. "Fuck! You! Too!" Two Templar archers fell from above. "I mean, you're glowing, too. You're not magic. He's not magic. It's a not-magic glowing people party, with a lot of punching people in the cod!" She punctuated that last with a fist to Abernache's crotch, bending him out of the way of an arrow aimed at his head. "Thank me later!"

"It's the lyrium," Varric called, over the sounds of combat. "Try not to get too much of it on you! It'll get into your head in seconds!"

"That's encouraging," Blackwall muttered, jamming his sword up under a Templar's chin. That might not have been the best move, he decided, a second later, trying to free his blade from the sackweight of dead meat hanging from it.

"You're a Warden, aren't you?" Bull's hammer rang against a Templar's shield. "Don't you people like... bathe in darkspawn blood or something? You can't really be afraid of a little lyrium."

"Cautious is a better word," Blackwall replied, shooting Bull a look under bushy eyebrows. "And honestly I'm more concerned about what would happen if it goes to your head. There's so little in
Bull barked out a laugh while Blackwall's beard twitched in a smile, and he swung his hammer the other way, cursing when it slammed into a pillar instead the Templar who'd been standing in front of it, splintering the wood on impact. "Hold still!"

Another Templar fell to Cassandra's sword, and she manoeuvred around his falling body to help Adaar with Denam, flanking him so he was forced to bring his shield to bear, meeting her sword but opening up himself to Adaar. With a roar, Adaar barrelled into his exposed side, shoving him past Cassandra and out the window, ducking his head against the spray of glass.

Varric paused, blinking at the shattered window and the qunari with his horns stuck in it. "Well, that's one way to take out the trash."

Barris choked on a horrified laugh, ducking under a dagger to flip a Templar sporting what looked like a crystal mask onto the table. "Well, he came and died for someone. That's a drop to the kitchen entrance."

The Templar on the table howled and writhed, the lyrium overcoming him, crawling out through the gaps in his armour, bloodlessly. In moments, he stopped moving, and the room fell silent.

"Why do I get the feeling we're not done here?" Cullen held his sword low, but ready, turning slowly in a circle, unwilling to believe that all the Templars had fallen so easily. What had they come for, if this is what they'd found?

"Because that would be much too easy, obviously," Adaar said, grunting with effort as Bull helped him wrench his horns free. More glass splintered, and he shook his head like a wet dog trying to dislodge the shards.

"Red lyrium," Varric muttered, shaking his head as he prodded a corpse with the toe of his boot, trying not to think of the madness in his brother's eyes. "See, Cullen, I left Kirkwall for this shit!"

He waited for the expected barb, that clearly he was the one bringing all the trouble with him, but Cullen was too agitated to respond.

"Is the Lord Seeker here," Cassandra asked, "or did he just send his... his men?" She paused like she was considering a different noun.

"He's here," Barris promised. "We're all here. Well, most of us. Except the rebels, obviously."

"We have met the rebels," Cassandra assured him. "And we can account for many of them."

"I can bring you to his office. It's across the courtyard and up, but... I don't know if he's going to be there." Barris gestured around them at the fallen Templars. "I don't know much any more. Captain Denam was always a bit of an ass, but... not..."

"Red lyrium," Cullen supplied, rubbing absently at the scar on his lip. "I'd know it anywhere. And I've seen what it can do to a person. And now, so have you."

"Maker's breath, I wish I hadn't." Barris glanced around for survivors and found Lord Abernache still ducked down in the corner where Sera had dropped him.

"Have we got to take Lord Haberdache with us? Sounds like a good way to get him killed," Sera pointed out, picking arrows out of corpses and checking them before either dropping them into her quiver or flinging them wherever they landed. "Of course, with all these freaky Templars running
around, maybe he won't be safe here, either."

Painfully, Abernache staggered to his feet, face pale under his gold mask. "I will... rejoin the other nobles. I fear all this blood is making me ill."

"That would not be safe either," Cassandra warned. "We do not know who is involved in this, plus the way out may be blocked."

"Then what would you advise?" Abernache snapped. "I cannot follow, I cannot stay, I cannot leave?"

Bull shrugged, answering for her. "You can hide."

"Hide?" Abernache's voice conveyed the confusion his mask hid.

Sera's eyes lit up as she looked around the room, searching for a suitable hiding spot. "Oh! It's like Hide and Seek! Just with more murder. Hide or Stab, really."

"More murder?" Adaar repeated with some concern. "Just how much murder is there to start?"

Another shrug from Bull. "Cultural difference?"

"And people say the Tal Vashoth are savage." Varric shook his head. "I guess we needed to be looking at the city elves, instead."

"I'm not in with that... elfy shite," Sera scoffed, shoving a crate aside with her back, and then whipping open the cupboard behind it. "Here, it's your very own closet! Put you right in it and nobody'll know the difference."

"Maybe you should check it for skeletons, first," Blackwall joked, as he looked up the walls around them, noting the handful of Sword of Mercy hangings.

Bull put a hand on top of the cupboard and leaned down to look into the space, which stood as high as a man. He shoved some equipment out of the way. "Nope, any skeletons in there, he'll be bringing for himself."

"You want me to climb into a cabinet and wait there? How long? What am I waiting for?"

Abernache crossed his arms petulantly. Cullen had his hands pressed to his face, his head tipped far back. "The end times," he muttered into his hands, and Blackwall coughed over a laugh. "Until we come back for you? Until you haven't heard anything in long enough that it might be safe to escape? We are simply trying to prevent you getting stabbed by these... men." The last word was weighted, as if he'd meant to say something with a great deal more bite, but stopped himself in the name of diplomacy.

Abernache made some more disbelieving noises, glancing back at the sea of bodies, which he seemed to regret from the way he shuddered. "Hide... in here, with..." Another shudder, but he sullenly allowed Sera to manhandle him into the cupboard, folding his limbs into a position that would lead to cramps later. "Do be quick," he said, aiming for imperious but tripping into desperate instead.

"Sweet dreams, Lord Haberdache!" Sera singsonged, slamming the cupboard shut.

Adaar considered the cupboard for a moment. "Can we do that with all the Orlesians?" he asked, soft enough that Abernache wouldn't hear.
"We'd run out of cupboards," Varric responded in kind. "And then where would we store all the fine dinnerware?"

"We don't have fine dinnerware," Barris pointed out. "Or at least not those of us living in the barracks. Who knows what goes on with the officers?"

"I do!" Cullen volunteered. "And we don't have fine dinnerware. At least not in Kirkwall."

"You have fine dinnerware," Varric reminded him.

"I do not. My husband does. My husband also collects crotch-cratas and anything with a dragon on it." Cullen rubbed his face, tiredly, trying to hold off the headache that threatened his sanity and his aim. "I can only hope the Lord Seeker's taste is somewhat more restrained, fancy dinnerware or otherwise."

"I'll let you be the judge of that, Commander." Barris hauled open a door, leading them out into a hallway he looked down both ways, before stepping into.

As he passed by Cullen, Adaar leaned down to add, "If your husband has crotch-cratas with dragons on them, you need to introduce me to his supplier."

Luckily, he kept moving, and Cullen didn't have to answer.

The hallway was another battlefield, Templars with pale skin and pulsing red veins leaping at them with a nearly rabid intensity. Under the sweat, blood, and steel, they carried with them a sickly-sweet smell Cullen associated with decay, and he wondered how much of them was even human any more.

"They're monsters!" Cassandra exclaimed, and Cullen didn't think he'd ever heard her voice shake like that.

"We noticed!" Bull shouted back, a broad swing of his hammer sweeping a pair of Templars into the wall.

The fight was ugly, the space tight, but eventually they carved a path out into a courtyard, the sunlight jarringly cheerful.

"What were those things?" Sera looked disgusted, as she examined the fistful of arrows she'd rescued from the last fight. "And don't tell me those were Templars. That's a Templar. This is a Templar." She pointed to Cullen and Barris. "Those things were not Templars."

"They were." Cullen sighed, tipping his head up to let the winter sun light his face. "Before that, they were. 'Red or dead' the man said, and that's red. I've seen it before and I wish I hadn't, but I'm glad these seem less..."

"Resilient," Varric filled in. "Utterly fucking terrifying. I'm not seeing any giant statues walking, this time, and there's a lot more of these guys than there were of her. None of these guys have turned into magisters with swords."

"Why would they be magisters? This isn't Tevinter." Barris tried to absorb the idea that he was with people who had seen this happen before and survived.

"Not so much magisters in terms of the title. More in the level of competence and power." Varric shrugged and fiddled with his crossbow. "I watched the Knight-Commander of Kirkwall cast a barrier spell and march juggernauts into battle. You need to know that's possible, and we all need to hope they don't know it is."
Barris looked at him with wide eyes, glancing at Cullen to make sure Varric wasn't making this up. The grim set of Cullen's jaw said he wasn't.

"Maker's breath," Barris breathed, paling.

Adaar shook his head in amazement, not quite able to wrap his head around that image. "You two, I swear. Either you keep finding trouble or trouble keeps finding you."

Cullen smiled through a wince. "I keep finding Varric. Same thing."

"So we need to be ready for anything," Cassandra said with a determination that was as much for her as for the rest of them. She nodded to herself and set off towards the opposite end of the courtyard, shield raised defensively when more Templars cropped up from the courtyard's other entrances.

"This is shite," Sera said in a weak voice. Her arms already burned from the fight with Denam and the others down the hall, but she raised her bow again.

After another round against more Templars given unnatural strength by the red lyrium, the sound of battle stopped. The air no longer carried hints of other battles -- the clash of swords and shouts had all passed. No footfalls on stone could be heard but their own, and Barris looked shaken, both by the sudden betrayal of the men he'd worked with and trusted and by the sudden stillness.

"It's this way," he said, leading the Inquisition's representatives up more stairs, to a large balcony that wrapped around below a smaller one, obviously designed for speeches or presentations to be given to those below.

"The fancy door, right?" Bull asked, pointing up two more flights of stairs, to where a well-lit red door stood between two enormous statues.

Barris nodded. "I heard this place used to be a Seeker fortress, and that's the Lord Seeker's office from back then."

"A lot of walking for the guy," Adaar muttered, sword still held at his side. The stillness was unsettling, almost suffocating, and he was on-edge, waiting for another barrage of Templars.

At the top of the stairs, in front of the red door, stood the Lord Seeker, his back to them, his stillness no less unsettling. They paused, forming a loose semi-circle around him to cut off escape, but all he did was lift his head.

Adaar exchanged a look with his friends and stepped towards him, adjusting his grip on his sword. When Lucius was close enough to touch, he finally burst into action, grabbing Adaar by the throat and pulling the qunari forward with a strength no human should have.

"At last," said Lucius, face twisted in a scowl as he pulled Adaar through the closed door, the world bleeding away to white.
The air in Redcliffe was still misty, as the day wore on, the chill blooming as it met the warm breeze off the lake. Ahead of the group coming up to it, the door of the Gull and Lantern smacked open and a young man stepped out, turning to shout something into the tavern behind him.

"Up yours, Godwin! You weren't there! You don't know!" The young man turned around, mid-step, and slammed straight into Fen'Din, who staggered back a step at the impact. "Oh, shit, sorry. I wasn't watching where I was g-- Enchanter?"

"One of them, yes," Fen'Din drawled, squinting upward. "I hope you're doing well, Connor."

"What's Godwin shoving up his ass this time?" Anders asked, half a smile creeping across his face at the memory of the nearly infinite havoc he'd wreaked on Godwin when they were forced to share a room. "Is he still a Lucrosian disaster in mage robes?"

Behind them, Kinnon put his hood up and tugged the front down. Right. He'd just walked straight back into the survivors of Kinloch Hold, and the last thing he needed was anyone recognising him before he got a chance to explain.

Still recovering, Connor looked up at Anders, studying his face as though trying to decide if he should recognise him. His gaze dropped to the blue and silver robes, and his eyebrows arched higher. "A Grey Warden?" He threw Fen'Din a questioning look before turning back to Anders. "Are you a friend of Solona's?"

"Mage-Warden Jannik, at your service," Anders said before Connor could make any other connections and say the right name at the wrong time. And then he made a connection of his own: Connor, Redcliffe, knew Solona. "Oh, you're that Connor," he blurted before he could think better of it. He regretted it the next moment when Connor grimaced.

"That's me. The boy with Redcliffe's blood on his hands." Connor looked down at his hands as if they might still be red.

"Jowan's hands, I heard," Anders replied with a single-shouldered shrug. "The most incompetent maleficar in Thedas, even if he did me a favour, once. Summoned demons in front of six Templars in the entry hall of the tower. I don't know how he ended up trying to teach you. He wasn't even Harrowed."

Cormac slowly put together the pieces of stories he'd heard. "You poor kid. I'm so sorry to hear it. Yeah if that was your teacher, anything that happened is on him. What were you nine? Ten?"

"Almost twelve. I should've known better. I should've done something." Connor stuffed his hands under his arms and glared at Cormac. "Sometimes I have dreams, and I remember that happened. I see the death and destruction and it's me. It's all me."

Anders put his hands on Connor's shoulders and turned the young man to face him. "You were a
frightened child with a bad teacher, and you trusted the person you'd been told you could. Someone lied to you. A lot of people, I'd guess. I know. I was twelve, and I didn't have a teacher." He took one of his hands back and pressed a knuckle between his eyes, lips twisting in an embarrassed smile. "I set my dad on fire, and that was completely intentional. The barn was kind of an accident, and I feel bad about that, but I was twelve and it was my first fireball."

Some of the pain in Connor's eyes shifted to curiosity. "Your dad? Did he live?"

"Unfortunately," Anders sighed. "The barn was less lucky."

Connor offered him a pained smile. "And was your barn full of an entire village that was also trying to fend off darkspawn?" He grimaced as soon as the words left his mouth, rubbing his eyes. "Not... to diminish what happened to you. I just... People died because my powers weren't properly contained. And now everything's in upheaval, and I feel like it's happening again, just not through me, specifically."

Kinnon tugged his hood lower when Connor glanced his way.

"It was the Anderfels," Anders offered. "Even the sheep are secretly darkspawn. Well, not really, but until you've had a six hundred pound blighthram run at you, you really kind of underestimate the potential for damage."

Peryn squeezed Kinnon's hand and stepped forward. "You have been touched by something very dark. Demons, yes? Your teacher brought them to you, but you have come back. You have seen that path, and you do not want to follow it. I do not think the mark will ever leave you -- I can see it in you. But, you do not feel like a maleficar. You do not have the ... there is a different mark that comes with summoning demons, with using your blood for magic instead of your will. You have the mark of someone who spent time with demons, very close to them. Some older Templars wear it. Ser Cullen wears it. But, you were a child. You were used for a pawn, and it does not make you a maleficar. You need good teachers and a strength in you, not punishment or pity."

"Ser Cullen's a fucking nutter and I hope I never see him again," Connor snapped, trying to turn attention away from the rest of Peryn's words. The man was obviously a Templar, but he'd never known any Templars with that power, though there was talk of some who could sense mages just being in the room with them.

"Ser Cullen's had a hard lesson and come to change his ways," Anders said, quietly. "He's much better than he even was bef-- but you didn't know him before, did you? I had the chance to meet him before he turned into the destroyer of mages. He's a great ally, now, and a good friend. Of mine." He turned his hand up and called a wisp to it. "When we met, the second time, I didn't expect him to recover, but he has. Won't blame you if you still don't want to see him. I figure a lot of mages who knew him then wouldn't."

Connor frowned, eyeing Anders like he wasn't quite sure he believed him. "I'll just take your word for it, thanks."

Anders didn't press the issue, not with the way Connor was tensing. "So, when Solona told the story, she said Arl Eamon was in charge." He thought back to the curious greeting they'd gotten just inside the gates. "That... does not seem to be the case. Where is he?"

Connor let out a heavy sigh, looking older than his twenty-three years as he peered out across the lake. "After the Landsmeet, he stayed in Denerim. I couldn't be his heir, not after what happened, so eventually he passed the title to Uncle Teagan."
"Teagan... like the Bann of Rainesfere? That Teagan?" Cormac's eyebrows lifted, and he bit his tongue against the first thing he thought to say -- that he'd seen the man in a Summerday parade, when he was younger, and always fancied him a bit. "No shit. You don't look a thing like him."

"You know him?" Connor asked, curious.

"No, not really. My dad was a mercenary, and he did some work down here. I've seen some of the southern nobles, but I've never met any of them." Cormac paused awkwardly and then held out his hand. "Well, until now. Mack Kestrel, no one of any real import. Pleased."

"You still haven't," Connor corrected him. "Connor Guerrin, mage. I can't hold a title."

"Still plenty noble compared to these peasants," Anders joked, pointing his thumb directly at Cormac.

Connor smiled, but it was a weak thing, just to be polite. "It's probably safer a mage can't hold a title. The way things are in Tevinter..." He trailed off, lips pressing thin.

Vivienne picked up the end of that thread. "Someone at the gate mentioned a magister was in charge."

That drew a ragged, bitter laugh out of Connor. "Yes. An 'alliance' with Tevinter, they say. That magister threw my uncle out into the street! He signed us into servitude!" He shook with an anger that all but made the air around him vibrate. "This is my home. Redcliffe. Ferelden. No matter what evils I've done, I would never have invited Tevinter here!"

Anders rubbed his forehead, closing his eyes behind his hand, knowing they would be glowing.

"So, Jan, what do you think? The usual magister disposal techniques?" Cormac grinned and cracked his knuckles. "It's been a few years."

"I'd prefer something more subtle," Anders sighed, eyes still shielded behind his hand.

"Please talk some sense into the Grand Enchanter. Selling out to the Imperium won't win us any friends," Connor pleaded, earnestly. "We have to find a way to make peace."

"But, not with Tevinter." Kinnon raised a wry eyebrow, still concealed by his hood.

Connor's eyes darted to Kinnon, as he recognised the voice, and then lit on the Templar next to him, and bounced back to Kinnon's suspiciously familiar robes. The meaning slowly became clear to him, and he looked even more grim, before he spoke again. "No, not with Tevinter. Not while they're trying to work up a sovereign holding on my family's lands. Peace with Tevinter can wait until they've stopped invading the South, which is never, apparently."

"I like him." Peryn chuckled. "Tevinter is getting too big for its borders again, though I did not expect them to start on two fronts at once."

"We'll take care of this," Fen'Din promised, his eyes already gazing past Connor to examine the tavern's structure, and the people standing around outside.

After some more internal struggling, Anders managed to convince Justice to calm down, to wait until they knew what they were dealing with.

"Shall we?" Vivienne asked brightly, following Fen'Din's gaze to the tavern doors.
Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

A conversation with someone who shouldn't have anything to say about Redcliffe.

Inside, the tavern was dimly lit, sunlight peeking in through the slats blocking the windows, and it took a moment for their eyes to adjust.

"Welcome, agents of the Inquisition," said a familiar voice with an Orlesian accent, and Fiona stepped forward from the shadows in the back, her smile welcoming but distant.

"Fiona." Fen'Din tried for the smile, as he stepped forward, bowing shallowly. "I should have come sooner."

"And First Enchanter Vivienne," Fiona observed, nodding to her, face carefully neutral.

"My dear Fiona. It's been so long since we last spoke. You look dreadful! Are you sleeping well?" Vivienne's voice was politely inquisitive, but clearly barbed, and Cormac's spine straightened at the sound of it.

"What has brought you to Redcliffe?" Fiona asked, with a pleased, if confused, look across the group.

Anders stepped foward, calculating all the things that might have gone wrong, here. "Grand Enchanter, please sit. Vivienne's right, you're not looking so good. I'm a healer-- I understand those have been in short supply."

Fiona waved him off. "It is nothing. Just these difficult times."

Fen'Din caught Anders's eye, both of them thinking the same thing -- it was either blood magic or possession, but they wouldn't know if she wouldn't let them closer.

"Don't you remember? We met in Val Royeaux. I was going to bring some friends to Madame Vivienne's salon." Fen'Din chose his words carefully, knowing full well the slap he'd just taken at Vivienne. "You asked if we would come to Redcliffe, after, and help you with your Tevinter problems."

Fiona's brow furrowed, but she kept her poise. "You must be mistaken. I haven't been to Val Royeaux since before the Conclave."

"Well, that is very strange," Anders said, that healer's concern still plain on his face as he looked her over, "because someone who looked exactly like you spoke to us in Val Royeaux. Are you certain you are well?"

"Exactly like me?" Fiona looked between each of them, as though waiting for someone to come forward and correct him. When none did, she looked discomfited. "I suppose it could be magic at work, but why would anyone..." She trailed off, shaking her head as though to clear it. "Whoever... or whatever brought you here, the situation has changed. The free mages have already..." She swallowed, forced out the word, "...pledged themselves to the service of the Tevinter Imperium."
"Fiona dear," Vivienne said, "your dementia is showing."

Fen'Din took note of the word. 'Pledged'. Which wasn't at all what Connor had called it, but Connor had always been a bit excitable. Still, the way Fiona choked on the word suggested he was right. "An alliance with Tevinter is a dangerous choice, at the best of times. But, these aren't the best of times, are they?"

Solas shook his head and stepped forward, easing himself between Cormac and a table. "I understand that you are afraid, but you deserve better than slavery to Tevinter." His eyes were steady and his face lacked its usual half-smile.

Fiona paused, before she replied, and it told them everything they needed to know.

"Oh, shit," Kinnon breathed, mashing his forehead against Peryn's hair.

"As one indentured to a magister, I no longer have the authority to negotiate with you," Fiona said, too calmly.

Anders tipped his chin at Fen'Din, mouthing 'blood magic', with a curious look.

Fen'Din rolled his eyes theatrically. "You have the authority granted you by the people you represent. Understand that we will accept any deal you choose to make with us as if it were made by the Grand Enchanter, and regardless of what your master thinks is best. This is not one of your better moments, Fiona, but we will get you out of it, if you trust us to do so."

"You don't understand! All hope of peace died with Justinia!" Fiona protested, weakly. "This... bargain with Tevinter would not have been my first choice, but we had no choice. We are losing this war. I needed to save as many of my people as I could."

"We're here, now, and we've done this before," Cormac told her, with a grim smile, as he glanced at Anders. "Kirkwall part two?"

At the other side of the bar, Artemis had been half-listening and mostly drinking, one hand squeezing Fenris's in both reassurance and a reminder to behave, but he stilled when he heard that voice. Fenris's ear twitched, and they exchanged a look.

"Kirkwall," Fenris repeated. The tattoos on his left arm flickered to life, and he growled, slapping at them as though it could turn them off. Eventually they faded on their own.

"Kirkwall," Artie agreed, the word thick in his throat, and turning to see his brother here of all places felt like someone was squeezing his lungs. He had to check for a moment that Fenris's hands were where they should be.

Not just Cormac, he realised, but Anders too, in his Warden dress, Ser Peryn standing to his other side.

"Do you know them?" the man sitting next to them asked, a young Tevinter named Felix with waxy skin and shaking hands.

"A few of them, yes," Artemis answered, not taking his eyes off the scene in front of him.

Fenris squinted over his shoulder at the group as a man approached them, studying the tallest figure in their midst. "That's Anders, isn't it," he muttered and it wasn't a question.

"And my father," Felix noted, gesturing in the direction of the man now greeting the group. "I'll
thank you not to kill him. He really does try..."

"Nobody dies until we know what's going on," Theron promised, sliding into a seat with another pitcher of ale and a plate of bread and cheese. "Though, I've got to say, he's been a good candidate, so far."

"Dorian's here, now. We'll make him see sense," Felix said, sounding like he was trying to convince himself.

"Many southern mages," Anders corrected the magister, and his voice rang across the room, not quite Justice, but certainly more forceful than he tended toward. "Don't credit yourself where it isn't due. You have made some sort of alliance with these mages, but there are still others. Loyalists, Wardens..."

"Have you found the Wardens, then?" Alexius's crisp reply cut through the sound of tavern chatter.

"Why, no! No, I haven't. That's obviously why I'm dressed in full Warden arms and resisting the urge to flick taint in your eye. I am a Warden. Hello, you've found me."

"Has he got a death wish?" Felix asked, watching Anders posture.

Artemis sighed. "You have no idea how often I've asked myself that." At least Anders looked like he was surrounded by capable allies, and there was always the group of them here, in the corner.

Alexius did not seem impressed by Anders's demeanour, but he met Anders's anger with a calm that bordered on condescending. "And have the Wardens pledged themselves under the Inquisition's banner? The rest of them are with you, yes?"

"He speaks as though he knows something," Fenris said, his voice a low growl. It made his skin crawl, watching a magister strut about the tavern unchallenged. He flexed his fingers inside his gauntlets but kept his seat.

"I suspect he does," Felix said sadly. When next he paused to listen, Alexius was describing the indentured servitude of the rebel mages, and even from here he could see the flashes of blue that danced along Anders's skin as he turned away to calm himself.

Fenris thought of his sister, as Alexius continued to describe the arrangements he'd made with Fiona. In the Imperium, even freedom had been meaningless without citizenship, which was something he hadn't taken into account. Apparently. He still wished he could remember more of that decision, what he'd been thinking, when he chose that fight.

"It could only be divine providence that I arrived when I did," Alexius expounded, voice just a little louder, as he turned a somewhat condescending eye on Fiona.

"It's not. He's been planning this ... well, not this, but something like it, since the war broke out." Felix poured himself half a glass of beer. "And what's with your Warden? He's glowing."

"So's my husband," Artie pointed out, patting Fenris's flickering hand. "It's... well, let's just say it's a Warden thing."

Felix gave him a curious look but didn't press for details.

Someone Artie didn't recognise asked about the Arl of Redcliffe, and Felix huffed a bitter laugh into his drink.
"The Arl of Redcliffe left the village," Alexius said, and Artemis was relieved to see that none of the Inquisition seemed to buy that.

"He's not technically lying," Theron pointed out with feigned cheerfulness while they argued in the background. He plucked up a bit of cheese to place on a slice of bread. "A man does leave when he is kicked out."

As Alexius led the group to a large table, he waved to Felix. "Felix, would you send for a scribe, please? Pardon my manners. My son Felix, friends."

Felix rose and bowed, drawing attention away from his still-seated companions. "Watch my beer. Duty calls," he murmured to Artemis, rolling his eyes, before he straightened up and went to find a scribe.

Fenris stuck his finger in Felix's glass, as soon as the man was out of sight, but his eyes never left Anders, whose glowing was fairly subdued as he loomed behind a much shorter figure who sat across from the magister.

"I'm not surprised you're here. Containing the Breach is not a feat many could even attempt." Alexius looked like he might almost be impressed. "There is no telling how many mages would be required for such an endeavour. Ambitious, indeed."

"Hardly ambitious." Fen'Din corrected, his calm voice barely audible under the chatter in the tavern. "Entirely necessary. And when one needs to do something properly and quickly, one chooses the right tool for the job." He slid off his glove, cupping his hand under the gaping rift in his palm. "I am the tool. All I need is the power. And right now, I am told that you, and not the Grand Enchanter, are the person I must negotiate with for access to that power."

"Fascinating," Alexius murmured, leaning across the table to better examine Fen'Din's hand. "You escaped the Fade, but it seems you have taken a piece of it with you, yes? Now, as for my mages, we would have to --" Alexius trailed off, his attention drawn to Felix, who had wandered back their way. He staggered where he walked, his face ghostly pale.

Anders was at his side before he could think about it, a healing spell ready, and he was just in time to catch Felix as he collapsed, eyes rolling back in his skull.

"Felix!" Alexius burst to his feet as well, brows drawn together with worry.

"I'm so sorry. Please forgive me," Felix apologised to Anders, as he recognised the healing spells racing through him.

"You're a Warden?" Anders asked, baffled as he met the taint in Felix's blood, and Felix met his eyes with a confused look.

"Felix, are you all right?" All the negotiator's cautious expressions fled from Alexuis's face, to be replaced with fatherly concern, as he hovered tensely at Felix's side.

"I'm fine, Father." Felix kept his eyes on the ground.

"Come, I'll get your powders." Alexius hurried toward the door. "Please excuse me, friends. We will have to continue this another time."

Not a Warden, Anders realised, suddenly. A ghoul.

A sneaky ghoul, Anders decided, finally noticing the scrap of paper Felix had slipped into his sleeve.
Come to the Chantry, it read. You are in danger.

Across the room, Artemis squeezed Fenris's hand and watched Felix with concern. Felix lifted his head just enough to offer them a wink as he hobbled past.

"A letter for you," Anders said softly, sliding the scrap of paper over to Fen'Din.

"Oh, how kind of him to state the obvious!" Fen'Din folded up the note and tucked it into one of his pouches. "Do you think we have time for a drink, before we set out, again? I'd hate to miss Torrin, again."
Chapter 59

Chapter Summary

Even more Hawke. A joyful reunion.

"What are we doing?" Cormac asked, glancing around the room for any unexpected additions.

"Going to have a chat with someone who thinks we're in danger. Which we are. This entire situation reeks of blood magic, at best. I know Fiona... and I don't know a situation that could make her choose this of her own will." Fen'Din huffed in irritation, a few seconds later than seemed appropriate.

"Fiona has no patience for the long game," Vivienne argued, looking less than impressed, both with the Grand Enchanter and with her surroundings. "Is Ferelden always so..." She paused and gestured to the tavern.

"Are you kidding me? This is pretty fancy for Ferelden. Redcliffe's a big deal." Cormac grinned unapologetically. "But, let's have a drink and decide how to go have this conversation, because I... I might be paranoid, after my last visit to Kirkwall, but this feels like a trap."

"You are already in the trap," said a familiar voice, and Anders wondered if it was just because Cormac had mentioned Kirkwall that he thought he'd heard Fenris, until, of course, he looked up and spotted the elf padding over to them from the shadows.

The figure next to him waved, and Anders ducked to see under his hood. "Hello, everyone!" Artemis said with a bright smile. "Welcome to Redcliffe! The tavern is filthy!"

"See?" said Vivienne. "That is what I've been saying!"

Cormac made an utterly inhuman sound, darting around Peryn and under Anders's arm to get across the room, where he tried to sweep Artie into his arms and dropped to his knees instead, as he hit the immovable force mage. "Everything exploded and I was so worried about you. I sent word to Gwaren, but I haven't heard back, and here you are. In Redcliffe." He looked around and then laughed. "It looked fancier when we were kids, didn't it?"

Artie laughed through the lump in his throat, crouching to wrap his arms around Cormac without dirtying his knees on the floor. "You idiot." He pressed his face into Cormac's springy hair, throat too tight to tell him how worried he'd been, knowing Cormac had been at the Conclave.

Anders stood in front of Fenris, a beaming smile on his face as he threw his arms out wide. Fenris growled but allowed the hug.

Kinnon cleared his throat awkwardly. "So I take it you know each other?"

"This is the infamous Lord Hawke," Cormac answered, more successfully lifting Artie as he stood and tried to get his brother away from the filthy floor and the wad of snot he spotted on the underside of the table. "And his equally infamous elven companions, the other Lord Hawke and Hahren Theron."
"You may call me Leto," Fenris added, nodding, but not raising his hood. He couldn't afford to show his face, since the Vints had come.

"They call me Hahren Shem-tamer, back home," Theron offered with a wide grin at Peryn.

"They call you 'halla-fucker' back home," Fenris corrected.

"Lord Hawke is not a Halla," Cormac groaned, setting his brother down beside Anders and gesturing to the to elves to introduce them. "This is Fen'Din. Don't. That's Solas. You might. You know Kinnon and Peryn -- no, you don't know Brother Kinnon, but you do know Peryn."

"Fereldan Bran," Peryn said, raising his hand with a lopsided smile.

"And this is Imperial Enchanter Vivienne, from Orlais. She's something else," Cormac said, as tactfully as possible.

"Which is all one ever strives to be, my dear," Vivienne replied smoothly.

"Hello, everyone!" Artie said again, looking at each face and matching them with the name. He paused on Solas for a moment. He hadn't heard the name before, but there was something familiar about his face. Yet no matter how long he stared, Artemis couldn't tease out the memory, and he looked away when he realised he was being rude.

Only to find himself staring rudely at Fen'Din, instead. Or, rather, at Fen'Din's hand.

"Your hand is glowing," he said helpfully.

Theron chuffed behind him. "One would think you'd be used to glowing elves by now!" He clapped Fenris on the shoulder.

"You have known others who survived this?" Solas asked, looking past Artemis to examine Fenris.

"No," Fenris replied, keeping his head down and his eyes up. "That is not what I am." But, the lyrium rang like a chorus of bells, this close to the other elf. Almost like it did when he touched Justice.

"He's talented," Cormac covered, flashing an indigo hand. "I'm pretty talented, too. But, Theron's right. You'd think he'd be used to all the glowing, between me and Jan and Leto. None of us glow green, though."

"Solas and I believe I may have touched whatever caused that massive rift above the mountains," Fen'Din explained. "Whatever happened, I don't remember any of it. I don't even remember going to the Conclave."

"He fell out of the sky and smacked his head," Anders sighed, rubbing his face. "I'm glad he remembers anything at all. But, no, Leto is definitely a different kind of glowing." He offered a lecherous smile and an eyebrow raise, before his hand settled across his eyes again. The headache was much less bad than it had been in Val Royeaux, but it was still annoying -- particularly since he hadn't had to deal with headaches from anything but overusing his magic for decades. It was the bright side to being a healer.

"I'm not sure I want to know," Kinnon murmured.

"Not to interrupt this touching reunion," Vivienne said, keeping her voice soft enough that only those directly around her could hear her over the din of the tavern, "but what do we plan to do about the
Tevinter presence here?"

"Hopefully, at some point I will get to stab some of that 'presence','" Fenris growled. He winced as his tattoos started flickering again. "For now, however, I have been informed that that will not help us." Solas eyed the flickering lines of lyrium and frowned.

"Felix is a good man," Artemis said, keeping his voice down as well. "He wants to help."

"Every man believes himself a good man, with righteous motivations. Jan can tell you how many of them are correct." Fen'Din shrugged, demonstratively. "But, I will speak to Torrin, and then we will-"

"Oh, look! The Inquisition brought back Enchanter Crazypants!" came a voice punctuated by the slap of an empty tankard against the bar.

Anders turned around. "Two out of three isn't a bad thing, except for you, Godwin, considering the nice one's missing."

"Who the fuck are y--" Godwin registered the accent, first, and then the height, and then those eyes. "Oh, shit. You're not dead, and I'm out twelve sovereigns."

"He's no more dead than I am," Fen'Din replied, with a mischievous sparkle in his eyes.

Anders fluttered his fingers. "Where's Enchanter Torrin? I've brought Montsimmard to see him." He cocked a thumb at Vivienne. "And the... er... 'Herald of Andraste'."

Godwin pointed toward where the room turned a corner. "He's by the fire, holding court. He wouldn't let the Grand Enchanter speak for us, and he's been there having it out with the ones who followed her, instead, for days." He paused. "Twelve sovereigns, Anders. I can't fucking believe you."

"You've always been an idiot, but this is a whole new level of stupid. It's your fault for wagering against me. You knew I was going to make it. I always do." Anders rolled his eyes. "And you can call me Jan, like everyone else does."

"Who the blight calls you Jan? Nobody has ever called you Jan!" Godwin argued, still entirely confused and concerned at this entire sequence of events.

"I do," Fen'Din replied, then pointed at Cormac. "Mack does. So when you hear him screaming, you'll know who it's for."

Artie coughed into his fist to hide a laugh. He pointed at Fen'Din. "I like him."

Anders hummed, giving Artemis a sidelong look. "I am going to repeat Mack's advice of 'don't'."

"But..."

"Trust me on this."

"And hold on," said Godwin, still a beat behind in the conversation. "Did you say the 'Herald of Andraste'?" He stared at Fen'Din in horror.

"One of the Heralds," Peryn helpfully agreed, offering Godwin a guileless smile. "It would seem they come in pairs."

"And you sent us this one?" Godwin replied, pointing rather rudely at Fen'Din. "Oh, we are so
fucked."

"Godwin, the day you get fucked is the day Andraste will descend from the heavens to bear witness to that inexplicable event." Anders rolled his eyes and took a step toward the corner, before Fen'Din put up a hand.

"Stay here, where you can see the door." Fen'Din gestured for Vivienne to follow him. "Come, we should see Torrin."

"He is First Enchanter, now? I have heard little from other Circles, since the incident at the White Spire," Vivienne remarked, following just a step behind Fen'Din, as she would a footman.

Cormac draped an arm around his brother's shoulders. "Don't you have enough elf?"

"More than enough," Theron promised, with a crude gesture.

"Yes. You're more than enough for anyone, Theron, and that's with all your clothes still on," Fenris drawled, as Anders dropped a hand on his shoulder and healing washed through him, closing up all the little splits and sores from the interaction of the winter chill with the lyrium.

Anders didn't point out how much worse Fenris looked since the last time he'd seen him, didn't comment on the way the elf leaned into the hand with the healing. They were both a little worse for wear, though Anders hoped he didn't look quite so ragged.

"Agreed on all counts," Artemis said, holding his hands up and out in surrender. "But you can't blame a man for being curious! He's cute!"

From where he was pretending to ignore them, Godwin gave a derisive laugh. "I'm not even gonna touch that with a ten-foot pole. Especially if it's Anders's ten-foot pole."

"Jan," Anders corrected with a note of irritation.

"Janders," Godwin corrected with a shrug.

"If you have come with your First Enchanter, did you come with your Templars?" Peryn asked, noticing the lack of armour in the room. "Or did they go to the rebellion?"

Godwin snorted. "We're better rid of them, but no, they didn't rebel. After the Vints put out Teagan, they decided the Templars were a threat to the peace in a whole village of mages. Took Hadley and the rest of them up to the castle. Haven't seen them since."

"Hadley's not a threat!" Anders protested. "He couldn't find his own ass with two hands and someone else holding a lantern!"

"Of course he's a threat," Solas cut in. "If he is a Templar, he can separate them from their power. History tells us there are no practising Templars in the Imperium -- not like you see them here. They are merely guardsmen with different armour."

"And that's why you're staying here, when we go to walk into this trap." Anders smiled brightly at Peryn. "I need you safe, because you may have to come get us out."

"Assuming he doesn't set everything on fire," Godwin retorted, pointing at Anders.

"Hey, I'm not going to argue with what works." Cormac held his hands up. "He's set fire to two magisters, so far, and it's done wonders."
"It is a terrible temptation, sometimes, isn't it?" Solas's half-smile bowed into three-quarters of a smile.

Fenris hummed in agreement.
Adaar waited for the impact, the splintering crash of wood, only to find himself pulled into... nothing. He stumbled forward, nearly toppling over without the forward tug of Lucius's hands, and when he whirled around, tensed for an attack, it was to find Lucius gone altogether.

Turning, Adaar found himself surrounded by fog, standing at the edge of a colonnade that seemed to disappear into the air, the dirt at his feet tinged a sickly grey that reminded him of the mark on his hand.

"Oh, what the shit," he muttered as he stepped forward cautiously towards what he thought were torches. When he got close enough to make out the shapes under the fire, he hissed in a breath. "That... that is not a torch." They were corpses, frozen in twisted expressions of terror. Carefully, Adaar picked a route around them, muttering, "what the shit, what the shit," over and over again, just for the comfort of hearing his own voice.

At the end of the rows of columns stood a pair of familiar figures, Cullen and Josephine, the greenish tinge of the fog giving their skin a sickly glow.

"Hey!" Adaar greeted them, relieved to see familiar faces even as his instincts told him to keep back. "Were you dragged here, too? What's...?"

Leliana strode out of the mist, passing between the two unnaturally still figures. "Is this shape useful? Will it let me know you?" The voice was hers, but different, somehow. Only her lips moved, when she stopped walking, her face an unnatural texture like oiled porcelain.

"Everything tells me about you," she went on, striding to where Cullen stood listless and vacant. "And so will this," she said, with a smile, as she stepped behind Cullen and raised his head with the edge of her knife. He made no move to stop her.

"Watch," she commanded.

Adaar's hands twitched as though to stop her, but Adaar held himself back. This wasn't really Leliana. Which meant that wasn't really Cullen. There was something familiar about this place, not the fog and the columns and the vaulted ceilings, but something else he couldn't quite put his finger on, some quality to the air.

"You don't fool me, demon," Adaar growled through his teeth. Why was it always demons? "I see through you."

The creature with Leliana's face just stared at him impassively, no reaction, no judgement, just cataloguing his response. When she drew her knife across Cullen's throat, it almost felt like an afterthought.

Adaar only just managed not to flinch at the spray of blood and the way Cullen slumped, doll-like, to the ground.
"I see through you," Leliana echoed, as she backed away, Adaar's own voice coming from her mouth.

Josephine awakened and stepped forward, a dagger in her hands. "Being you will be so much more interesting than being the Lord Seeker," she declared, strutting past Adaar, as if to circle him, but never appearing on the other side. As he turned, following her, she appeared again, behind him. "Do you know what the Inquisition can become? You'll see..."

Adaar turned... and kept turning, the echoey quality of her voice and his poor hearing making it hard to pinpoint where she was.

"When I'm done, the Elder One will kill you and ascend," she said, her voice sounding less human by the moment. Adaar couldn't find her and stopped spinning, tensed for a fight he couldn't predict. "Then I will be you."

"Who the fuck is this Elder One everyone seems to love so much?" Adaar yelled out into the fog. The answering laugh didn't sound like Josephine at all, though it seemed to be coming from everywhere and nowhere at once. "He is between things. Mortal once, but no longer." When she reappeared on his bad side, Adaar jumped. "Glory is coming. And the Elder One wants you to serve him like everyone else: by dying in the right way."

"Oh good," Adaar sneered, trying to hide how jittery he was. "I would so hate to die in the wrong way. Why don't you tell me more?"

Josephine talked off into the mist, only to be replaced by Cullen, who appeared behind Adaar, to the side of the qunari's better ear.

"I am not your toy! I am Envy, and I will know you!" Cullen raged, strangely bearing the same dagger as the others, instead of his sword. He strode past, as Adaar turned to face him. "Tell me 'Herald', in your mind... Tell me what you think."

A figure in oily black appeared, just as still as Cullen had been, but far, far taller. Though monochrome, the shape was unmistakably that of a qunari, apparently dressed the same as Adaar, its eyes glowing with green flame. Cullen turned, just past it, driving the tiny dagger into its back, and letting the creature slide limp off the blade.

As the qunari-shape crumpled into the mist, Cullen vanished again, only to appear behind Adaar, who was getting used to this tactic, and turned in time to meet not just Cullen, but the war table, entire.

"Tell me what you feel," Cullen demanded, leaning on the edge of the table.

Adaar was about to offer a shaky bit of sarcasm when a choked gasp from behind him drew his attention. He turned to see that shadowy version of him again, this time bleeding from a new wound, hands clutched over its stomach. As it crumpled for the second time, Adaar noticed the weight of a dagger in his hand where there had been nothing a moment before, the blade and his hand red with blood.

Adaar hissed out a shaky breath, tossing the blade away from him, even as the creature at his feet gasped out, "Tell me what you see."

Adaar put a hand out to lean against the war table, only to find it gone, along with Cullen and the not-him, leaving him alone again with the fog and the burning corpses.
A secret meeting turns into a strange reunion.

The Chantry was hardly a quiet place of worship when they walked in the door. Green light reflected off stone, the rift floating in the middle of the nave a familiar sight. Less familiar was the dark-haired mage single-handedly fending off a Despair demon, killing it by cracking his staff over the creature's head.

He looked up at them, impressive moustache moving with his smile. "Good! You're finally here! Now help me close this, would you?"

No sooner had he spoken than the rift glowed ominously, spitting out a few Terror demons. The strange man whirled out of their way, bringing his staff to bear.

"From the rift the wind did beckon, heaving with the Beyond's air, spewing out its awful demons, fighters to our nightmares bared," Theron belted out, springing into battle, his sword cleaving a misshapen green arm from one of the demons.

Two demons slammed into rapidly shrinking barriers as they lunged, and Solas shot a confused look over his shoulder at Kinnon, before he managed to raise a shield for the moustachioed man. Kinnon, though, hung back, face almost invisible under his low hood, hands tucked into the wide sleeves of his robes. He remained nearly motionless, in opposition to Cormac, who lunged in beside Theron, glaive cleaving through the midsection of another demon, as its claws scraped down his shield.

"Enough," Fen'Din pronounced, pushing his way through the group, as the rift began to waver. "This will not help."

Solas drew forward, but stopped beside Anders, who seemed to be the mark the rest fell back to.

As Fen'Din raised his hand, the rift readied itself to disgorge more demons, but he filled the echoing stone hall with a song. Spirits drifted out of the rift confused and frightened, but still whole, and they crowded close around the source of that song, as he tugged at the rift.

"I wish Adaar were here," Fen'Din muttered under his breath. "There's something in the way. I can't get it to pull closed. What is trying to hold this open?"

The others braced themselves, expecting another demon, the largest demon yet. What came through was a foot -- a human foot -- flailing around.

Anders squinted up at the dangling foot. "What the shit?" he muttered.

A voice came through, but the rift garbled the words past recognizability.

"Well, that has to be the oddest demon I've ever seen," the moustachioed stranger said.

After a bit more staring, Anders cursed under his breath and reached up, grabbing hold of the dangling foot and pulling. The dangling foot gave way to a dangling leg, then to two dangling legs,
then to a body falling heavily to the ground.

"Oof." The man stared at the ground, touching the rug under him as though to make sure it existed. "Am I here? Am I actually here?"

"Hang on..." Anders said, recognizing that voice, then recognizing that face when the man gazed up at him in wonder. "Oh, you have got to be kidding me!"

"Jowan?" Kinnon squeaked out.

"Shh!" Jowan held up his hands as he turned back to the rift. "Don't say it too loud. And help me get the rest of them! I'm not alone." He stared into the rift for a moment, trying to ram his hand back through, but he couldn't seem to do it. "Lily? Brynn? It's safe!"

Fen'Din stopped trying to close the rift, but kept singing, as the spirits near Jowan began to waver. Solas took up the song as well, trying to lead the chorus away from the rift and whatever might come through it.

An arm extended from the rift, first, this time, heavy with armour, and Kinnon caught it just in time for the matching hand to grab him as well. After a moment, a helmeted head followed, along with the rest of a clattering Templar far too heavy for Kinnon to support.

"Sorry," the armour muttered as it fell, knocking Kinnon to the ground beneath it.

"Come on, Owain, we've got to get the rest of them before this one closes!" Jowan stretched toward the rift just in time to meet a woman in traditional Rivaini garb who sprung out hands and feet first, prying herself out of the rift.

"Lily's right behind me," the woman promised, climbing down Jowan to the floor.

And sure enough another woman tore her way through next, clearly taking great pains to touch Jowan as little as possible as she clambered to the floor. She clung to the Rivaini woman, tears of relief welling in her eyes as she looked around.

"It... it worked," Lily said, voice shaking with wonder. "I can't believe this one actually..." She trailed off, turning to point an admonishing finger at Jowan, even as he helped another young mage out of the rift, getting his face stepped on for his efforts. "Redcliffe! How long have I been saying 'Redcliffe'?"

Jowan sighed wearily. "If I had realized we were being plagued by an Irony Demon, I would have tried it first."

"That's... not actually a thing, is it?" Kinnon felt like he should ask, brushing himself off.

The stream of mages continued behind Lily as she stepped to the side, studying Kinnon. "Ask the mages. It might be. ... Don't I know you?"

"Brother Kinnon," he introduced himself, with no explanation, hoping she wouldn't remember.

"Brother...?" Lily's eyes took in the robes and then returned to his face. "You're that apprentice they wouldn't Harrow!"

Kinnon's hands flew up, fluttering at her to speak more quietly. "Shh! You can't just... I'm Brother Kinnon, out of Kassel."
"Uh-huh." Lily cocked a thumb at Jowan. "Like he's Levyn, bold explorer and rescuer of peasants."

"No shit?" Cormac's eyes rounded. "That's Master Levyn? Everyone thought he died fighting the darkspawn! The refugees kept waiting for him to come back!"

"Jowan? Seriously?" Anders leaned to the side to look around Lily instead of over her head. "Well, that's one thing he didn't fuck up. I knew almost a hundred people he'd helped."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Anders," Jowan muttered, though he was relieved to know the people he'd saved were still okay. As Anders had said, it was good to know there was something he hadn't fucked up.

The moustachioed stranger leaned in to address Solas, eyeing each new person as they came out of the Fade. "Now, I can't say I have as much experience with these rifts as you all clearly do, but... is this normal?"

"It is very much not," Solas replied, shaking his head.

"Jowan," Anders said to them with a shrug, as though that explained everything. And if any of them had known Jowan, it would have.

There was a pause to the trickle of escapees, and then a gauntleted hand reached through, followed by an armoured body. Owain reached up to help this one through, helping the other Templar to the ground with a heavy clank.

"Is Niall coming?" the Rivaini woman asked, still watching the rift. "I know he wasn't sure about this..."

The second Templar eyed the singing elves strangely. "Yeah, he couldn't stand to see us all go. But, you might want to step back. I don't know what he's going to be when he gets out here. You've got to accept that, Asha. He's..."

"Yes, I know what he is."

Above them, the rift parted wider than it had for any of them, and what looked like a faceless mage in a flowing black cloak of smoke appeared, a chill seeping into the room around it. The Templars drew their swords and stepped back from the roiling green.

As a face resolved from the mist, the moustachioed stranger stepped forward to offer a hand. "Well, well! Not a desire demon, I hope?"

The misty mage looked down disapprovingly, but accepted the hand, stepping down to the ground as if weightless.

"Niall? I thought you were dead! Elfhole said--" Anders started, wide eyed and staring, but Kinnon cut him off.

"He is dead. I was with Solona when she found the body."

"I decided I didn't like being dead, all right?" Niall huffed, snatching his hand back from the man with the Tevinter accent, as he realised that grasp had lasted far too long. The singing elves suddenly drew his attention and he drifted closer, putting a hand on Fen'Din's shoulder, as the smoky cloak dissolved from around him, leaving a man dressed like a Fereldan enchanter. "I'm... Jowan, are you sure we're out? This looks like some desire demon's kingdom."
"Not if you're me, it's not," Jowan retorted, still taking in the details and how little had changed since he was last in Redcliffe.

"Niall, if you think we're part of a desire demon's kingdom, I have some questions," Kinnon said around a shaky laugh, staring at Niall, wide-eyed, as he slowly became more and more human.

"Fascinating," said the stranger, looking between them and the rift, eyes alight with excitement. "You were all in the Fade? Physically in the Fade?"

"How did you manage that?" Solas asked, politely curious.

One by one, each head turned to Jowan, who threw up his hands in exasperation. "I was just trying to--!"

"He was trying to rescue his girlfriend," Niall supplied.

"Ex-girlfriend," Lily muttered.

"From Aeonar," Niall finished.

"Ah," said Solas, nodding his head like that explained everything.

"He tried to summon geese," Lily drawled. "And then he... well, he pulled a Jowan."

Anders snorted. "Of course he did. I would expect no less. But... Into the Fade? How? When did this happen? If it was in the last month or two, I could see it, once the rifts started popping up all over Thedas, but..."

"Oh, that's great. Jowan broke Thedas." Niall rolled his eyes and rested his forehead on the top of Fen'Din's head, apparently not realising that this might be construed as weird.

"It could only be a few months, however long it seemed like." Jowan shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. "Time's weird in the Fade -- that's what the Circle would have you believe. But, I don't remember rifts all over the place..."

"What was the date?" Fen'Din asked, stopping the song long enough to edge past Niall, who drifted closer to Solas, and raised his hand to the rift, again.

"Thirty-eight Dragon," Jowan replied. "In the winter. So, it's only been a couple of months, at the most, really."

"Jowan, it's forty-one Dragon," Anders corrected. "You've been in the Fade for years."

Jowan laughed nervously, looking around him. "Oh, that's a good one, Anders. That's great. Forty-one Dragon. With that beard, I'd almost believe it!"

"He's not kidding, and I can recite every event of any importance in the last three years," Theron volunteered, taking a deep breath.

"Do not." Cormac pointed at Theron, glaring down the length of his finger. "Well, not now. Do it later. I want to hear what's been going on in the Marches."

Jowan looked ashen, and Anders put a hand on his shoulder to make sure he wasn't going to fall over.

"Th... three years?" Owain stammered. "We have been gone three years?"
"Long before the Breach," Solas mused, chin in hand. "The Veil there must be thin indeed."

"And it must be thin here, to let us back out," Niall said. "And... 'breach'?"

The stranger barked a laugh. "When you get a chance to go outside, look up. There you will find your answer."

Niall and Jowan exchanged uneasy glances. That sounded ominous.

"Which brings us back to: who the Blight are you?" Anders asked cheerfully.

"Ah! Apologies. Where are my manners?" The moustachioed man pressed a hand to his chest. "Of course, it is hard to give introductions over screaming demons." He gave a formal bow and offered Anders his most charming smile. "Dorian of House Pavus, most recently of Minrathous. How do you do?"

Fen'Din's arm whipped back from the rift, apparently pulling it closed as if it had purse strings. "Quite well, frankly."

Dorian's eyes lingered on where the rift had been. "Fascinating. How does that work, exactly?"

"Current speculation is that I was exposed to whatever caused the breach, and some sort of sympathetic resonance is at work. I'm afraid we haven't had the time to commit to a proper study." Fen'Din gazed down at his hand, eyes curious.

"You don't even know? You just wiggle your fingers and the rift disappears!?!" Dorian rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"We've been otherwise occupied. Notably with preventing demons from spilling out across Thedas and having nosey Vints like yourself for breakfast." Fen'Din's eyebrow was no less pointed for the time it took to rise. "When we have a moment, I'm quite certain the research will reveal many notable things. For now, however we have only the speculations of individuals who have worked with rifts in the past -- notably, Jan, myself, and Solas."

Anders waved and Solas nodded deeply, still singing under where Niall seemed to be draped on him like a cat on a warming pan.

"So why exactly were we sent here?" Anders asked Dorian. "To meet you or to take on that rift? You didn't know that this was going to happen?" A wave of his hand indicated Jowan and the others as 'this'.

"In short, I wish to help," Dorian said. "And no, I did not know, or I would have brought a ladder."

Lily offered a weak laugh.

"Magister Alexius was once my mentor," Dorian went on, "so my assistance should be valuable -- as I'm sure you can imagine."

"So you're a magister," Anders said flatly, glad they hadn't brought along a certain sword-wielding elf.

Dorian blew out a dramatic sigh. "All right. Let's say this once. I'm a mage from Tevinter, but not a member of the Magisterium. I know southerners use the terms interchangeably, but that only makes you sound like barbarians."
Theron glanced at Cormac. "Something tells me Fenris would punch holes in him either way," he said softly. "Where is Felix in all this?" he asked Dorian, looking around as though he expected the man to magically appear.

Dorian shifted uncertainly. "He was to give you the note, then meet us after ditching his father. I'm sure he's on his way."

"He's... not 'sick', is he?" Anders asked, after a moment. "He's tainted."

Dorian's eyes rose to meet Anders's. "What would give you that impression?" he asked, carefully.

"Dirty Warden tricks." Anders fluttered his fingers. "And I'm a healer. I kind of noticed."

Dorian looked deeply shaken. "He's had some lingering illness for months. Doesn't the taint kill fairly quickly? You must be picking up on the taint that remains from the Blight."

"So, why have you chosen to betray your former mentor, assuming it is he you've come to warn us about, and not some other danger?" Fen'Din asked, with a hopefully stern look at the pair of Templars still clutching their swords.

"Let's start with Alexius claiming the allegiance of the mage rebels out from under you," Dorian began. "As if by magic, yes? Which is exactly right. To reach Redcliffe before the Inquisition, Alexius distorted time itself."

"I'd started to assume that was possible," Niall muttered into Solas's shoulder. "But, I've been dead for ... ten years? Eleven? Time's distorted anyway."

"The rift you closed here?" Dorian went on. "The one that they... sort of fell out of?" He gestured vaguely at Jowan and the others. "You saw how it twisted time around itself, sped some things up and slowed others down?"

Solas, still singing, raised his eyebrows and nodded pointedly at his companions.

"Solas said something similar about the rift at the gate," Kinnon pointed out. "Is this a Redcliffe thing? I don't remember other rifts doing this."

"For right now?" Dorian said, moustache moving in a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "It is indeed a 'Redcliffe thing'. But soon there will be more like it, and they'll appear further and further from Redcliffe." He shook his head, some of his swagger faltering under his desperation. "The magic Alexius is using is wildly unstable, and it is unravelling the world."

"Unravelling the world? That seems a little extreme," Jowan remarked, still trying to get over the fact that he was out of the Fade, and back into the world, where things had textures whether or not he remembered to consider them.

"I helped develop this magic," Dorian snapped. "I know what I'm talking about."

"I don't think time exists in the Fade," Niall pointed out, stupid relief plain on his face, as he stopped rubbing it on Solas's bald head. "So, you'd be using that ... I can't even call it instability. Malleability? To change time in the one place it does exist."

"Are you sure he's not a desire demon?" Dorian asked, with a sidelong glance at Niall.

"Intensely sure," Jowan replied shuddering at the thought.
"When I was still an apprentice, time magic was pure theory. Alexius could never get it to work."

Dorian ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "Clearly that's changed. What I don't understand is why he's doing it? Ripping time to shreds just to gain a few hundred lackeys?"

"I don't know the man, but I do know it's a mistake to speak as if we are not in the Fade," Fen'Din began, and Niall and Jowan groaned loudly at each other. "We are in an ancient kingdom of it. One made stable by belief, by long rulership by the same lords, queens, and gods. He can do this, because time isn't real, any more than I'm alive."

"I might finally give him that last one," Niall admitted. "Seeing how I'm standing here."

"But, why? I can only think he means to grab for power, not just lackeys, by reverting the flow of time to its more natural pooled state -- to a state that makes it more compatible with the rest of the Fade." Fen'Din stared into the light pouring down from the rosette window high on the wall.

"He's rather distraught over his son. Is he trying to accelerate time until the sickness has passed, or maybe roll it back so Felix won't get sick?" Anders asked but he knew that no matter how close Dorian had at one time been to Alexius and Felix, he hadn't even realised how sick or what kind of sick Felix was now.

Dorian was about to answer when he spotted someone else coming into the Chantry, brightening at the familiar Tevinter robes. "Took you long enough!" he said, greeting Felix as he stepped into the torchlight.

Felix looked around at them all, blinking in surprise. "This is quite the turn out," he said with a wry look at Dorian.

"It's a long story that I haven't even heard yet," Dorian replied. "Is your father getting suspicious?"

"No," Felix assured him, "but I shouldn't have played the illness card. I thought he'd be fussing over me all day." He looked around until he spotted Fen'Din, squared his shoulders and explained all at once, "My father's jointed a cult. Tevinter supremacists. They call themselves 'Venatori'. And I can tell you one thing: whatever he's done for them, he's done it to get to you."

"I'd ask why you're working against your own father, but I've met his." Cormac cocked a thumb at Anders.

"I love my father, and I love my country, but this?" Felix shook his head. "Cults? Time magic? What he's doing, now is madness. For his own sake, you have to stop him."

"It would also be nice if he didn't rip a hole in time. There's already a hole in the sky," Dorian noted, tartly.

"But, you said it was all to get to me. That's not an end in itself. What does he want from me, that I wouldn't willingly provide, if asked?" Fen'Din clicked his tongue and crouched down, as a few skeletal mice skittered in from behind Felix.

"The Venatori are obsessed with you -- you and the other one -- but I don't know why. Perhaps because you survived the Breach?" Felix shrugged and glanced at Dorian.

"You can close rifts," Dorian pointed out. "Perhaps they want you to do it for them? Or they see you as a threat."

"Then you don't know if this cult is responsible for the Breach." Fen'Din looked up, as the mice clambered onto his sleeve, chittering. "It is, after all, the perfect first move in re-conquering the
"I've changed my mind," Niall groaned. "I think I liked being dead."

"If the Venatori are behind those rifts," Felix said heavily, "or the breach in the sky, they're even worse than I thought."

"All this for us?" Anders said dramatically, a hand on his chest. He turned to click his tongue at Fen'Din. "And here we didn't get Alexius anything."

"Get him a fruit basket," Dorian drawled. "Everyone loves those." He drew in a heavy breath, all business again the next moment. "You know you're his target. Expecting the trap is the first step in turning it to your advantage. I can't stay in Redcliffe. Alexius doesn't know I'm here, and I want to keep it that way for now. But whenever you're ready to deal with him, I want to be there." He started backing towards the exit as he spoke, offering Niall a smile on the way by. "I'll be in touch."

Niall stared after him blankly. "Can't wait," he said in a flat voice.

"And, Felix?" Dorian called out at the door. "Try not to get yourself killed."

Felix offered his back a wan smile as he slipped away. "There are worse things than dying, Dorian."

"Says the man who hasn't been dead," Niall drawled.

Theron made his way through the assembled group, eyes lingering on each new person he passed. "There are a lot of shemlen here." He smiled at Cormac as if he'd gotten a late Wintersend gift. "I don't think Lord Hawke would mind..."

"If Lord Hawke thinks he gets to have an opinion, remind him of the wedding." Cormac laughed and took his own look at them all. "I think we need introductions and beer. Once we've got that, we need a plan. And if anyone who knows Brother Kinnon from before could avoid mentioning his prior life, I would be extremely grateful -- whatever he may once have been, he's a reasonably loyal servant of Andraste's will, now."

"I don't think it said anywhere in the Chant that you can't get laid," Anders offered, with a lopsided grin. "You, on the other hand..." He pointed to Jowan.

"There's still nothing in the Chant about whether I can get laid, it's just never going to happen again." Jowan rubbed his face. "Redcliffe. Why did it have to be Redcliffe?"

"I feel like I missed something." Felix blinked at the assortment of people standing in the Chantry aisle.

"That's because you did." Cormac patted him firmly on the back, gaining a cough for his efforts. "I'll buy you a drink, and we'll explain most of it, if you'll do the same."

"Done!" Felix agreed, with an odd look at Anders. Something about the man tugged at the back corners of his mind -- the ones he most wanted to ignore.
Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Through the nearest door -- which turned out not to be an exit, after all -- the mist changed from green to red, in the midst of a room lined with cells. At each corner of the inset floor, a hooded man pointed a sword inward to the figure crumpled in the centre. Cassandra observed, between that figure and the next door.

"You think me a fool?" Cassandra's voice rang out, somehow twisted as those before her had been. "Explain this!"

"Deja vu," Adaar muttered, eyeing the figure being held at swordpoint and finding him suspiciously qunari-shaped. He addressed the air around him, knowing the demon was still around. "If your goal is to use Cassandra to terrify me that's... not a terrible idea!"

"You mock to hide your fear," said a voice that sounded like three in one, sounding as though it were coming from the walls. It was said almost clinically, an observation, and just the sound made Adaar's skin crawl as he shoved through the next door.

The glowing-eyed, oily-black qunari stood with its arms crossed between two people in heavy armour.

"Our enemies have surrendered unconditionally," the armoured woman announced. "The Inquisition's strength rivals any kingdom in Thedas."

"Our reach begins to match my ambition," the oily-black qunari declared, in a voice that nearly matched Adaar's own, green flames licking the edges of its eyesockets. "But, we will strive for more."

"I know imitation's supposed to be flattering," Adaar said, squaring off in front of the glowing-eyed qunari, "but this is a bit sad. Is this your only hobby, demon?"

"Accusing..." it said, again almost clinically, and Adaar had the feeling he was being studied. "Trying to find my weakness. Is that the man you are?" The laughter that followed didn't even sound like it was trying to be human.

All three figures exploded in a blinding flash, jolting Adaar back a step. "What the shit?" Adaar hissed through his teeth as he looked around to find them gone.

Cautiously, he continued on, finding himself surrounded by more columns that led up to vaulted archways, seeming to disappear into nothing. Every movement of shadow had him tensing. He started to walk between a pair of pillars with ornately carved dogs rearing up along their sides, only for them to spew green fire from their open jaws. Adaar jumped again but had given up on being surprised at this point.
Pillars, at least, could be walked around.

Another room spread outward in the mist -- this one with a throne at the centre, bearing the Inquisition's eye. Barred walls stretched out past the throne, and spears of red lyrium jutted from the ground. It seemed almost to be a combination prison and throne room, fallen torches still burning amid the fallen stone from some assault not depicted. To the right of the throne, the oily qunari again appeared with two others.

"Did you truly have no preference among the standards?" the demon's voice echoed from the walls. "For when I am you, no one will ever doubt your focus."

"Right now you seem pretty focused on being a pain in my ass," Adaar grumbled through his teeth. He pushed on, finding this room to be a dead-end and tried to go around the pillars from the other side. Another room like the last materialized out of the mist, three soldiers in Inquisition armor standing in front of the 'throne'.

"Who would stand against us when the Inquisition commands nations?" one of them said.

"No one wise," a second responded, drawing her sword.

Adaar rolled his eyes. "Right, so this is what you want the Inquisition to be if you take over? You don't need to keep stroking your ego on my account."

If the demon said anything in response, Adaar didn't hear it, stepping back out amidst the fire-breathing pillars and gingerly picking his way around them.

Past a few barrels with bottles atop them, another room appeared, but it was only a brief niche, with three more people standing in it.

"When the Chantry fell, we despaired, but the Herald of Andraste brought us light," said a young woman, to the mage beside her. "The people stand in awe of the Inquisition."

The mage said nothing, nor did the Inquisition soldier, and Adaar darted across between the flames to find another niche, equally occupied.

"The Herald saved all of us! Our army could tear down a kingdom!" proclaimed a man in a ridiculous Orlesian hat. "No force matches ours for strength!"

There was no smoke from the green flames, but the air was starting to feel thin. Was he trapped in here? Would he just keep wandering from room to room forever until he went insane?

Movement caught Adaar's eye, the back of a fleeing figure in Templar armour disappearing into the flames. Adaar followed as far as the fire would let him. Another room was a dead-end, incongruously set up like a bedroom, and Adaar spun around, growling in frustration.

"Do you see how glorious my Inquisition will be after you die at the hands of the Elder One?" the demon taunted with an almost feverish excitement.

Then there was a second voice, like a breath on the air. "You're hurting, helpless, hasty. What happens to the hammer when there are no more nails?"

Adaar spun, but he could not find the source of this voice either.

"What are you?" hissed the demon. "Get out! This is my place!"
Adaar crept back out of the bedroom and into the hall of fire.

Another door stood blocked with a shimmering magical barrier. This, then, must be the way out, but how? As the turning flames came back around, Adaar threw himself at the barrier, locking metaphorical and physical horns with the force that held it in place, and just as the flames licked at his heels, he burst through it... into another bedroom.

As he turned to leave, confused, the second voice called out, "Wait."

When he hesitated, it spoke again. "Envy is hurting you. Mirrors on mirrors on memories. A face it can feel but not fake. I want to help. You, not Envy."

"Who are you?" Adaar asked guardedly, getting tired of all these floating voices. But there was something familiar about this one that he couldn't quite place. "I've seen you before. Have I?"

"I've been watching." Now the voice seemed to come from the other direction, though it was hard to tell. Adaar just made it a habit to continually spin in slow circles. "I'm Cole. We're inside you. Or I am. You're always inside you." The voice spoke either haltingly or all in a rush, like it was having trouble keeping pace with the words it wanted.

The voice -- Cole -- moved again, and Adaar all but jumped when he found himself face to face -- or rather face to hat -- with a young man standing on the ceiling. "It's easy to hear, harder to be a part of what you're hearing," Cole went on as though this were perfectly normal. Adaar took a few cautious steps back, not quite paying attention to what the boy was saying, more focused, incongruously, on how the Blight his hat managed to stay on while he was upside-down. "But I'm here, hearing, helping. I hope."

"Helping," Adaar repeated dubiously, even as a part of him was desperately hopeful. This Cole sounded so earnest.

"Envy hurt you," Cole continued, "is hurting you. I tried to help. Then I was here, in the hearing. It's -- it's not usually like this."

Adaar threw out his arms. "If you have an explanation for all this, I'm all ears. Or..." He paused, gestured at his good ear. "All ear, I guess."

The flames flared, outside the door of the room, and an uncanny presence made itself known. But, nothing followed. Nothing entered.

"I was watching. I watch. Every Templar, when you arrived. They were impressed, but not like the Lord Seeker." Cole vanished again, reappearing atop the headboard of the bed.

"The 'Lord Seeker' is an Envy demon. It wants to be me." Adaar offered strained smile. "And who wouldn't? Memory loss, demons everywhere, and a mark on my hand that does weird shit. Of course a demon would want to be me, right?"

"Yes. It twisted the commanders, forced their fury, their fight. They're red inside," Cole explained, sitting back against the wall. "Anyway, you're frozen. Envy is trying to take your face. I heard it and reached out, and then in, and then I was here."

"So... okay." Adaar wiped a hand over his face then over one of his horns, trying to wrap his head around what was going on. "You're what, exactly? A nosey ghost who can just pop into someone's head?"

"If it bothers you," Cole said, voice dropping to a hollower tone, "I can make you forget. That
Adaar tried to catch a glimpse of his face under the hat but couldn't. "I've... done enough forgetting for a lifetime, I think. All right, 'Cole', if you really want to help, how do I get out?"

"It's your head," Cole answered. "I'd hoped you knew how to stop it."

Adaar looked around him helplessly, only then noticing that there were sideways chairs on the walls. This place was creeping him out. "...well I don't."

"All of this is Envy," Cole declared, standing to walk down the bed and somehow managing to tower over even Adaar. "People, places, power. If you keep going, Envy stretches. It takes strength to make more." Cole hopped down off the side of the bed, still talking, as he walked over to the fire. "Being one person is hard. Being many, too many, more and more, and Envy breaks down, you break out."

"So if we keep moving in my 'head', we tire Envy into submission?"

Cole turned to Adaar and then back to the fire, a few times, abortive half-moves, before he settled on looking at the qunari behind him. "Maybe. I hope it helps. It's more than sitting here waiting to lose your face."

With a final glance at the fire, Cole turned and bolted for the door. "This way."

Adaar was still processing the idea of 'losing his face', but he scampered after Cole. They ventured back out into the hall -- into the Chantry nave, Adaar finally realized, seeing the shapes through the fog -- and Cole stopped in front of the streams of fire that had held Adaar back earlier, the streams he'd watched 'Lucius' run through.

"Ideas are loud here," Cole said. "Make them louder. Think of water."

Adaar shot Cole a dubious look. "Think of water?"

"Yes."

Adaar shrugged helplessly but stared at the green flames pouring out, thought of water pouring out instead, a harmless waterfall. Green flame faded to clear water, and Adaar blinked in amazement. That almost seemed too easy.

"That thing can't help you," Envy screeched around them, sounding decidedly agitated. "I will see more!"

Fire -- regular hot, red fire -- flashed at Adaar's feet as he ran through the door he'd been unable to reach, before, and Envy's mocking laughter rang out around them, as if the demon still believed it were in control.

The room beyond sat between cells, again -- bit of a theme, really, all the locks and bars -- and it featured a table larger than a man that looked like it might have been put to some questionable uses. A flash of light moved Adaar back to the door, and Cassandra's back appeared before the table -- the war table, now -- facing that Chantry asshole with the low heels, on the other side of it... Chantryman Ridiculous? What was his name? Did anyone care?

"Betrayed allies will curse your name. Like the first Inquisition, you will bring blood and ruin and fear." Envy's voice seemed to trickle out of the walls.
"Unless you don't," Cole suggested. "You don't have to. None of this is real unless you let it be."

"Get out, thing!" Envy howled. "I am learning!"

"Thanks, Cole," Adaar murmured, more to himself, as he continued on. The next scene featured Mother Giselle, flanked by soldiers and staring down Envy in its oily, fake-qunari form.

"What do you say to your crimes, heretic?" Envy asked, almost sounding like the qunari it was imitating -- almost sounding like Adaar.

"This is a farce!" Giselle snapped. "I demand justice!"

"Have it," sneered Envy. It tipped its head at the soldiers flanking her. "Take her to the gallows."

Adaar scoffed, coming to stand next to her. She did not acknowledge him. "You think pretending to be me will give you that kind of absolute power? Please. The people would rise up against you long before it got to that point."

"I will clear their doubt," Envy responded, glowing green eyes fixed on him, its voice splintering back into its demonic undertones. "As Herald, the lash will follow my word."

Before Adaar could respond, the scene vanished in a flash of fire, leaving him in the middle of a long, stone hall, a statue to one side of a skull and sword. Some kind of Fereldan crap, probably. Fereldan crap was always weird. On the other hand? Not enough dogs.

A turn brought him through another door, to where an Inquisition soldier stood outside a cell holding a Chantry Mother.

"Where is the Herald? Let that tyrant charge me to my face!" the Mother cried out.

"Heresy against the Inquisition is the only charge we need," the soldier replied.

"I am a Grand Cleric of the Chantry!" the Mother protested.

"You are a threat to the peace! The more of you in here, the better." The soldier crossed his arms.

The next cell featured some sort of Orlesian nobility, his shaking hands revealing the fear his mask hid.

"Baron," the soldier in this room said, "do you confess to conspiring against the Herald of Andraste?" She almost sounded bored.

"I confess nothing," the nobleman protested. "The Inquisition took my land and turned out my family!"

"Then your sons will be executed in absence of a declaration of guilt."

"What?" the Orlesian croaked. "They're just children!"

"A bit much, don't you think?" Adaar said, addressing the air around him, but Envy didn't rise to the bait.

The place was a maze of prison cells, each holding someone innocent. Adaar stuttered to a stop in front of Cullen's.

"The Herald has questions, Commander," this room's soldier said.
"Is it my turn to be branded a traitor for questioning what we've become?" Cullen's voice dripped with sarcasm, as if his situation were nothing new, and he'd seen it coming miles off. "I deserve it, for letting him turn the Inquisition into a butcher's pit."

And that... really was Cullen. Disturbingly like the real thing.

Chapter End Notes

Into the fic? Want to come spaz out about your favourite parts with other readers and your awesome authors? The next Fan Chat is Saturday, 28 July 2018 @ 17:00-21:00 EDT, at the Kirkwall Gazette's Discord server. Join us! We don't bite... hard...
Chapter 63

Chapter Summary

Everything's easier with a friend. Revelations are still hard to swallow.

The next room held Cole, before a cell, and an Inquisition soldier stood beside a weeping Lay Brother just outside the door.

"It's dark, but it isn't real," Cole assured Adaar. "Think of sparks. Keep going up. You're more you there than you are Envy, and that tires it out."

"Good, I think."

And then Cole was gone, a flicker, an outline, and then nothing, as if he'd never been. Next to where he had been standing, suddenly a brazier flamed to life, holding a green fire that made Adaar's hand ache just to look at. There was something familiar about it, something that brought to mind Fen'Din and Solas and all that weird Fade stuff they liked to talk about.

"Veilfire, right?" Adaar mumbled to himself, finding an unlit torch conveniently nearby and dipping it into the flames. "Solas would be so proud."

A demonic hiss of frustration filled the room, and Adaar took that as a good sign. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do with this veilfire, but, well, lighting things on fire was probably a good guess. When Adaar passed an unlit brazier suspiciously like the one holding the veilfire, he paused and shrugged, dipping his torch into it until it caught.

The ground seemed to tremble underfoot, making the fire quiver, and suddenly the walls moved.

"No!" Envy screeched.

"Yep," Adaar muttered. "That looked like a good sign."

Another brazier lit, and the wall moved again, sliding back through another wall with an open doorway.

"Away from there!" Envy hissed as Adaar chased the wall into another room, this one bearing a statue that seemed important, somehow.

Flashes of memory -- how did that work, walking around inside one's own mind? -- jarred the qunari's thinking. Images of the Lord Seeker, similarly trapped; voices he was unfamiliar with speaking -- but that voice he knew. That was Envy, under it all. These were Envy's memories. He watched himself in Val Royeaux, through the eyes of the Lord Seeker, who was already this demon.

One line of thought sprung out at him, that he was 'beneath the Lord Seeker's notice'. He'd thought himself at least tall enough to be seen over the crowd.

"I haven't seen enough!" Envy growled as Adaar made for a flight of stairs, slowly rising out of the ill-lit gloom, until he could throw open the door at the top.
It took a moment for Adaar to sort out what was going on. There were trees growing in the prison, old, gnarled things that pushed their way through the ceiling. Rotted corpses swayed, hanging from the trees.

"The chevaliers couldn't stop them?" asked a young man with an Orlesian accent.

"There weren't enough of them, boy," an older man answered. "Val Royeaux is burning! The Herald marches here next, bringing even more demons!"

Adaar scoffed, picking his way through the room and stepping over ancient roots that weren't actually there. "Right. The other shit didn't convince me, but this will! Your lies are getting more pathetic, demon."

"Determination?" Envy said, his layered voice echoing. "Such a useful trait."

Cole's voice was gentle in contrast when it cut through. "You're letting the Herald see more to sketch his shapes, but what he sees makes him stronger."

Adaar pointed at the ceiling. "Yeah, what he said."

"Quiet!" Envy snarled.

The next door flew open on a pair of demons, one reaching for the handle and the other still facing away. It took a moment to recognise the back-lit, almost-human shapes, but the surprising number of teeth was a dead giveaway.

"You're never getting out of here," one of them said. "It's far too late for you. Do you know how long it's been? You've wasted away, and now you can never go back."

The other turned toward Adaar. "Everyone's dead out there, anyway. The Templars killed them all. Monsters with lyrium-eyes have torn apart everything you love."

"Great. Thanks!" Adaar didn't even slow. He was getting used to these demons' tricks, and he didn't even pause to think over their words.

Green flames, like the edges of rifts, licked out from behind the trees as he sprinted past a burned mark in the road, trying not to look too long at the still-smouldering ruin of what had been there, before. It looked almost like parts of southern Ferelden, here, complete with demons and terrifying green glowing marks.

Envy's voice wound out of the spaces between things. "You wish to be difficult? Then see the legacy of the Inquisition!"

An Inquisition soldier approached a pile of rocks hung with a green haze, only to be knocked back as spears of green crystal sprung up from the ground, as if they'd suddenly grown there, called into being by the approach of something mortal. Green lyrium? Was that a thing? It looked almost like the last stage of a rift, before it closed.

Suddenly, the mist and the crystals vanished, the soldier flung off into the trees.

"Its followers hosts to demons! Your world -- ashes! Show me what you'd do with them!" Envy commanded, all subtlety gone, for the moment.

"Or don't," Cole suggested, as Adaar danced around a sudden spike of more green crystals in the road. "It can't make you, not any more. You're getting too strong."
A small smile curled Adaar's lips at the sound of Cole's voice. He kept on walking.

Envy roared with frustration. "Shut! Up! Thing!"

Adaar found himself at the steps of a fortress, and as he ascended, more green crystals shot up from the ground. Halfway up the steps, Adaar stopped flinching at them. On the landing he found a familiar form, the shape of a young man with a hat that shadowed his face.

"Almost there," Cole assured him. He was sitting among the stone as if he hadn't a care in the world, his smile confident. "Keep going up."

Adaar eyed the archway into the mysterious fortress, too dark to see inside, a portcullis blocking his path. "What then?"

"You're making it hard for Envy to think," Cole explained. "It'll probably come out soon."

"Oh," Adaar sighed, realizing that meant facing down the demon. He found a lever off to the side.

"It's angry," Cole added. "But that's okay. So are you."

"You bet your skinny ass I am," Adaar grumbled as he pulled the lever. The portcullis open with a telling screech.

A courtyard opened beyond the gate, filled with burning wreckage and scattered soldiers. Two lingered by a covered well, half-hidden in the smoke.

"I think we've escaped them," one soldier said, as Adaar ran past.

"What does it matter when all of Orlais is overrun?" the other asked, never registering the qunari.

On the other side of the road, two more of the hunched demons in leather shawls waited, both of them eyeing Adaar, as their hands gestured at the soldiers.

"They say Tevinter's fallen and Antiva is besieged by the demons that took Val Royeaux," the second soldier went on.

"Maker," swore the first, finally noticing either Adaar or the demons, and lunging into battle, drawing his sword.

The soldiers fell quickly, and Adaar kept running, taking the first stairs he saw -- a long flight, turning with the angles of the building it climbed the side of.

"Almost there," came Cole's voice again. "Keep going up."

Adaar side-stepped more demons, not bothering to engage, as the landing opened up into another courtyard. Orlesian soldiers stood in the fog, arrows nocked on their bows.

"They say the Herald summoned these demons after Celene was murdered," one said, and Adaar's ears pricked at that.

"An abomination!" said her friend. "Why did no one realize?"

"Quiet!" the first one hissed as Adaar kept walking. "I hear something."

With the sounds of battle at his back, Adaar didn't need to glance back to know that more demons had attacked them. Or... maybe not demons, Adaar realized as he continued through the courtyard.
Templars jumped out of the fog, eyes a glowing red.

"Nope," Adaar muttered, turning away from the Templars and toward a sagging archway, lit in Fade-green smoke. As the smoke cleared, the arch stabilised into a doorway, leading into what might once have been a barracks or a tavern.

Up the wide stairs from the disused tables on the ground floor, the Fade lunged at him again, green and crystalline, but he waited it out, knowing it couldn't hurt him, unless he allowed it. Unless he imagined it.

Running for the first stairs he could see, he passed a strange statue -- a shouting head? a crouching demon? -- and Envy called out to him, "That won't save you! I will have you!"

Taking that as a sign that the statue would be a great help, Adaar turned to examine it, only to be overpowered by more of Envy's memories. Visions of himself leading a shining, conquering horde to victory, as a hero, and Envy's... well, envy. An unquenchable flame, all-consuming. The desire to destroy that hero, to become that hero, to show that hero's face as a trophy before the Elder One.

This maze of a building led outside again, and this time Adaar heard the crackle of fire, the ringing of steel on steel, the battle cries of warriors, and his ears perked, wondering who was fighting whom. He followed the sounds into the fog, up more stairs that wound around and around the building.

"Almost there!" Cole assured him, and Adaar hoped he was right, hoped trusting this stranger was the right thing to do.

Another set of steps, and the air started to waver, the images before him seeming to drift off into black mist at the periphery of his vision. The next set of stairs was crumbling, a war-torn wreck, but Adaar kept climbing and climbing, until at least he found himself in front of a familiar red door.

Just as Lucius had lunged at him in the real world, Envy came at him now, in the form of Adaar's oil-black, glowing-eyed twin. Adaar backpedaled, dodging its attack, but the demon backed him into the door.

"Unfair, unfair!" It was odd hearing a demon whine. "That thing kept you whole, kept you from giving me your shape!" A hand grabbed Adaar by the throat, lifting him up into the air.

"Why the fuck would you want to be me?" Adaar spat back, legs kicking in the air. "Most days I don't even want to be me!"

"Don't want to be...? Augh!" Envy looked away in disgust, shaking his head, and then slammed Adaar back against the door. "We'll start again. More pain this time. The Elder One still comes."

Something began to take shape over Envy's shoulder, a mist of what looked like blood and oil, trying to take a humanoid form.

From above, Cole's voice called out, "It's frightened of you."

Envy glanced around for the source of the sound, taking a hand off Adaar to do it. "Get out of--"

The last word was cut off by the collision of horns, as Adaar rammed his head into Envy's face, strangely without the familiar crunch of splintering bone. Everything was spongy, and then white. And then just as suddenly as it all began, Adaar found himself standing before the door he'd been pulled through, everyone behind him, just as they'd been.

A demon -- Envy, Adaar assumed -- lay in a tangled mess where Adaar had headbutted it through
the door. It was one of the uglier demons he'd seen, long-limbed like a spider, pale flesh stretched over bone. When it stood, it twisted up and under itself in a way that made Adaar's back ache just looking at it, and it lifted a head that was all swollen flesh and lipless mouth, teeth and gums parting in a mournful screech before it leapt off and disappeared in a black mist.

"The Lord Seeker!" Ser Barris called out after it, eyes wide with shock.


Ser Barris shook his head, jaw tight, while Adaar looked around to find they were in a Chantry, the rest of the Templars clustered inside. "That monster ensured we weren't prepared," Barris murmured. "I still don't know what we're up against."

Adaar looked around for Cole, wanting to thank him, but he was nowhere to be seen. "Did anyone else see a young man appear beside me?" he asked, turning to address the others.

"What young man?" Ser Barris asked, glancing around as though he might yet appear.

"Pale, strangely dressed, clearly Fade-touched. Big-ass hat."

Ser Barris shook his head. "I saw no one. The Lord Seeker was alone, when you revealed his true nature."

"You, ah... You hit your head pretty hard, a minute ago. You sure you're not just seeing ghosts?" Varric asked, wishing, not for the first time, that Anders had come with them. Or even Cormac. Or even another fifteen healing potions.

Bull leaned to the side to clap Varric on the back hard enough to make the dwarf stagger forward. "He's Vashoth. It'll take more than headbutting somebody to make him see things. Of course, that was a demon. I don't know what happens if demons get that close to your head."

"Demon was already in my head," Adaar muttered, rubbing his forehead. "I just... headbutted him out of it.

"That's one way to solve your problems," Varric said with a shrug. "Still no strange man in a giant hat, though."

"Right," Adaar muttered. Too bad. He was starting to like Cole. To Barris, he explained, "It's an Envy demon. Not that I have any idea how to kill it."

"Envy!" Cassandra blurted, a hand moving up as though to cover her mouth before she thought better of it. "Then the Lord Seeker..." She trailed off, voice trembling with emotion.

"Is caged or dead," Barris finished in a murmur. "Maker." He looked ten years older in that moment but he pulled himself together after one shaky breath. "And my captain knew. It's the red lyrium, isn't it? I knew that wretched stuff was risky!"

"Don't even get me started," Varric said with a pained smile.

"They often give us new kinds of lyrium," Barris explained. "Our Commanders ... some used the red stuff first, to prove it was harmless."

"And they all turned into fucking nutters after about a week, didn't they?" Varric guessed. "I've heard it takes a little longer, if you're human. Or maybe it's if you're a Templar. It got my brother as soon as he touched it."
Barris shrugged helplessly. "There was so much going on. We thought it was just the stress. The Knights would've been next. That demon turned our leaders so we couldn't question when this started!"

"We'll take care of it, Barris," Cullen promised. "The Order's been through some difficult times, recently, and a lot of bad leadership, though nothing this bad, however many times I might have wished we could blame Meredith on demons. We'll kill the demon and then we'll see how many men can still be saved. Are you with us?"

"Yes, Commander." Barris looked relieved. "You sound like you have a plan, and I know most of the Knights haven't been turned. They'll be grateful for someone whose eyes don't glow red in the dark. If you offer them a chance to strike down the demon that's done this to us, they'll jump at it. We all will." He turned and pointed at one of the other Templars. "Templar! What is Envy?"

"A coward, brother!" the woman replied. "It studies, makes less mistakes. But, most of all, it hides."

"We need our veterans!" Barris declared to the room. "Our Commanders may have turned, but the lieutenants may still be fighting!" He turned to Cullen. "We'll hold the hall. You find the lieutenants and the uncorrupted lyrium stores. Bring them here, and I'll give you Envy." With a grim look, he marched into the midst of the gathered Templars. "Show those things no mercy."
Jowan walks directly into his worst nightmare.

No one looked up as the tavern door swung open. The place was busier than it had been at any point since the Fifth Blight, and people were in and out constantly. By the bar, Eadric sat between Connor -- with whom he had an uneasy truce on the subject of coming to Redcliffe -- and Artemis, whom he suspected might be flirting with him, albeit not in the way one tended to expect from shem. A few tables over, Artemis's husband sat with a Templar, making jokes about Tevinter politics. Eadric had heard that elf, now also Lord Hawke, had once been a Tevinter slave, which was the reason he kept his face hidden. All things considered, he couldn't fault the precaution.

He knew most of the voices coming in -- they'd been here earlier. Jan, who sounded strangely familiar, Fen'Din, that Rivaini, the other elf, and... no. That couldn't be... He sat straight up fast enough that Artemis stopped talking as he whipped around to look, just in time to see the Templar -- Perrin, was it? Something. The man leapt up and drew his sword, lunging at... there was no way. There was utterly no fucking way.

"Maleficar!" Peryn shouted, his sword wavering between Jowan and Niall.

"Peryn--" Kinnon started, reaching out for him, but then the smite hit and he was too busy trying to pretend it hadn't knocked him cross-eyed. He managed not to stagger, but many of the mages around him weren't so lucky, a few bystanders shouting out in surprise and terror, chairs screeching as they tried to get away.

Niall, on the other hand, just stared blankly back at Peryn, the edges of his shape starting to blur.

"Okay," said Anders, stepping over Jowan, who had managed to trip over his own robes and fall to the ground. "Maybe a few introductions are in order..."

"He is a maleficar!" Peryn said again, jabbing his sword in the direction of Jowan, who flinched. He eyed Niall. "And he is worse!"

Lily slipped in between his sword and Niall, her hands palm out in a gesture of peace. "I would not upset him, Ser Templar," she said, voice tight.

Near the back of the group, Solas stepped forward. "That man I do not know," Solas began, nodding to Jowan, "but this one is no man, at all. He is a spirit of the Fade. We ask your indulgence, Ser Peryn."

"I am not a spirit of the Fade!" Niall protested, face flickering behind Lily. "I'm a spirit of a man, of a mage! I'm not a demon! I'm just dead!"

"He's a little of both," Asha admitted, stepping up to put a comforting arm around Niall's waist. "But, the longer he is with good people, the more he returns to being a man."

Eadric finally got up, making his way over to the group by the door. "Enchanter Niall?" He paled at the familiar face. "We burned your body. Solona found you..."
"Sloth," Niall admitted, putting both arms around Asha and closing his eyes. "We weren't enough. Leofric went forward, and I was supposed to take the Litany and go back. He died first. I saw him pass me. But, Solona came to help us, and I ... I didn't want to be dead, but it was too late to come back. Another spirit helped to keep me safe from the demons, but..." He laughed bitterly. "Safe. Demons. I don't even know what those mean any more. I just want a chance to finish living my life. That's it."

"His protector was Pride," Asha filled in. "I fought it. We fought it."

Understanding broke across Solas's face. "The demon who protected him has left a trace under his skin. It will take time and work to clear it off him."

"I'm trying," Niall muttered. "I just want my life back. That's all."

"I didn't even want to come to Redcliffe!" Jowan complained, dragging himself to his feet just in time for Connor's first kick to meet his chin.

"You!" Connor's eyes blazed with rage and Niall flickered again. "How dare you come here? How dare you be alive?"

Anders let him get a few good kicks in before making a half-hearted attempt to pull him away. "As much as we would all like to kick Jowan, Lily is right; we really shouldn't be upsetting Niall."

"I'm not kicking Niall!" Connor spat. If he hadn't been hit with a smite, Anders imagined there would be flames coming out of his clenched fists.

"Right now you might as well be," Lily said, trying to keep her tone calm, to bring the shouting down to her level instead of escalating. "So can we all calm down so I can have a drink? A real, Maker-damned drink?"

Asha whispered soothingly to Niall, whose edges kept melting in and out of solidity, his brows crinkled in concentration. Peryn still gripped his sword tightly as he eyed Niall, but he was no longer shouting and waving it around. Ser Brynn came up beside him, offering him a weary smile.

"We'll keep an eye on him," Brynn said, "but right now he's harming no one."

Peryn caught the Sword of Mercy, deeply scarred, on the front of Brynn's chest. "You are a Templar?"

"Knight-Captain Brynn, out of Aeonar," Brynn introduced himself.

"Another Bran," Peryn sighed. "It is true, then. The south is all Bran."

"Brynn, not Bran," Brynn corrected, with a tired smile. "Close, though. Is that Hossberg I hear?"

Peryn's face lit up. "Yes! I came from Hossberg. For the Conclave. But... It is a mess. I have stayed."

"I've been stuck in the Fade for three years," Brynn admitted. "The worst of the maleficars fell when the demons came, but some of the ... There were those I never believed were guilty, some simply knew the wrong people, like Lily. It's a different thing to turn down a demon standing before you than to do it through the Veil. Only maybe a dozen of us survived, and it's because of Jowan -- who you're pointing that sword at -- that we got out."

"It doesn't make up for what he did to me! For what he did to this village! For what he did to my father!" Connor shouted, foot flying out in another kick, only for Jowan to finally catch his leg and
Jowan shook his head and regretted it instantly. "Demons were already here. There's something wrong with the Veil in the castle. I summoned demons once. Once in my life. You weren't there, but Lily was. And I regretted it. It was stupid. And I got the worst infection in my hand. And I lost my girlfriend. You want to talk about things that weren't worth it? Demons. Demons aren't worth it."

"Really? That's what you're giving me?" Connor snapped, voice shaking. He struggled to pull his leg free. "All this time, and you still can't take responsibility? Blame the demons, sure, but I'm blaming you too! You should have stayed with the demons!" He kicked and twisted, but Jowan just hugged his leg tighter until Connor managed to knock himself over too. Unfortunately for Jowan, that just freed up Connor's leg for more kicking.

"I really don't think this is helping anyone," Artemis said as he slipped out from where he'd been watching in the shadows. He scooped up Connor with his hands under his armpits and hauled him back, flailing limbs and all.

"You weren't there!" Connor argued, trying to shove Artie back, only to find that he couldn't.

"No, but I am here. And so are a lot of people who are wondering what the Blight is going on."

Jowan staggered back to his feet, brushing the dirt off his robes and positioning himself strategically behind Anders.

"Fucked up again, didn't you, Jowan?" Anders glanced over his shoulder.

"Yeah. You wouldn't believe me if I told you what happened. Nobody does. Except Solona. Probably Solona." Jowan fiddled with his cuffs. "Look, I poisoned Arl Eamon. I did. It was supposed to just make him sick enough he couldn't go to the Landsmeet. That's it. That's all that was supposed to happen. And yeah, okay, I wasn't Harrowed, and I shouldn't have had a student, but... Come on, Anders, it was the first time anyone had faith in me. I'm guilty of being a shitty teacher, and my student got possessed. But, I did not summon the demons. I swear to you, of all the things I did do, that was not a thing I did."

"So, you're taking responsibility, but not for the demons," Cormac suggested, edging into place at the edge of the group, if only to get out of the doorway.

"Because I didn't summon them. I'm not taking responsibility for things I didn't do." Jowan sounded just as petulant as Anders remembered him being.

Cormac grinned and clapped a heavy hand on Jowan's back. "Well, if there's demons in the castle because the Veil is thin, it's a good thing we're here. I've lived in Kirkwall. Demons are what you deal with between breakfast and lunch."

Brynn's head turned so fast his neck cracked. "Kirkwall?"

"Kirkwall," Anders agreed. "I just want to..." he paused, with a pained look. "Either I want to pick up that city and put it somewhere else, or I want to shove the whole thing into the Waking Sea, and I'm never sure which. Everything you've ever heard about the number of demons in Kirkwall is true. Was true. There's a lot less, now."

"Speaking of demons, how's Carver?" Cormac asked, with a sly smile at his brother.

"A tit, as usual," Artie sighed, shifting his grip around Connor to a friendly arm around his shoulders. Connor still looked angry, jaw tight enough to make his teeth crack, but at least that anger was no
longer manifesting in kicks to the head. "But they've just about cleaned out the Undercity, from what I understand. In theory, he's keeping an eye on the other tit, at the moment."

"Anton?" Anders laughed. "Oh, I'm sure that will end well. Better than being left to his own devices, I suppose, with Cullen and Varric on holiday with us."

"Aveline's still there," Artie assured him. "She'll keep him from accidentally burning down the city. So what... happened, exactly? There was another rift, and these... fine people fell out?"

"Something like that," Anders said. "We made a..." He looked around to make sure Fenris wasn't there. "...friend. Look, we're all clogging the doorway, and Lily wants a drink --"

"So badly," Lily muttered.

"--so why don't we have a seat, and we can fill you in?"
Chapter 65

Chapter Summary

Artie and an assortment of elves. Anders tries to patch Fenris up again, before they join the rest of the room.

The room was a bit small for the number of people in it. Anders had Fenris behind the privacy screen for the chamberpot, examining the damage the lyrium had done, beyond just the tattered edges of the skin. On the bed, Theron lounged with Artemis and Eadric sat opposite them, leaning against the footboard, looking uncertain. Fen'Din sat atop a dresser, sketching all he could see -- the height gave him the advantage of the room, he always claimed. There was no sense in sitting on the floor.

"So, really, the point is, if you're going to try a shem, try this one. He'll absolutely ruin all other shem, for you. He is--" And here, Theron paused to nibble Artemis's ear, looking over his shoulder. "-- the very best. There are earthquakes. Do you get earthquakes? I don't get earthquakes."

"Artie, if you're going to do this, please wait until my hands aren't full of your husband," Anders called out from behind the screen. "I just want to heal all of you, now, so I don't have to heal all of you, later, after we have a problem."

"He's paranoid," Eadric said, firmly, gesturing at the screen. "Always has been."

"It's not paranoia, it's good sense!" Anders argued, and Theron nodded.

"Can't hurt. What's the worst he'll do, make us healthier? Oh, no!" Theron clapped a hand to Artie's chest, which was in front of his own.

"Don't worry, Anders," Artie called back, addressing his silhouette. "It's not like I'm Isabela!" He laughed, only to pause and consider that seriously, his smile slipping. "Wait, I'm not, am I?"

"If you were," Theron replied, "my hand would be out here." He moved the hand on Artie's chest out a foot.

"I'm not going to comment either way, Slutty Hawke," was Anders's answer.

Artemis threw the screen an offended look when he heard his husband chuckle. "I hate you all," he said, squeezing Theron's thigh.

Eadric watched them all with the amusement of a spectator. "Sorry, but I can't say I'm convinced."

"Not even a little curious?" Artie asked with a crooked smile and what he hoped was an enticing look but was probably just awkward.

"Curious, yes," Eadric agreed, "but not convinced."

"Three more drinks and you might be," Fen'Din chimed in. "You're not slurring any words, yet."

Eadric muttered something under his breath as he glanced over his shoulder at Fen'Din. "There are a lot of elves in this room."
"Artie's always had good taste," Theron joked, tossing a leg over Artemis's hip.

"And you let him... this shem...?" Eadric squinted at the two of them, again.

"Let him what?" Theron laughed. "I usually tie him down."

"I'm afraid we left all the scarves at home," Fenris noted, with some regret. "But, I'm sure we'll think of something."

"I may still be convinced," Eadric ventured. "But, not this easily. This isn't the way these things work."

Theron shrugged one shoulder. "It's the way things work in this room. We'll see if we can't convince you." His lips returned to the skin behind Artie's ear, trailing kisses down his neck. Artemis arched into his lips.

"Wait until I'm finished," Anders reminded them.

"I don't think I'll catch anything from kissing him," Theron drawled.

"You won't catch anything at all!" Artemis huffed.

Theron smirked against his skin, the hand on Artie's chest drifting down to slip under his shirt. Artemis leaned into his touch, but for all their teasing, he was keeping an ear on what was going on behind the screen. He'd known Fenris wasn't doing well, but he'd watched it happen in stages. Anders, on the other hand, had had the shock of it all at once, and it showed on his face.

"I'm more afraid of him catching something from you. I know what you're like, Theron. You can't convince me you didn't leave a swath of pounded shemlen asses across Gwaren." Anders laughed, his hands still trying to sort out the damage to Fenris's body. "I can fix it, but I still don't know how to stop it," he murmured to Fenris.

"In Gwaren? Have you been to Gwaren?" Theron snorted, and then buried his face against the back of Artie's neck, as his hand traced dirty words across Artie's skin. "Though I did pound one shemlen ass everywhere in Gwaren I thought we could get away with it."

"Is he serious?" Eadric asked Artie.

"He's serious," Fenris sighed from behind the screen, as Anders fixed something he hadn't even been sure how to explain. "That is the majority of the relationship my husband has to ... elven culture."

Artemis laughed sheepishly, feeling his ears burn. "I haven't heard any complaints from you!"

Fenris chuckled, some of the pain easing from around his eyes. "Nor will you, at least not about that. I will, I am certain, find other things to complain about."

"Like mages?" Anders drawled, earning him a flat look from Fenris. For all that he was joking, he was suddenly very glad that Dorian hadn't walked back to the tavern with them.

"Tevinter mages," Fenris corrected, following a similar line of thought.

"Wise distinction," Eadric said under his breath. He couldn't see the scowl Fenris was directing his way through the screen.

"I think we can all complain about Tevinter mages," Artemis agreed.
"Is this the 'magisters burned down my wedding' brother?" Fen'Din asked, charcoal still moving across the page, the dust settling into his sleeves.

Theron cackled against the back of Artemis's neck. "Yes. Unless you know someone else who had a flaming magister at their wedding."

"No, just the one!" Anders's strained smile carried in his voice. "And that might not have been the magister who started the fire... Definitely the magister who started the fight, though." He stood on his toes to look at Eadric over the top of the screen. "We killed him. It was messy."

"I should've killed him," Fenris protested, the words losing some force as the middle of his back suddenly relaxed.

"Your darling and beautiful husband turned him into a runny paste. Close enough," Theron mumbled around where he was nibbling Artemis's shoulder. "Nothing says love like crushing your beloved's enemies. Reminds me, I want to go to Denerim, again, while we're here."

"Speaking of," said Anders, "how is Kalli?"

"Theron's wife," Artie explained to Eadric and Fen'Din, as though that explained the segue from Denerim.

"Missing me terribly, I imagine," Theron called back. One hand played along Artie's waistband, tracing the edge where clothing met skin.

Fenris huffed in amusement. "I suspect she is enjoying the peace and quiet." To Anders, he added, "No one is a greater appreciator of my husband's ass than I, but I truly do not need to hear another song about it." He flexed his fingers, finding his joints moving more smoothly. He'd almost forgotten what that felt like.

Eadric shot a curious glance at the screen then at Theron. "You've made songs about--?"

"Don't ask him!" Artie and Fenris protested at the same time.

"Once you've experienced this ass," Theron started, firmly grabbing the ass in question, "you'll want to sing about it, too. To praise its glory! The very finest of June's creations!"

"You can thank Dirthamen for that ass, according to his brother," Anders filled in from behind the screen.

Eadric looked mildly concerned at that. "There's ... two of them?"

"No," Anders and Fenris said at the same time.

"The other one is a magical bear." Fenris's disgust came through clearly.

"He's soft and fluffy and he can carry me around like a sack of barley." Anders nearly purred at the thought. "And his interest in elven culture is more... academic than physical."

"Practical," Eadric corrected.

"No, it's pretty practical, it's just less physical." Anders could be heard shaking out his hands, before he gave Fenris another look. "I think I've done all I can, for now. I'll take another look after you sleep. Have to wait for your body to decide what it thinks it's doing with that."

"You have my thanks, mage," Fenris rumbled in reply, and Anders had to smile at the way he used
the word 'mage' as more of a title than an invective now.

Fenris couldn't begin to understand what Anders had done, but he felt looser, more relaxed, the sharpness of his pain dulled at the edges. He stretched, hearing a few joints pop, and rose to his feet. He considered wryly whether he should bother getting dressed, considering his husband, but he slipped on his pants for the sake of their company.

"Better?" Artemis asked when his husband appeared from around the screen, already telling the answer from the smoothness of his gait.

"Better," Fenris agreed. "The healer is, occasionally, useful." The barest smirk said he was teasing.

"Oh, yes, only sometimes," Anders scoffed, peeling off his outer robe and tossing it over the screen, before he stepped out and went to check on Artemis. "Okay, all of you just sit still for a minute. I think you're close enough that I can get all three of you at once."

Theron smiled wickedly, his back to Anders, as he pinched and teased Artemis's nipple, hoping for something other than 'still'.

"I'll say it again," Fen'Din started, looking up at the three on the bed again, to check the angles, before he adjusted a few lines in his sketch, "I didn't realise how spoilt we were to have you until you were gone that last time. After a few months with just Finn and Petra, I came to an entirely other understanding of what Wynne meant when she talked about you taking her place. You weren't just her favourite, you were the only one with the constitution for it."

"Finn," Eadric spat, hanging his head back over the footboard. "Petra wasn't as good, but better Petra than having to listen to Finn talk."

"Yes, working with Flora always was a certain kind of fun," Anders drawled, only half paying attention to the conversation. He cast as he took the last few steps nearer the bed, hands glowing with a blue mist.

Artie felt the warmth of healing under the warmth of Theron, struggling not to writhe at the attentions Theron was paying him.

"Ooh, tingles," Theron said in his ear before pausing to nibble at it again.

"Yes, he's good at making people tingle," Artie said, voice a bit breathy as he arched back into Theron.

"Sparkle-fingers," Anders said, wiggling his fingers at Eadric, who rolled his eyes. "Between that and the Spicy Shimmy, I am irresistible."

Fenris didn't quite manage to hide a laugh behind a cough.

"The last Spicy Shimmy went to Kinnon, didn't it?" Fen'Din asked, turning the page and starting on another sketch. "Current spiciest shimmy is no longer yours."

"That's just because of Peryn. And Candles. I had an audience already biased in favour of anything that would make Kinnon less clothed," Anders argued, flicking another spell at Fen'Din, as he stepped back.

"Speaking of Kinnon... Is that him, downstairs? Like... actually him? Dressed up as a Chantry brother?" Eadric asked, twisting around to look at Fen'Din, without giving himself a headache.

"Of course it is. And the Templar is his ..." Fen'Din shot a glance at Anders.

"They're very definitely fucking," Anders confirmed, sounding faintly exasperated. "And Ser Peryn is unaware that he's banging a mage, so we'd all prefer you didn't tell him."

"Did every last one of you lose your spirit-touched minds when you walked out of the tower? Is that it? Does apostasy just make you fucking nuts?" Eadric paused and pointed at Fen'Din. "Not you. You were already nuts. Is this just a shem thing?"
"My husband is definitely nuts, but I couldn't tell you if it was the apostasy that made him crazy," Fenris teased, making his way around the bed to sit opposite Eadric, at the head, running his fingers through Artemis's hair.

"Of course not!" Artie huffed, pretending to be offended even as he leaned into Fenris's touch. "It's being a Hawke that's made me crazy. Consider my brothers, including the non-magic ones."

"I would truly rather not consider your brothers just now," Fenris sighed. "But, I will concede that being a Hawke makes people crazy."

"As a Hawke by marriage, you prove that point," Anders said. He pointed at Eadric as he addressed him. "And you should know as well as anyone that I was perfectly crazy before apostasy was even in the equation."

Eadric held his hands up in defeat. "That, I will not argue. Though now I'm wondering at my own sanity by allowing myself to be surrounded by you lot."

"Sorry," said Artie, who did not sound sorry, "but if the crazy's contagious, it's already too late for you."

"He's not my student," Fen'Din argued, amusement gleaming in the corners of his eyes. "Who did you bel-- oh. Right. No, it's too late for you anyway."

"Nug-fucker," Eadric muttered, turning back around and spotting Fenris's feet. "Tell me I missed you taking your boots off..."

"No, he really does run around half-barefoot all the time," Theron said, both hands thoroughly occupied with Artemis's lean body.

"How do you still have toes?" Eadric looked utterly dumbstruck. "It's snowing, out there!"

"Practice." Fenris's smile was less than entirely pleasant, but definitely amused.

"I've given up trying to get him to wear boots. The bottoms of his feet are harder than the soles of my boots, anyway," Anders sighed, taking a seat behind Theron and reaching across to drop a tiny spark against one of the spots on Fenris's forehead.

Fenris's ears twitched, and he made a sound between a growl and a purr, throwing a look at Anders, who smirked, waggling fingers that sparked with electricity. Artemis pulled Fenris down into a kiss, while reaching behind him for Theron's hip, pulling the elf into him.

"Well, I suppose no one needs shoes at the moment, anyway," Eadric said lightly, as though he were watching some sport.

"Personally, I don't think anyone needs pants, either," Theron murmured against Artie's skin, slipping his hand under the waistband as though to make a point.

"Right now, or just in general?" Eadric asked.

"Do you plan to keep up the inane commentary?" Anders drawled.

"It's a legitimate question," Eadric said with a shrug. "Mages don't wear pants." He paused to consider Artie. "Well, not generally."

"Well, he's not going to be wearing them for long," Theron said, earning an eye roll from Artie even
as he started undoing the laces with one hand.

"I'd think by now the inane commentary is part of the experience, for you," Fen'Din quipped. "Or had you forgotten the goat jokes?"

Anders's face slackened like he'd been kicked, his hands suddenly still. With a weak scoff, he came back to himself, and concerned look from Fenris. "That was a long time ago," he said, running a sparking thumb down Fenris's chin, as he tried to stop thinking of Karl. "Recently, my bed has been mostly inanity-free."

"But, not insanity-free. We've all heard Mack. It's a good thing you're a healer." Fen'Din met Anders's eyes, over the top of the sketchbook, but Anders looked away, more intent on Fenris.

"How could my bed possibly be insanity-free?" Anders traced a lyrium line down Fenris's neck and out along his collarbone, under the edge of the shirt. "It's got me in it, hasn't it?"

"As crazy as a Hawke, most days," Fenris agreed, slightly breathless. "Do you mean to tease me all day, mage?"

"I thought it might be fun." Anders smiled slyly. "Or I could do something more enjoyable, but I'd hate to distract you from your charming husband's magic ass."

"It is magic. There is a rune defined by this shape," Theron decided, pressing himself firmly against the ass in question, as he slid a hand down the front of Artie's trousers.

Artie bit back a moan, arching up into Theron's hand, his grip tightening on his hip, guiding him to rock against his ass.

"Ass magic," drawled Eadric. "Wonderful." He sat back, arms folded, and tried to keep a bored look on his face, though his eyes lingered on the movements of their hips.

"The best kind," Theron said, and Artemis turned in his arms just enough to kiss him over his shoulder, as much to shut him up as anything.

Fenris chuffed, appreciative of the tactic. Without taking his eyes off them he addressed Anders. "I am capable of multitasking."

"Of course you are," Anders said with some amusement, fingers still gliding over lyrium lines.

"What was that you said about pants and my not wearing them?" Artemis asked Theron, words close to his lips.

"I was saying it would be a very good idea. I'm not a mage. I can't get my mi'nehn through all that leather." Theron's hands shifted, forcing Artemis's trousers down over his hips. He caught Eadric's eye. "You're closer to the bottom. You should pull. It'll go faster."

"I don't know ... that seems... You want me to help you get the shem naked?" Eadric shot a look at Anders.

"With or without pants, he doesn't bite." Anders shrugged, considering the two bodies between him and Fenris. "If you're still curious, here's where it's going to start getting interesting. And if you never wondered about me, you're probably about to find out more than you ever wanted to."

Eadric still didn't look quite comfortable as he grabbed the cuffs of Artemis's trousers and pulled as Theron pushed. From the sounds behind him he could tell Fen'Din was sketching this, and he turned
his head to make his face more obvious, and also not to look as the trousers bunched into his hands. A glance down, and he tossed them off the bed, in Fenris's direction. He would not follow the line of those slender legs up to their juncture, where Theron's hands were still obviously occupied.

"I see we're playing a game called: How Many Elves Does It Take to Undress a Shem?" Eadric said, keeping his tone light to hide his discomfort. The shem had nice legs, he'd give him that.

"I can make it at least three," Fenris rumbled, bending to kiss his husband before rucking up his shirt, his hands moving around Theron's, needing to contend with two bodies instead of one as he worked the shirt over Artie's head. He folded it neatly and set it aside. "Though the final tally depends on how many elves were involved in taking off his boots and socks, as I was behind the screen for that." As he spoke, his eyes roved over Artemis' bare form.

"Right now I'm more concerned with how many elves are still wearing their own clothes," Artemis said with a sheepish laugh, aware that he was the only one naked in the room and of the number of eyes upon him.

"Should I help with that?" Anders asked, eyeing Fenris appreciatively.

"No." Fenris grabbed his cuffs and went to slide the loose shirt he wore over his head, but stopped. He eyed Eadric and then Fen'Din. Normally, he had no problem stripping in front of people, but normally he also wasn't trying to avoid being recognised by a magister.

"You sure?" Anders asked. "You look like you're stuck in your shirt, already."

"My clothing fits in such a way that only I, generally, have the skill to remove it. I do not need human hands tangling me in my garments." Fenris gave serious consideration to the idea he might yet be recognised, become a liability, but it had been four years since Danarius had ... 'disappeared' while on holiday in the Marches. After so long, who would still be looking? There was no one to return him to.
Chapter 67

Chapter Summary

Horrifying revelations and interesting uses for lyrium.

As Fenris deliberated, Fen'Din slid down off the dresser and ducked out of his robes, with a faint jingle, draping the cloth back over the top of the dresser as he hopped back up, picking up his book. "One less elf," he said, trying to capture the expression on Fenris's face, before the other elf took a deep breath and peeled off his shirt.

"Andraste's ashes!" Eadric blinked, but couldn't stop staring at the white-silver lines -- like the ones on Fenris's face -- that now very obviously went all the way down. "Are you like him?" he cocked a thumb at Fen'Din. "Did you do all that yourself?"

"No," Fenris said shortly, leaving it at that.

Artie's exclamations cut over any more questions from Eadric. "Maker's tits!" he blurted, staring down at Fen'Din's rather... impressive display of jewellery. He shook himself. "I mean, Andraste's tits... whatever! How...? Why...?" It occurred to him that he was probably being rude, and he clamped his mouth shut.

"We were travelling north, and we stopped in a place called Hawk Hold. The Avvar tend to put their guests through tests to prove they are appreciated by the gods. I was the obvious choice, for the first two tests." Fen'Din managed a smile. "And then a kind smith offered to make them permanent. I thought it was the sort of thing I'd like to remember."

"It's the sort of thing I'll have no choice but to remember," Artemis muttered to himself, trying and failing not to stare at the piercings. He would have reached down to shield his own crotch in sympathy if Theron weren't already doing so for him, though 'shielding' might not be the word.

Over Theron's shoulder, Artie caught Anders's eye, widening his eyes and shaking his head, hoping Anders would catch the message: don't let Cormac get any ideas.

Anders caught the look and knew exactly where Artie's mind had gone, a laugh bubbling up out of his chest.

"He's naked, isn't he?" Eadric kept his eyes on Fenris's face. "I'm going to be very glad I didn't turn around, right?"

"You say he did that, himself?" Fenris asked, eyes a bit wide as he remembered what little he knew of his own brands.

"Both the face and the jangling dangles," Anders confirmed. "I might have helped with the face. Well. No. I helped him not die from putting lyrium dust and blood lotus under his skin." He rolled his eyes at Fen'Din.

"I'm already dead. I would have disliked misplacing you, though. The Fade is very large." Fen'Din sounded entirely unapologetic.
"There's something wrong with him," Eadric muttered.

"No more wrong than the rest of us." Anders reached over Artemis and Theron again to run a sparking finger down the lines on Fenris's chest, tugging at the line of skin-tight leather at his waist. "Andraste knows how many Templars I paid favours to."

"Anders, have I ever, in all the time we've known each other, given you the impression there wasn't something wrong with you?" Eadric asked, and Theron choked on a laugh.

"Well, no, but it's usually that I'm a filthy shem, which is a whole other kind of 'wrong'." Anders's hand traced a long line of muscle down Artemis's thigh.

"You don't consider us all 'filthy shem', do you?" Artemis asked, voice breathy and body arching in a way he hoped was enticing. It was to the elves on either side of him, at least, to go by their looks. "I'll have you know that I am very clean."

"Frightfully so, sometimes," Fenris said as he stood to peel off his pants.

"Blighting shit!" Eadric cursed, voice rising in pitch. He'd been about to say something derisive in Artemis' direction, but found himself distracted by the rest of Fenris. "There, too?"

Fenris offered him a nasty smile. Eadric half-turned so he wouldn't be staring, only to find himself facing Fen'Din, and somehow, that seemed worse. He squeezed his eyes shut and turned back to face the bed fully again.

Anders couldn't quite contain a laugh, the sound of it shaking his voice as he spoke. "That look is usually the reaction I get. This is almost refreshing."

"You're the real horror." Fenris jabbed a finger at Anders, who caught it in his mouth.

"That's not what you said last time you saw me naked." Anders grinned wickedly, flicking his tongue against the fingertip caught in his teeth.

"Perhaps not, but I'm sure I said something about that hideous beard." Fenris snatched back his finger, folded his trousers, and stretched out close along Artemis's body, trying to ignore the backs of two hands this put him in contact with.

"Perhaps strangely for someone who spent as long in Kinloch Hold as I did, I never have seen Anders naked," Eadric admitted, spanning a hand across his brow and resting his elbow on his knee to stare down into his own lap. "Though I can't say I much wanted to."

"Well, you probably won't see me naked today, either!" Anders smiled cheerily as he kicked off his boots. "Pantsless, probably, but not naked."

"What, do you have a third nipple? A drunken tattoo of some Tal Vashoth's name?" Theron half rolled over, untangling his arms from Artemis long enough to shrug off his own shirt and toss it in a direction no one else had started throwing clothes.

"The mark of a slave," Fenris said, and Theron laughed, but Eadric wasn't sure he was joking.

"No, we've been over this," Artemis said with mock seriousness. "He has six nipples, like a cat."

Eadric barked out a laugh. "That seems a bit excessive."

"That's something else I usually get," Anders drawled.
Eadric just looked at him blankly, unsure if he really wanted to know. "And you?" he asked Theron, focusing on him as the only one still wearing pants in front of him. "What eldritch horror do you have in your pants, then?"

"No horrors," Theron promised as he started undoing the laces of his pants. "Just elf. No embellishments, tattoos, or piercings. Completely natural, and all a neurotically clean shemlen needs."

"Not by half," Fenris scoffed, with a pointed look at Theron. "After all, he married me, didn't he?"

"I'd already been swept away by the romantic tide of a beautiful woman who could carve through the ranks of the Arl of Denerim's guard in a wedding dress. I couldn't be stolen back from that, but I can definitely be borrowed." Theron sighed, dramatically. "If only my one true love hadn't vanished in the middle of the night."

"What, Artie?" Anders grabbed Theron's face to check for a fever.

"No, the earthquakes," Theron scoffed, shoving his trousers down as he gave Anders a scornful look. "Artemis was a delicious bonus, though. Wouldn't have given him up, if I'd had any say in it."

"I see how it is," Artemis said with a dramatic sigh. "You just want me for my earthquakes!" He'd been concerned about the thought of earthquakes in the tavern, until he remembered that they were surrounded by mages anyway.

"Not 'just'!" Theron corrected, giving Artie's ass a squeeze to remind him of his other enticements. "Just mostly!"

Eadric rolled his eyes at the exchange but eyed the three in front of him, telling himself he was only admiring the elves to either side of the shem. There was much to admire there, after all, both handsome and well-built, and they ran their hands with practiced confidence over Artemis' bare skin.

"Right, so, considering that I'm on the side of the bed with the wrong nude elf, trade seats with me?" Anders nudged Eadric with his foot.

"There's a wrong one?" Eadric raised an eyebrow. "I didn't think you were picky."

Anders and Theron looked at each other and laughed.

"We're not--" Theron pointed and shook his head.

"His wife, not him." Anders replied.

"I still think she must have been drunk," Theron huffed, as Anders got up to move to Fenris's side of the bed. "There's no way she saw what she thinks she did."

"You're about to find out, aren't you?" Anders took a seat at the head of the bed, beside Fenris, as Eadric climbed over the feet, at the bottom. "Well, in a bit. I've got other things to do, first." His hands traced the lines on Fenris's skin, a faint charge clinging to the tips of his fingers, as he followed one path and then another. "Earthquakes are great, but the real benefit of mages is the sparklefingers."

"I agree," said Artie, watching the way Fenris's eyelids fluttered, his breathing deepening as he leaned into the touch. When Artemis kissed his lips, he could feel them tingle with a light buzz of electricity.
"I don't," Theron replied, and Anders flicked a spark in his eye in retaliation. "That's not convincing me. This is the kind of magic I'm interested in." He pressed his hips up into Artemis' ass, where there was no longer clothing barring the way.

"Once again, Ass Magic is not a thing," Eadric said.

"You only say that because you haven't had his ass," Theron shot back with a laugh.

"The longer I spend with the Hawkes, the more convinced I am that Ass Magic is one of the lost schools we don't teach in the South." Anders grinned, reaching out to pinch Artie's ass, before he returned to groping Fenris's lyrium. "It's some great Rivaini secret or something, like Seers."


"That is not 'just an ass'," Fenris replied, fingers nudging Theron's out of the way, so he could run a finger down from Artemis's hip to the inside of his thigh. "That is a Hawke ass. It is an entirely different class of posterior."

Theron's hand twitched and he blinked at it. "Anders, knock it off!"

"Knock what off? I'm not touching you." Anders blinked in confusion, touching another spark to Fenris's shoulder.

"My fingers tingle when you do that." Slow realisation dawned in Fenris's eyes. "It's the lyrium." He pressed the backs of his fingers against Theron's wrist with the next spark.

Theron squeaked, jumping and pulling his hand back, making the mattress shift. "Okay, then you knock it off!" He huffed, shaking out and flexing his fingers.

"Huh," said Anders, tilting his head. "You're a conductor. An elf-shaped lightning rod."

"Or an elf with a lightning rod," Artemis quipped, waggling his eyebrows at his husband. He paused to think that through. "Oh, that sounds interesting." He looked down at Fenris's knob with intrigue.

The bed creaked as Eadric shifted position, one leg falling asleep. "Good to know that being kinky is a mage thing in general. Here I thought it was just a Circle thing."

"It's not," Fenris and Artemis said at the same time.

Anders snorted and glanced at Eadric. "Seriously? I thought you could read Tevene."

"Whatever you're implying, it isn't kinky, it's disgusting." Fenris tipped his head back, but ran into Anders's shoulder before he could get an angle to look up at the mage. The other mage. The tall mage. He was naked in a room with four mages, which was far above his general one mage comfort level, but only the two he actually wanted touching him had even tried. And he wasn't quite over the idea that he wanted Anders touching him, however often he might have agreed to or even suggested it. Mages.

"It's only disgusting if someone involved doesn't want to be there," Anders argued, lowering the force of the lightning as he traced it over Fenris's chest, not to shock Theron again. He forgot, sometimes, that Fenris's tolerance for electricity was quite high.

"It's Tevinter. At least one person doesn't want to be involved, and they probably have pointy ears, though that's not actually a requirement. Just makes it easier to see, in pictures." Fenris shook his head. "But, I think we were discussing more pleasant things. Like my beautiful husband's incredible
"It is an incredible ass!" Theron agreed, shifting closer as he pressed himself between the cheeks of that ass and rolled his hips.

"I am hoping the three of you -- four of you -- will eventually wind up in a position that allows me to draw more of that ass. I have yet to see it from an angle that reveals more than a partially-compressed curve." Fen'Din turned another page, and the sketching sounds began again.

"Don't worry," Theron said in a low rumble. "We'll be trying all sorts of positions."

Artie let out a breathy laugh, arching back to meet the roll of Theron's hips. He tangled his fingers in Fenris's hair, his skin dark against the white, and pulled him into another kiss, almost disappointed when it didn't tingle this time. Fenris swallowed Artie's small, needy sounds, his hand tender on Artie's cheek, a reminder that this wasn't Tevinter, that this mage -- and the mage behind him -- he could trust.

Artemis pulled back to pant against Fenris's lips. "Anders," he said, and Fenris was about to quip that that wasn't his name when Artemis looked over his shoulder. "Grease? You're still, uh, much better at that than I am."

"Perhaps the one benefit to the Circle," Anders said, cocking an eyebrow at Eadric as he pressed his fingers against Artie's belly and cast. "No one ever has to go looking for oil."

"You burned down a fucking barn, Anders. You needed to be locked up for a while," Eadric teased.

"You hit a cow with lightning, so I don't really want to hear it." Anders jabbed a finger at Eadric before he put his hand back on Artie, running a finger along the thin line of fluff on his belly. "I'd ask if we should switch positions, Fenris, but I have a feeling I know what Artie wants, and we all know that's not going to work with me, there."

"I would be terribly concerned if it did," Fenris replied, gently caressing Artemis's knob with one hand. "Are you feeling left out?"

"I'm just glad to see the two of you. If I really want to fulfil most of my utterly normal and reasonable desires, Mack's downstairs."

Eadric snorted.
Chapter 68

Chapter Summary

The enjoyable part of the evening, and then more of Anders than certain elves really needed.

"Justice, though..." Anders shrugged against Fenris's back. "If you're interested."

Fenris hummed in consideration, eyeing Anders over his shoulder. It had been a while, and Fenris had some concerns with his lyrium misbehaving. But, then again, healer. "There is a chance I could be persuaded," he said out of the corner of his smirk.

Eadric's brows knit in confusion, but he wasn't sure he wanted to ask. With Anders, he was never sure if he wanted to ask.

The other two on the bed distracted him from the question anyway, and Eadric had to admit that the shem's ass wasn't terrible, though it looked something obscene now, around Theron's fingers.

"Maker," Artie panted, one hand behind him, holding Theron's hip, the other still tangled in Fenris's hair, anchoring him as he rocked between the two of them.

Anders's hand glowed with a blue light that could have been more electricity, given the way it cracked and flickered over his skin, but only Fenris reacted to it, Eadric noticed, as his eyes were drawn to the light.

"Could you be?" Anders asked, voice still his own as he spread his hand across Fenris's chest, breathing deeply at the sensation of lyrium pressed against more than just his fingertips. "I don't know about that. I'm very, very good at what I do, but whether I could lure you away from your delightful and ever-so-sexy husband's charms, for a bit... It's stiff competition. Or maybe just competition that makes you stiff."

Fenris snorted and Fen'Din threw a wadded up, charcoal-streaked rag at Anders.

"The puns were better with Karl."

"That's only because Karl's puns were even worse than mine!" Anders shot back, looking over his shoulder at Fen'Din, before he took the opportunity to inch down the bed, rubbing his cheek against Fenris's lyrium-lined bottom.

"The more terrible puns you make," Fenris said, breath hitching at Justice's proximity as he twisted to keep an eye on what Anders was doing, "the less likely you are to 'lure' me into anything."

"I'll stick with mediocre puns for the rest of the night, then," Anders quipped before licking a line of lyrium up Fenris's leg, eyes flaring blue for a moment.

Fenris let out a shaky breath, letting Artemis pull him into a brief kiss. "Let me rephrase that: the more you talk in general, the less likely I am to be lured into anything."

"I'm sure you can think of a few good ways to shut me up," Anders said, and Fenris could feel the
"Yes, I'm quite certain a sock would serve excellently," Eadric groaned, looking at anything that wasn't Anders. "How did you never get caught?"

"Because when you're making bad puns everyone can hear, no one imagines you might be doing other things, at the same time." Anders smiled smugly over the curve of Fenris's hip, before he ducked back down and touched the sparking tip of his tongue to the end of another line of lyrium, causing Fenris's breath to hitch, before he could respond.

"Because very few people would do other things with someone who makes such terrible puns."

Eadric thought about it much harder than he ever wanted to. "You only think that because you've never been inside a Circle tower," he decided, at last, tearing his eyes away to watch Theron, instead.

The warrior's muscles rippled with every thrust and roll of his hips, the lines almost serpentine on his back as he groped and nibbled Artemis, one hand finally rising to the shem's neck. And then Eadric was really paying attention -- how would this go? He wasn't here to watch someone get strangled, not that he thought Anders would sit for that, but the other elf with the wolf name that wasn't Fen'Din -- the husband -- still watched, smiling at the shem.

Theron squeezed just enough to make Artie's soft moans change in pitch, but the sounds kept coming, trembling under his fingers, if anything more enthusiastic. Eadric watched in amazement as the shem seemed to lean into the touch.

"Huh," he said simply, finding himself intrigued despite himself by this unusual power dynamic. He watched the pleasure playing clearly over Artemis' face and found he couldn't quite make sense of it, but he had to admit there was something alluring about the way they moved together.

Anders chuckled against Fenris's skin, one hand tracing lyrium lines while his tongue continued to map out others. "'Huh', he says," he teased Eadric, barely pausing in his ministrations. "I suppose I've heard worse reactions from audiences."

"I'm assuming you have an ass cheek in either eye-socket or you'd know I'm not looking at you. There are far more interesting sights, in this room." Eadric shifted, tipping both knees to one side, to angle himself better against the bedpost.

"Three other elves," Fen'Din pointed out, nearly forgotten on the dresser. "Much more your taste, I'd think."

Eadric didn't answer, eyes on the flickering glow of Fenris's fingers, before it caught and bloomed, the hand fading into a blue haze that traced down Artemis's thigh.

That change caught Fen'Din's attention, and he sketched quickly, trying to capture the sudden ethereal nature of Fenris's hand. "I didn't know you were a mage. Like Mack, then? Fade shroud?"

"I am neither a mage nor a magical bear," Fenris retorted, casting a sharp glare over his shoulder.

Artie arched at the touch, at the pleasurable tingles the taste of the Fade sent across his skin. He tried to string together a reply, but between Theron inside him, a hand on his throat, and now Fenris's glowing fingers on his skin, proper words got lost in the tangle of sensations.

"His touch just feels like magic," Anders said instead, throwing an exaggerated wink at the two observers.
Artie garbled out something that sounded like agreement, pointing at Anders. "That," he finally choked out between pants. "What I was going to say."

"What did I say about you talking?" Fenris asked Anders with a growl and a narrowed glare Anders didn't believe for a moment.

"I've already forgotten," Anders said blithely, teasing with an electric spark under Justice's Fade-glow. "What do you plan to do about it?"

Twisting lithely, in a way he realised he wouldn't have been able to, yesterday, Fenris pushed his fingers against the middle of Anders's chest, leaving them there, as the mage's mouth wrenched open and toes curled fast enough to pop. Anders grabbed Fenris's wrist, the blue light of Justice's sudden attention glowing from his fingertips to his chin. His eyes lit a brilliant blue, and on the other side of the bed, Eadric took a sharp breath, leaning forward to get a better look.

"Holy shit, Anders. What the fuck?"

Anders took a few breaths, reeling Justice back until he could speak. "Dirty Warden tricks. Did I mention I'm a Grey Warden?"

"Bullshit." Eadric studied him.

"He is definitely not joking about being a Warden," Fenris clarified, picking the exact wrong part of the objection. "For which I find myself grateful, at times."

Anders settled between Fenris's legs, as Fenris untwisted himself to lie on his back, beside his husband, both hands glowing, one for Artemis and one for Anders, who stopped himself from saying anything further by licking Fenris's lyrium-lined knob into his mouth.

"This is... an awful lot of glowing," Eadric said, pressing himself a bit closer to the footboard as though unsure if he wanted to be that close to that light that looked and felt like raw magic.

"You don't know the half of it," Fenris said, voice broken by a gasp at the press of Anders's tongue. The mage really was good at this, though he'd be loath to admit it. But the smallest smirk around his knob said that Anders was well aware.

In the rare moments he was able to focus, Artemis watched the movements of Anders's head, the subtle shifting of Fenris's muscles in the blue glow. "Maker," he breathed, as though Anders's mouth were on him, the word thinned by the barest squeeze of Theron's hand.

One of Fenris's hands glided down Artemis's chest, over his taut belly, to wrap around his knob, still glowing. Fenris breathed carefully, his focus on remaining mostly outside Artemis's skin, until he could be sure he was as well as he felt. The other hand rested on the back of Anders's neck, not pulling, but teasing with the hint of the Fade on his fingers. Whatever Anders thought of it, Justice always seemed to appreciate it. And Fenris still tried not to consider that too closely. That was not what spirits were for. There were stories and even poems that warned against it. Yet, even after all these years, Justice seemed unaffected. This was not a desire demon, but just a spirit who enjoyed the feel of the Fade and the taste of lyrium. And he could almost understand it -- he'd give quite a bit to be as warm as he'd been in Tevinter. Some things about home, whatever it was, were comforting, even if one didn't want to return.

Fen'Din focused on Fenris, trying to capture the difference in the way he slid out of focus to the way Cormac did. There was something similar, yes, but ... this wasn't the same thing, somehow, and he wanted to be sure he'd be able to see that difference, later. Anders looked the same as he always did,
with that beard in the way. His face was easy, from years of practice. But, the way the other three
moved, that was new. New to him, anyway, they'd obviously gotten quite used to each other, and he
wondered how long they'd all been together.

"Fen," Artie choked out, forgetting in the beautiful play of sensations that there was more than one
'Fen' in the room. "Theron!"

Fenris's fingers worked in beautiful counterpoint to the undulation of Theron's hips, the tingle of
lyrium along his knob making his toes curl and his head light, his body tensing, coiled tight like a
spring as the bed started to tremble. Somewhere outside his body, he could hear Theron's wicked
chuckle, could hear Eadric's *you have got to be shitting me*, could hear himself crying out, voice
ragged under Theron's fingers as he spilled over Fenris's, starbursts of colour flashing behind his
eyes.

Eadric held onto the bedpost as the headboard clattered against the wall, shaking his head in
amazement. A good thing this one hadn't been sent to a Circle.

Fen'Din dropped the charcoal, grabbing onto the edge of the dresser as the stick shattered against the
floor. Hopefully, he'd have another opportunity to draw this, because his own precarious perch was
not helping, this time.

Anders hummed almost silently, as the shaking of the bed clattered through his bones, pressing his
tongue tighter against Fenris, letting the electricity dance between his fingers across that lyrium-lined
skin. So, perhaps he wouldn't be getting lucky, now. Just meant more for Cormac, later, though he
thought he might take Cormac up into the woods. No sense in putting all the people who
remembered his own silence through Cormac's shouting. Maybe a few of them. Maybe later. But,
not all of them at once. And definitely not Niall.

Fenris writhed as the sparks raced between his hips, Anders's tongue pressing more of them into
places he'd have written off as lunacy, were it anyone else. The earthquake rattled through him, and
Artemis's breathless pleasure washed over him. It should take more than this, he thought, as he
followed his husband over, throbbing against Anders's Fade-touched tongue, but maybe it was just
that nothing hurt any more. There was nothing in the way of him just getting swept away by the
simplest pleasures.

Theron followed not long after, hips moving with intent, the earthquake still thrumming in his bones
as he pulled Artie tight against him. The room fell to silence as the furniture stopped shaking. Anders
still glowed, crackling slightly as the others panted for breath.

Eadric cleared his throat, watching Theron's grip soften, his fingertips soothing the marks he'd left on
Artie's skin. Artemis pulled Fenris into a breathless, lazy kiss, Fenris's hand still gentle on the back of
Anders's neck. "So... you weren't kidding about those earthquakes."

"Why would I kid about earthquakes?" Theron asked with mock solemnity as Artemis let out a
wheezy laugh.

"Tada," Artie said with a tired, wrecked voice.

"I think I would like the earthquakes better if I were sitting somewhere more stable, next time,"
Fen'Din decided, pulling a loose page from the back of his sketchbook and lowering himself to the
floor. "I've gotten too accustomed to Mack. The screaming is almost soothing."

Eadric's eyes dragged slowly off the erotic tangle in front of him to where Fen'Din swept shards of
charcoal and black dust onto the page. "Screaming?"
Anders purred quietly as he let Fenris slide slowly out of his mouth. "Screaming. Took me a while to get used to it, but it's incredible. Can you imagine it? Just... being able to let go like that?"

"Absolutely not. That's horrible. Why would you do that? It just seems... rude!" Eadric gestured to Artemis. "That's more than loud enough, and if that doesn't count as screaming, I'm sure I don't want to know!"

"You don't," Fenris assured him. "Screaming is ... literal. There is no exaggeration. I will never be used to it, nor to the magical bear doing it."

"You are so used to the magical bear," Anders argued, rolling to the side and pushing Fenris's legs together, as he propped himself up. "You'll get in bed with him, naked, so long as he's on the other side of me."

Theron's eyes lingered on where Anders's shirt had rucked up to reveal the front of his trousers, the loose cloth twisted around an obvious protrusion. "Either you have a squash in your pocket, or my wife wasn't joking. I'm going with squash, because that's just ridiculous."

"I may be kinky," Artemis muttered groggily, "but I'll have you know I've never put a squash up my ass. That's not a squash."

"Considering what I have heard of Fereldan turnips," Fenris teased, "that would not be such a surprise."

Artie shot him an unconvincing scowl, reaching out to flick his ear in retaliation.

"Not a squash or a turnip or any other kind of vegetable," Anders assured them, though the look on Theron's face said he did not feel reassured.

"Lies," Theron said unconvincedly, staring a bit longer than was polite. Not that ever staring at someone's crotch was 'polite'.

Anders blew out a heavy sigh. "You're not going to take my word on this, are you?"

"Absolutely not." Theron dragged his eyes back up to Anders's face. "Kalli was drunk, and you're just messing with the Dalish. I know shemlen are bigger, but not that big. That's... you'd have to be a qunari, and you might be horny, but I'm not seeing any horns on you."

Fen'Din poured the charcoal ends into the bin by the door and considered saying something, got as far as opening his mouth, before he decided not to.

Anders sighed and rolled onto his knees, the bed dipping precariously as he moved. He lifted his shirt from mid-chest, just enough to bring it to the top of his hips, and held it in his teeth as he shoved down his trousers, letting the flagpole spring back to slap him across the belly. "I'm not joking," he muttered around the shirt in his mouth.

Eadric stared like he'd lost touch with the world, entirely. "And there's Anders, giving a whole new meaning to 'arcane horror'."

Artemis pressed his face into Fenris's shoulder to stifle his snicker, but behind him Theron looked like he might be faint. Eadric just stared at it though trying to figure out what illusion was at work here.

"Well, that just seems excessive," he said at last, in a small voice.
"You don't say," Anders said, still managing to convey sarcasm with the fold of fabric still in his mouth.

Artie cleared his throat, propping himself up on his elbow. "The proper title is the Flagpole, for anyone at a loss for words."

"Definitely not a squash," Theron admitted. He eyed Artemis then, or, more specifically, he eyed Artemis's ass, then the flagpole as though trying to work through the logistics. Considering what else Theron had seen him take, Artie was sure he had no right to be surprised.

"That's me. Excessively not a squash. And --" Anders pulled the shirt out of his mouth. "-- entirely proportional and appropriate for someone my size. Which everyone is, in the Anderfels. Well, mostly. I'm only a little tall. Fenris, you've been. Tell him."

"Peryn is much shorter than you." Fenris's eyes gleamed in amusement.

"Peryn's half dwarf or something." Anders snorted. "Kinnon says he's from the Chantry orphanage in Hossberg. He's not really a representative sample. Come on, you've been to Tallo and Kassel."

"Most Ander people are taller than most Fereldans," Fen'Din admitted, from behind Anders. "Having lived in the Anderfels, I believe I can say that in good faith."

"And now if you've all gotten a good look at the local tourist attraction I keep under my robes, I'm putting my trousers back on," Anders huffed, tugging his trousers back up one-handed.

"Why do you wear trousers?" Eadric asked. "I mean, you... also wear a robe. Trousers and a robe?"

"Ander fashion," Fen'Din answered, after Anders took a little too long. "It keeps the sand off."

"Also keeps wild sandcats from tearing at your legs," Fenris rumbled. "I hear that is how they show affection."

"Considering you spent your visit under a pile of them," Anders replied, "you would know."

"Fur demons, the lot of them," Fenris said with mock seriousness. "Perhaps there is a rift somewhere in the Anderfels."

Anders laughed until he stopped to wonder whether or not there actually were. His mother's face passed through his thoughts, but he reminded himself that there was an 'abbey' full of mages nearby who knew how to defend themselves. Not that that quelled the sudden cold feeling in his gut.
Chapter Summary

The battle for Therinfal begins in earnest.

As the Templars rallied around Barris, Cullen caught the man for a few last questions. "How in the Maker's name did this happen?"

"Envy's rare. Rank and file aren't trained for this. You know. That's why it took us top down." Barris shook his head. "And the lyrium... The Lord Seeker only said it was better than the Chantry lyrium. We didn't know it was corrupted -- how would we know? All magic is corruptible, all magic is dangerous, and yet, all magic can serve. Lyrium the same, apparently. The red lyrium was just a tool, we thought. More powerful than the one we were using. He was the Lord Seeker! Who were we not to trust?"

"When did the Lord Seeker start taking over from the Knight-Vigilant?" Cullen asked, rubbing the side of his face with one hand, trying to hold the pounding behind his eye at bay long enough to figure out what had happened here.

"No matter what I say, I'm shamed." Barris sighed and held out his hands. "If he was fake at the start, we let a demon walk in. If he was genuine, Envy took the Lord Seeker from under our noses. Who knows if the Knight-Vigilant even knows what's happening? Captain Denam 'relayed' his orders." His voice conveyed how much faith he had left in Denam.

Cullen's other hand rose to his face, and he tipped his head back, breathing deeply. When he looked back down, dropping his hands to his sides, his eyes looked red and grainy, and his face looked like he hadn't slept in days, but he carried himself as if he meant to be taken as healthy. "And you think there's enough of us here to stop this?"

"You bring me the veterans and the good lyrium, and we'll stop it. With enough lyrium, we can punch a hole in that barrier, and when we break, we'll break the enemy." Barris looked grim, but terribly sure. "A demon holds the honour of the Order. There's not a man or woman here who will let that stand, Commander."

"I've been off the lyrium for ... two months? Is it three?" Cullen shook his head. "But, if you need me to stand with you, as a veteran, you can count on me, Barris. I'd also appreciate you ... not mentioning my lyrium troubles to anyone else. I had to make a choice, when I left Kirkwall, and the supplies we have in Haven are better reserved for the men who'll do less well without it." It wasn't quite the truth, but it was close enough, and politically a better choice than admitting he'd quit the lyrium so he wouldn't be one of those men again.

Barris nodded respectfully. "Understood, Commander. We'll hold the hall."

Thinking back to the horrors the red lyrium had wrought upon the Templars, Cullen was surer of his decision, even if the headache throbbing in time to his pulse tried to convince him otherwise. "Let's move out," he said to the others, looking them over to see what sort of shape they were in. Better shape than the Templars, he'd say, though Adaar's face had a sort of grim determination he wasn't used to.
They were barely through the doors and back out in the sun when the fight came to them. Daylight highlighted the sinister glow of red lyrium as it sprang in shards from the shoulders and backs of people who had been Templars, skin waxy and red-veined and barely human as they raised their weapons for the attack.

Cullen found himself hesitating, as the others leapt forward, Cassandra's blade ringing off the jutting crystals. This could've been him, he realised. If he'd made different choices, a few years ago. If it hadn't been for Anton -- Anten. Shit. He had to send another letter as soon as he got back from this. If he got back from this.

"Don't let it touch you!" he shouted, a reminder he wasn't sure anyone needed, as he ducked under Iron Bull's elbow to jam his sword into the greyish-pale skin of the creature coming up on the qunari's blind side. Creature. Templar. It could've been him.

But, the crystals had been the end of Meredith, once. Why were these things possible? What had changed? That was a better line of thought than considering who these red-eyed, crystalline monsters had once been. But, then, he hadn't known them. Ser Barris had. It was a good thing they'd left the man inside.

"No shit, Curly," Varric called, hanging back and putting bolts through every swath of red-veined skin he could find amid the crystals. "You didn't see what it did to my brother!"

Cullen was rather glad he hadn't. Meredith's glowing red eyes haunted enough of his nightmares.

He was careful to stay out of range of the qunari. Between Bull's hammer and Adaar's greatsword, they cut broad swaths through the red Templars, and he couldn't tell if the spray of red were crystals or blood, deciding he was better off not thinking about it. Just any other monster, he reminded himself. He was better off not thinking about that, too.

"This way!" Cassandra called out, and Cullen followed, not quite sure where she was leading but following the line of fighting, Sera's arrows and Varric's bolts picking off a few of the creatures. The bigger ones, the ones most swollen and twisted with the crystals -- the ones the most far gone, Cullen reflected -- took more than one missile to go down, and Cullen just barely staggered out of the way one when it swung at him, an arrow through its eye.

Bull turned and slammed his hammer through the back of its head, shattering the crystal spires rising from its shoulders. "That was pretty badass," he said to Cullen, pointing to what was left of the thing's face, after it crumpled to the ground. Not waiting for a response, Bull swung his hammer back into the battle and left Cullen looking like he was the one who'd gotten hit.

How did Envy get the upper ranks -- the best trained Templars -- to take the red? Because that was pretty badass. All it took was a demonstration of that power, on some level, though probably not this one. The crystals would have ruined it. A demonstration that the red made one nearly unstoppable, just like it had Meredith.

The distraction cost him, though, and he turned around straight into a half-crystalline beast staggering back from one of Varric's bolts. As surprised as it was, he shoved a sword up under the thing's ribs, feeling it clip something harder than bone and grind to the side. With a bloody grin, it spit in his face.

He'd thought that was blood until it hit him, and he could feel the weight of it, the call of it against his skin. Cullen's lyrium-deprived mind seriously considered the offer for a moment, and it was as if his joints had gone stiff, when he moved to wipe it off. The beast was still watching him, grinning slyly, knowingly, as arrows hammered into its back.
"No," he said, firmly, yanking his sword out and shifting to drive it up under the creature's chin. "No."

Cullen wiped the blood off his face, ignoring the way his hands shook. He looked around to see if the others had noticed his struggle, but if they had, they said nothing. The battle commanded their attention, after all.

They were on the battlements when they finally found Templar armour unblemished by the red, and Sera had to stutter-stop mid-shot to keep from hitting him, his pale face a clear target but unmarked by the bulging red veins they had noticed on the monsters.

"Hold!" Cullen called out what would have been a moment too late if Sera hadn't already corrected herself.

The man lowered his shield with a heavy, relieved sigh. "You bless us," he said to Adaar, then to the others. "I feared you were dead."

"Just get to the hall," Adaar said, pointing back the way they'd come. "Barris will explain."

"The way should be clear, if you hurry," Cullen added, clapping a hand on the man's shoulder as he passed.

The Templar nodded grimly. "Fight well."
Chapter Summary

A gift for Ser Samson.

"You're not looking well," the mage told him.

"Too bad, because I feel fantastic," Samson grumbled into his beer, one hand counting the vials in the case on the side of the table.

The Elder One, as the magister liked to be called, though Samson privately thought of him as 'that old fart', which, to be fair, many of his own men probably thought of him, had sent word he was to escort Imshael to a ruined fortress in some frozen wasteland in Orlais. And Imshael, he'd learnt on the journey, was nothing if not chatty. And annoying. And full of inconsequential questions about choices that would never matter.

"But, you're not, are you? You can feel it changing you, can't you?" Imshael went on, perching in the glassless window of the room Samson had claimed as an office. "I could save you, you know."

"Yes, but you can only save one of us, and I've made that choice. All of this was for him. I'll never be able to make it up to him, but if I can make even one thing right..." Samson marked a number on the side of the box in grease pencil. "I'll pay for it, and he'll tell you when he's ready."

"But, will you live to see it? How much longer do you really think you have?" Imshael shrugged, looking out across the snowy hills."There are so many other things to do..."

"And I'll live to do the ones that matter." Samson's lips pulled back in what might have been a grin on anyone else, but on him a grimace of broken teeth. "I'm a stubborn fuck, like that. Never did that roll over and play dead thing well. Did the roll over and be dead thing even less well."

"Have you tried rolling over and just staying alive?" Imshael asked with a quirked brow. "Or have you tried not thinking of my offer as 'rolling over'?"

"I have already accepted your offer," Samson said, frustration sharpening his consonants as he set the box aside with a bit more force than necessary. And he had to bark a laugh at the way it skidded. Still didn't know his own strength, but the red shit kept doing that, shifting the line where 'normal' sat.

"And that's it, is it?" Imshael said, not even flinching. "You'll march to your death like a good martyr?"

Samson tossed him a glare, wondering what the mage gained by needling him like this, wondered if he gained anything, noting the way Imshael watched him, almost like he was studying him.

"No. I'll march to my death like a revolutionary."

"What's the difference, if you're still marching to your death?" Imshael shifted, crossing his ankles and sliding his feet up the windowframe until his legs stretched up, bending him into a vee.
"The difference is that I'd have been a martyr if I stayed. I know what that looks like, the way we all sacrificed ourselves to the good of all -- except it wasn't the good of all. It wasn't good for very many people at all. I could've lived out my life as the good Templar, the one who didn't ask questions, followed orders, and got shipped off to some monastery when the lyrium got to be too much. I could've lived my life a hypocrite and died another martyr to the cause. I could even have done it happily, once, because what else was there?" Samson tapped his fingers on the desk, counting hours. He glanced past Imshael, out the window. Another quarter cand-- fuck it. No. Control was paramount, wasn't it? He took a vial in his fingers, turning it, but not opening it. "I found out what else there is. What else there's always been. And I like it a lot better than what I saw in there. I'll march to my death with a smile, if it means I can take down the Grand Cathedral and the last of the Grand Clerics. If it means I can pull the whole system down with me, what price is dying, really?"

And there, he'd finally turned the question back on Imshael. Maybe that would put a crimp in the man's constant questions for a bit.

"What price is living?" Imshael asked, not one to be outdone, and Samson resisted the urge to rub the ache in his forehead, to let Imshael know just how much this was getting under his skin. He suspected the damnable mage already knew. "Have you no desire to live to see the fruits of your 'revolution'? All that hard work behind you?"

Samson suspected the 'hard work' was what would come after. "I am too sober for this conversation," he finally decided. His skin itched with irritation at the amusement in Imshael's smile.

A pair of shadows darkened the doorway, and Samson latched onto the distraction. He looked up to see Carroll, the veins on his face dark and red against pale skin, his smile more unsettling than reassuring these days, but past him was Maddox, and even if his smile was hollow, something in it eased the tension in Samson's shoulders.

"If the problem is sobriety, I'm holding the solution." Carroll's smile was even more disturbing, somehow, as he got close enough to set a steaming mug on the desk. "It's coffee -- Orlesian, sorry. But, it's got four measures of rum in it. That raider stuff from the trader out of Jader. So, I guess it's more... rum, with some coffee in it. It's good for you. Put the spring right back in your step."

"Drink rum, it's good for you," Samson drawled, shooting Carroll a wry look as he took up the cup and took a heavy swig. "Maker's balls that's ragged shit." He coughed a couple of times and gestured for Maddox to come closer.

"Man's got you a gift, ser. Little something that fell into our hands. Needed a bit of work but... well, let him tell it. He's proud. I didn't have shit to do with it, and I'm proud, just looking at it." Carroll laughed in a way that Samson thought sounded a bit like drowning.

"The sword sings," Maddox said, laying the bundle he carried on the edge of the desk and unwrapping it gently to reveal a massive sword, heavily runed, with a faint pink tinge.

Imshael shifted, instinctively pulling back from it so hard he nearly kicked himself out the window and covered with a cough. Whatever else that blade was, it was a spirit-slayer, and he could feel it.

"It's beautiful!" Samson's eyes widened and he stood up to get a better look along the length, smiling wider than he'd done in longer than he could remember, the edges of his lips cracking in the cold air. He could feel the lyrium in it, like he could feel the lyrium through the vials. It sang to him, called to him, and he let his fingers drift down the blade.

"It wasn't finished. The last smith did it wrong, and I had to start again, but it's done, now." Maddox peeled his eyes from the blade. "I shaped it just for you. I know how you like the weight. This will fit
you as well as the last one, but it's a much better blade."

"You are a rare talent, Maddox," Samson said, eye alight as he picked up the sword. It not only sang, it hummed, a chord thrumming through him as though he were a string on a harp, and he nodded with satisfaction at the balance, stepping aside from his desk to give it a few practice swings.

"Lovely, isn't it?" Carroll asked with that unsettling smile. And lovely was the adjective for it, if such a word could be used for a weapon. Or if not for the sword itself, then for the amount of care Maddox had clearly put into it.

Sword in hand, Samson looked at Maddox, at Imshael in the corner of his vision, and nodded to himself, certain that he had made the right choice.
"As we said," Cassandra said, pulling open the heavy door of the Great Hall for the last of the still-human Templars they'd been able to find, "Ser Barris is currently in charge. He has the knowledge we, as outsiders, lack. I trust him entirely."

"Well, what other choice do you have?" the woman she'd been speaking to asked, leading the others into the building.

"She's got a point," Varric muttered.

"We've got plenty of choices," Sera argued, planting her foot firmly on Varric's ass and shoving him into the room. "It's just this one's not completely stupid. It's only half stupid. So it's the good one."

"Ser Barris!" the first Templar called out, as she approached him. "Bad news! We've found the Knight-Vigilant."

"How is tha--" Barris paused, his eyes widening. "Dead. You found him dead."

"In Captain Denam's quarters. Looked like he'd been there quite a while, too. Everyone above us is gone. Dead or turned."

Barris groaned, but pointed to Cullen. "Can you handle all of us, Commander? Assuming we survive?"

"I cannot be the only commander left standing. That is --"

"Likely," Cassandra filled in. "There are sixteen towers, and therefore only a few more commanders -- Aeonar, Denerim, the special cases. Most are, as this knight says, dead or turned. You may be the only one we find alive for a good long time."

Cullen's ears were full of the sound of his pulse, and he tried to think through his headache. He kept tripping from one disaster to another, yet somehow more responsibilities kept falling into his lap. He found he missed Anton with a tangible ache.

"Let us deal with Envy first," he said. "Then we can discuss what I can or cannot handle."

Ser Barris nodded, squaring his jaw as he looked up at the barrier, which rippled with green energy. "Right. If there are any more red Templars, I'm going to need you to keep them off us." He looked to Cullen first, then to Adaar, then to the others. He was met with a series of solemn nods.

"That's why we all have pointy things," Sera said, nodding in a way that said this was her way of being reassuring.

"All?" Bull drawled, quirking his lips in a grin as he held up his hammer.
"You got horns, don't you?"

Bull laughed, conceding the point.

Barris turned from them to face the rest of the Templars, approaching them with a purpose that had them watching him expectantly. "Let's break this beast!" he shouted.

There was the sound of swords striking shields as Barris prepared the chalice they would drink from, prying open the last of the clean lyrium stores.

Cullen and Blackwall worked together to barricade the doors, in preparation for this battle. If they could control where the enemy came in, the fight would be simpler, and Cullen tried his best to focus on that, as the metallic lyrium smell swirled around him.

"You're not looking so good, Commander. You want to sit down for a bit?" Blackwall offered, looking a bit concerned, as the sweat ran down Cullen's face.

Cullen wondered if the inside of his mouth had ever been this dry, as he tried to work up enough spit to respond. He wanted it. His body ached for the lyrium that was so close at hand, and visions appeared in time with his pulse of taking the chalice, drinking it, tasting it, bathing in it. "No, I'm -- No. It's nothing. Let's get this done."

Barris took the first swallow and a deep breath of the fumes, before he passed the chalice down the line, and set himself to opening more vials for when it emptied. One chalice worth wasn't enough for all of them. Not if they were going to break through a barrier formed by a powerful demon that was strong enough and convincing enough to have taken them from the top down.

The air hummed with energy as the Templars formed a circle, taking a knee in front of the barrier, and the barrier rippled and shimmered.

"Red Templars!" Cassandra shouted suddenly, but the barricaded doors held. She was pointing at and racing towards the barrier's edge, where the magic was wearing thin and where the glow of red, crystallized armour clashed with the green energy. A similar scene waited at the opposite edge, and Cullen was shouting orders before he could even stop to think.

When the barrier thinned enough for the red Templars to push through, the Inquisition was ready, a hammer caving in the helmet of the first Templar, an arrow streaking through the eye-slits of the second. On the other side Cassandra's shield caught the sword of another, while Adaar's sword caught -- and took off -- his head.

"We're gettin' good at this," Bull noted, his elbow clanking gently against the armour on Blackwall's shoulder, as the Warden splintered the shards off of some crystalline horror.

"I feel like that's a failure on the part of the world," Blackwall grumbled. "No one should have to be good at this. This shouldn't even be happening."

"Yeah, well, darkspawn shouldn't be happening either, and you're supposed to be good at those," Bull responded, bringing his hammer down. "Close your eyes!"

The thing exploded in a hail of red shards, drawing the attention of the next wave to push through the barrier.

"How many of these assholes are there?" Sera complained, trying to take them out before they could get too close.
"Too many," Varric decided, doing the same on the other side of the dais.

"Hopefully just enough to make us feel useful," Adaar said with fairly convincing cheerfulness, "and no more than that." He waded in where Cassandra gave him room to swing, staggering the Templar with a blow even though his armour held. After a second swing, the red Templar was less lucky.

"Aww, are you not feeling useful?" Varric called out to him without glancing over. "Maybe we should get you a crossbow."

"I dunno," Adaar said, letting Cassandra dart in under his reach. "They make a much less rewarding sound when you hit people over the head with them."

The barrier continued to thin, and then the red Templars weren't just trickling in one at a time. Adaar glanced back at their Templars, heads bowed in concentration, and knew they had to stave them off.

"If I knew it was going to be this kind of party, I'd have worn a shirt," Bull quipped, positioning himself in front of the stairs that led up to where Barris's men did ... whatever they were doing. Each swing he took shattered crystals and staggered every man he touched. "Seriously, though. I feel like maybe I should be wearing the curtains, for my health."

"Should've thought of that sooner," Blackwall muttered, glancing over his shoulder at the banners hanging through the room, before he cut down another red-eyed man.

Cullen looked worse and worse, as the fight dragged on, but his sword stayed almost as quick as it started, even as his hands trembled and his vision blurred. It called to him. He could feel the power behind him and the lyrium that splintered with every blow before him. But, he knew he didn't need it -- not for what he was doing. What Barris was doing... that was insane. It was working, though, and Cullen reminded himself to have faith that it would be enough. Reminded himself that he would also have to be enough, just as he was, because to fail now, to fail here... there would be no return from that. He wasn't sure he could drag himself back from the lyrium again, and the red was so much more.

When the air hummed, Cullen blamed it on the headache, blamed the flash of light on that too, until he spotted Ser Barris and the rest of his Templars collapsing in a heap, the barrier turning to green smoke before disappearing altogether. He hadn't noticed their enemy slowing to a trickle, only noticed now that they had slowed to a stop, his sword still poised to kill something that wasn't there.

"Ser Barris?" Blackwall called out when he didn't, and for one lung-squeezing moment, Cullen feared the worst.

"The beast!" Barris called out from the floor where he panted for breath, face twisted in pain. "End it!"

"I've been looking forward to stabbing the thing all day," Adaar grumbled, hefting his sword.

Cassandra led the way through a side passage that had been blocked by the barrier, Cullen following closely, but more slowly, more stiffly.

"Not looking so good, there, Commander Stabbypants," Sera was quick to note, and Blackwall moved closer to Cullen's side, ready to catch him or defend him, if necessary.

"You really are looking rough," Bull agreed, shaking shards of red out of his trousers as he followed. "You sure you don't want to go wait this one out with Ser Barris?"

"No!" Cullen's vehemence had even Cassandra turning to look back at him, as they came up on an
arcade that faced out, the first breath of fresh air Cullen had gotten since Barris opened the first vial. "You can't smell it, can you?"

"I get the sense you're not talking about the overwhelming stench of unwashed soldiers and exposed viscera," Varric remarked, coming up on Cullen's other side.

"Ooh, 'viscera'! Good word. Makes putting someone's insides out sound posh!" Sera rambled on, taking a quick look around, outside, while everyone else was focused on Cullen.

"Lyrium," Cullen responded, after a few long breaths that seemed to bring some of the colour back to his cheeks. "I've been a Templar too long, I guess. The red is... definitely stronger, but it's got something else. And it's raw. You saw those crystals. I've never seen it raw, before, except after Meredith turned, and we all stayed away from her."

"Too well, I'd think, given nobody knows where she got to," Varric reminded him.

"The point is, I'll be fine. Let's just get outside, away from that smell." Cullen checked to make sure they were all still with him, before he stepped out onto the pathway that led toward another courtyard. "We've got a demon to fight."

And the demon knew it too, to go by the diabolical laughter that echoed around them. Adaar suppressed a shudder, recognising that unnatural laugh that sounded like three voices in one from when Envy had had him stuck in his head. He gripped his sword all the tighter, half expecting to see that oily reflection of himself again.
Chapter 72

Chapter Summary

Spirits and demons, an end and a beginning.

The pathway spilled out into a courtyard with unfinished walls set against grey skies. Red lyrium crystals grew out of the ground, lending a red glow to the air, and Cullen held his breath, the shadows under his eyes a bruise against pale skin. He could feel the others watching him, though none of them said anything.

Then Envy's voice came again, echoing in the air around them, and Adaar could swear the words were said right in his ear. "I touched so much of you. But you are selfish with your glory. Now I'm no one."

The ground at Adaar's feet ruptured, spewing forth a demon that seemed to unfold forever, every joint bending the wrong way, nothing moving quite as it seemed it should, until a pillar of pale flesh, tinged with red, stood before them, its neck ending below the head with a half-formed swell. Four blood red hands grasped at nothing, as a young man in a huge hat pushed his way forward, stepping between Varric and Cullen as if he'd been there all along.

"Dark and desperate. Death to make yourself alive. I used to be like you." He stopped at the demon's feet and gazed up, fearless. "I'm not anymore. You shouldn't be either."

Envy looked like it might recoil, but its shoulders finished the arc, thrusting forward again as its hands darted out, one grabbing for Cole and two more for Adaar.

With a growl, Adaar brought his sword around, side-stepping the grab and slicing across the back of Envy's knotted fingers, earning him an almost insulted screech in reply. As suddenly as Cole had appeared, he disappeared too, seeming to melt away before he reappeared behind Envy, a dagger slicing for the back -- front? -- of its knees.

"Ugh," said Sera, grimacing as the demon stretched to its full -- and fully naked -- height, her arrow sinking into its shoulder but only seeming to annoy it. "Do you see that? Look at that, flopping around! Should be calling that a Penis Envy demon!"

Varric choked on a laugh, his shot almost going wide. "You just had to point it out, didn't you?"

"I'd have to point it out for you to see that small a target!"

"No wonder it wants to be you," Bull joked, slamming his hammer into a slender, pale elbow. "No better choice than a qunari to make up for something like that."

"Is that even true?" Blackwall asked slapping one of the hands aside with his shield. "I mean everyone always says it, but is that just wishful thinking?"

"If we live through this, you want to find out?" Bull offered a wide grin that became visible as he smashed Envy's knee out of the way.

"Eww! Keep your cod in your piece!" Sera shouted, raining arrows on where the demon's head
might have been.

"Piece in your cod. Cod's a bag," Varric pointed out, scrambling to the side in an attempt to box it in.

The demon shrieked again and leapt back, the sky well behind it swirling green, in the centre of a broad platform that looked like it might once have been used for speeches. A crumbling wall sprawled behind it, and the demon seemed to be edging toward either the shelter or the barrier.

"It's trying to hide!" Cole sprung after the demon as it suddenly vanished just as easily as it appeared.

"Thing's got a fucking personal guard," Varric groaned as red Templars poured out from behind a wall.

"Maybe it should have invested in some fucking armour instead!" Adaar growled as he turned, twisting around trying to find the creature. He found it on the far side of the platform, the air in front of it a familiar swirling green. "Oh, not again!"

The Templars demanded his attention, then, and it was almost easier to fight the ones wearing helmets, the only piece of their faces showing their inhuman, glowing red eyes. It made it easier to forget these were once people as Adaar's sword mowed them down.

"Take cover!" Cassandra warned him, her shield catching an arrow that would have hit him between the ribs. She nudged him back towards a cluster of ruins, stone high enough to provide some cover while they turned and faced the Templars coming at them.

"If I never see any more red lyrium after this, it will be too soon," Varric grumbled, Bianca resting on the ruined wall as he picked off targets, cursing when it took more than one shot to take them out. He expected Cullen next to him to make some sound of agreement, only to be met with silence. Varric paused in his shooting to glance at the Commander, finding his face pale and covered in a sheen of sweat. He realised then that the ruined walls brought them too close to the lyrium crystals, growing out of the ground like a living thing.

"Stay between me and Bull," Blackwall suggested, bashing a red-eyed thing in the helmet with his shield. "If anything goes wrong, we can carry you out."

Cullen managed to lift an eyebrow and gesture at Adaar.

"I heard he fell down at the Breach. No sense in having him fall on you."

Blackwall's sword came dangerously close to Cullen's face, and Cullen turned an entire second too late, just in time for the spray of blood from the red Templar behind him to coat his face. On him. Touching him. He could feel the lyrium against his skin, burning like it might scar.

"You aren't like them."

Cold water splashed across Cullen's face, and his vision resolved from its red haze to show him Blackwall defending where he stood, and the young man with the floppy hat holding a bucket.

"It's not the bright blue blanket you miss. The lyrium lies, but you know not to listen."

The young man's eyes were a pale, unearthly shade of blue, and Cullen felt like they were staring through him, peeling back his layers of mental armour. He sucked in a breath like he had forgotten to breathe. "Who are you?" he asked, but the young man was gone again. Cullen hadn't even seen him move, had merely blinked, and he was no longer there.
He wiped a hand over his wet face and wondered if he was seeing things now.

A discordant scream of frustration stole his attention, and Cullen dared lift his head from cover to look for Envy. The demon had abandoned its shield and was stalking towards them, twisting, shifting, and melting as it walked, long and disjointed limbs pulling in, thin body thickening into the shape of a qunari with horns that swept up and back. More of the suggestion of Adaar than a copy of his shape.

"Hey!" Adaar called out from a different set of ruins, sounding supremely offended.

"Joke's on you, Adaar Junior!" Sera called out. "That look just makes me want to shoot you more!"

"Hey!" Adaar said again in much the same time, this time directed at her. "What's the point of this, exactly?" he shouted back at Envy. "Besides getting a much nicer ass, that is?"

"Everything!" the demon howled, lashing out at Cassandra, as she got too close. "The Elder One promised you to me! Now no one will have you!"

"Bleh!" Sera gagged and followed with a few quick shots. "That thing sounds like my last girlfriend. Don't do serious with people like that. Or demons like that. Don't do anything with that."

"Kill it," Varric decided, after a moment's contemplation and three crossbow bolts. "I think that's the answer we're looking for."

Envy elbowed Blackwall in the face as it lunged for Adaar, only to meet Cullen's sword.

"No." Cullen declared, firmly, as if that would be enough. In combination with the sword to the gut, and the smite that followed, it seemed to be, though, and the demon leapt back toward its barrier, again.

Instead it met Bull's hammer, a solid swing to its borrowed face, momentum hard enough that it simply swayed, stunned, for a moment. Its form melted and shifted again, and somehow Adaar found it more disturbing watching the transformation in reverse, body elongating, long, twisted limbs tearing out of its body.

"Blegh!" said Sera, her arrow going unnoticed as it sank into its backside. "Turn back! Adaar's rump is a bigger target!"

"You're going to end up my target, if you keep this up!" Adaar called back even as he ran up to join Bull, sword swinging for the creature's knobby knees. The creature shrieked, its knee buckling.

"Not with your ass pointing my way, I'm not!"

Adaar side-stepped so that Cassandra was between Sera and his ass, his next swing aimed at the back of Envy's thighs, but the demon managed to stagger out of the way, swinging its claws around, which raked over Cassandra's shield.

Green light fountained forth from the ground, like geysers, and the demon seemed to pass from one spring to another, lashing out at whoever was closest, before vanishing again. The young man with the hat appeared, again, in the middle of the field of deadly spouts of Fade energy, eyes closed, simply listening.

"Higher ground!" Varric called to Sera, climbing up on a broken wall, and firing every time the demon appeared.
A flicker on the field, and both the young man and the demon vanished, only to re-appear at Adaar's feet, the young man having pinned the demon through two of its shoulders with his daggers.

"It's not going to change back," he said, turning those large blue eyes on the qunari above him. "It wanted to take your face, but if you take its head, it can heal."

Adaar wasn't sure what that meant, but he knew that cutting off its head would certainly make him feel better. He gave Cole a nod of thanks, raising his sword overhead and bringing it down in a mighty chop, as though he were cutting firewood. The creature managed one last squirm and shriek before the blade fell. It fell limp, then its body faded to dust.

"I could live without ever seeing one of those again," Varric said cheerfully, Bianca resting on his shoulder. It was the relaxed pose of someone who had just won a battle but was still prepared for more, just in case.

"Have any of those in Kirkwall?" Adaar asked as he looked around, relaxing in increments when no more red Templars jumped out at them.

"No, but you should see some of the Pride demons we had to fight."

"I could live without seeing those too," Adaar replied.

The sound of footsteps and shifting metal got Cullen's attention, and he turned, expecting to see more red Templars coming up from behind them. Instead, over the edge of his sword, he saw Ser Barris and the rest of the group from inside.

"The demon is dead! Andras be praised!" Barris called out to all of them. "She shielded you from its touch!"

"Not friggin' hardly!" Sera shouted back, from where she was picking up stray arrows and checking them for damage. "You should've seen the way that thing grabbed our Cow Rampage--"

"Rampant, if it's heraldic," Varric corrected, absently.

"-- Our rampaging cow." Sera stuck her tongue out at Varric. "Looked like it was gonna start snogging him and maybe kill him after, but definitely some snogging, which is gross. That thing was naked. You could see its bits all flapping about!"

"Nothing to brag about, either," Bull joked, nervously, still looking around as if to be sure they'd killed it and another one wasn't about to pop up.

"I can assure you that there was no snogging on the agenda," Adaar said matter-of-factly. He glanced back at Varric. "And I'm making a note of that 'Rampant Cow' heraldic thing."

Varric held up a hand innocently. "No offence intended!"

"No, no. I mean I'm making a note of it so we can make it a reality. That's what the Inquisition is about, right? Fulfilling dreams?"

"That's... that's not at all what the Inquisition is about," Cullen sighed.

"Then maybe that's where we're going wrong."

Barris and the rest of the Templars looked back and forth between them, somewhere between amused and bemused.
"Well, we know where we've gone wrong," Barris said, gesturing out at the open space where Envy's corpse had faded into dust. "Somehow, we let this happen. Our officers either failed to see it or were complicit." He sucked in a breath and squared his shoulders, and Cullen knew what was coming when Barris' gaze fell on him. "Commander, you're the highest ranking official we have left. We stand ready at your order."

"You are, I hope, willing to put aside recent events, and work alongside our mages? We offer the necessary supplies for you to battle the demons spilling out of the breach, so the mages can close it." Cullen wiped his sword as he spoke, checking that it was free of ichor and lyrium-tainted blood. "The Chantry won't like it, until we actually do it, of course. By now, you know how that works. But, if you're willing to work toward closing the breach and ridding Thedas of demons, we're happy to have you on. It's a choice, Ser Barris, and possibly the first one you've been given in many years."

"And I thank you, Commander." Barris turned to face the Templars behind him. "Do we take the Commander's offer, brothers and sisters?"

The cheer that followed was exhausted and punctuated with the sounds of armour on armour, as the Templars overjudged themselves and staggered into one another.

"We will come. I hope your stronghold is ready." Barris stood straight, but he looked nearly dizzy with relief.

To one side, the young man with the large hat reappeared, waiting until he caught Adaar with a pointed look, before he slipped back into the building, behind the Templars.

"So do I, honestly." Cullen smiled weakly, remembering he'd left Harritt alone with Threnn, with only Josephine to keep the peace. "We've a camp for the night, but walk back with us, after we've all rested."
Redcliffe

Chapter Summary

Godwin cheats at cards. Connor becomes extremely useful.

Godwin shuffled the cards around in his sweaty hands, eyeing the mage in front of him -- Mack, he'd said his name was -- and trying to decide whether the man was cheating. No one had luck like that playing fairly. Or, in Godwin's case, from even playing unfairly, one of the discarded cards now tucked inside his sleeve.

If the two men to either side of him suspected anything, they hid it well, Peryn smiling easily as Torrin added a few more coins to the pot.

"You are confident!" Peryn laughed, even as he matched Torrin's bet.

"So are you," Torrin replied.

"And you've got a card up your left sleeve," Cormac said, gesturing at Godwin with his beer, without looking up from his own cards. "And if I don't miss my guess, it's the Knight of Roses."

"What?" Godwin sputtered, sitting up straighter. "How can you possibly say--"

"Because you're Godwin, and I've met your former roommate." Cormac set down his beer and played a card. "I also grew up with my little brother, who went on to open a gaming house." He pointed to Torrin. "He discarded the Knight of Roses, and you picked it up when you reached for the dumplings."

"One way to check, yes?" Peryn reached across Torrin for the discard pile. "Did you discard it?"

Torrin nodded. "Not the hand I meant to make."

Peryn spread the cards down the table. "It is not here."

"Then it fell on the floor!" Godwin insisted, one hand dropping into his lap.

"You mean, it will fall to the floor," Peryn said, peering under the table and seeing Godwin drop the card. "I would be careful. Someone spilled some beer around there earlier. You wouldn't want to ruin the card!" For all that he had caught Godwin red-handed, he still laughed and smiled as though it were all in good fun.

Torrin sighed, reaching between their chairs to pluck up the stolen card, slipping it back onto the table with a reproachful look at Godwin. "I would say our friend Godwin has forfeited his turn for this round, wouldn't you agree?"

Godwin grumbled, grabbing another dumpling... and not daring to steal another card this time with the way Torrin was watching him now.

"I wish Commander Greagoir were still with us," Torrin said, after a moment, drawing a card and then a dumpling. "He always played well. I never understood how Irving beat him so often."
"Now we've got Hadley who won't consort with mages, as if it even matters any more," Godwin huffed, still chewing. "Or we ... had Hadley."

"Did he not make it down with you?" Cormac asked, watching Godwin's hands as Peryn took his turn.

"As I told Enchanter Fen'Din, our Templars are no longer with us. Magister Alexius has taken them prisoner. To ensure negotiations would continue in good faith, he said, after having to come in through the battles outside the gates. I understand his distrust, but I find his methods extreme. Many were wounded in the ensuing scuffle, on both sides, which only reinforced his outrage that we permitted them to exist in the south. It was only after Fiona and I negotiated with him that he agreed to hold them, without having them executed."

"We must bring them back!" Peryn sat up straighter, smacking a hand on the table.

"We have to convince Alexius he's not getting what he wants, here, and he needs to go home before someone gets hurt. Namely him." Cormac eyed the cards on the table and tossed another coin into the pot. "Lord Hawke and his husband are noted magister-hunters. I'm relatively sure we can end him, if we have to, but I'd rather not. It takes an enormous amount of power and wreaks an exceptional amount of destruction on the surrounding area."

"Magister-hunters?" Torrin echoed, eyebrows twitching up. He kept his voice low, darting a look around, in case someone loyal to Alexius had heard that. But everyone loyal to Alexius knew they weren't welcome in this part of the tavern anyway. "I suspect there is a story behind that title -- perhaps many stories -- and I should like to hear it at some point. As for Alexius, he was only able to seize power here because he filled a need." He gave Cormac a rueful look. "We were desperate. But you say the Inquisition can offer us protection?"

"The Templars are supposed to offer you protection," Peryn said, his frown as bitter as his words.

Godwin barked a laugh and snatched up the last dumpling.

"I don't know about protection, but you know Enchanter Fen'Din. He and Commander Cullen -- you knew Cullen, didn't you?" Cormac nodded at Torrin as he picked up his beer, just in time to hear Godwin choke on his dumpling.

"Nobody wants to know Cullen. Cullen's what's wrong with Templars!" Godwin mangled out around the half-chewed dumpling.

"Ser Cullen ... did not recover well from one of the more horrifying failures of our enchanters to keep order. Things were quite strained during the Blight," Torrin explained, tactfully.

"Ser Cullen didn't believe mages were people, when we met, and now he's married into a family of mages and lets Jan -- yes, that Jan -- kiss him on the mouth. He's finally gotten better," Cormac assured them, taking a sip of beer. "But, Cullen and Fen'Din have come up with a plan to close the Breach and get things back to normal, so we can get back to the debate about the rights of southern mages, and how to ensure we wind up with a Divine who will support those rights."

Torrin nodded, brow furrowed in thought as he tapped his cards against the table. "I suppose the demons falling from the sky would be a priority, yes," he drawled. "And I suppose with Fen'Din as Herald we will not have to worry about being cast aside after."

"With Fen'Din as Herald, we'll have a lot of other things to worry about," Godwin grumbled, throwing down his card with a bit more force than necessary.
Torin shot him a look too tired to be reproachful. "I would rather Fen'Din be in charge of our fate than a bunch of magisters."

"We need your Templars," Peryn said again. "They are, sadly, the best way to fight mages, if fighting is what this becomes."

"We're willing to try reason, first, but none of us are stupid. We've been enough similar places. I'd like to get some of our scout team into the castle, before we have our next meeting, just to get eyes on your Templars and any traps we might be walking into." Cormac tapped his fingers on the table. "Do we know anyone who--"

Torin held up a finger and tipped his chair back. "Connor! I need your help with something!"

Connor looked up from where he'd been studying Imperial Enchanter Vivienne's diagrams, surprised to be called upon. "Me?"

"It's about the village," Torrin said, twisting a little further to set eyes on Vivienne. "Please excuse us, Vivienne, we're trying to work through the mistakes that were made, here. I'd like to get us back into a position in which we can negotiate without the threat of Tevinter hanging over us."

"By all means, Torrin. I'd prefer to see more reasonable minds in charge, particularly since Fiona's unfortunate and unthinking decision started this entirely unnecessary war, and I would offer myself as one of them." Vivienne's straight back and court dress seemed to bring an air of nobility to the corner she sat in, with Connor.

"We don't need to get into the politics of who's to blame and why," Torrin tactfully replied. "I'm much more interested in the politics of how we can get out of this mess." With a smile, he waved Connor over while Vivienne bent back over her diagrams.

Peryn scooted to the side so that Connor could pull up a chair between him and Godwin.

"It's about the village, you say?" Connor prompted, eyeing each of them curiously. His eyes fell on Godwin's cards. "Well, you've got a shit hand."

Godwin scowled.

"Don't give him that look, Godwin," Torrin said. "We all know you've got a shit hand. Connor, I would say that, of anyone in this tavern, you know the castle best. Would you agree with that assessment?"

"Assuming they haven't changed it much since I was twelve." Connor shrugged. "Why?"

"Other than the obvious entrances, how would you get into the castle. Or out, I suppose. You were twelve. I was twelve, once." Cormac shrugged and offered a lopsided smile. "I'm trying to get some scouts in to make sure we're not walking into a trap."

Connor shook his head. "I didn't sneak out. But, I know how the Hero of Ferelden got in, when she came to save us from the demons. That windmill up on the hill, by the road? If you go down under it, it's the escape passage from the castle, in case of siege. But, I don't know if they've found it. If you go down there and it is a trap, there's probably going to be guards. They'd be stupid not to put guards there, if they know it exists. On the other hand, I can't imagine Uncle Teagan mentioned it, if only because he's probably making plans to march more than just scouts through it."

"That is exactly what I was hoping for." Cormac's eyes lit and his smile turned bold. "There's always a way out. Even in Circle towers."
Torrin cleared his throat. "Not since that time the darkspawn came up from the Deep Roads into the cellar. We sealed up the entrances, after that. Much too dangerous."

"And yet," Godwin drawled, slouching back in his chair so that his head was barely above the table, "Fen'Din managed to find a way out. You were there for that."

"Fen'Din made a way out," Torrin corrected. "And yes, I was."

Godwin shrugged, nearly upsetting the precarious balance of his pose and sending himself sliding completely out of the chair. "Same thing. Point is, he got out, despite how harebrained his plan was."

If Torrin didn't know better, he'd say that Godwin sounded impressed, maybe even envious. But the man had had his opportunity to escape too and hadn't taken it.

Godwin rolled his head along the back of his chair to look at Connor. "Your way in doesn't involve singing, does it?"

"No," said Connor, drawing out the word until it almost became a question.

"Good."

"So, here's the plan," Cormac started, glancing over his shoulder to where Kinnon sat at the bar, between Lily and Jowan.
Chapter 74

Chapter Summary

An argument about the application of faith and good sense.

"You're out of your mind," Lily said, reaching over to tap on Kinnon's forehead. "You are unwell. Have you seen a healer about this?"

"It's not that crazy," Jowan argued, picking up the pitcher in front of Kinnon and pouring himself another drink. "I fell in love with you, didn't I?"

"I'm not a Templar!" Lily huffed, jabbing a finger in Jowan's direction, before she grabbed a handful of puffed barley from the bowl on the bar, and poured it into her mouth.

"At least Templars are allowed to get laid!" Jowan shot back.

"Not with mages!"

"Shh!" Kinnon raised his hands and brought them down, gesturing for both of them to lower their voices. "He's sitting right over there!"

"No one is supposed to be having sex with mages! Mages aren't supposed to be having sex!" Lily argued, washing down a mouthful of barley puffs with thin beer. "Which is another argument someone should have had with both of us!"

"Has it ever occurred to you that's a stupid argument?" Kinnon asked, reaching past Lily to drag the bowl of barley closer. "It's a stupid argument across the board, especially since we, and probably you, didn't actually choose celibacy. Mages are people just like anyone else, and saying we're not allowed to do the things people do, because we were born sparkly is just going to make us do them more quietly." He nudged Jowan. "Tell her I'm right."

"He's right." Jowan took a long swallow of beer. "You remember what it was like!"

"Yes, and I also know I was wrong." Lily rolled her eyes.

"You were only wrong because he's a blood mage. And an idiot." Kinnon tipped his head toward Jowan. "No offence. You know you're an idiot, right?"

"I was an idiot. Was. In the past. I'm not an idiot, now," Jowan muttered. "And I'm not a blood mage, now, either. Once in my life, I summoned demons. It was a horrible idea. I have regrets. Does that sound like a blood mage to you?"

"The 'I summoned demons' part does, yeah," Kinnon replied. He waved a hand through the air to cut off whatever argument Jowan started to make. "And maybe it's past tense, but I haven't spent enough time around you recently to know that for sure."

"I just said--! Lily, tell him!"

Lily held up her hands, palm out. "I just spent the last few years with you in the Fade, where you
don't really summon demons, because the demons are already there. And I distinctly remember there being demons when you broke into Aeonar."

Jowan flailed, gesturing helplessly. He could never catch a break. "All I did was summon geese! Geese! Perfectly normal, only-demonic-in-a-metaphorical-sense geese! Anyway, why are we on me? Let's go back to talking about Kinnon's fuck-ups!"

"Hey!" Kinnon protested.

"You really haven't told him?" Lily eyed Kinnon pityingly. "And you think he doesn't know?"

"How would he know? Most of my magic is kind of unignorable, so I don't even try to sneak spells. I've barely cast anything since we got the camels to come down here. Well, no, I took some time down here, helping with the village, while he was still staying close to Haven because of the lyrium. It's been almost impossible to get, since we came south." Kinnon offered a shaky smile and looked back at where Peryn was deep in discussion with a table full of mages. "I've been so nervous about what happens if the lyrium runs out. Anders says... Anders says all kinds of things, but I don't have a reason to doubt him. He said Cullen had to be carried home, after two weeks without it. Wouldn't wake up until they gave him more."

"... I kind of liked Cullen, actually," Jowan said, after a moment. "Is he all right?"

"You liked Cullen?" Kinnon recoiled, almost bumping shoulders with Lily. "Not like that!" Jowan looked horrified.

Kinnon blinked a few times, before realisation dawned. "Oh. Right. I forgot you left before all that. Yeah, he's... probably more like you remember. He's advising the Inquisition on 'tactical matters' or something. I don't know. I just stay out of his way and encourage people to keep faith and help each other."

Jowan's brows furrowed. "Why? What was he like in between?"

Kinnon looked to Lily for backup, only to remember that she had left around the same time. Or been dragged away. "Not like he is now. Or like I hear he is. The... whole thing with Uldred did a number on him." Which was about as much detail as he wanted to go into it, wondering at the sick feeling in his stomach until he realised he was thinking of Peryn again, wondering how easy it would be for Peryn to turn against him. "Which is why, again, blood magic is a 'no'."

"And I, again, am not a blood mage," Jowan said, words clipped.

"We've missed so much," Lily murmured, staring into her beer.

"Well, a lot of what you missed was pretty shitty, so." Kinnon shrugged. Lily's flat look said she wasn't reassured.

"Were there dragons?" Ser Owain leaned on the bar next to Lily, obviously several drinks down, and waved for the bartender. "Because if there was one thing we found in the Fade, it was dragons. They'd be shittier if they were alive. No, wait, they'd be doing more shitting."

"Annnnd speaking of shitty, you're shitfaced," Kinnon observed as Lily tactfully pulled out a stool for Owain.

"There's no beer in the Fade," Owain pointed out.
"On the contrary, everything is beer in the Fade, if you want it to be," Jowan argued, squinting into his glass, "and it was better beer than this."

"Fine, but it was the kind of beer where no one could get drunk, because there were demons everywhere." Owain helped himself to the puffed barley and ordered a roast chicken. "I'll share," he promised.

"Okay, I'll give him that. Three years of no one getting drunk because we were surrounded by demons. Which is why I'm having another." Jowan tipped back the rest of his drink.

"You still probably shouldn't get drunk, because Tevinter," Kinnon pointed out, shocked when Lily grabbed him and turned him to face her.

"The Maker has given me the power to stand against evil, and I will rip the lungs out of any magister between me and the next pitcher."

Owain peered over her head. "She's not kidding. She's scary."

Kinnon wisely sidestepped so that he wasn't in her way either. "Well, now I know how we can take out Alexius. Put a pitcher of beer behind him."

"Don't even joke," Lily said, glaring at him before catching the bartender's eye and pointing at their empty pitcher.

"Joking? Hardly." Kinnon put a hand to his chest, the expression of innocence, subtly putting Jowan between her and him. "Just considering the resources at our disposal."

"Careful," Jowan muttered, "or she'll start considering the disposal of something else."

Lily ignored him in favour of pouring herself a beer, sliding the fresh pitcher out of Jowan's reach.

Kinnon clapped a hand on Jowan's shoulder. "I think she's been considering that for a while, Jowan."

From across the bar, a sound of frustrated agony could be heard, followed by a shout of, "Oh, for fuck's sake, Jowan! Knock it off!"

Jowan winced. "Niall," he explained, without explaining anything. "Sorry!" he called out. "I'll think about kittens!"

Kinnon blinked a few times. "What just happened?"

"He's dead. It's made him weird. He complains about hearing people's suffering and regrets, even when they're not talking. Apparently, I'm loud enough to hear from the other side of the tower, three floors down." Jowan rubbed his face and sighed. "And he gets a little... demony, if he gets too upset. I mean, it's Niall. You know what he's like. You probably know better than I do. He's just... Fade-touched, now."

"No, you're Fade-touched. He's a spirit," Kinnon argued. "You just said it. He's dead. We were all there for that par-- well, you weren't. I was."

"Well, is he still a spirit, really? He's standing right there, and this isn't the Fade, and he's not possessing anyone!" Jowan sputtered, shrugging.

"... When Fen'Din gets back, I'm letting him explain it." Kinnon shook his head and took a drink.
"I'm not sure I could explain it right, sober. He's the specialist."

"The Herald of Andraste," Jowan said, shaking his head. "I think even Andraste's confused by that one."

"I think Andraste's laughing her ass off, personally," Kinnon replied. "But then, who knew Solona would turn out to be the Hero of Ferelden? Kinloch may have churned out some weirdos, but they're weirdos that get stuff done."
Chapter 75

Chapter Summary

Everyone loves Master Levyn.

The sun was bright in a cloudless sky, and from where they walked by the lake, Niall couldn't see the Breach or its sickly green glow. It could almost pass for a normal day, and Niall, with a beautiful woman on his arm, soaked in the hope of those around him the way he soaked in the sun.

Somewhere nearby, Kinnon and Jowan were haggling with a vendor, while another tried to get their attention with a smile and a beckoning wave.

"Something for your lady friend?" the vendor asked Niall, even as Asha paused curiously to look over his rather eclectic display.

"Oh, this is nice!" Asha picked up a metal cuff that looked like it might cover most of her forearm and studied the engravings on it. "We should come back, when we can afford it."

The vendor nodded, sympathetically. "You with those mages? I heard there's no money in those towers. But, if you've got good skills, I bet somebody would pay for you to help them. There's been a lot of that going on. It's a whole other world out here."

"I barely remember it," Niall admitted, turning an amulet over in his hands. "She remembers, though."

"Yes, but I remember Rivain," Asha reminded him. "That might as well be another world, too!"

Niall set the amulet down distractedly, as a woman walked intently toward Jowan. "Do you think--?"

"He got kicked in the face, yesterday. Maybe we should go make sure..." Asha smiled at the vendor. "Would you hold onto this for me? We have to go rescue our friend. I'm sure I'll be back for that."

Asha took Niall's hand in hers as she made for Jowan, to ground Niall, in case this went as poorly as she feared.

"Master Levyn?" the strange woman called, the wind catching in her stringy blonde hair. "Is that you?"

"Levyn?" Kinnon echoed, but the woman paid him no mind.

Jowan turned to her with a wary smile, but before he could say anything, she exclaimed, "It is you!"

The woman's hands came up, and Asha nearly leapt at her, certain she was going to strangle or shove him, but instead she merely wrapped her arms tight around him in a hug, the painful kind of hug, to go by the way Jowan's eyes bulged, a strangled sound squeezed out of him.

"What's happening?" Kinnon asked in a loud whisper, to which Asha shrugged, relieved to find Niall still solid and stable.
"Erk," Jowan squeaked, before the woman finally let go of him. "You ... know me? I'm sorry, it's been years, and there were hundreds of people..."

"You helped us escape the darkspawn," she said, tears in her eyes. "They'd gotten most of our village, but my sister and I were heading for Highhever, when you found us. I'm Melinda. I don't expect you to remember, but you got us safely to the docks in Highhever, and we got a boat to Wycome. We'd just come back to Ferelden, when the war started, but we never expected it would get this far! And... here you are again! We thought you'd died!"

"I had some ... ah ... personal things to take care of, after the Blight. And I've been travelling, ever since. The war surprised us all." Jowan nodded, trying to sound like he knew what he was talking about. "But, here you are! Safe in Redcliffe! It's so good to see you've made it through everything!"

"Is she serious?" Niall hissed at Kinnon.

Kinnon shrugged. "Don't look at me. I stayed in the tower!"

"Thanks to you," Melinda said, her smile wobbly. She clasped his hand and repeated it. "Thanks to you."

Jowan's throat was too tight for words after that.

Jowan's companions weren't the only ones staring at the display. Vendors and customers kept casting them furtive glances, looking away the moment Asha noticed they were watching. When eventually Melinda pulled away and moved on, Jowan looked no less dazed.

"'Levyn'?" Niall asked.

"A better name than Jowan, it seems," Jowan sighed, voice pitched low. He shook his head at the confused looks turned his way. "It's a long story." Though at least they'd be more inclined to believe it than Lily had been. And of course, proof had walked right up to him when she wasn't there to see it. Such was his life.

"I don't know where your thoughts just went, but cut it out," Niall said, voice a little strained.

"Sorry," Jowan said, reminding himself of the gratitude in Melinda's eyes.

"Excuse me?"

Jowan turned to find an elderly elven man had come up behind them. "Oh, I'm sorry. We're probably blocking the whole path!"

"No, no. Is it true? Are you Master Levyn? The one from the stories?" the old man asked.

Jowan nodded. "That's me. But, that was a long time ago. Did I help someone you know?"

"No, most of the elves didn't go anywhere. Where would we go? Who would take us?" the old man chuckled and shook his head. "I've been looking for some help with something, and if Melinda thinks that much of you, well, you're probably a trustworthy young man."

Kinnon covered his mouth and turned away, snorting. "Flowers," he croaked, after a moment, trying not to burst out in hysterical laughter. "They make me cough."

"Well, I can't make promises, if I don't know what you need," Jowan answered, warily. "I'm not really a hero. I just helped some people get out of Ferelden. Any good hunter could've done it."
"Oh, it's nothing so serious," the old man replied. "But, the demons and brigands on the road have made it hard for an old man like me to travel. I'm afraid I won't be able to lay flowers at my wife's shrine, this year. Dear Senna deserves better, but I know the roads have been impassable with the war. Would you be so kind? I'm sure it would be less threatening for a strong, young man who's fought darkspawn."

Jowan floundered for a bit. The roads were hardly safe, just the mention of darkspawn making him shiver even though they were hardly their biggest problem at the moment, but ... it was just some flowers, right? Surely he was capable of doing that right?

"I would have to see how bad the roads are first," Jowan said hesitantly. "As much as I would like to, I can't promise anything, but we can try."

The elf nodded, smiling in relief. "That is more than I had hoped for. Thank you, Master Levyn."

Niall and Kinnon looked on in amazement as the elf marked the spot on a map for Jowan.

"I'm still in the Fade, aren't I?" Niall drawled. "In some weird, alternate place where Jowan is sometimes competent?"

"He got you out of the Fade, didn't he?" Asha pointed out.

"Well, that's the question, isn't it?" Niall retorted.

"I've never been in the Fade, and I'm seeing this too." Kinnon pinched himself, just to make sure he was awake. "So, either the Breach did something extra weird to the world, or this is actually happening."

"I saved hundreds of people from the Blight," Jowan said, as the elf walked away, and he turned to drop one arm around Niall's shoulders and reached up to lay the other on Kinnon's. "I'm not a fuckup all the time. You just knew me before I figured that out."

"I just knew you when you were." Kinnon plucked the map out of Jowan's hands. "Oh, that's not too far, is it? I bet we'll be back before Peryn and everyone get back with the scouts."

"Fuck you," Jowan sighed, snatching the map back.

"Not even if you paid me." Kinnon smiled sweetly.
They could see the windmill from the edge of town, or what was left of it anyway, tattered ruins obscured by foliage, but as they climbed the hill that led to it, Artemis found himself staring at Solas. Fenris noted the look with some amusement.

"Looking to add to your elf collection?" he asked, voice pitched low so that Solas wouldn't hear. Not that he would have, engrossed as he was in conversation with Anders.

"Mm?" Artie blinked, glancing at Fenris. "Oh. Surprisingly, no." He paused to consider. "Well, maybe. I'm just trying to figure out why he seems so familiar." He rubbed his forehead, staring at Solas again. "It's on the edge of my brain, and it's driving me crazy."

"So, primaetas leaves?" Anders asked, looking at Solas with nothing short of scholarly curiosity. "I've only heard of using the root, but nobody's seen the plant since the Second Blight destroyed half of Orlais."

"The plant may be no more." Solas shook his head and shrugged. "But, once, it was a major component in elven ritual and in certain types of healing. It is said that the juice of the plant could maintain a body while the inhabitant wandered the Fade. So many things have been lost entirely, and so many more now persist only in legend. Legend is dangerous, combining history with desire. It is never the whole story, but often what someone in the distant past wished it to be."

"And, yet, it's all we've got, in a lot of cases," Cormac argued, holding up a book he'd been paging through. "All we can do is build backward from the pieces we have. Who knows? Maybe the world has lost less than you think. Could be we've just misplaced some things. Primaetas, though... I wonder if it grew anywhere other than Orlais. It must have, if it was that important. The Blight can't have gotten all of it."

"After how many Blights, five?" Solas raised an eyebrow. "I wonder if you underestimate the taint."

"And I wonder if you underestimate how much of Thedas remains untainted," Cormac shot back, smiling like a man seeking the impossible. "But, the legends are important, if only because they tell us where to start looking for more parts of the story. And if we find more parts of the story, we find more places to look for things everyone's written off as lost!"

"There is more to you than your ass, isn't there?" A faint smile curled one side of Solas's lips, and he gestured to Cormac's face.

Artemis stopped in his tracks, the memory clicking back into place at those words, at that gesture. He stared at Solas, mouth agape, hand up in a gesture that didn't go anywhere.

"Amatus?" Fenris called back, slowing when he noticed Artemis had stopped and looking back over his shoulder.

Artie's first attempt at words just came out as sounds that tried to be a laugh. Then he was no longer
frozen, trotting to catch up with the others, stepping in front of Solas and walking backwards. Solas eyed him curiously and slowed.

"You used to have dreadlocks," Artemis said, the look that passed over Solas' face proving his suspicion.

"What makes you think that?" Solas asked, barely a reply at all.

Cormac stopped dead. "Are you fucking kidding me?" His eyes darted to his brother and he took a few quick steps to join him, turning to face Solas. "You... you are him, aren't you? But, you weren't called Solas, then."

"I have always been Solas, regardless of what anyone else calls me," Solas noted, his face still. "Who is it you think I am?"

"The tattooist, from Amaranthine." Cormac's voice felt strange as it left his mouth, as if he were in two places at once. "The one who wouldn't give me Dirthamen vallaslin, and it wasn't because I wasn't an elf. You had another reason, and I remember because I expected you to say you wouldn't do it because I wasn't an elf. But, you said you wouldn't make me a slave to wisdom."

"I should apologise for your face," Solas finally admitted. "It was a rash response."

"Are you kidding me? It's great! It's better than the real thing! It's like the rune of getting laid!" Cormac broke out in a huge smile. "But, why didn't you... oh. We... look different, don't we. Right. We're not kids any more." He paused. "But, you look like you haven't aged a day."

"Thank you," Solas said mildly. "Though I assure you that's because I shaved off all my grey hair, much of which I suspect came from dealing with you." The barest smile said he was teasing. "So yes, I remembered you, both of you, but I doubted your memories of me would be fond."

"Are you kidding?" Artie said. "Finding out what that writing meant was one of the greatest moments of my life."

"So you're to blame for this?" Fenris said, pointing at Cormac's face.

"No, I suspect his parents are," Solas quipped, "but as for the tattoo, ah, yes."

Peryn looked around at his friends, looking terribly confused. "I do not understand. What does the writing say?"

Anders burst into guffaws instead of answering, which Peryn didn't find helpful at all.

"It says 'nice ass'," Cormac replied, tipping his head so Peryn could see it better. "It's written in an old Elvish script. It's Theron's fault we know what it says. Or... that my brother knows what it says, anyway."

Solas's eyes widened in surprise, but he recovered quickly.

"Taking my name in vain?" Theron called out from higher up a hill beside the road, as he came down with a few ducks tied over his shoulder. "I have one of those names that echoes. Ducks for lunch, if you want to stop for a bit."

"Not in vain, this time. Just talking about you behind your back." Cormac grinned. "We're almost to the village. We can stop there."
Fen'Din finally cut into the conversation, eyes lingering on Solas. "You are a tattooist? And you know how to write vallaslin?"

"I do know, yes." Solas nodded cautiously. "But, I will not write them."

"I know the lines. I do not know the ink." Fen'Din widened his eyes, expectantly, after a moment's pause.

"Yes, what is in the ink?" Anders asked, loudly, giving Fen'Din a long-suffering look. "Because this asshole of an elf, this elfhole, right here, almost killed himself trying."

"Then he was probably almost correct." Solas smiled up at Anders.

Anders's hands clutched at the air in frustration. "And you people do this to yourselves on purpose?"

"The Dalish," Solas corrected, and Anders jabbed a hand at Theron, looking for an answer.

Theron threw his hands out wide, one still holding the string of ducks. "You have seen what he has done to his mi'ñehn, but it is the tattoos on his face that concern you? At least the Dalish don't do that on purpose!"

"His what?" Peryn asked Fenris, brows knit in confusion.

Fenris opened and closed his mouth, not certain he'd be doing Peryn any favours by telling him.

"Different situation!" Anders protested. "He didn't nearly die that time!" He cut a look at Fen'Din. "Right?"

"It was very simple. I was undertaking another test by the next morning." Fen'Din eyed Anders. "Petra's not as good as you are, but a minor wound doesn't need much more than a potion, and she can make those."

"You have a way with words," Solas remarked to Theron.

"Please don't get him started," Fenris groaned, pressing a slightly-swollen hand over his face. "I have heard enough epic poetry about my husband's bottom, on the way from Kirkwall. On the way from Gwaren, even."

"It has to be better than three hours of Tevinter pub songs, every time we went up Sundermount," Anders argued, shrugging. "At least he's an actual poet-historian."

"Omnès gentes plaudite," Fenris retorted, clapping his hands in the rhythm of the most vulgar of the songs he could recall.

Anders groaned. "That was not a request for an encore!"

"Sorry, can't hear you over my clapping," Fenris said, just to make Anders roll his eyes.

Theron looked like he was about to join in, when Artemis came up next to him, wrapping an arm around his waist. "Oh, Theron. Theron! You are not going to believe this..." He steered Theron back around, gesturing grandly at Solas, who looked less than impressed. "This is the elf responsible for 'nice ass'!"

Theron tilted his head in confusion, gaze flitting down Solas' body. "Well, it's not the best I've seen, though it's hard to tell under the pyjamas..."
"Under the what?" Solas asked with a flat look.


Peryn hung back looking confused, until he tripped on something in the road. Looking down, he found a book, hand-written, now with half a footprint on the page it had fallen open to. "Did one of you drop this?"

Cormac glanced back and checked his own bag. "Not one of mine," he said, picking it up anyway, and turning to a cleaner page.

Anders leaned over his shoulder, squinting at the text. "Talking to rocks? Isn't that a dwarf thing?"

Fen'Din nodded. "When we were in Orzammar, I heard many stories about the miners who claimed the stone spoke to them. Something about the lyrium, Dagna said."

"Let me see," Artemis said, nudging his way over to look over Cormac's shoulder. "The stone calls to me,'" he read aloud, then frowned as he skimmed over the rest. "You're reminded of dwarves, and I'm reminded of Bartrand."

"That's just what we need," Anders mumbled.

"Bartrand?" Solas asked, and Peryn looked relieved that he wasn't the only one confused this time.

"Ask Varric," Artie said, only to think better of that advice. "On second thought, don't ask Varric. Probably still a sore subject, I imagine."

"His brother," Anders explained, as though that explained anything at all. "Either way, we should probably keep an eye out. This person doesn't seem well."

Cormac handed the book to Peryn. "It looks like there's a note in there, from someone else, suggesting that whoever this is should go see a Templar about the problem."

"No offence to present company, but a Templar is the last solution to that problem I'd wish on anyone." Anders raised his eyebrows, pointedly.

Peryn turned the note over, reading it, but the next page caught Fenris's eye.

"We could go find him," Fenris noted, "since he's conveniently left directions to the cave he wants to go to. If he's hearing the echoes in the stone... Did I ever mention how much I disliked going to the Bone Pit? The pit part, in particular. Some Tevinter experiment, no doubt, but the stone remembers what happened there, and it's very eager to inform anyone who can hear it."

"Was that the time we decided you were dwarfier than Varric?" Anders asked.

"Which time? That seems to be a common conclusion."

Anders conceded the point.

"For someone who likes elves," Theron said, nudging Artemis with his elbow, "you managed to marry the unelfiest elf in all of Thedas."

Artie shrugged. "I still kind of like him."
"My husband forgives my flaws," Fenris drawled.

"Just as I'm sure you would forgive mine, if I had any."

Fenris laughed, shuffling closer just to nudge Artemis's shoulder with his. "My husband is also very humble," he added to Peryn. "But I still kind of like him, too."

"But going back to this person, before I start gagging from the sweetness," Anders said, gesturing at the page in Cormac's hand, "yes, I suggest we find them once we've done what we came out here to do."
Help from Harding. A plan is born.

As they reached the expanding village at the crossroads, they stopped to talk to Corporal Vale, who assured them that aside from a few drunken mishaps, the mages and Templars were well in hand, however little each side trusted the other, even now. Anders took a moment to check in with Sile, the healer from Redcliffe, while the others went on to meet with Harding.

"Herald!" one of the scouts shouted back into the camp, and Harding ducked out of a tent, wearing a wide smile.

"Good to see you! Are you heading back up to Haven, or did you need something?" she asked, making her way over to Fen'Din.

"I need some help," Fen'Din admitted, rifling through his bag for the diagrams Connor had provided. "We may be walking into a trap, and I'd like to borrow some of your men to check it out without setting it off. I just need to know what we're facing, before I walk into it."

"Well, that's what we're for!" Harding took the offered papers and flipped through them. "Ooh! Is that the castle? I've always wanted to see the inside of the castle!"

"The old Arl's son drew it from memory, so it might not be perfect, but it's better than going in blind." Cormac offered an uncomfortable shrug. "But, we do need people who are more comfortable inside than outside, if you've got any with you."

"Please." Harding laughed, spreading the maps out on a table already piled with papers. "Leliana wouldn't let me leave Haven without personnel for every possible occasion. I have what you're looking for. How many people do you want to send in? Are you expecting any particular passages to be patrolled?"

"I trust you to decide how many people to use," Fen'Din assured her. "I don't know where the guards are, except here." He dragged a finger along a hallway. "The dungeons are here, and we have reason to believe Kinloch Hold's Templars are being held there, if they haven't been executed."

Harding finally looked up. "Executed? What's going on down there?"

"Magisters are going on," Fenris replied, and Harding had never heard anyone put so much disgust into one word.

"Magisters?" Harding repeated, drawing a nod from Artemis. "Like magister magisters? From Tevinter?"

"Do you know of a different kind?" Solas asked, raising an eyebrow.

"No," Harding scoffed, straightening as she turned to look up at him. "But a few weeks ago, I didn't know that demons could pop out of the sky, either! Kind of reminded me I don't know everything."
"So yes, magister magisters, from Tevinter," Artie replied, "who we will hopefully be sending back to Tevinter, potentially in pieces."

"'Potentially'?" Fenris echoed, ears twitching.

Artie considered that, considering the grim look on his husband's face. "Okay, probably."

"I would prefer we not return him to Tevinter at all," Fen'Din remarked, "until we find out what his role in recent events actually is. This entire situation strikes me as a bit too convenient for coincidence, or even a last-moment scramble. And depending on what we discover, it may be wise to retain even his remains. No sense marking a trail for his successor."

"I wonder how he has held off the Smite." Peryn pulled the maps together, looking for the overlap between floors. "He is holding a large number of Templars, and they are supposed to be alive. He cannot be too close to them."

"Niiice." Harding drew out the word as she followed where Peryn was pointing. "I like the way this guy thinks! And it tells us that this magister has more than just mages with him."

"Or his mages are trained for combat," Cormac suggested. "We're not all useless without magic, but that's the expectation most Templars have. They'd have walked right into it."

"Either way, we will know soon enough." Fen'Din caught Harding's eye as she looked up from the maps. "We need to send word back to Haven about what's happening, here. Do you have a runner we can use?"

"No runner, but I have got Baron Plucky!" Harding gestured to the raven sitting atop a stack of crates, tearing apart a fish. "I was going to send a report back in the morning, but if I write it now, we can get both messages out tonight. Keep it short -- the message has to fit in the capsule." She drew a shape with her fingers. "Fits about two sheets, if you can fold them tight enough."

"So we're entrusting our correspondence to birds," Fenris said, eyeing Baron Plucky who seemed to watch him back with one beady eye. "A good call. I already trust him more than most people."
Chapter 78

Chapter Summary

Jowan & co. deliver the flowers. Kinnon's got a few more letters from the dead in his bag.

"Hey, I think I see it." Kinnon pointed up a hill, still a bit off. "It's some kind of ... shrine? Ruin? I can't tell from here, but it looks more like it than anything we've seen so far."

"Which means there's going to be demons, any moment," Niall groaned, his fingertips glowing faintly with a spell.

"It's just a shrine for a dead woman. It's not that exciting," Jowan argued, turning toward the hill. "Do you know it's just a shrine and not, say, a grave?" Niall asked, sounding a bit more irritated. "No, you don't know, and neither do I. The man said 'shrine', but he didn't say anything about what kind of shrine. Do you know what hangs around dead bodies?"

"Besides flies? Because I think we've seen enough of those recently." Jowan checked the map and looked around.

"Hey, at least you're not the one checking them for identifying objects." Kinnon huffed and folded his arms.

"Doesn't count," Jowan scoffed. "You have shields."

"I'm not Wynne. My shields don't keep the smell out!" Kinnon complained, jumping back with a shriek, as a fennec darted out of the brush next to him.

"Ah yes," Asha drawled, watching the fennec dart away, just as startled by Kinnon's shriek, "the fiercest of demons!"

"We're at a shrine in the middle of nowhere, with Jowan," Kinnon protested, smoothing out his robes and failing to preserve his dignity. "Being on your guard against demons is quite honestly the wise move."

Asha conceded the point, and Jowan gave up on any support from her either.

"It's just flowers!" he said in exasperation. "I'm not casting a spell or summoning anything, so can you all relax?"

"We're relaxed enough," Niall said, still holding onto that spell. "In fact, I think we should consider being relaxed in a more fanned-out position. Spread out, guys."

"Good thinking," said Kinnon, taking a few steps away from Asha and Niall.

With a disgruntled sound, Jowan stormed up the hill, the flowers wrapped in a damp cloth in one hand. Still, as he drew closer to the shrine, he slowed, taking the time to examine the engravings and read the text.
"This is really sweet," he said, gesturing to the words on the stone, as he slowly knelt, trying to ignore the creeping dread against the back of his neck. It was just the rest of them standing around like something was going to happen, he was sure, but it was with a hesitant hand that he brushed away the leaves and lowered the flowers into the hole obviously meant for them.

For a long moment, none of them moved, listening to the sound of the forest.

"See? I told you! It's just flowers. That old guy said he'd been doing it for years." Jowan rocked back onto his heels and stood, triumphant. "And now we can tell him nothing's happened to the shrine."

A small frog hopped up from the depths of the hole, disturbed by the sudden flowers, and croaked loudly.

"It's not a demon!" Jowan shrieked, even as he staggered back in surprise.

The others jumped back too, Kinnon all but climbing Niall to get away. When he realised it was just a frog, he climbed back down and straightened his clothes, his laugh just a shade too high to be anything but nervous. "Could have been!" Kinnon teased, playing it cool. "Those frog demons are deadly!"

"More or less deadly than fennec demons?" Niall drawled, drawing a scowl from Kinnon.

"Oh, shut up."

Jowan straightened, getting his breathing under control. He found himself looking around, checking, and Jowan realised he'd been expecting something to go wrong too. His expression soured as he dusted off his hands.

"It's such a nice day, yet." Asha looked supernaturally calm, like some sort of spirit of stillness. "There's actual sun and the smell of the trees. There's no demons, so far. I almost forgot how nice the world was -- I thought I knew, but then I came back."

"I forgot what outside was like, but that was way before I died," Niall admitted, quietly. "It's a little cold, isn't it?"

"It's just you," Asha told him, pulling the heavy bearskin cloak closer around him. "You know how it is when you get uneasy."

"It's nice away from all those people. Every one of them has dread just pouring out of them. The one who thinks he won't get to meet up with the woman he loves, the good dozen who think they're going to be force-marched to Tevinter and wish they hadn't been part of the deal, everyone's sick and tired and dripping with regret." Niall dimmed, thinking of it, the colour leaving his fingers.

"So, why don't we stay out here, for a while?" Asha shrugged at Jowan. "I'm sure we can find something to do, for a couple of days. There's a crisis, but no one can do anything about it, until the scouts come back."

Kinnon's hands fell to his bag. "Actually, I have some things we could look into. Missing people, weird spirit sightings... It's not all running around beating down demons."

"Weird spirit sightings?" Niall echoed, and Asha was relieved to hear a note of curiosity in his voice.

"Well, I mean aside from you," Kinnon teased, fishing about for his map. "You've already been sighted."
"Are you really in a position to imply someone else is weird?" Jowan asked.

"Never said I wasn't."

Asha rubbed Niall's hands between hers, as though by warming them up she could rub the colour back into them. It seemed to help, the grey pallor leaving his skin between the warmth of her fingers and the warmth of the sun. He soaked in the peacefulness of their little section of the world, and for now, that was enough.

Kinnon turned his map this way and that, catching his bearings.

Jowan brushed some of the leaves off the shrine, wondering if some day he'd be delivering flowers to his own... wife? No, that didn't make sense. But, someone who mattered just as much as the woman this shrine was for.

"Got one!" Kinnon flashed a page. "So, it sounds a little dumb, but Solona said there was another one like it, out past Ostagar. A spirit waiting for an offering. Except, you know, that one was a demon. So this one probably is, too, but it's a demon in a really pretty lake, and I bet after we get rid of it, we could camp there and enjoy the... well, the..." He shrugged. "I don't know. I went from the Tower to the blightlands. What do you do with a lake, besides fish in it?"

"Swim," Asha suggested, still holding Niall's hands. "Oh, that could be fun! And just one demon between us and swimming?"

"Sounds like a vacation," Jowan said with a crooked smile, pulling himself away from the shrine and from his thoughts. There had been lakes in the Fade, certainly, but they were about as real as the food they'd conjure when they were hungry. Or when they remembered the sensation of feeling hungry. The sun on his face was a grounding sort of real, as he suspected the water would be, and it would do Niall good. It would do them all good.

Fighting a demon -- or a few demons -- seemed a small enough price to pay.
Chapter 79

Chapter Summary

Appeasing a spirit with terrible aim. Or excellent aim, depending on one's view.

They stood on the shore of the lake, looking around, until Jowan spotted what might be some kind of shrine at the end of a short pier.

"I think that's it, over there," he said, picking his way across a wooden bridge that headed in the right direction. "It's got a banner and... I think that's a brazier?"

"Demons. I thought you were past this! I thought you said you were done summoning demons," Niall complained, tucking his hands under his arms and letting his cloak fall close around him.

"Well, it says in the story that it's supposed to be a spirit of Valor," Kinnon pointed out, and Jowan stopped so suddenly that Kinnon walked right into him.

"Well. That could be awkward." Niall cleared his throat and looked up at the sky. "Still, even if it was Valor, once, there's no saying what it is now."

Jowan let out a thin laugh. "I hope it's not Valor Valor. Especially if he's... no longer Valor."

"I'm sorry," said Kinnon, leaning to the side to look around him, "but what part of that was supposed to make sense?"

"We met a spirit of Valor," Asha explained, giving Jowan a not-so-subtle nudge forward. "He's hoping it's not that Valor. And that that Valor isn't a demon now."

"Thank you for translating," said Kinnon.

"It's what I do."

Jowan shuffled to the edge of the pier, where he found what looked like a golden bowl set at the edge. The water, at least, was pleasant, the way it reflected the sunlight, the breeze catching in his robes. He turned a blood lotus over in his hand -- the offering the demon supposedly favoured -- and glanced back, waiting for the others to signal that they were prepared.

"Is it wrong of me to hope this is something simple, like a rage demon?" Kinnon asked, peering into the water.

"I could do without another pride demon. Ever." Niall breathed into his hands, before realising that was making them colder. "Rage. I could probably handle a rage demon. Freeze it solid with my bare hands. Is it always this cold in Ferelden? I don't remember it being this cold!"

"It was warmer in the Tower," Kinnon assured him, still nervously eyeing every fish that flickered below the surface. "A good laugh will warm you up. Did I tell you what Anders was calling himself in Llomeryn?"

"Why do I have the worst feeling about this?" Niall asked, eyeing Kinnon suspiciously.
"Biggus Dickus!" Kinnon cackled. "Of the Dickus family of Carastes!"

Niall sighed and pressed a freezing hand over his eyes. "That... sounds exactly like something Anders would do," he said, admitting none of his own knowledge about what might compel Anders to such a choice.

Jowan gave up and crouched down to light the coals in the bowl, gently laying the blood lotus on top. "Here goes nothing..."

The water rippled, the barest shimmer that could have just been the breeze. Jowan held his breath, wiping the sweat from his palms, and tried to be reassured by the friends at his back as he weaved the beginnings of a spell, just in case. The rippling turned to bubbling and frothing, and Jowan had just started to stagger back when something erupted from the water -- two somethings, flying by to either side. Jowan ducked and shielded his face with his arms, the spray soaking through his sleeves, when he heard a metallic clunk and Kinnon shouting, "Ow!"

Jowan wheeled about, expecting to find Kinnon tangling with the demon, only to find the idiot flat on his ass and rubbing his head. Next to him in the dirt laid a greatsword he was pretty sure Kinnon hadn't brought with him.

"What the Blight?" Jowan hissed.

To the other side, Niall struggled with a loop of leather than had landed around his neck and fallen over one shoulder. "What is this thing?"

"Hey, that's my head, you watery tart!" Kinnon shouted at the lake, which remained unmoved.

"I'm not sure I'd have gone with 'tart', right there." Niall muttered, thinking of the clattering pile of armour he'd come to know as Valor, as he wrestled what turned out to be a belt out of where it had snagged on his cloak. "That's a pretty nice belt, though. Feels enchanted, but I couldn't tell you what kind."

Kinnon continued to mutter irritatedly, as he picked himself up, and Asha hefted the sword.

"That's lighter than I was expecting," she noted, peering at the hilt. "Ah, I see. That's strength, right there. It must make whoever picks it up strong enough to wield it. There's some other runes, but I don't think any of them will make you more talented with a sword."

Kinnon leaned in, still rubbing his head. "That one's strength of will, down the end, there."

Niall crouched to look at the other side of the sword. "Here's your 'talented with a sword'. Or, well, I don't think it matters what the weapon is. It just makes you more likely to hit what you're aiming at."

Asha turned it over to see what Niall was talking about. "Ah! It is! Which goes well with the strength of will." She nodded, as if the design made perfect sense. "Still, are any of us able to use it? Should we take it with us?"

Jowan held out his hand. "Well, I made the offering, so I guess it's my sword."

Asha eyed him doubtfully. "You know how to wield one of these?"

"Do you?"

Kinnon looked between Asha and Niall and ducked his head, not quite biting back a snicker.
Niall rolled his eyes. "Sword jokes? Really?"

Kinnon spread his hands innocently. "I didn't say a word."

"It's like I never left the tower," Niall grumbled as Asha handed over the sword without further protest. Despite the sour look on his face, though, Asha couldn't help but notice how human he looked in that moment, skin warmed by more than sunlight.

"So, swimming?" Asha suggested, looking between them. "Or are you afraid some moistened bint is going to throw a scimitar at you next, Kinnon?"

"It's a very real danger," Kinnon said with mock seriousness.
Chapter 80

Chapter Summary

Niall argues the benefit of resurrection. Asha and Jowan convince Kinnon to help.

"I really don't know about this one. Maybe we should just leave flowers." Kinnon flipped the letter back and forth in his fingers, making a fluttering sound. "This really sounds like we're going to end up with demons."

"Listen, I spent eleven years in the Fade," Niall began, thinking back to how he'd watched his body slip away, even as Solona fought to free them all. "If someone had a ritual to put me back in my body, I'd have... Well, no. Probably not. Not right at the start. The first... I don't even know how long. Weeks? Months? Years? It wasn't so bad. Finally, some peace and quiet. And no Templars. But, it gets old pretty quick. If Grandpa wants to come back, and it looks like he does, I'm the last person to stand in the way."

"We should see if we can speak to the spirit, first," Asha suggested, twisting Kinnon's wrist so she could read the letter. "That way we can be sure he still wants to do this. Of course, if we can't reach him, I'm sure the family knows what they're doing -- or at least what they're trying to do. I don't think I've ever seen this particular ritual before, but I haven't seen a lot of things -- resurrection among them."

"Having a spirit with us might make the... conversation easier," Jowan pointed out, indicating Niall with a tip of his chin. His hair was almost fully dried from their swim, curling a little at the ends. "And honestly, Kinnon, you've been moaning about 'demons' this entire trip!"

"Well, honestly, Jowan," Kinnon replied, mocking his tone, "that's a pretty fair assumption, considering you and considering the current demon to non-demon ratio in Ferelden, thanks to the Breach."

"Demons that come from rifts," Asha pointed out. "This is just a spirit waiting to be summoned. It'll be fine. Who knows, maybe he'll lob a suit of armour at you next to go with the sword!"

"Great," Kinnon grumbled.

"So what are the instructions, again?" Jowan asked, crowding Kinnon from the opposite side, twisting Kinnon's wrist back the other way so he could read too. "Three times around the crowned statue... and where is --? Ah!" He spotted the appropriate statue, dragging Kinnon over with him.

"This is a terrible idea," Kinnon insisted, stepping back to try to find the actual grave, before one of them got grabbed by a rising arcane horror or something.

"Touch your right hand to the statue," Jowan recited as he edged into place. "And walk around it in a circle, three times."

As he turned the first circle, they all stood watch for demons, Asha calling out to the local spirits to see if any would answer. What no one had counted on, though, was the sudden appearance of an enormous bear, which reared up onto its hind legs and roared, towering above even the statue.
Jowan froze, unwilling to take his hand off the statue or step away.

Kinnon let out a blood-curdling shriek and leapt into Asha's arms, before calling on his magic and pulling part of the hill down on the bear.

"I don't think that's anyone's grandfather!" Asha said, a shield rippling to life around her -- around them -- as though unbidden.

The bear staggered out of the pile of rocks and dirt Kinnon had dumped it under, shaking its furry head in confusion. Jowan stepped forward with a roar of his own, wavering about his new sword as he summoned fire along its blade, and the bear stumbled back in bewilderment. When more rock came flying at its face, it continued its retreat, growling at the indignity.

"See?" Asha said brightly as they watched it flee. "No demons. Just a bear."

"Bear demon," Kinnon muttered, only then remembering that Asha was still holding him. He flailed like a wet cat, scrambling back to his feet.

"I want you to know," said Asha, "that I am going to tell your Templar friend about every second of that. Minus the magic, of course."

"Shit," Jowan murmured. "I stopped the ritual. Do I just start again at the beginning?"

"I'd do it for you, but I think you might actually have to be alive." Niall gestured at himself and sighed.

Jowan started again, this time with Kinnon watching for bears. "Once," he counted, coming back to where he started. "Twice. And..."

"Oh, no." Asha inhaled sharply.

"What?" Jowan asked, as his last step landed, and the corpse's hands began to push out of the ground. "Does anyone have a healing potion? Will it help? I mean, you're not dead if you've got a body and a spirit together, right?"

"You should ask Anders about that, when we get back to town. He's got some personal experience, there." Kinnon shook his head and stepped aside, still more concerned about bears than the corpse.

"That's not grandpa," Asha cut in. "Or if it is, we got here too late."

"Give the guy a minute." Jowan waved a hand, dismissively. "You know it took Niall a bit to adapt."

The corpse clawed its way to the surface, its jaw hanging at an angle around an inhuman hissing sound, and it stared at them with red, glowing eyes that didn't blink.

"Has it been a minute yet?" Asha asked tightly, knuckles white on her staff.

"Hello?" Jowan tried. "I hear you're someone's Grandpa..." It just shuffled towards him on bony, rotted feet, and Jowan suspected it wasn't coming closer to give him a hug. He gave Niall a nudge. "You're a spirit too! Say something!"

"Like what?" Niall shot back. "'Lovely weather we're having'?"

"Whatever! Just say it!"
"I don't think it cares about the weather!" Asha hissed.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Jowan staggered back, snatchning at the sword and wishing he still had a staff. But, this was just a demon. And what did one do when confronted with demons? He grabbed at the fabric of the world, trying to wrench it apart.

Kinnon stared blankly, for a moment, before reaching for a spell that wouldn't quite come to his fingers. "What are you even doing?"

The world around them all rippled and suddenly the corpse jerked back to the edge of the grave hard enough to splinter bone.

"What the fuck?" Niall blinked, stunned. "You can't go ripping holes in the Fade, Jowan. We're not in the Fade."

Jowan shook his hands out like he'd slammed them in something. "Still worked, didn't it? Not what I meant, but I can't argue with the results."

Kinnon dumped some earth on top of the broken corpse for good measure, reburying it, in case it got any other ideas. "Once again, this is why we burn the dead instead of burying them. Also, I would just like to point out that I called it." He was only half turned towards them, still squinting into the trees in case of bears.

"'Called it'?" Asha prompted.

"That there'd be demons involved."

"You've been saying that about every stop!" Jowan protested.

"And I was bound to be right at least once! And I just was!"

"Try not to get too used to the feeling," Jowan replied.

"Still, we should probably burn the thing," Niall pointed out, as Kinnon got ready to pound down the earth and add more to the grave. "Burying it only makes it someone else's problem."

"Isn't that going to let the demon out?" Jowan asked, nervously.

"No, he's right," Asha confirmed, nodding. "The demon should return to the Fade, if you destroy the host."

Jowan waved Kinnon toward the grave. "Well, dig it up!"

"What, so you can burn down the forest?" Kinnon huffed. "You couldn't aim well enough to pass your Elementals."

"You're older than me, and you were still an apprentice, when I left! Did you even have your Harrowing?" Jowan shot back, hefting the sword and resting it on his shoulder.

"Unlike you, yes, I did." The corpse burst up out of the grave in a shower of dirt, landing in a tangle of meat and bone at Jowan's feet.

"I spent three years in the Fade, fighting demons. I think that counts." Jowan tried to remember how fire felt on his fingers, outside the Fade.

"I spent eleven years in the Fade, and I've been Harrowed," Niall pointed out, "and I'm pretty sure
Jowan's right, this time. That said, I'm still not sure he could aim well enough to pass his Elementals."

"Oh, fuck you," Jowan sighed, calling the fire into his hand and flicking it toward the corpse.

Fire engulfed it, setting it and some of the grass around it alight. Jowan held his breath as the corpse burned, partly to avoid the stench, partly out of fear that the fire would spread.

"Should we, I don't know, say a few words or something?" Kinnon asked, voice tight from the smell.

"Unless those words are 'sorry we woke you up'," Jowan said, "I'm not really sure what to say."

When the remains had burned to ash and before the fire could spread to the trees, Kinnon dumped more earth on the scene, dousing the flames. Niall looked a bit greyer than he had by the lake, but his shape was still human.

"So what's next?" Asha asked.
Chapter 81

Chapter Summary

The man who hears the Stone calling is found.

"I hope Jan's going to be all right," Cormac said for the hundredth time, glancing back toward the crossroads, again, as they climbed further into the hills.

"He is fine," Peryn assured him. "Just as Kinnon is fine. They are both in town with many people, not out with bears, like we are. You have left him with the elves. They are helping people."

"Not all the elves," Fenris reminded them. He'd been feeling much more himself, since Anders had arrived, the healing and salves relieving much of the pain and stiffness he'd been having. Perhaps that was how things would be, now. Maybe he really just needed to hire a healer to return to Kirkwall with them, from among the multitude of mages in Redcliffe. The thought wasn't nearly as appalling as it might have been, just a few years earlier.

"Are you really sure you want to do this?" Cormac asked Fenris, with a look of concern.

Fenris nodded, firmly, as if reassuring himself. "If the stone is speaking, I will hear it. If it's demons..." He smiled grimly. "We can do demons."

"You must have fought many demons, since the sky opened," Peryn remarked, looking a bit impressed.

"I fought more demons before the sky opened." Fenris laughed and slid an arm around Artemis's waist. "We live in Kirkwall. You can't piss without hitting a demon. At least, not if you're the Viscount."

"I'm pretty sure that's just Anton, and nothing to do with the office." Cormac chuckled, before explaining to Peryn. "Anton's not allowed to pee on things any more. Possibly including ancient latrines, after that letter from Bethy. Did he really summon toilet demons?"

"Aveline says it is so, and you know Aveline." Fenris shrugged, obviously amused.

"She does not seem the type to exaggerate about toilet demons," Artemis said, slipping an arm around Fenris in return. "Anton? Yes. Aveline? No."

He was a little concerned about leaving the healer behind with Fenris in the state he was in, but at the moment, Fenris seemed almost back to his normal self, walking and smiling without the stiffness of pain underneath.

"Toilet... demons?" Peryn echoed, wearing that innocently blank look that said he was having trouble with translation.

Fenris laughed. "It is exactly what it sounds like. According to Aveline, Anton tried to use an ancient latrine, only for a demon to jump out of it and attack."

"Nothing is safe any more," Artemis said with mock seriousness.
He felt Fenris shrug under his arm. "Only if you're Anton."

"I didn't think it was that cold," Cormac said, pointing up a hill beside them, to where what looked like an old mine sealed off with ice.

"It's not," Fenris replied, catching on to the line of thought. "You expect mages?"

"I wasn't expecting anyone, but if there's some more mages out here, we should let them know what's going on. Maybe they've found our missing stone guy." Cormac shrugged and made his way up the hill.

"It seems very solid," Peryn pointed out, as they got closer. "Is anyone going to be able to hear us through that?"

"I can melt just a small hole and we can shout through it," Cormac suggested.

"And you should not stand right in front of it, because anyone with this much energy to spend locking themselves in probably does not want to be disturbed." Fenris tapped at the ice.

"It's probably runework," Cormac decided, sighing as he realised how much work it would be to cut through it. Still, he set to work melting the edge of the ice where it met the door of the mine entrance. "I hope whoever's in there is all right. ... I also hope we're not about to open a tunnel full of darkspawn."

"Just don't pee on it, or we'll end up with demons," Artemis replied. He watched Cormac at work, the edge of the ice thinning, water trickling into a puddle at the barrier's base. "In fact, don't pee on it, demons or no. I doubt that will endear us to whoever's on the other side."

"It certainly would not endear you to me," Fenris drawled, flexing his fingers. Not so long ago, he would have volunteered to step through the barrier or at least peek through it, but he wasn't about to risk it.

Artemis hummed, standing to the side a bit, ready to conjure up a shield of stone if something less than friendly poked through the ice.

"Hello?" Cormac called through the sliver of space between the ice and the wooden frame. "Is everyone all right in there?"

"Get away!" an irate voice echoed from somewhere inside. "You can't keep cutting away at the stone! You can't keep breaking the memories! The Stone is angry! Can't you hear it?"

"The Stone doesn't talk to me. I thought it only talked to dwarves," Cormac replied, trying to keep the hole open, but not place himself in front of it. "But, we're not here about the Stone. We were just hiking, here, and we saw the ice. Wanted to make sure nobody was trapped!"

"I put the ice there! Me! To keep you out!" the voice raged. "You're all the same! You've come to break apart the memories!"

"Memories?" Fenris murmured. "As in dwarven Memories? Those are written in stone... I remember Varric talking about it."

Peryn waved Cormac back, coming up on the other side of the hole. "You speak to the stones? I wish I could hear them. Do they remember good stories for you?"

There was something soothing about Peryn's voice, something calming and believable, and there was
a pause before the voice inside made another sound. It let out a sigh, stone and ice almost making it sound like a hiss.

"I remember..." the voice started. "They remember... The memories are broken." The voice was tight with frustration, its owner speaking more to himself than to them, but at least some of his rage had cooled.

"My memory is not perfect, either," Peryn said in that gentle way of his, and Artie could imagine him using that voice on scared young mages. "But, you will tell me the pieces you know? Do you have a name?"

"Somewhere," came the distant reply.

"I wonder how long he's been in there," Artemis muttered.

"Too long, I suspect," Fenris rumbled in reply.

"Is anyone else with you?" Cormac asked, quietly, and for a moment, he wondered if he'd been too quiet.

"Not alive," the voice finally replied. "There's a dwarf, but I think he got in a fight with the Stone. I put ice on him, for the smell."

"A fight?" Fenris looked confused. "It's a rock."

Peryn shrugged, equally clueless.

"You think he got in a fight with the Stone?" Cormac tried not to sound as baffled as everyone else looked. "What makes you think that?"

"The broken memories have long claws. They're angry, because they don't remember. If you saw him, you'd know." The voice sounded very sure of itself. "But, you can't see him. He's here. All the way in the back, under the ice."

"Do you have food to eat?" Peryn asked, as he spotted a ram, nibbling grass and watching them with some small concern. "We can get you something.

"Clement!" the voice exclaimed, as if finally remembering something. "I'm called Clement!"

A strange sound followed that raised the hair on the back of Cormac's neck.

"But, don't call me that, or I can't hear the memories any more..." The voice seemed saddened by this realisation.

"He's barely human, any more," Artemis murmured. "Assuming he was human, that is. Maybe barely an elf."

Fenris threw him a wry look. Peryn tried to peer through the chink in the ice but saw only stone and shadow before stepping back out of the way again.

"Do you have food to eat?" Peryn asked again, a bit more insistently.

"The Stone does not eat," Clement said, voice faint.

"Perhaps the Stone speaks to you," Fenris called out, "but you are not a part of it. You still require food to live." To Peryn, he added, "I suspect that is answer enough to your question."
Peryn frowned and nodded. "It is good that we found him."

Cormac turned and raised a hand, a spell clinging to his fingers, and then he blinked. "No, Cormac, you can not give the man a brick of meat." Laughing, he shook off the spell and switched to lightning, like Candles had been teaching him to hunt.

The ram collapsed under the first strike, and after a tense moment, fell dead.

Peryn stared owlishly at the whole procedure. "I would say you must teach me this, but I think it would not work for me."

Fenris patted his back, sympathetically. "You'll never be a mage, but you'll also never be three-quarters *fur.*"

"When you're feeling better, Fenris, I'm going to punch you in the crotch so hard my brother's going to whine about it for a week." Cormac rolled his eyes, then gestured at the ram. "Can you take care of that, Peryn? I'm going to see if I can get a hole closer to the bottom that we can pass cuts of meat through."

"You should cook them, first," Fenris suggested, prying the rivets out of a fairly dry wooden bucket. "I do not think Not-Clement is well enough to think of it."

Peryn nodded, stepping away from his post by the ice. "That is wise, yes."

While Peryn skinned and gutted the ram, Fenris and Artemis took care of setting up a fire. Some overturned mining carts provided ample wood after Artemis flattened them into the ground, breaking them into manageable pieces, and a quick spell set them alight. Clement, at least, no longer seemed to mind their presence just outside the mine or at least had taken to ignoring them. Fenris still kept his ears pricked for sounds of movement, in case the man proved to be more of a threat than he sounded.

"Will you tell me a story from the memories?" Peryn asked, leaning beside the hole, while Cormac cooked.

"Do you know where you are?" Clement asked, pausing as if he expected an answer.

"In the Hinterlands of Ferelden," Peryn said, with a quick glance at Mack. "I feel like I am not saying it right."

"You are," Cormac assured him, prodding at the meat.

"This is much more! These were the lands of Luthias Dwarfson! The Ash Warriors held this valley and protected this place!" Clement's excitement at the history spurred other strange noises from beyond the ice. "Gelgenig the Faithful had his vision of Andraste right where I stand! Korth the Mountain-Father's hands shaped this stone in a time before the Avvar lived in the mountains!"

"And the stones tell you all these tales?" Peryn asked with genuine awe in his voice.

"Not the 'stones'," Clement called back. "The Stone." The way his voice weighted the word made it into a capital 's'.

"Will you tell me one?" Peryn asked again. Behind him, the fire crackled, the smell of cooking meat wafting through the air, and Peryn wondered if Clement could smell it. "What was that first one? A... dwarfson?"

"Luthias Dwarfson," Clement corrected, again with that feverish excitement. He broke into story-
telling mode, then, the words seeming to pour out of him, like he couldn't stop them even if he tried.

Fenris crept up the hill to hear better, as Clement's voice didn't carry far beyond the hole in the ice. The tale was one of those classic Alamarri epics -- bravery, love, betrayal, and everyone dies at the end -- but he hadn't heard it before, and he certainly hadn't heard any Alamarri stories in their ancient forms. It occurred to him to wonder if this was just a dwarven thing, if they'd taught it to the Alamarri, here, or if anyone could record memories like this. Certainly the Bone Pit had the last memories of the slaves sacrificed to it, but those were fragments, terrors, not whole stories.

"That is a very sad tale," Peryn said, at the end of it. "But, you must want water, after such a long tale. And meat! Let us bring you some."

"It smells like mutton," Clement said, wistfully, and the sound like an angry wind swelled again. "I will give you new memories!" He argued with something that couldn't be seen through the ice. "You have no memory of mutton!"
Chapter 82

Chapter Summary

The spirits of the Stone have little desire to release their interpreter.

Peryn waited a moment, hoped this wouldn't all turn into another sad tale for the Stone to remember. When Clement didn't yell at them to go away, Peryn picked up a scrap of wood that hadn't made it into the fire and used it as a makeshift 'plate', setting a piece of meat upon it before sliding it under the thin opening Cormac had made in the ice.

They waited and listened, but the sound of feet dragging along the ground could have been anything. The time dragged on, but then next time they heard Clement speak, his voice was considerably closer.

"Thank you," he said, voice ragged from dehydration.

"You can't stay alone like this," Cormac warned Clement, coming back up with a piece of mutton for Fenris. "Maybe it upsets the Stone that you're alive, but you'd have to be alive for it to share the Memories. At the very least, someone in the village should know you're up here, so they can make sure you get food."

"Did we not meet a storyteller, in Redcliffe?" Fenris asked, after a moment. "I think she'd be very interested to hear these stories, and she would also have no reason to harm the Stone."

"It's true, she'd be a good choice. Cormac raised his voice so Clement could hear, even if he didn't speak straight to the hole in the ice. "The concern seems to be the miners. They want drakestone, but I grew up around here, and there's drakestone everywhere. It shouldn't be hard to convince them to mine somewhere else, especially if Jan can convince his business partner to invest in a new mine. It looks good, too. Material aid to war-torn rural Ferelden."

"His 'business partner'?" Fenris's eyebrows arced up.

"The one who owns half of the Bone Pit?" Cormac fluttered his eyelashes at Fenris.

"Isn't that--"

"The Viscount, yes." Cormac nodded slowly.

"Ah, yes. The Viscount. How could I forget that ... 'business arrangement'." Fenris offered a long-suffering look.

"You would help us?" Clement asked, the words distorted by chewing. "Would they really move the mine?"

"It's a sacred shrine of the Alamarri people," Cormac proclaimed, gesturing as if setting the idea before the local miners. "Clearly dedicated to the memory of great warriors and philosophers! And due to misuse, the spirits have become angry!" He paused. "Of course they'll move the mine. No one wants angry spirits in their mine, or to disrespect the memories of their ancestors. You must have seen all the statues in the hills."
"And all the demons wandering the hills," Artemis muttered, "to speak of 'angry spirits'. No one wants to deal with more of that."

"Those before you did not care," Clement said between bites of food. "Those before you did not listen."

"But we are listening," Peryn reminded him gently.

A long pause followed, and Peryn imagined he could hear Clement chewing over their words as well as the meat. There was that strange sound again, like claws scraping over stone.

"The Stone is still angry," Clement said, speaking slowly as though translating the words, "but perhaps that will give it a chance to heal. I cannot protect you from its rage in the meantime, however."

Fenris found that ominous, and, for the moment, he found himself grateful for the wall of ice blocking them off.

"Do we want to go back and gets Sings-to-Demons, before we go any further?" Cormac muttered to Fenris.

"This seems like a problem better addressed by a dwarf," Fenris replied, "and you are not travelling with any."

"Up to you, then!" Cormac clapped Fenris on the back. "As the dwarfiest elf ever to walk the face of Thedas..."

Fenris made a disgruntled sound.

"We've got a man with us who can hear the Stone," Cormac called to Clement. "Maybe he can calm it!"

"Dwarf?" Clement asked, amid sounds of running water, his voice sounding clearer than it had since they arrived.

"I am not." Fenris raised his voice, to be heard. "But... the Stone and I are very close. It is... part of me."

Peryn's eyes landed on the curve of lyrium on Fenris's chin, the only spot it wasn't covered by the mountain of furs the elf wore. Not that he could blame the man. Ferelden was much too cold to live in for any length of time. He was very sure of that, and even less sure than usual why Tevinter had once invaded this frozen wasteland. Perhaps it was nicer in summer.

"A part of you?" Clement repeated, sounding more curious than confused.

Fenris's lips twisted in an unfriendly smile. "In a rather literal sense."

"Like the Templars who passed near here recently?" Clement asked. "The Stone's pain twists them, changes them."

"I am no Templar," Fenris assured him. He flexed his fingers, barely noticing the ache in them any more. "And this is... different."

"Different..." Clement sounded like he didn't even realise he was speaking. "Perhaps... perhaps it will listen." As his voice faded, so too did the barrier, ice melting away into nothing.
"Thank you," Peryn said, squinting as he tried to peer into the dark. Shadows moved and danced along the tunnel, the creeping chill up Peryn's spine his own warning before a tearing screech told them Clement wasn't alone.

Fenris drew his sword and lunged past Clement, recognising the sounds from the less-pleasant corners of Kirkwall. But, as he pressed forward, blinded in the sudden darkness, he could feel the lyrium traces in his fingers warming. Shattered fragments of celebrations, rituals, and battle flowed through him, light pouring out of the few gaps in his heavy winter clothing.

Cormac was quick behind him, throwing Fenris back, with one hand, as the ancient Tevinter sword the elf held clattered to the ground.

"Korth! Bless this place! Grant us favour!" Fenris cried out, uncertain where the words had come from or what effect they should have.

Deeper into the cave, the gleam of Cormac's shields provided some small amount of light, as he fended off a pair of shades, their talons clinking and squealing along the metal shaft of his glaive. With Fenris obviously out, the shades were his problem, unless... "Peryn? A little help?"

Peryn was already on his way... but so was Artemis, darting into the cave after his husband. Fear squeezed his lungs when he heard Fenris's sword clatter to the ground, when he saw Fenris standing defenceless in front of a shade, its claw-like hands reaching for him. A shield rippled to life around him as he snatched up Fenris's sword, a sharp swing connecting with the shade. Smoke wafted from the wound in place of blood, and the creature let out another jarring screech as it darted back.

"Fenris?" Artie called over his shoulder, standing in front of him with his sword at the ready, eyes glued to the shade in front of him. Fenris was too lost inside broken memories to hear him.

"Clement? Stand by the glowing elf!" Cormac called back, unable to look away from the shades, and unwilling to use any spells that might hit the walls and further upset the Stone, if these shades were the consequence. After a moment's pause, he brought up a barrier, shielding Clement and Fenris from anything that might get past him.

As Cormac cleaved a shade, ice clinging to the blade of his glaive, Peryn lunged in beside him, striking the taloned fingers off another.

"We could end this quickly. They are only shades. I am trained for--"

"Don't." Cormac's voice was just strong enough to ring back off the walls. "If we hit the walls, we might end up with more of them. I don't think he's confused about the Stone, and if he's right, we'll end up ass-deep in demons."

One and then another, two shades went up in smoke, struck down with steel.

In the pause, Peryn finally got a good look at Artemis, limned in rippling magic, the runes on the ancient blade in his hands glowing gently. Tevinter-trained, he thought, which made sense in light of the husband's origins. But, the real wars with Tevinter had happened centuries before he was born, and he'd never seen one of their warriors in combat. Still, he told himself, a good hard Smite would make most of the difference, if it came to that.

Artemis looked around, sword tight in his hand, but the shadows were still again. He finally got a good look at Clement, at his hollowed cheeks and shadowed eyes, at the slim body and graceful sweep of his ears that made him an elf. He did not seem to be reaching for a spell or to have any desire to attack, but when Artemis went to check up on his husband, he put himself subtly between
Fenris and Clement.
"Fen, you all right?" Artie asked, looking in to his dazed eyes. He went to touch his arm only to still, forgetting he'd wrapped a shield around himself and caught off-guard by the rippling energy over his skin. He shook his hand as he dispelled the shield, as though trying to wake up a limb that had fallen asleep. "You know, glowing is weird. I'm just now starting to appreciate that."

"What hit you?" Cormac asked, with a gentle hand on his brother's shoulder, a flicker of familiar energy catching the corner of his attention. "Are you all right? You don't usually glow."

Artie blinked, brushing aside his brother's hand, though the magic carried a pleasant tingle. "What? Nothing. Something tried to hit him, though." He gestured at Fenris.

Fenris spoke again, still lost in the dreams and memories pouring off the walls. "Korth will protect us, as he always has. He will give us shelter, as he sheltered those before us. As he still shelters Andraste."

Clement seemed much clearer than he had, the memories lighter on him. "He really can hear them, can't he. I thought it was just me."

"He hears a lot of things," Cormac said, absently, still looking at his brother. "Artie, when did you start glowing? I don't remember you glowing."

"It's just my sunny disposition," Artie drawled. He laid a hand on Fenris's arm now that he was no longer glowing, concern furrowing his brow. Still focused on Fenris, he went on, "It's... a long story, and Theron would be much better at telling it. Rhyming and everything." He paused, as though expecting Fenris to break in with a derisive comment or at least an eyeroll, but Fenris still wasn't there with them. "Long story short: elfy ruins, found an ancient elf who wanted to impart his secrets. Tada, I can swing swords and glow!" He threw Cormac a beaming smile.

"Maker's brazen asshole, are you serious? We're... having a talk about that. Later. When your stabby elf is feeling a little more stabby and a little less like one of the Disciples." Cormac crouched, folding Fenris over his shoulder as he stood. "Right now, we're going outside."

"To these halls came Willem Halfear, who brought the tribes of Ferelden together in a way Calenhad alone could never have done! He came from deep in the eastern wood, as you have done, and placed his faith in the teachings of Andraste. From the Ash Warriors he arose, and to them he returned!" Fenris proclaimed, as Cormac carried him out.

"You are truly a mage, then?" Peryn asked Artemis. "Did you not once ask me what mages were like? If they were dangerous and scary? How do they say it in Ferelden? 'I think you are a bit of a shit'?"

"I've been telling him that since we were kids. Hasn't made the slightest difference," Cormac teased, setting Fenris down beside the remains of the fire.
Artie threw a rude gesture at Cormac's back and offered Peryn a weak laugh. "In fairness, I was trying throw you off the scent. What better way to do that than to pretend I knew nothing about mages? And I don't know if you've noticed, but certain Hawke mages can be scary. Particularly mages named Mack, after they've eaten cabbage salad."

"'Scary' is the word?" Peryn asked dubiously, the barest twitch of a grin saying he was joking.

"It's a word," Artemis amended with a shrug. "Among other words beginning with 's'."

Clement watched them all vacantly, seeming to glide as he stepped towards the mouth of the cave, squinting into the sunlight.

"Cabbage salad is spectacular. Superb, even," Cormac argued, pulling a salve out of his bag and rubbing a bit on Fenris's chin.

"Stench," Fenris muttered, swatting Cormac's hand away, "being what comes from you, when you eat it." He grabbed the salve and sniffed it. "This isn't the healing salve."

"Spirit balm," Cormac said, offering Fenris the lid. "It helps keep the spirits out of your head."

"Why...?"

"Everything's covered in demons. Jan thought I should take some, just in case." Cormac shrugged and waved Clement over. "Come down and get some more meat! You've got ice; it'll keep for a long time!"

Clement wafted down the hill, eyes nearly closed, as he followed Cormac's voice. "They went back to the Stone," he murmured, barely audible above the crackle of the fire. "When you killed the broken Memories, they went back to the Stone."

"Where they should stay," Fenris grumbled, rubbing more of the salve up under the fur edge of his hat.

"Yes," Clement agreed, his voice seeming to fade along with the spirits. Peryn gently steered him over to a flat rock by the fire, which Clement sank onto. The firelight deepened the shadows along his face, sharpening the hunger-chewed edges of his cheekbones. When he spoke again, it was with more strength. "As long as they are not disturbed, it is where they will stay."

Artemis glanced back at the entry to the mine. "We should probably close it off." He turned to Cormac for confirmation, a spell already half-formed.

"No!" Clement argued. "What if someone boarded up the Chantry in Redcliffe? It's the same thing!"

Cormac choked on a laugh. "More than you know. There were demons in the Chantry, the other day."

"What do you suggest?" Fenris asked, a faint remembrance stirring in the back of his mind. "The Memories called you from your home, didn't they? You're afraid if we seal it up, they'll do it again, but you won't be able to get in to make it stop."

Clement nodded. "Getting in doesn't really make it stop. It just makes it different. It's like being driven, being chased, and then... everything opens up like falling. But, it's never going to stop calling if someone isn't here."

"It is not safe for you," Peryn reminded him. "How long have you been not eating?"
"There are stories, in Tevinter, of people who consult with the spirits. Some of them are said to live near sacred caves where the Old Gods still speak." Fenris hummed, thoughtfully. "I have never met one of them, but it is said they only consult with the spirits a few hours at a time. Perhaps if you had someone with you, they might be able to make sure you come back out."

Artemis let the spell fizzle out, not sure he liked the idea of keeping the mine open but knowing that wasn't up to him. "Would one person giving a few hours every now and then be enough?" he asked, eyeing the open entrance. "The last thing we need is for someone else to get pulled in like you did because there's no one around."

"Eat," Peryn entreated Clement, cutting off a slice of meat and handing it to Clement, who ate it gratefully.

Clement took his time chewing before responding. "I do not know," he said, eye glazing as he tried to reach out for the Stone again. "But the Stone longs to be heard. Perhaps that is enough?"

"If someone is here to check on him, to lead him back out, should he not be just as well as he is now?" Fenris asked, shrugging.

"Okay, new plan. We need a door on that cave -- which it has -- and a house a bit down the hill." Cormac nodded slowly to himself. "And we need a volunteer or two from the village. Other mages, maybe? Trustworthy Templars? Someone's got to be interested enough in the tales to keep track of the one person who can bring them back out of the stone."

"I would not know who to trust, with all the fighting," Peryn sighed, putting another piece of meat in Clement's hands.

"So, first, we'll fix it up, so no one gets in by accident," Cormac decided, cutting a slice for himself. "And we can put in a little house. And then we bring Clement back to Redcliffe with us, or at least to the Crossroads, so he can find someone he likes. What do you think, Artie? Can you do it? Ki-- That is, I've seen mages do some great things with stone, and you've done this before."

"A door? I suppose I could."

It would take a bit more finesse than simply blocking off the entrance would have needed. A year or two ago, he would have expected disaster. A part of him still expected disaster, but after spending so much time practising his stone shaping, Artemis thought that, maybe, he could be wrong. "But, Clement, after you've eaten and rested, you're going to need to tell us what you want, if you want to be tending to these... spirits, this Stone, whatever, for potentially a very long time."

It felt like another kind of servitude for him, even if Clement had come here more or less on his own. He doubted the elf had any idea what he had been walking into.

Rather than respond, Clement had that glazed look again that said he was trying to reach the Stone, and in that space of time, Artemis started casting. It took some work and much frustration, overestimating then underestimating the stone's malleability, but he eventually drew the stone together in something that could pass as a door. And worked like a door, thankfully, if an unwieldy one.

Cormac gave the door a few swings. "Well, nobody's going to open that by accident," he laughed, turning back to Clement. "Have you any objections from the Stone we've just moved?"

"It is confused. I'm trying to show that this is how to keep people from breaking any more memories." Clement spoke slowly, as if it took an enormous amount of concentration to make words. "It would like very much if I stayed. The Stone needs a voice, companions. It has been alone too
long -- look, the Memories stop. And then here are mine."

Fenris watched the man gesture as if the rest of them could see. "Come to the village, with us, and we'll make sure you bring more companions, if this is what you want to do."

"I never dreamed of knowing so much, of doing so much!" Clement's eyes gleamed, even as they wouldn't quite focus. "I have been all of these people! So many battles! So many wonders!"

"Let's put the house further down the hill, shall we?" Cormac offered his brother a lopsided smile and a thick slab of meat.
Chapter Summary

A night in the woods. Sometimes the noises aren't just forest creatures.

The only thing louder than the dragon's -- the archdemon's -- screech was the sound of her pulse in her ears, the clamour of darkspawn a background roar. If she was screaming, she couldn't tell, and she couldn't move, the glow of torchlight seeming to surround her, until all she could see were flames, until all she could feel were flames. And when she snapped awake, sweaty blanket clinging to her, Sigrun realised that she was, in fact, screaming.

"Shit," she hissed, pushing back the tangle of hair that had fallen out of its tie in the course of all her tossing and turning.

"I think there was one or two people who didn't hear that," Velanna said, tone crisp in a way that said she'd been awake for some time, "if you want to try that again a bit louder."

"The Archdemon--" Sigrun started, reaching for her armour, before she realised where she was and how long it had been since the last Blight. "There's no way, right? It's barely been ten years. We're still in Ferelden -- what are the chances?"

"Very small," Velanna assured her.

"Okay, but what the fuck?" Junar cut in. "Seriously. I thought there were demons. I was out in the woods keeping watch for more bears and giant spiders, and then I heard screaming."

"Nightmares." Sigrun waved a hand, blearily. "It's some kind of Warden thing. It's supposed to tell us when we're near darkspawn, but... We've been checking. We're not near darkspawn."

"It's the Commander's insane experiments," Velanna huffed, putting her canteen in Sigrun's hands. "She's trying to cure the Taint, without leaving us defenceless against the darkspawn. It's all blood magic, to me."

"She's trying to cure the taint in darkspawn, too," Sigrun muttered, after a moment, wiping water off her chin. "That's why Captain Freakshow is working with her. Enchanter Creepy is working on the Warden angle. She's convinced -- they all are -- that they can stop the Blight forever, but... sometimes the tests don't help."

"I'm not really sure what you ladies are talking about," Junar said, "but I'm not feeling very reassured." He darted a look behind him into the woods as though expecting more of those 'red things' to pop out at them. The night had gone almost too still after Sigrun's screams had stopped ringing in his ears.

"Warden business," Velanna said with a withering look that said he wasn't to repeat any of that. "And you shouldn't feel reassured."

"I dunno," Sigrun said. "At least Solona's trying something."

"It might make things worse."
"It might make things better." Sigrun paused to take another swig of water, gulping noisily but feeling more alive after. It was hard to think the word 'better' when there was still sweat cooling her skin after that nightmare. "I mean, someone has to do something. Right?" She looked to Junar for support.

"Sure," Junar said, not sounding sure at all.

"Wait, if you cure the taint, do the darkspawn just... what happens to the darkspawn?" Murray still looked rumpled and red-eyed from sleep.

"There's a partial cu--" Sigrun started, but Velanna cut her off.

"You can't tell them that!"

"The Messenger was standing in the middle of the City of Amaranthine. I don't think it's exactly a secret," Sigrun argued, twisting the blanket around her as she sat up. "There's a partial cure -- they can't hear the... archdemon, any more. And they're just... really ugly people who don't know how to act in public. Problem is, it's only a partial cure, so they still spread the taint."

Murray stared at her, blinking some as though trying to figure out if he had dreamed that answer. "There's... seriously? Partially-cured darkspawn?"

Sigrun shrugged. "I mean, I wouldn't recommend shaking their hand or anything. But if that's possible, who knows?"

"I suspect there were seven mages who once asked a similar question before walking into the Fade," Velanna muttered.

Sigrun gave her an unimpressed look.

The snap of a tree branch caught Junar's ear, and he looked back over his shoulder, into the woods. He told himself it was just the talk of darkspawn and the archdemon that had him on edge.

Murray followed the look and shrugged. "It's probably just some small woodland creature that pissed itself when Sigrun screamed."

"So Gilroy, in other words," Sigrun drawled.

"Screw you," Gilroy muttered, pulling his blanket over his head.

"The last time I checked, small woodland creatures didn't reflect red when struck by firelight." Natia pulled her gear closer, buckling on a belt full of grenades, as she glanced at Junar. "You going to tell me what that is, Dalish Wonder, or are we going to find out the hard way?"

Junar nocked an arrow. "Hard way. I've never seen anything like it."

Outside the partial shelter of their portico, an unearthly sound of agony and rage tore through the night, far closer than anyone was comfortable with.

"Ancestors... I hope I didn't sound that bad." Sigrun smiled weakly, sighing as she got up and checked all her daggers. "Time to go put something out of its misery. I wonder if it's tainted... I've heard the change isn't any more pleasant for anything else than it is for us, but that would mean we have a taint problem to deal with, before you can move anyone in here."

"That's just what we need," Natia muttered. She shook Sheena awake, wondering how the Blight the
woman had managed to sleep through all that.

"Just keep your distance," Velanna said, rising smoothly to her feet and gathering up her staff in one motion. She followed Sigrun, the Wardens keeping themselves between the portico and the glow of red filtered through the trees. "If whatever it is is tainted, you don't want to be near it."

"We're mages," Gilroy reminded her. "We generally don't want to be too near what Sheena is aiming at."

"Excuse me," Sheena huffed, still rubbing the sleep from her eyes and looking a little confused. Still, she had her staff in hand, ready for whatever had everyone else on edge.

The thing staggered into the plaza between the buildings, the glow from the ceremonial lamps, lit for the first time in centuries, revealing the translucent red crystals, before anything else.

"What is that?" Sigrun gaped at it. "Some kind of golem?"

"I've seen golems," Natia said, after a moment's pause, "but never like that. But, sure. Golem. That's ... We're right over the Deep Roads, and the port's down by Gwaren, but there might be another entrance we missed."

"Not unless you've got a golem in Templar armour," Murray pointed out, parting the ground under one of the thing's feet, to trip it.

"Meredith?" Sheena looked horrified, as she flung a spell, shoving the thing into the recently-restored statue of some elven god, listening to the way the crystal creaked as the creature shrieked angrily at them.

Gilroy's face drained of colour just from the sound of Meredith's name. He stared at the lumbering monster, tried to find the shape of something human amid the sinister glow of red lyrium on twisted flesh. "Not Meredith," he said distractedly, nearly forgetting what spell he was casting while he was in the middle of casting it. "Meredith didn't wear armour like that."

And that was almost worse, Sheena decided, the implication that there were other creatures out there like her more than a little terrifying. As the creature drew closer, staggering under the weight of their spells but still pushing forward, Sheena realised that the juts of red crystal were a part of its body, sticking up through the skin. She had to swallow back her nausea at the thought.

Velanna's hands flashed and vines wound around the creature, holding it in place. "It must be a demon," she ventured. "It can't possibly be alive."

"You'd be surprised," Murray muttered, concentrating on the crystals. "Ever been to Kirkwall?"

The crystals hummed, and Murray's face screwed up with effort, but the creature stopped fighting the vines for a few seconds, just long enough for Velanna to get a better grip.

"Don't break them!" Natia cut in. "If that's Kirkwall style, we don't have the equipment to clean it up. And I don't know who does, in backwoods Ferelden." Still, she lobbed one of the glass spheres from her belt in that direction, nodding as it exploded against the crystal, ice forming as the liquid inside ran down the thing's body.

The thing let out a terrifying sound that could have been a roar of outrage, slowing to a stop as the ice hardened around it. Spiderwebs of cracks formed in the ice as it struggled, and they knew they didn't have long.
"Where am I even supposed to aim?" Junar hissed, sighting down his arrow. The creature was a mess of armour and crystals, not the sort of thing an arrow was made to fight.

"I don't know," Natia hissed back. "The face?"

Junar frowned. The helmet left a part of the creature's face exposed, its glowing eyes and red-veined skin disturbing. "You have much more faith in my skills than you should."

"Just shoot it!" Natia said.

The ice holding it chipped and cracked, arrows plinking off its helmet as it tore itself free. Vines snapped, and chunks of ice went flying, while Velanna sent more vines to replace the ones broken.

"Oh, come on!" Natia whipped another grenade at the thing, and this time the creature howled as the contents of the bottle etched the crystal and chewed through what remained of its skin. Natia blinked and tossed another of the same. "Acid. I had to get these made special, so they wouldn't melt the bottles, but they're great for cleaning the crap off walls in the Deep Roads. Just gotta rinse it off after, so it doesn't ruin the engravings."

"It's melting!" Gilroy looked horrified, as the creature continued to howl, clawing at its own skin in a desperate attempt to wipe off the acid.

Velanna changed tactics, eyes closing as she took long slow breaths. With each inhale, the creature's struggles slowed.

"Should you really be doing that if it's blighted?" Sigrun asked, after a moment.

Velanna shrugged. "We already have the taint."

Softened by the acid and weakened by Velanna, when Sheena punched her fist into the ground, the creature went down as though punched itself. It roared and shrieked, an animal's expression of pain, and she almost felt bad for whatever part of it had been human.

"Do you have any more of those flasks?" Sigrun asked Natia.

Natia considered her grenade belt, dropping a hand to her last acid flask. "Yes, but I don't think we'll need it."

The creature writhed in the dirt, still pawing at its skin, acid chewing through its armour and leaving it exposed to the barrage of spells that followed. Junar finally scored a hit once it had fallen still.
Chapter 85

Chapter Summary

What do you do with a growing heap of red lyrium?

Velanna waited, breath held, but the creature didn't stir again. "Almost more stubborn than a
demon," she said, shaking her head as she looked down at its claw-like hands, red crystals
sharpening its nails into points. She suspected this would have been a difficult battle if they had
allowed it to get close.

"You know," Murray said after a few moments watching the thing settle into the earth, "we still have
a Kirkwall problem. It's a giant chunk of red lyrium, and we can't move it."

"Cursed!" Junar threw his hands up, bow still in one. "That's it. That's the problem. This place is just
cursed. A thousand years ago, Tevinter came down and killed everyone and cursed the ruins."

"It's not cursed," Sheena sighed, shaking her head. "It's just had a lot of excitement over the years. A
temple where everyone died, werewolves, demons..."

"By which you mean it's cursed," Junar insisted.

"No, see, a curse is a whole other thing," Murray cut in. "This is mostly just demons, and demons
and massacres go together like marchpane and Orlesian chocolate."

"Okay, but the werewolves were totally cursed." Sigrun slipped between Junar and Velanna, to get
closer to the conversation. "Solona said so. She got rid of them by breaking the curse. So, I mean,
he's not wrong. There was totally a curse here. It's just that it was an ancient elven curse, and it's
already broken."

"Yeah, but none of that changes the fact that there's a giant pile of red lyrium that used to be a
Templar in the plaza, and we're supposed to be ready to send for the Kinloch Hold mages, soon,"
Gilroy pointed out. "I think we want to work on the boundary wall, in the morning. I want to work
on it right now, but if we do it in the dark, Lord Hawke's going to kill us when he gets back."

"He will kill us, and then bury us under the perfectly symmetrical wall he will build himself," Sheena
said, nodding in agreement.

"I do not like the look of that lyrium," Velanna said, giving it a wide berth as she edged closer. It
glowed with its own light in the dark, like embers. "I would not touch it."

"Yeah, well, I wouldn't leave it lying around, either," Sigrun said, bumping Velanna with her
shoulder as she followed. "We could handle this the way I handle all my problems and bury it. Either
in the dirt or with your... magic rock stuff." She gestured vaguely, waggling her fingers. "Pretend we
don't have a problem until we find a means to fix it."

"I still don't want to leave it here, even if it is covered in dirt or rocks or something." Gilroy shook his
head, lips tight. "Doesn't lyrium ... grow? I remember reading that somewhere. And we've seen what
trees can do to rock and what lyrium can do to a Templar." He gestured at the mound of crystals that
almost seemed to be growing larger, as they watched, the corpse still withering around it.
"So, we'll wrap it up, and then Sheena can get it out of here," Murray suggested, with a shrug. "It doesn't have to go far, just ... not somewhere I'm going to trip on it if I get up to take a piss in the middle of the night."

Sigrun snorted and Natia slapped a hand over her own cackles.

"Please don't pee on the lyrium," Sigrun managed, the corners of her mouth tugging up in a horrified half-smile. "Even if it is red. Maybe especially if it's red. I've seen some lyrium in my day, and that is not normal. That is creepy lyrium."

"Lesson for the day: Do not drink, snort, or pee on the creepy lyrium," Junar drawled, still hanging back, away from the crystals.

"Listen to the wise elf," Sigrun said with mock solemnity.

"Bet that's the first time anyone's called you that," Natia teased.

"Well, someone was bound to see my genius eventually," Junar said with that same deadpan inflection, watching Murray as he approached what was left of the Templar.

Murray paused at a safe distance, keeping his feet away from the shards of lyrium that had fallen -- if they could be called shards, the way the acid had chewed them up -- and started to cast, pulling rock out of the earth and folding it over the creature. He breathed a sigh of relief as it disappeared from view, hiding the lyrium's eerie glow. He stepped back and gestured grandly at Sheena to manoeuvre the mess of rock in front of him.

"Past the markers for the wall," Gilroy suggested, as Sheena shoved the massive ball of stone onto a path. "I don't want that thing in here, with us."

"Nobody does," Sheena assured him, the Force doing most of the work, as she followed the accelerating rock toward the edge of the settlement.

"We'll be back in a bit," Natia assured the group, as she checked her last acid flask and followed Sheena. "Just going to make sure she doesn't get eaten by rabid Templars lurking in the wood."

"So, how do we fix it?" Murray asked, watching the two women escort the stone to what would become the gate. "Maybe we should write to the Commander. If nothing else, he's got to at least know how lyrium's transported, if he signs for it every month."

"Somebody stole Meredith, remember?" Gilroy tapped his teeth as he thought. "That means somebody in Kirkwall knows how to move this stuff safely. Didn't they decide she'd been coated in lead?"

"Yeah, but we still don't know who took her, or what happened to them. Or her." Murray shrugged. "Unless Cullen figured it out after we left."

"So, write a message to your contacts in Kirkwall, and we will see what comes on the next ship." Velanna nodded firmly, putting an arm around Sigrun to lead her back to bed.
Haven

Chapter Summary

Herald Pointy returns to Haven, only to find Herald Crazy is still in the field.

Adaar was grateful to see Haven's arched gate, its red banners fluttering in the wind. The riding had dulled him to the cold, but he was still looking forward to being able to feel his fingers again.

"Welcome back, Herald! Commander!" a guard called from the gate. They'd left their mounts with Master Dennet, and walking was a painful sort of relief as Adaar stretched his legs. He smiled and murmured a return greeting while Cullen paused to chat.

"Hey, Pointy!" Varric called out, companionably smacking his elbow the way he usually smacked shoulders. "You gonna join us? Drinks are on Cullen, once I talk him into a round of Wicked Grace." He tipped his head in the direction of the tavern.

"Maker, yes," Adaar laughed, "but I'm going to check in with my other glowy half first."

He hadn't heard anything from Fen'Din or his menagerie of mages, and something about that wasn't sitting right. He could blame it on the treacherous roads making communication difficult, but Dennet's stable hadn't been as full as he'd expected.

Adaar poked along the streets, ducking into the mages' usual haunts, but found no sign of any of them. That uneasy feeling only grew, setting in his gut, when he even stopped by the bees to find them unattended.

He watched them buzz around and tried not flinch when they flew too close. "Where's your dad?" he asked them, but the bees said nothing.

Dammit. He knew they shouldn't have split up.

Adaar changed tack, and luckily his next target was easy to find. Josephine was in the tavern, talking to Varric, and she turned, brightening, when she saw him. She only got out the word, "Herald!" before Adaar spoke.

"Where are the other idiots?" he asked, trying to sound unaffected. Trying not to think about the Conclave and the last group of companions he'd lost.

"Still in Redcliffe," Josephine assured him. "We have received word just days ago that there have been some complications. Tevinter arrived before us, and the negotiations have been disrupted by the arrival of Magister Gereon Alexius, who has also displaced the Arl of Redcliffe, citing concerns for Teagan's ... 'safety'."

"Counting on the fact that the man should be scared to death of mages, after what happened to his nephew with that apostate and all the demons," Varric pointed out. "Big thing in the Blight. I read the story, when it got published."

"But, the fact remains, the Arl of Redcliffe has ridden to Denerim to petition the Queen for assistance in taking his lands back from what he frames as a Tevinter invasion. Enchanter Fen'Din has made the
decision to try to sort things out before military intervention becomes necessary," Josephine explained, with a polite smile. "He has scouts checking the castle, now, before he goes in to meet with Magister Alexius. He has Warden Kasselmann with him, and I have no doubt that between the two of them, they will be very sure not to walk into any traps they can't handle."

"Honestly, I'd be very concerned if Jan walked into a trap he couldn't handle. That man is terrifying. I've seen him fighting things out of nightmares I'd like to stop having, in the Deep Roads." Varric whistled and shook his head.

Adaar huffed. "And here I thought our little detour was exciting."

Varric made a considering noise. "I would say it still qualifies. And trust me, at this point I'm an expert in 'exciting'. It's what gives my writing its dramatic flair."

"Is that what does it?" Adaar drawled. "And here I thought it was just the whiskey."

"The whiskey helps."

Adaar looked around and realised he was just standing in the middle of the bar, he gestured Varric and Josephine back to the table where Varric had set his drink. "Now I'm wishing we'd sent more Templars with them. They make great magister repellent, from what I understand."

"Ser Peryn is perfectly capable, I am sure," Josie reassured him, squeezing his arm. Her fingers looked small and delicate in contrast to his bulk. She didn't sit, however. "Apologies, Herald, but I must try to catch the Commander."

"Of course," Adaar said, nodding his head in understanding. "You should save the drink for after that."

"I find drinking first helps, if I have to have a serious conversation with Cullen," Varric teased.

Josephine found Cullen standing on the steps of the Chantry, with Leliana at his side, a pile of papers getting passed back and forth, as a few carts were unloaded, crates being carried past them into the depths of the Chantry.

"They broke up a smuggling ring and made a deal, so the lyrium would be sent to us, instead," Leliana explained, flapping a page at Josephine. "And here's Josephine, now. Tell him about the lyrium."

"We received a message that someone in the Hinterlands had been supplying the rogue Templars, but after some pointed threats from Brother Kinnon, they've decided to supply us, instead. It's understood that any Templar who joins with the Inquisition will have their lyrium needs met," Josephine explained, leaning to the side to address one of the unloading crew. "In the cellar, if you please! There's a sign on the door, down there!"

"There are some concerns, still--" Leliana began, and Josephine cut her off.

"You have concerns. I am much less concerned. An act of violence in the magnitude you're proposing would start a war, and one I have no doubt Ferelden is capable of winning, even in its post-Blight state. It is only one magister, Leliana. And I do not have any reason to believe his choices are sanctioned by the rest of the Magisterium or the Archon. It's his own problem, and one that he will discover the consequences of."

"Oh, just the one magister?" Cullen said with a weary but unconcerned laugh. "I hear that Jan has a tendency to light magisters on fire, if it comes to that." That also put him in mind of Artie and Fenris'
wedding, and he wondered what they were up to, if they were well. It was an easier thought than what the mention of lyrium brought. While he was relieved his men and women would have what they needed, just the knowledge of easy access to lyrium made his skin itch. "But 'having no reason to believe' is not the same as 'certain'. We're assuming he's working alone, but if he isn't?"

Josephine shrugged. "I believe you just mentioned something about a Warden and fire?"

Cullen huffed a laugh, rubbed his gritty eyes as he tried to focus on the paper in front of him. The words blurred a bit and he had a headache. He wasn't sure which had caused which.

"And you know Solona, of course," Leliana said, eyes sparkling as she handed over another page. "The letter was addressed to 'Warden Seymour Buttz', but I believe she meant it to go to Jan, after reading it."

"Then why are you giving it to me?" Cullen blinked at Leliana in confusion.

"She has some interesting things to say, and I believe it is best you hear them straight from her."

Leliana watched Cullen squint at the page. "Hold on to it. You can read it later. For now, you should know that she approves of Blackwall, but not enough to let him give orders, in Ferelden. She's given Jan -- assuming 'Warden Buttz' is Jan -- a temporary field promotion to Acting Warden-Constable, in the absence of her Constable who has been in Starkhaven for the last few years."

Cullen's eyes drifted closed, and he rubbed the back of his neck. " Howe, " he said, after a moment. "We met at the royal wedding."

"Yes," Leliana confirmed, with a nod. "So, for all things involving interpretations of Wardens actions, we have been instructed to turn to Jan, if Solona is unavailable. Though she does go on at length about Blackwall. And then about Brother Kinnon, who I take it has never been fond of his chastity vows."

Cullen peered at Leliana, one eye barely open, just in time to catch the way her eyebrow lifted. She knew. She had to know. She'd been there, after Uldred's... He wasn't going to think too hard about that. "And what is your opinion on Brother Kinnon?"

Leliana tilted her head as though giving his question a great deal of consideration. "I would say he wears the Chantry robes surprisingly well otherwise."

Cullen nodded, understanding. She knew who he was but had no intention to reveal his secret unless he gave her reason to. Cullen wasn't sure why he found that reassuring, putting him in mind of all that time he'd been with Anton before finding out his siblings were mages. He'd felt betrayed, of course, but he'd needed to hear it at the right time. He could only hope that Kinnon would find the right time with Peryn.

"I suppose there are less flattering robes he could wear," Cullen said with a tired smile. He missed his idiot husband.

"I just don't know about those Ander cuts." Josephine shook her head. "Why would you wear trousers under two robes and a coat in the middle of the burning desert? There may be less flattering robes than Ander Chantry robes, but there are so many more flattering ones, as well. I will see if I can get him a nice Ferelden set. They'll be warmer, at least."

"We're in the middle of what might be a war with Tevinter, and you're worried about--" A small smile teased the corners of Leliana’s lips.

"Don't you start with me, Leliana. He's very handsome, and he's that age where if I had him on as a
clerk, no one would think a thing of it, but they would all be watching him. You can tell a lot about a person by the way they watch your servants and clerks." Josephine smiled slyly. "If I dress him up nicely, he'd be a lovely prop for all sorts of negotiations."

Cullen looked from one to the other of the women at his sides, before he tipped his head back and groaned.

"I could have used you, Ser Cullen, but you don't know when to shut your mouth." Josephine elbowed him. "You have that wholesome Fereldan look, and with some nice tight leggings and long boots, you'd be perfect."

"Thank you for reminding me to talk more." Cullen pressed his hands to his face and laughed, before bringing his gaze back down. "Where is Adaar? We need to make a decision about Redcliffe. Especially if you want us to bring Kinnon back alive for your ... nefarious purposes."

"I just ran into him in the tavern," Josephine said, gesturing with her quill. "He said I would need a drink after talking to you." Her eyes twinkled with mischief.

Cullen huffed. "I'd need a drink after talking to me."

Josephine laughed, tucking her clipboard under her arm. "Well, I suggest getting to him before Varric gets him too drunk. The last thing we need is a drunken qunari charging at magisters, horns first."

Cullen didn't argue that he thought that was exactly what they needed.
Redcliffe

Chapter Summary

Revenge of the chainmail bikini.

The Gull and Lantern was busy, as usual, though many of the mages were out walking through the village, taking advantage of the calm day and the relative warmth of the lake. Clement walked between Fenris and Peryn, as they piled through the door, Anders and Theron loudly making jokes about knobs in the back of the group.

"I wonder," Peryn said, looking around, "where is Kinnon? Maybe he is out enjoying the lake."

It took every bit of Anders's willpower not to point out that Kinnon had lived on another shore of this lake for most of his life, but Godwin looked up from his lunch and answered.

"He went out with Jowan, a few days ago. They haven't come back yet."

"With Jowan?" Anders looked horrified.

"With the Maleficar?" Peryn echoed, dread splashed across his face.

"Niall and that Rivaini girl went with them. I don't know. Something about an old man and bringing somebody some flowers." Godwin shrugged and took another bite of roast. "Assuming Jowan doesn't get everyone killed by being a moron, I'm sure they'll be back soon."

Peryn turned and made for the door, but Anders grabbed him.

"You don't know where he is, and you don't have to worry about Jowan hurting him," Anders said, quietly. "You do have to worry about Jowan being stupid enough that someone else gets hurt, but Niall's with them, and he's a good guy."

"Niall is a demon," Peryn argued, pulling at the hands on his shoulders.

"Honestly, Niall's just dead," Anders replied.

"Niall -- and that is definitely actually Niall -- is a spirit," Fen'Din ventured. "When spirits are frightened or overwhelmed, sometimes they become demons, for a time. Some of them stay that way, but I don't believe Niall is angry or frightened enough not to recover. And Asha is there to keep him from turning. But, he was, when he was alive, talented enough to become one of our enchanters, and a reasonable enough person that I looked forward to working with him. Whatever Jowan is stupid enough to do, this time, we know Niall, and we would both venture that Niall is enough to protect Kinnon, if he can't protect himself. But, having lived with Kinnon, I think he is far more capable than you give him credit for."

"He is a Lay Brother. He has no weapons! No traini--" Peryn stopped suddenly, some realisation dawning behind his eyes. "This is the secret in his past, yes? He was a raider or a mercenary? This is what he still does not say. It is sad, but one day, he will tell me. I will not ask you. That is not fair to you, or to him."
"Good. Grab us a table, and I'll get drinks. Redcliffe Red?" Anders glanced around their group as he pushed his way through it, toward the bar.

"Make mine a Highever ale, if they've got it." Cormac tossed an arm around his brother's shoulders and led him toward a large table in the back corner, and the others followed, just to stop blocking the door.

Anders ordered their drinks, watching the bartender pour them and set them on a tray as he reached into his pouch, fingers touching something round and metal, assuming it was a coin until he pulled it out and it settled on the bar with a heavier clink than expected. He blinked down at the skimpy bit of chainmail, and the bartender did the same.

"Listen," said the bartender, slowly setting down the drink he'd been pouring. "I don't know how they do it in the Anderfels, but here in Ferelden we use coins."

"Interesting," said a woman's voice over Anders's shoulder, he turned to see Vivienne eyeing the scandalous lump of metal as though appraising a piece of artwork not to her taste. "Did they not have it in your size, dear?"

Anders opened and closed his mouth, heaving a sigh as he counted out the correct amount of coins -- actual coins -- for the bartender. "I was told it was a 'one size fits all' sort of thing. Do you want to try it on?"

"I'm afraid it's not my style. Rusted lingerie is so last season." Vivienne looked pityingly at the heap of rings. "First Enchanter Torrin suggested you had unusual tastes, but I'm afraid I hadn't expected the ... breadth of your aesthetic. Or perhaps breadth is not the word. That looks terribly narrow, dear. What an accident of birth, if it does fit you."

Anders opened his mouth, hoping words would come to him, when a hand slipped between them, plucking the chainmail off the bar.

"It doesn't," Niall said, after a moment, setting the thing back down, and turning his attention to the bartender. "When you have a moment, the strongest drink you have. I don't want to remember any of this."

"And yet--" Anders started.

"No. Don't say it." Niall glared up at Anders, who looked over his head to find the everyone else who'd come in with him.

"Hey, Kiinnon! Your boyfriend misses you!" Anders called out, pointing to the table where Peryn sat, laughing at another of Theron's terrible jokes.

Cheeks burning, Kinnon threw Anders a rude gesture even as he headed for that table. He wasn't about to ask why Niall was handling what looked like chainmail underwear.

When Peryn caught sight of him, his whole demeanour changed, brightening with a smile that reached every corner of his face. With his blond hair and tan skin, Kinnon would have likened him to the sun if he were the more poetic type. As it was, every analogy that sprang to mind only sounded cheesy in his head.

"Didn't get into too much trouble without me, I hope?" Kinnon said, hooking his foot around an empty chair and pulling it over to Peryn's table, where Theron made room for him, scooting closer to Solas than Solas seemed pleased with.
"I did not make trouble," Peryn said, clapping a hand to his chest. "To keep our friends from trouble was not easy." He threw a teasingly scolding look around the table.

"I know the feeling," Kinnon sighed, tossing a glance back at Jowan, who still lingered awkwardly in front of the door, standing at an angle to accommodate the massive sword strapped to his back.

Anders glanced at Jowan, as he picked up the pitchers of beer. "Niall? Who gave Jowan a sword?"

"Lake spirit." Niall shrugged. "Less 'gave', and more 'threw it at our heads'. He hasn't used a staff in years, so he's trying to see if he can adapt to the sword instead. I really wish he'd go back to something smaller. And less sharp."

"Huh. Well, surprisingly, I'm not bad with a sword. Maybe that's the solution to his magic problems - stop using it and become a swordsman." Anders laughed, trying to figure out if he could hook another pitcher onto his fingers, but Niall picked it up, instead.

"He's never been bad at magic," Niall argued. "He's bad at making reasonable decisions, and I don't remember you being so great at those either."

"Screw you, my decisions have been fantastic," Anders huffed, heading for the table.

"Which is why the sky exploded and you're still in Ferelden. Because that sounds like a good decision," Niall snorted, picking up his own drink in the other hand and following Anders.

"It's a great decision. I'm a healer. People need help." Anders rolled his eyes and looked over his shoulder at where Jowan continued to lurk by the door. "Hey, Jowan! Bring that sword over here, so we can get a look at it?"

Jowan gestured frantically for Anders to lower his voice, as he darted across the room. "Not so loud! Out there, I'm still Levyn. People remember what I did for them. I'd like to hold on to that."
Fen'Din leaned to the side to see around Fenris. "Where's Asha?"

"She went up to the Chantry to see Lily, when we got back. Something about the rift, there. It's closed, but the place is still weird," Niall explained, dropping into a chair at the next table over.

"That's what she tells us, anyway," Kinnon said. "I think she's trying to steer clear of Jowan with a sword."

"She is a wise woman," Niall agreed.

"I'm standing right here," Jowan groused.

"'Lurking' might be the better word," Anders said, setting down the pitchers and sliding them into the middle of the table. "And you could be sitting, you know. There's plenty of chairs. And if there's not enough room at the tables, we can kick Theron out."

Theron sat back in his chair, wearing a look of fake shock. "Me? It's because I'm an elf, isn't it?"

"It is because you know far too many words that rhyme with 'ass'," Fenris cut in, "and I do not need to hear any more in another one of your songs."

Solas chuckled into his drink, and Theron shot him a narrowed look. "You're one to laugh about asses and the like, Baldy."

"Why is my laughter any different to his?" Solas asked, with the most innocent look he could muster.

Theron pointed at Cormac. "The more I think about his face, the weirder that story is. He kept bothering you to do vallaslin, so you wrote 'nice ass' on his face?"

Solas shook his head and paused to take a drink, before explaining. "You know that Elvish is a heavily contextual language," he reminded Theron. "You must know that."

Theron's eyes widened and his mouth opened slowly as he looked back at Cormac's face. "Creators, I wish Merrill was here for this! This is exactly the discussion we were having about that incantation. So, you're telling me I'm reading it wrong?"

Solas merely nodded, eyes sparkling with amusement, as he waited for Theron to figure it out.

"Okay, so, that's an ass, but it's also to sit, to rest, a seat, and a bushel basket. And the other one is an emphatic. I mean, the most obvious choice is 'great ass', but that's wr-- oh. It's an emphatic. He's emphatically an ass. It's a shemlen phrase written in Elvish." Theron started laughing so hard he needed a hand to hold his head up. "It's not 'nice ass', it's 'such an ass'!"

Cormac groaned and slid down in his chair cackling. "Are you kidding me? I've been walking
around with 'what an asshole' written on my face, all these years? I mean, I was an asshole. I probably had that coming. And somehow, no one read it the right way, and that makes it even funnier. You meant to put a warning. Instead, it's been an advertisement!"

Artemis nearly fell out of his chair, wheezing with laughter. "What an ass! Oh, Carver would love this!" He wiped tears of laughter from his eyes. "Maker! I'm glad I didn't ask you for a tattoo."

"Then it would have been 'nice ass'," Theron replied with a wink.

Solas pointedly cleared his throat. "He was a bit young for such thoughts."

"Young enough that you still had hair at the time!" Artemis gestured vaguely at his head. "A lot of it, too. In thick dreadlocks."

Fenris's eyebrows twitched up. "Really?" He eyed Solas's bald head with a disbelieving look.

Solas noted all the looks turned his way and blew out a sigh. "It was a phase."

"It was a good phase," Artie said in a loud whisper.

"Please excuse my brother. He has a particular fondness for elves, and he's been lusting after two of the ones at this table since we were young and stupid." Cormac made no attempt to sit up, having slid most of the way under the table.

"As opposed to middle-aged and stupid?" Kinnon inquired across the top of his glass.

Fenris kicked him, under the table. "My husband is not stupid." He paused. "Usually. While sober."

"You who ran into the wilderness with a demon and a maleficar maybe do not have the room to say someone else is stupid," Peryn teased, pinching Kinnon's side.

"I'm not a demon!" Niall protested, again. "I'm a mage! An enchanter, even!"

"You know, Niall," Anders tipped his chair back, "speaking of enchanters, it always cracked me up that there was a Fraternity of Isolationists."

"Not isolated from each other, jam-for-brains, isolated from non-magical society. Not that I'd have minded complete isolation, after a few years of Kinloch Hold..." Niall rolled his eyes.

Anders considered saying something snarky about complete isolation within Kinloch Hold, but took a drink instead.

"I would not mind complete isolation from this table," Fenris said with an exaggeratedly put-upon sigh.

"Complete, hmm?" Artie drawled, nudging him with his elbow.

Fenris gave him a considering look. "I would let you visit on weekends." He slid an arm around his husband's shoulders, a slow smile curling his lips when Artemis laughed.

Theron hummed around his drink, waggling his fingers at Jowan, who was trying to figure out how to sit down with a two-handed sword strapped to his back. "But let's see this sword that nearly usurped my seat at the table. It looks impressive!"

"So does the weapon strapped to his back," Kinnon joked.
"I imagine you would know a thing or two about handling swords," Anders teased in kind, and Kinnon coughed, ears turning red.

Jowan finally gave up and took the sword off, so he could sit, taking a moment to offer Kinnon a single finger, as he passed the sword to Anders. "I made an offering to the lake spirit, and it threw a sword at me."

"At me," Kinnon corrected.

"And a belt," Niall added.

"A weapon for someone who needs a bit extra," Fen'Din remarked from the corner behind Solas where he perched with his drink and his sketchbook. "I recognise those runes."

Niall nodded, looking down the wall to where Fen'Din sat. "Yeah, it's an interesting combination. I'd almost want to say it's the kind of sword you'd give a farmer to turn him into an adventurer, like in all those old stories."

"Well, this one's not Tevinter," Anders decided, after a long examination. "I'm pretty sure that's a genuine Fereldan sword."

"Got a wide spread of genuine Fereldan swords at this table," Cormac joked.

"You're a Marcher," Anders reminded him, as he stood up, sword in hand. "Born in Kirkwall. I've heard you say it."

Cormac pointed to Kinnon, Jowan, and then his own brother, and raised an eyebrow.

"Ah! How could I forget?" Anders looked distracted as he weighed the sword, obviously meant to be wielded two-handed, checked the height of the lamps, and let Justice rise to the surface. He glowed a dim blue, Fade light pouring from his skin, as he stepped through a battle he'd fought, before, carefully missing all the furniture. As the glow died down, he offered the sword to Theron, pretending obliviousness to the eyes on him. "It's a good sword, but I don't like the balance on it. I like something with more heft in the hilt."

"I heard there were potions for that," Fenris said with mock seriousness.

Theron turned the sword over in his hands, eyeing Anders even as he tested its balance. "I had heard you knew your way around metaphorical swords, but I hadn't thought real swords would be your thing."

"Some skills carry over," Anders said with a crooked smile and a shrug. "But I prefer polearms myself." He offered a wink at the Hawke brothers.

Theron huffed in amusement. "No, indeed. You don't have the right armour for carrying a sword, anyway."

A click of heels on hardwood was Anders's only warning before Vivienne sidled up next to him, pressing the skimpy chainmail into his chest. "I beg to differ," she said in a sugar-sweet voice.

"It's still not my size," Anders said in kind as the table burst into fits of laughter.

Peryn looked faintly disturbed, as if he were trying to remember something, and Niall was still blatantly staring.
"We're having a talk about this, later," Niall decided, jabbing a finger at Anders. "You... You've done something outrageously fucked up, haven't you?"

"Come on, Niall, you know I've always been good with a sword." Anders's smile didn't make it to his eyes, even as he winked saucily in Niall's direction. Of course, the spirit would notice. And he hadn't had a chance to explain himself. But, Niall apparently knew enough not to say anything in front of the Templar, who was still eyeing Anders as if looking for some misplaced memory.

"I must ask, what was that spell?" Vivienne inquired, letting the chain lingerie drop into Anders's hands. "I don't think I've ever seen anything quite like it."

"Grey Warden secret." Anders said with a shrug. "It's Spirit, though. I can tell you that. The rest... I can't really talk about it, without getting into a really awkward position with Weisshaupt."

"And he would know about awkward positions," Artemis said, nudging Fenris with his elbow. He'd seen the look on Peryn's face, had held his breath, but if Peryn had made the connection between Justice and Hector, he gave no indication. Still, best to change the subject. "Speaking of, I think the chainmail should go to whoever's going to wield the sword. Or the sword should go to whomever looks best in the chainmail."

Artie looked at Jowan first, who had walked in with the sword, but he held up his hands, palm out. "I can't say I want the sword that badly."

He looked at Fenris next, who just raised an eyebrow. "The sword you already gave me is more than adequate, thank you."

"Too bad," Artie said. "You would have won."

Fenris raised his cup in a wry salute.

Clement, who had been sitting silently through all the jesting and mayhem, pointed at Kinnon, his eyes more focused than they'd been since he'd been coaxed out of the cave. "I think the Brother might win this one, if the Maker permits him to show that much leg."

Peryn whooped with laughter, plucking the scrap of chainmail out of Anders's hands and holding it up to examine it. "I do not think it is tall enough," he said, looking disappointed, as he pointed first to his shoulder and then his hip, showing where he thought it might be short.

"Then maybe you should try it on!" Kinnon's eyes gleamed and he stuck out his tongue.

Peryn looked like he might be considering it. "No, it is too small to the sides. I would not fit." He paused and then tossed the thing to Fen'Din. "The Enchanter, maybe. I think it is elf-size."

Fen'Din stood up on his chair, still perched behind Solas, and held the thing up to the light, studying it. "I have no need for a sword, but I would fit in it. I might put it on, anyway, but I think we've all missed the obvious choice."

The chainmail landed on Theron's head.
Chapter 89

Chapter Summary

The chainmail bikini strikes again. Harding comes back with a plan.

Vivienne's voice was raised higher than her hat, as she complained once again to Torrin. "It's a demon. That is not your Enchanter. That is a demon pretending to be your Enchanter, and it is going to wreak havoc the moment you take your eyes off it."

"Any time you want to stop talking about me like I'm not three feet away," Niall drawled, pulling Asha into his lap and rolling his eyes at Jowan.

"Niall is the first person in centuries to return from death, relatively intact," Torrin argued, holding up a hand at Vivienne's next objection before she could voice it. "He admits to having been changed by the Fade, and is seeking our help to return to the form and temperament he had in life. There is little harm in trying. We have a Seer, a Spirit Healer, and ... well, I'd almost say two Seers travelling with us, and I have seen enough of their work to genuinely believe that should Niall turn, again, they, alone, will be enough to prevent harm to anyone else. This does not even account for the other Enchanters in the building. Even if he is a demon, he is only one demon, and he does not want to be one. There are far more than enough of us to handle a single demon, should he turn foul."

Vivienne's lips only pressed thinner. "And do you intend to be on your guard for such an eventuality? Because from what I am seeing --"

Vivienne cut herself off, her words and her train of thought dying at the sight of Theron as he slinked back into the room to the clink of chainmail, which did little to cover his most intimate areas. He stretched his arms out wide, his grin stretching wider still, completely unselfconscious of the amount of skin on display.

"Maker's tears," Vivienne sighed, pressing her fingers into her forehead as though to ward off a headache.

The rest of the tavern was more appreciative, erupting into laughter and applause, a few sending coins flying as though he were a stripper. Theron soaked in the attention.

"That I should look so good in it," Niall grumbled into his drink.

"You're a spirit, Niall. You'll look good in anything you want to." Jowan winged a honeyed almond at Niall.

As Theron climbed up on a table to more wild cheering, Vivienne again addressed Torrin. "Is this what I should be led to expect from Kinloch Hold, now that Irving has passed on?"

Torrin laughed, a round, jovial sound. "You didn't expect this from Kinloch Hold, under Irving? Obviously, you never visited. It was like this even under Weneslaus. Though with Irving, it was more likely to be him than any of the elves." He pointed at Anders. "And that elf isn't even a mage, so you can't blame him on us."

Atop the table, Theron flexed for the crowd, resting one foot on Artie's shoulder. "That's right! Gaze
upon the glory of the Dales!"

Ellendra looked up from the conversation she was having with the Stone-Speaker and a Tranquil. "But, what you're saying about being able to see the stories and then tell them? I think it would be a wonderful opportunity for all of The--" Her eyes caught on Theron. "Are all Dalish like that?"

"They might as well be," Solas sighed, looking like the drink in his hand wasn't nearly strong enough.

Artie brushed Theron's foot off his shoulder, then with a mildly scolding look, brushed off the imagined dirt Theron's foot had left behind. Theron was undeterred, strutting about like an armoured peacock. If such a thing could be called 'armour'.

"I leave you alone for five minutes," said a voice from the doorway, and heads turned to regard Scout Harding, freshly back from the castle, hands on her hips as she took in the ludicrous scene.

"He's just like that," Anders said with a shrug, and Harding hated how she had to crane her neck back to look up at him. "All the ass poetry."

"All the alcohol," Fenris grumbled.

Fen'Din squeezed out from behind the table, where he'd been drawing. "What news?" he asked Harding. "How poorly is this meeting going to end?"

"Piece of cake." Harding grinned, taking a step toward the bar, both to get a drink and to get Fen'Din out of her view of Theron. "If you can get in there and distract the man, himself, we can clear out the rest. No one seems to have considered the servants' passages at all, and once we get the Templars out of the dungeon--"

Fen'Din shook his head. "Don't. Bring Peryn and Brynn with you. They'll be able to determine if it's safe to let the Templars out, in their current condition. They'll also know the base lyrium dosage, which none of the rest of us do."

"They're... a little big and clunky for that, don't you think? I don't know how well we can sneak with two big chunks of metal staggering after us," Harding raised an eyebrow, but her eyes stayed on Theron. "He's got nice legs, doesn't he? But, I'd be afraid of breaking him if I grabbed his ass too hard."

"This is one of the great scholars of the Dalish clans, one of their historian-leaders," Solas sighed loudly. "This is what the elves have become."

"And they should be damn proud!" Theron called back, vallaslin shifting with his broadening grin. He shimmied just enough to make the chainmail rattle and to put that pained look back on Solas's face. "Or maybe you'd like to wear this armour instead? We could always put you in it."

Harding glanced down at Solas's legs, a sceptical look on her face.

"I assure you, you could not." Solas's voice held a warning edge, his eyes narrowing.

Theron rested his hands on his hips, exchanging a look with Artemis.

"I don't know, Theron," Artie said with a dramatic shrug. "That sounds like a challenge to me."

"It was not," Solas said a bit more forcefully, some concern leaking into his voice.
"I think it was," Theron said, that grin still on his face.

"Is this really necessary?" Vivienne's voice cut across the room.

"Yes!" Theron insisted and Fenris looked like he might be swayed.

"Absolutely not," Solas retorted, suddenly vanishing from where he stood and rising with a curl of vine around his feet, much closer to the bar.

Harding shrugged and grabbed him by the elbows. "Got him!"

Solas shot a betrayed look at Fen'Din, who merely stepped back and started drawing. As Theron closed in again, once again, Solas vanished, reappearing closer to Vivienne. As the dance continued, Fenris looked less and less disturbed by the exchange, with the increasing certainty that Theron wouldn't be able to catch Solas, if Solas didn't allow it.

"Give me the thing!" Eadric called over the laughing and cheering that spread through the room at each missed capture.

"Nobody wants to see you in it, Eadric!" Godwin retorted.

"Nobody's going to see me in it! If you want this done right, you need another mage!" Eadric laughed, but the sound faded as warm chainmail struck the side of his face. "Oh. Ew."

Harding offered Theron her cloak, which he fastened around his waist with a wink at her, before lunging back into the game.

Solas remained three steps ahead of him, letting him get nearly close enough to touch before suddenly slipping away, his posture barely moving. For all the annoyance written on his face, Fenris noticed that Solas stayed in the room, teasing Theron by letting him get as close as he did.

Then Eadric joined the game, and all bets were off. He stepped through space the way Solas did, only a beat behind as he followed Solas from one end of the tavern to the other, and all the while Theron tried to keep up, panting for breath from the chase. The tavern erupted when all three converged, vines snaking up out of the floorboards to wind around Theron and Eadric, obscuring what they were doing. Eadric leapt back with a crow of victory, only for his grin to shrink as he realised that he'd just helped Theron wrestle the chainmail onto a pair of vines, not Solas, who was suddenly nowhere to be found.

"The fuck...?" Eadric muttered, untangling himself from vines that were no longer interested in him, but more in the chainmail and each other.

"I'm going to count that as a win," Theron decided, staggering back as the vines dropped him, to finish twining around themselves.

Standing where Solas had been was a figure of an elven woman, made entirely of vines, the shape supporting leaves that seemed to be her skin. She fit the chainmail perfectly, and one wooden hand supported a burst of flowers, while the other stretched toward the ceiling. Of note to Theron, it was not the shape of any of the standard representations of the gods.

Eadric gazed at the statue in amazement for a long moment, before calling to the bartender, "Let me buy my girlfriend a drink!"
Chapter Summary

News of Therinfal reaches Samson, who is less than enthused about any of what happened there.

"You're not going to like this, ser," Carroll apologised, as he led a moustachioed Templar into the room.

Samson looked up over the hand he'd had massaging his temples, elbow on the desk, the smell of elfroot filling the room from the heavy tankard of hot tea in front of him. "I'm not liking much, today. What do you ha--" His eyes finally focused on the other Templar. "Paxley? I thought I left you in Kirkwall!"

"You did, ser. But, I was in Val Royeaux, petitioning for lyrium supplies, in the wake of the Lord Seeker's declaration -- you know. The Chantry decided if the Templars weren't going to follow Chantry rules--"

"Then they were going to stop shipping lyrium. And there's no other way to get it, legally, anywhere in the south." Samson looked grim. "You were all going to end up like me."

Paxley nodded. "So, Captain Thrask sent a few of us out to see what we could do. Ruvena's trying to cut a deal with the Carta, with the Viscount's backing. He saw what happened to Cullen. Good man, that Hawke."

And that warmed Samson a bit. Someone was still making sure Kirkwall's Templars were safe, even while the rest of the world fell apart. "How is Cullen?"

"He was... at the Conclave, ser. We... well, no. They probably know, in Kirkwall, but I don't know. I've been away. I got picked up by the Lord Seeker and taken back to Therinfal, with the rest of the Templars in Val Royeaux -- the word was that he had enough lyrium to keep us going. And then the captains switched to red lyrium! And all I could think of was Meredith!" Paxley's hands leapt up, in frustration, but he brought them back down and cleared his throat before going on.

"Pull that chair over and sit," Samson offered, gesturing to the damaged seat Imshael had been climbing on, earlier, to get a better look at some of the décor near the top of the wall. The mage was trying to make him crazy, he thought, and might actually succeed at this rate. But, Paxley's first sentence stayed with him. Cullen had been at the Conclave. Of course he had. And the Conclave had nearly no survivors. That wasn't what he needed, today. Not today or any other day, but really not today. Shit.

Paxley did as he was told, and Carroll moved a stack of papers off Samson's desk so he could sit on the corner.

"So, are you red, yet?" Carroll asked.

Paxley shook his head. "No. But... What I saw, there, didn't look bad. Not like Meredith. Well, not until the end..."
Samson's eyes flashed. "What do you mean, 'the end'?"

"That's what I've come to tell you, ser. The Herald of Andraste came. I didn't see him, but lots of people did. And when he came, Captain Denam gave the order that any who weren't 'stained red' were to be purged. He turned on us, ser." Paxley's teeth started to chatter.

"I'll kill him." Samson's voice was smooth and cold. "Did the Herald get him? Did you? I'll kill him, myself. That was not his decision to make. He was supposed to be protecting you!"

"I don't know, ser. I don't know." Paxley shivered in his seat, gloves clattering against the plate on his thighs. "It was like Kirkwall all over again, ser. I just... I got as many as I could, and we ran. Some of them stayed to fight. Fletcher's company. Some of the red came with us -- Denam's orders didn't sit right with them, either. It was Kirkwall!" Tears ran down his face, his teeth still chattering.

"I want Denam's head," Samson said to Carroll. "And I want it still attached to his body, so I can rip it off him, myself. What the fuck happened, at Therinfal?" He paused and sighed. "And get him a blanket and a cup of... get him the tea for the changing ones."

Carroll slid off the desk and nodded heavily, heading for the door.

"Some people aren't cut out for this," Samson said, quietly, taking a long swallow of his own tea before he got up to crouch on the floor next to Paxley's chair. "You know the story. We've both been through it. They lied to us -- lied about the mages, lied about the lyrium, twisted the Chant into an unrecognisable mess -- and when we refused to go along with it, they cut us off. We're going to die badly. But, Paxley, I can do better. We can do better. Denam was supposed to be looking out for you, getting you all ready for the day we could bring it all down. No more like us, ever."

"Lied to us," Paxley choked out. "He lied to us, too."

"He... probably did," Samson admitted. "But, I didn't choose him. The Lord Seeker left him in charge, and I took it on faith he knew what they were doing. But, that's something we have to watch for. Some people don't do well with the red. Some of them..." A smile crossed his face and he gestured toward the door. "Ser Carroll was so addled he couldn't remember where he was or who was with him. Look at him, now. He's whole, again. The lyrium changed us all, but it was never necessary, until after they got us hooked."

Paxley took a deep breath, still shivering, and his eyes met Samson's. "Of course it is. How else are we supposed to--"

"Funny thing... You never lose your Smite. You get to where you can't stop drinking, and water is never enough. You get to where the sky feels like it's made of lead, and your fingers are so cold you're afraid they'll break, if you bend them. You get to where you remember everything with perfect clarity, but only in your nightmares. But, it's still there. The ability never leaves you. It's still almost as strong as it is when you have all the lyrium the Chantry wants to give you." Samson's smile turned bitter. "We didn't need it; it made us easier to control. But, if you get enough of it -- really enough -- it turns that little bit of power into something much greater. It'll kill us, but we'll go down dangerous. Might as well. It'll kill us if we stop, too."

A startled laugh slipped out of Paxley, as he tried to wipe the snot out of his moustache. "I'm sorry, ser. I just--"

"Crossed most of southern Thedas to bring me news you weren't sure I wanted to hear? Escaped a repeat of the worst day of your life? Paxley, don't be sorry. You got here. Curious how you knew where to find 'here', though."
"I know your handwriting." Paxley laughed, nervously. "Got into the habit of asking messengers where they'd come from, when I saw it. Kirkwall accent did the rest. They know where you're from."

Carroll came back, carrying a steaming mug in one hand, an enormous fur blanket draped over the other arm.

Samson laughed along. "Carroll, I want you to meet Captain Paxley, out of Kirkwall. He's smarter than me."

"Lieutenant Paxley," Paxley corrected, accepting the tea, as Carroll unfolded the blanket onto him.

"Captain Paxley," Samson repeated. "You're Denam's replacement. I need someone I can trust, and you seem dead set on doing the right thing."

"How... in charge... are you, ser?" Paxley blinked at the formerly-fallen Templar beside him.

"The Order has changed, and I am now its general. If the Lord Seeker let this happen at Therinfal, the Blight can take him and keep him. Where was the Knight-Vigilant, for all this? Up his own ass, as usual, probably. Same place he's been since the White Spire." Samson's eyes caught on the blanket, and he looked up at Carroll. "Took mine, didn't you?"

"It's not like you're using it, right now." Carroll shrugged.

"Are we that short on supplies?" Samson asked, suddenly serious.

"Rough winter. I've had some of our men out hunting rams and bears, but it takes time to get usable skins out of that. We'll be all right. It's just a little tight right now, because it's colder than any of us expected."

"Piss," Samson sighed. "Right, well, larger problems need solutions. Carroll, can I trust you not to completely lose your recently renewed mind and start slaughtering my men?"

Carroll snorted. "Done, ser. I'm... not seeing a problem with that."

"Good. You stay here. You're in charge for a bit, and don't let that shit mage push you around. I'll take Maddox with me, so don't worry about him, but keep an eye on the rest of our Tranquil, around that prick. Something wrong with him, and I can't put my finger on it. And try not to kill him, either. The Elder One would be pissed as fuck if anything happened to Imshael, and that's a problem I don't need." Samson closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them, again, Carroll was holding out the tea he'd left on his desk.

"Where are you going?" Carroll asked, as Samson took the tea and emptied the cup.

"Paxley and I are going to go get the rest of his men. I'll send a message to the Elder One, before we go, so there are no surprises." Samson looked up at Paxley, who gazed back with dread at the thought of setting back out again. "Tomorrow's soon enough. See if you can spare good rations for us, and lyrium to take them. I'll take a few of the knights, some archers. Just enough to make sure we get there in one piece. It's going to be all right, Paxley. You'll have supper with us and a good night's sleep. It'll take the edge off. Tomorrow, we go about making the best of this."
"So, all you have to do is keep the man distracted, and we'll come up from below. We might even have Templars!" Harding grinned, walking backward as she went over the plan one last time.

"It would be comforting to have the Templars with us at such a time," Vivienne noted, gazing across the lake as they walked down to the docks. "Their duty is to prevent such as this from happening in the south."

Anders's lips thinned and his jaw popped, but he said nothing.

Fen'Din filled in the gap in conversation. "See if you find any of the Tranquil with them. Clemence says he was put out of the castle, because Alexius didn't want the reminder, but he's the only Tranquil I've seen, since we arrived in the Hinterlands. Even if they were driven out of the village, they'd be somewhere."

"People don't just disappear," Harding assured him. "Tranquil are those guys with the sun on their faces, right? The ones who don't talk much?"

Dorian looked entirely uncomfortable, as Fen'Din explained. "Yes, they've been separated from their magic, supposedly so they won't harm anyone with it. Unfortunately, this also separates them from nearly all of their emotions, the ability to dream, and most of their independent motivation. I can understand the desire to let people live, but this is an appallingly brutal way of preserving life."

Anders looked away, spotting a door banging on a building a bit off the road as they walked down the hill. "I'm just going to go fix that," he choked out, trying not to think of Karl.

"It's not your fault, Jan," Fen'Din called after him.

But, Anders froze in the doorway, door still held in one hand, as he took in the room before him. "We have a... I don't know what this is. You need to see this, Elfhole."

Fen'Din followed, ducking under Anders's arm as he came up to the door. "That is a very large number of skulls. Mortalitasi, I hope, but I do not see the spirits."

"Skulls?" Dorian echoed as he and Vivienne followed them to the door. Past Anders's shoulder he caught a glimpse of shelves of skulls, lined up like trophies. "So I take it this isn't a normal custom this far south?" The cheerful, joking tone was pasted on, but no one called him out on it.

Vivienne pushed her way past them both to get a closer look, brows furrowed in bemusement. Stakes were propped up against the wall, laid across the floor, runes glowing at their ends. "I suspect the skulls are more than just decoration." Something gleamed in the right eye of each skull, glowing with the same glow as the runes.

"How much do you want to bet that this is an instruction manual?" Dorian asked, pointing out a small cupboard tucked into an alcove, a thick tome set atop it.
Anders stepped back and waved for Fen'Din to look at it. "Necromancers first!"

Dorian reached for it before realising Anders was talking to someone else.

Fen'Din opened the volume and noted the letter tucked inside the cover, first. "This is a good bit more serious than anticipated, though I'm still not sure of the exact usage of the final product," he said, passing the letter back to Anders and stepping to the side to allow Dorian to read with him. "I'm not literate in Tevene, I'm afraid. Nevarran was more my choice. Still, I get the impression from the illustrations that these skulls are ... some sort of viewing implement?"

Dorian flipped pages back and forth with irritated snorts, comparing the images and text on multiple pages. "There are some sort of ... magic stones, invisible to the naked eye, that can be seen by those who are 'touched by the gods'. This is a copy of a much older text, but the suggestion is that one must have travelled to the Fade and then returned to the body, and if the body is slain at the moment of reintroduction, the skull will retain some of that capacity, opening the way for others to also see the stones by looking through the lyrium-treated lenses. There are references to things I don't personally understand, but I suspect they may be elven words?" He looked at Fen'Din.

"Don't look at me. I don't speak Elvish, either."

"Apparently, the completed device is called an 'ocularum', which is ... technically accurate, but not terribly descriptive." Dorian shrugged.

"Demons possessing the Tranquil?" Anders squinted at the page in his hands. "That doesn't sound like a reasonable thing to do, at all! What possible benefit would you get, other than an unresisting target?"

"Are you telling me these are the skulls of the Tranquil?" Vivienne said sharply, cutting a look back at them from where she had been studying the runes on the stakes. "The Tranquil Alexius had 'sent away' from the castle?"

"I guess they were sent away from more than that," Dorian muttered, shaking his head. "All for some... magical pebbles, it sounds like." He set down the book with a nauseated look. "This is not the Alexius I knew."

"Are you sure you knew him at all?" Vivienne asked, sharp enough to make him wince.

"You know, I'm beginning to wonder that," Dorian drawled.

"So, what do we do about all this... skull?" Harding asked, from behind all of them.

"I anticipate the reasoning being inexcusable, regardless of what it is. Unless these magic stones grant the power to close the Breach, there is nothing that would justify this much extremely discriminate death." Fen'Din eased the book away from Dorian and placed it in Harding's hands. "Bring that to First Enchanter Torrin, when you pass back through the village. Should anything go wrong, he will need to be aware of it."

"Nothing's going to go wrong," Anders scoffed. "It's one magister. We can take him, if it comes to that."

"Not something I'd want to venture my life on," Dorian remarked, gazing up at Anders sceptically.

"There's a good chance you might be," Vivienne said with an unfriendly smile. "One never knows with magisters, and we've already seen the lengths he will go to." She gestured at the lines of skulls.
Though he wasn't here, Anders could practically hear Fenris's agreeing rumble. But Anders just had to laugh, remembering the messy ends other magisters had come to thanks to them. "We can take him."

Dorian did not look reassured.

"And if you can't," Harding said from the doorway, "that's where you bring in Plan B."

Dorian blinked. "Plan B?"

Harding smiled, patting a pouch at her belt. "Dispel grenades. Like a portable 'Essence of Templar'."

"Ew," Anders remarked, taking that in a completely different direction.

"Not that essence, Jan," Fen'Din sighed, waving to herd them all back toward the door. "So, those are real? I'd heard about them in the context of the Alamarri rebellion following the First Blight, but historians seem unclear on whether they were real."

"Your historians were obviously Tevinter." Harding laughed and stepped aside to let the rest of the group out. "These things have been made in Ferelden since before anyone can remember. They don't work long, but you don't really need long. You just need long enough to get in with a sword. People always wonder why Tevinter had such a hard time against the Alamarri, but I'm pretty sure it's these."

"Terrifying, but potentially useful," Dorian ventured, shooting Harding a respectfully curious look. "Will they stop blood magic?"

"Wouldn't know." Harding shrugged, leading them down toward the docks. "Haven't tried them on blood mages. And I know, you're asking why we didn't break these out at the Crossroads, but if we only took down one side of that fight, we were still going to get ransacked by the other side. It was less dangerous to let them fight each other than to give them a clear route to the village."

"Messy, but probably wise," Vivienne admitted.

"Right, so, we're going to put you on the boat, and then go take care of the other thing." Harding nodded as she stepped onto the planks that ran alongside the lake. "That one," she pointed, "with the green banners and the snake-dragon thing."
Chapter 92

A meeting with Magister Alexius.

The walls of the castle were all heavy stone, and as Fen'Din walked through it, he began to regret not bringing Kinnon along. Of course, if he'd brought Kinnon, someone would likely have had to explain that to Peryn, which was something they were all better without. The walls were stone, the art seemed Fereldan -- it was as if Magister Alexius had taken the time to throw out the locals, but hadn't really moved anything of his own into the place. That was ... honestly less encouraging than it could be. He meant to gather the mages under Fiona's control and return to Tevinter, with them, but perhaps he did not mean to stage an invasion. Conquerors weren't much known for waiting to decorate until they'd actually won.

The footmen leading them up from the docks stepped aside and stopped, leaving Fen'Din and his people standing before the guards at... whatever room Alexius was waiting for them in. Fen'Din had never had much interest in castle design. After a moment of mutual staring, he raised his glowing hand and pointed at the door the guards were blocking.

"You can either step aside or announce us," he declared, with only the faintest irritation.

"The invitation was for Master Fen'Din only. The others will have to remain here," a blond footman explained, stepping out of the shadows he'd been observing from.

"They will accompany me." Fen'Din's expressionless eyes met the footman's. "You will not be depriving me of my attaches, nor will you be depriving Magister Alexius of their excellent conversational skills."

The footman took in the group with a pained look.

Anders looked at Fen'Din with some amusement. To the footman, he said, "Don't worry; they're better than his."

The footman eyed his blue and silver robes, the Grey Warden griffon across his chest. He hesitated but didn't argue further, dipping his head in a respectful bow as he turned to lead the way. Masked mages followed, the trap closing behind them.

They found Alexius in the throne room, sitting on the throne like he owned it, the fire burning behind him throwing its own dramatic lighting as well as heat. Felix stood at his side, the barest smile touching his lips when he made eye-contact with Dorian.

"My Lord Magister," said the footman, "the agents of the Inquisition have arrived." As though Alexius couldn't see that himself.

Alexius rose to his feet, all polite smiles, his attention fixed on Fen'Din. "My friend! It's so good to see you again." His gaze strayed to the three surrounding Fen'Din, lingering on Dorian. "And your associates, of course."

"I present First Enchanter Vivienne of Montsimmard, Warden-Specialist Jan Kasselmann of
Amaranthine, and I have reason to believe you know Master Pavus.” Fen'Din was nearly motionless, but for his lips, a stark contrast to Alexius’s congenial gesturing.

Alexius finally acknowledged that he was staring. ”Dorian.” He nodded.

”Magister.” Dorian waited a moment too long to respond, as if uncertain how to address the man.

”I'm sure we can work out an arrangement that is equitable to all parties.” Alexius nodded confidently, his eyes rising to Fiona, who entered from the back of the room.

”Are we mages to have no voice in deciding our own fate?” she demanded, and Vivienne's shoulders squared.

”Have you not made your decision, Fiona?”

”I must agree with the First Enchanter.” Alexius gestured to Vivienne. ”You would not have turned your followers over to my care if you did not trust me with their lives.”

”I will allow her to advise me,” Fen'Din decided, following with a dismissive gesture just a little too late. ”But, enough pleasantries. You have invited us here for a discussion, and I would hear what it is you propose.”

”It is refreshing to meet someone so goal-oriented,” Alexius replied, relentlessly amiable. He returned to his seat, relaxing back into it, and exchanged the barest look with Felix. ”The Inquisition needs mages to close the Breach, and I have them. So, what shall you offer in exchange?”

”I don't know about the Inquisitor,” Anders said cheerfully, ”but I'm much more interested in hearing about your time magic.”

”I'm afraid I have no idea what you mean,” Alexius said, and he was almost convincing, except for the way tension gathered at his shoulders.

”He knows everything, father,” Felix cut in

Alexius looked at his son, and the smile slipped from his face. ”Felix, what have you done?”

”He's taken a stand to help us fight the demons, like your friend Dorian!” Anders smiled broadly and tossed an arm across Dorian's shoulders. ”How long have you been a Warden, Felix? That's been bothering me.”

Felix froze, caught between his father's questions and Anders's, but Alexius turned first.

”A Warden? What? My son is no such thing! What in the world are you suggesting?” The magister looked stunned.

Anders's eyes squinted in some impression of mild confusion. ”My mistake. It's a ... sense. Wardens can usually spot one another in a crowd,” he hedged, trying to convey to Felix that he'd figured out what had happened, without outing the man in front of everyone.

Fen'Din cut in, before anyone could make Felix more uncomfortable. ”But, this is hardly the point, is it? Why have you asked us here?”

”Do you know what you are?” Alexius asked, pushing himself out of the chair once more. ”You walk into my stronghold with your stolen mark -- a gift you don't even understand -- and think you're in control? You're nothing but a mistake.”
"Yes, obviously." Fen'Din sounded utterly unsurprised. "We interrupted something greater, and this is the result. One can hardly argue the usefulness, in the current situation. But, what is this? Perhaps I don't know, but you imply that you do." He held up his hand.

"It was the culmination of the Elder One's work, his moment of triumph! It was to be a great day for this world, but you, unworthy to even stand in his presence, dared wrest it from his hands!" Alexius accused, gesturing angrily.

"Father, listen to yourself!" Felix said desperately, coming up beside him. "Do you know what you sound like?"

"He sounds exactly like the sort of villainous cliché everyone expects us to be," Dorian said, anger simmering just under the surface.

"Dorian." Alexius's face tightened as he looked at him. "I gave you a chance to be a part of this. You turned me down." He sounded every bit as disappointed in Dorian as Dorian was in him. "The Elder One has power you would not believe. He will raise the Imperium from its own ashes."

"I am so glad we didn't bring Fenris," Anders said out of the corner of his mouth.

"The Wolf lives?" Alexius glanced at Anders in surprise, and then flipped a dismissive hand. "No matter. Even Danarius's Little Wolf poses no threat to us, now."

"Who is this Elder One you serve?" Vivienne asked, managing to sound more curious than disgusted. "Obviously not the Archon, or you would have said as much."

"Soon he will become a god." Alexius's eyes darkened as he strode to the front of the low platform around the throne, Felix looking on in horror. "He will make the world bow to mages once more. We will rule from the Boeric Ocean to the Frozen Seas."

"You can't involve my people in this!" Fiona snapped.

"Hush, darling. Let the adults resolve your mistakes," Vivienne purred, venomously, without so much as a glance.

Dorian stepped forward. "Alexius, this is exactly what you and I talked about never wanting to happen! Why would you support this?"

Alexius almost looked pained by the question.

Out of the corner of his eye, Anders saw one of the guards drop, sinking slowly as though someone were helping him down. He didn't dare turn to look, hoping Alexius's attention would stay on Dorian.

Or on Felix, who started pleading with him next. "Stop it, Father. Give up the Venatori. Let the southern mages fight the Breach, and let's go home."

"No." Alexius's voice wavered with emotion as he turned, laying a hand on Felix's arm and squeezing, as though afraid to let him go. "It's the only way, Felix. He can save you!"

"Save me?" Felix spat out, eyes narrowing.

Vivienne threw a questioning look at Dorian, but he just shrugged and shook his head.

"There is a way," Alexius said softly. "The Elder One promised. If I undo the mistake at the
"I'm going to die," Felix cut him off, pulling his arm free. "You need to accept that." His words came out strangled, as though forced through a tight throat.

"Seize them, Venatori!" Alexius commanded, as Anders slowly realised what he was seeing.

"Wait! I can save him!" Anders shouted. "And all you have to do is take his advice!"

Felix's eyes darted to Anders, but Alexius shook his head, a pained look on his face. "The Elder One demands this man's life!"

Harding's scouts slipped out from behind the pillars lining the room, breaking necks and slitting throats as they approached.

"Magister Alexius!" Fen'Din's eyes gleamed gold in the firelight, as he tipped his chin up in that way that frightened the apprentices. "This was meant to be a peaceable negotiation! Now, look what you've started! Your men are dead, but Jan can still help your son. Look around you. There's still a way out of this."

"You are a mistake!" Alexius insisted, glaring down at Fen'Din, as he stepped closer. "You should never have existed!" As he spoke, he lifted a hand, already glowing with magical energy, a green light darker than the Fade magic of the rifts.

Anders fell into a battle stance, already reaching for a spell.

"No!" Dorian shouted, a spell of his own hitting first, a wave of similar green energy arcing out from a sweep of his hand. It knocked him back, knocked Alexius's spell off course.

The air seemed to split, a hole forming, like a rift but with that darker energy.

"Shit," Fen'Din sighed, as the darker rift tugged him forward. "Again?"
"You know what we're going to find in Redcliffe, don't you? It's going to be a magical orgy. They're going to have completely forgotten we existed," Varric insisted, as they came down the road.

"Isn't that what everyone says about mages? I mean, that sounds like a lot of stereotypical nonsense." Bull laughed and stretched. "I've been to Tevinter. They're not all like that."

"Maybe not all mages, but I know Jan. And most of the mages I've known were Hawkes, so maybe it's a Hawke thing, but magical orgy. I'm telling you." Varric shook his head. "And it's not even just the mages, with the Hawkes. You should ask Ser Cullen about his husband, some time. His parties are almost as legendary as his grandfather's."

"I need to ask him?" Adaar said, far too amused by this conversation. "The implication being that you haven't written all about it?"

"There are some things you need to hear from the horse's mouth," Varric said humbly. "Or the dog's mouth, I suppose."

"Better than the dog's arse," Sera said, crinkling her nose and waving a hand in front of her face as though she smelled something awful.

"If you met him, you'd agree that Lord Dog talks through his ass," Varric replied while the qunari laughed. "There's not much difference!"

"I'll be sure to tell Cullen you said that," Cassandra said, sighing with exasperation that was more for show at this point. Varric could see the way she was fighting not to smile.

"Cullen would agree with me."

The tavern was a welcome sight as they turned down the road.

"It's because you're an asshole, Godwin!" Eadric shouted into the tavern, before he slammed the door behind him and stormed down the hill. "Fucking shem," he swore, as he raised his eyes from the cobbles to the two towering qunari and the woman with Andraste's hairy eyeball on her chest. "Oh, shit."

"Excuse me," Cassandra said, gazing curiously at the elf who'd nearly walked right into her. "We are looking for Enchanter Fen'Din. I understand he can be found here."

"Shit, shit, shit," Eadric breathed, stepping back. "He's, um, in a meeting. You can probably wait in the tavern, though? I mean, if you don't mind being surrounded on all sides by a crushing number of sh-- er, people."

"Hey, kid, take it easy." Varric eased himself out from between the qunari. "We're friends. We heard
he might have run into some trouble, so we came down to help him out."

"That's great, but I still don't know you, and I don't know what's going on. All I know is Fen'Din's in
a meeting, and he's not going to be back for a few hours." Eadric shrugged. "And now I have to go
get a healer, so..."

As Eadric darted around them, Varric called after him. "A healer? Where's Jan?"

"With Fen'Din!" Eadric called back, hurrying down the hill.

Adaar's eyes followed the sounds of pained groaning to a robed figure slumped on the floor, hands
held to a broken nose. No one was helping him.

"I assume that's Godwin?" Adaar drawled.

"He really did deserve it," one mage said, coming right up next to Varric and using his shoulder as
an armrest.

Adaar expected him to get a crossbow bolt in the ribs, but instead Varric let out a barking laugh and
clapped the mage on the back, hard enough to knock over anyone who wasn't a Force mage.

"Artie? What the Blight are you doing here?"

Artie gestured around him as though that should be obvious. "We're in a bar. That really shouldn't
come as a surprise."

"As usual, my husband is excellent at stating the obvious." Fenris appeared from somewhere else in
the bar, gazing contemplatively at his knuckles. "I shouldn't have hit him."

"I don't think I've ever seen you feel bad about clocking somebody who so obviously had it coming,
by all accounts." Varric's eyebrows arced up in surprise.

"I don't feel bad about hitting him. I regret whatever I did to my hand, in the process." Fenris
squinted at the swollen edges of the lyrium lines on the back of his hand. "And-- Er, Jan's still out
'negotiating' with Magister Alexius. I could have kept this simple, but the mages wanted to try a less
violent approach."

"You were gonna stab him with your great big sword, right?" Sera asked, clapping Fenris on the
back, as she came back from the bar with a tall drink in her other hand. "That's where magisters
belong. On the other end of something pointy. Bleeding."

"I like her," Fenris said to Varric. "No, I thought I might tear his heart out of his chest and hand it to
him. Stabbing lacks that personal touch."

"Ooh, that gets style points!" Sera said, holding her drink up with a nod of approval.

"It gets blood everywhere," Artemis drawled. "But yes, style points."

"Right. Introductions!" Varric gestured grandly at Artemis and Fenris. "This is Artie, and this is
Fenris. Artie and Fenris, this is Adaar, Sera, and..." He looked around, only to find the others had
retreated to the bar to get something to eat. He sighed and waved a hand at the bar. "And some
hungry members of the Inquisition."

"And thirsty," Sera added, voice distorted by the tankard raised to her lips.

"Varric assured me there would be a magical orgy," Adaar said, mock seriously. "Have I missed it?"
"Sorry," Artie replied in kind. "Jan organises all of the orgies." He looked Adaar over curiously, stare lingering on his glowing hand. "So you're the other..." He fished for a word and just settled on waving his hand eloquently.

"Yes, I am the other..." Adaar mimicked the gesture. "Assuming the first one is Fen'Din."

"Where is Fen'Din?" Cassandra cut in.

Kinnon recognised that voice, even across the tavern. "Cassandra!" He waved and got up, making his way over. "They went across to the castle. There's... It's a disaster. First Enchanter Torrin's here with the rest of Kinloch Hold, but the Magister took all the Templars prisoner. Which, I mean, I never thought much of Hadley, but that's a bit much. And the other mages, the ones who came with Grand Enchanter Fiona, from Orlais... From what I've been able to piece together, Magister Alexius threatened them with the Templars you found up the road. I'm not sure how anyone could have seen those Templars as a serious threat, but he made it sound bad enough that Fiona made a deal for protection, and her mages are ..." He wavered.

"Enslaved," Fenris filled in. "She sold their freedom for a promise of safety against a threat that was never real -- at least not here."

"Yeah, but you remember what we all heard about what happened in Val Royeaux," Varric pointed out. "I get what she was afraid of. That was a massacre, and she's got most of the survivors."

"Either way, Fen'Din's gone to ... well, to distract Alexius, really, while the scouts free the Templars in the dungeons. They're hoping the Templar force will let them take Alexius alive, so we can figure out what's going on. Fen'Din still thinks it's the Black Divine. Jan's blaming the Archon. They're both sure whoever blew up the Conclave was Tevinter, though." Kinnon looked nervous and kept glancing at the door. "Peryn's with the scouts... I need another drink."

Adaar gave him a sympathetic look, clapping a hand on his shoulder and going with him back towards the bar. "I'm sure he'll be fine," he said with a conviction they both knew he couldn't back up. "Fen'Din and the others are... surprisingly competent. Jan's told you that story about him setting a magister on fire, right?"

"More than once," Kinnon said with a crooked smile.

"Then you know Alexius is the one who should be worried!"

For all his bluster, Adaar knew it was a risky plan, but he hadn't come here expecting to find magisters in control. He ordered a round of drinks, hoping they'd have word before he finished his first.

Solas appeared at Kinnon's elbow, leaning past him to order a plate of dumplings. "This is a dangerous situation, and one I might not have handled in this fashion, but we will either see them soon, or we will go handle this differently. Magister Alexius may be quite powerful, for a mage, but he cannot bring all of the Imperium to bear. At worst, there are only his own troops, and I have no doubt that with good leadership, we are strong enough and numerous enough to remove him from power. I have seen his like brought down, before."

"You think we're going to have to go in, don't you." It wasn't a question, and dread hung behind Kinnon's eyes.

"I try not to make predictions." Solas picked up a fried dumpling, letting the grease drip back into the bowl. "Would you like one? A dumpling, not a prediction."
Across the room, Blackwall studied the people around him, trying to get a feel for the inhabitants of the village. Frightened, mostly, though a few stood out with a strange confidence. A woman in traditional Rivaini garb comforted a man in obvious pain, and beside them, another man had a look Blackwall recognised: the look of someone pretending to be something greater. He saw it on his own face every morning.

The man looked up and caught him staring. "Yes, I'm Master Levyn. I'm sorry, I don't recognise your face. Did I bring you to the coast?"

"No," Blackwall realised he'd been staring and shook his head. "Apologies. There was just something familiar about you."

Jowan gave Blackwall a considering look, gaze pausing on the griffon on his chestplate. "You're a Warden, aren't you?"

"That's what they call me, yes." The corners of Blackwall's beard lifted in a smile.

Jowan hoped that wasn't a bad sign. Wardens seemed to pop up at the worst moments of his life. "I take it you know A-- Jan?"

"Not well. At least not yet." Blackwall leaned against the wall, turning so that he could talk to 'Master Levyn' while looking out at the rest of the tavern, gaze often straying to the door. "Has he been behaving himself?"

At that, Jowan laughed, and beside him, Niall snorted loudly.

"I'm sorry, Jan behaving himself? Has that ever been witnessed?" Jowan cackled.

"Jan doesn't behave himself. Other people just tie him to things, so it's harder for him to misbehave." Niall shook his head and instantly regretted it. "I should start drinking with the Tranquil," he muttered. "So much quieter."

"That sounds like a story," Blackwall encouraged, pulling out a seat on the other side of the table, to join them.

"Well, you know he's a Mage-Warden, right?" Jowan asked, eyebrows raised. "Let's just say the Circle didn't agree with him."

"The Circle didn't agree with anyone," Niall groaned, squinting at Blackwall, as he offered a hand. "Enchanter Niall, Kinloch Hold. I hold the Circle responsible for my death."

"Oh, it doesn't look like the hangover's killed you, yet!" Blackwall grinned and chuckled quietly. "Drinking contest?"

"No, he means he's actually dead," Jowan replied, and on the other side of Niall, Asha nodded.

"He's been dead for ten years. Pretty cute for a spirit." She smiled and kissed Niall's cheek.

"A spirit?" Blackwall echoed, eyebrows shooting up.

"Fresh from the Fade!" Asha said, half draped over Niall. "A bit like us." She tipped her head at Jowan with a wry look.

Blackwall's eyes bugged. "You're--?"

"We're not spirits, too," Jowan cut in, shaking his head emphatically. "It's..." He sighed. "It's a long
story."

"In attempting a dashing rescue of his girlfriend -- excuse me, ex-girlfriend -- he summoned some
goose and accidentally dumped us all into the Fade!" Asha offered Blackwall a beaming smile, while
Jowan's expression soured.

"That... doesn't exactly clarify things," Blackwall said carefully.

"You enjoy telling that story a little too much," Jowan sighed. "And I would like to emphasise the
'accidental' part."

"Everything's accidental with you, Jo-- what the fuck is your name?" Niall sighed and rubbed his
face.

"Levyn," Jowan reminded him. "Maybe you should go sit with the Tranquil for a bit, Niall. You're
looking grey."

"Everything in this place is--!" Niall stopped in the middle of the sentence and looked back at
Blackwall, for a long moment. "Everything's accidental, with him."

"Well, I mean, except that one time, but that was terrible, and I'm not doing it again." Jowan shook
his head and held up his hands.

"Was that Lily or the demons?" Niall inquired blandly, eyebrows drifting up.

"Anyway, you wanted to know about Jan, right?" Jowan asked Blackwall, his smile a little too
bright. "He's trouble, but everything works out for him, in the end."

"Oh, please, most of the trouble he was involved in was the grand act of hiking up his robes for
anyone who looked at him for more than three seconds," Niall scoffed, picking up Jowan's drink and
finishing it. "And running away. He was good at that, but terrible at staying gone."

Blackwall's eyes glazed over as he pictured that a little too literally and a little too well. "I'm not sure
if that's what I meant when I asked if he was behaving, but I'm starting to regret the question."

"Oh, and we haven't even given you details," Jowan said with a smile that was all teeth, eager to
keep the conversation on a topic that wasn't him.

"And I am fine with that," Blackwall replied.

"I'm not!" Asha huffed. "I demand details!"

"You said before that I was looking grey," Niall sighed. "That wouldn't help."

"So he ran from the Circle?" Blackwall asked, guiding the topic. "That's how he became a Warden?"

"Probably," Jowan nodded and glanced at Niall. "I just saw him again for the first time in a decade,
when we got here."

"I was dead at the time." Niall shrugged.

"I'm from Rivain," Asha volunteered.

"Well, he definitely didn't get recruited out of the Circle. That was..." Jowan's face fell and Niall
punched him solidly in the arm.
"Don't you dare. I already have a headache."

"Solona. They took Solona." Jowan shrugged. "What happened after that, I don't know."

"Solona?" Blackwall's eyes lit up. "As in Commander Amell? You knew her?"

"Maker, she was a terror." Niall rolled his eyes. "One of the First Enchanter's favourites. She was one of the two youngest mages to get drafted into his Fade-walking experiments. Fen'Din was the other one, and you know what he's like. She was a little better about knowing when she was awake."

"A lot better," Jowan huffed. "And she got away with almost anything she wanted, too."

Blackwall sat back a bit, thinking that over. Solona, Fen'Din, and Jan all came from the same place? "So Kinloch Hold just kept making heroes," he said with some amazement.

"It kept making survivors," Niall countered, blurring a bit at the edges.

"There's something funny about a dead man saying that," Jowan said, keeping his tone light. With an eye on Niall, he changed the subject. "So how was Therinfal Redoubt?"

Blackwall blew out a sigh. "It didn't do so well at making survivors."
Dorian staggered heavily against Fen'Din. "Shit--"

Across the room -- suddenly a very different room than they'd been in -- a conversation stopped.

"Blood of the Elder One!" one pointy-helmed figure exclaimed.

"Where'd they come from?" the other asked, charging toward the unexpected arrivals.

Dorian's fireball struck the pair at almost the same time as Fen'Din's hex, and they went down easily under the volley.

"Maybe we should have left one alive. I don't know where we are." Fen'Din's face remained still as he crouched beside the smouldering corpses to get a better look. "They look Tevinter, but... I didn't think the Imperium was still using these fashions. We have statues dressed like this in the cellar of the Circle."

"If you can call this 'fashion'," Dorian muttered, toeing at one of the pointy helmets. "Terribly impractical, whatever this is supposed to be. Are they supposed to be able to see through those?" He gestured at the holes punched into the helmet roughly at eye level.

Shaking his head, Dorian took a closer look at their surroundings, slogging through knee-high water. This was obviously no longer the throne room. "Displacement. Interesting. It's probably not what Alexius intended. The rift must have moved us... to what? The closest confluence of arcane energy?"

"The last thing I remember, we were in the castle hall." Fen'Din took in their surroundings. "This looks distinctly more like... dungeons? Docks? Watch your step in the flood."

"Let's see. If we're still in the castle, it isn't... Oh! Of course! It's not simply where -- it's when!" Dorian's eyes brightened, and he went on, excitedly. "Alexius used the amulet as a focus. It moved us through time!"

"I'd ask if we'd gone forward or back, but I'm ill inclined to believe there was red lyrium in the cellars of Redcliffe Castle all this time." Fen'Din nodded at the red glow that percolated through the room from elsewhere. "I'm sure Jowan would have mentioned it. How far have we gone? Can you tell?"

Dorian smiled excitedly and pointed at Fen'Din. "That is an excellent question! ...so no, no I can't, but we'll just have to find our own answers, won't we?" He waded through the water, the bottom of his robes soaked through. "Let's look around, see where the rift took us. Then we figure out how to get back... if we can."

Some of Dorian's cheerfulness faded at that thought. "I don't suspect Alexius planned for this to happen. I believe his original plan was to remove you from time completely. Then you never would
have been at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, never would have mangled his Elder One's plans. A neat trick, but I think your surprise in the castle hall made him reckless. He tossed us into the rift before he was ready. When I countered it, the magic went wild, and here we are."

"Remove me from time? What a fascinating concept!" Fen'Din's face remained unmoved, but his voice conveyed his interest.

"I don't even want to think about what this will do to the fabric of the world." Dorian rolled his eyes. "We didn't 'travel' through time so much as punch a hole through it and toss it in the privy. But, don't worry. I'm here. I'll protect you."

This time, Fen'Din laughed. "No, no. Help me, but stay behind me. They can't hurt me. I'm already dead."

Dorian tilted his head to the side and paused, looking for words. "I can't say you're what I've come to expect in possessed corpses. Bit of a specialist. Came up on the necromantic arts."

"Spirit, Entropy, or Mechanical?" Fen'Din asked, eyes bright in the dim room.

"Wisps," Dorian replied, and Fen'Din snorted.

"When we return to where we belong, I'll show you some things I'm sure you'll be very interested in. But, no, I'm not a corpse. I left that behind in Halamshiral." Fen'Din finally remembered to gesture, awkwardly flipping a hand in a way meant to be dismissive, but more like a gesture toward the door. "What about the others? Do you think they've also been pulled through?"

Dorian hummed as he considered, his moustache twisting with his expression. "I doubt it was large enough to bring the whole room through. Alexius wouldn't risk catching himself or Felix in it. They're probably still where and when we left them. In some sense, anyway."

"Do you know the 'Elder One' Alexius mentioned?" Fen'Din asked, squinting at the arrangement of stones in one wall. "You mentioned having worked with him, before, so I'm hoping that's come up."

"That was after I left. This isn't like the Alexius I knew." Dorian shrugged helplessly, before his face hardened with irritation. "But, I'd suspect the leader of the Venatori. Some magister aspiring to godhood. It's the same old tune. 'Let's play with magic we don't understand! It will make us incredibly powerful!' Evidently, it doesn't matter if you rip apart the fabric of time in the process."

"So, I'm not mad to suspect the Black Divine." Fen'Din finally glanced down, noticing the water had soaked up his robes past the knee.

"Yes, you are," Dorian laughed. "The Venatori are... extremists. Lunatics. Trying to bring back the height of the Imperium. Neither the Divine nor the Archon take them as seriously as they demand to be taken. But, at the same time, I wouldn't expect any official assistance with them. If they fail in whatever it is they're doing here, they can be decried as madmen. If they succeed, it was all for the glory of the Imperium."

"Ah, politics. How delightful," Fen'Din drawled. "Well, I trust you know more about time than I do, seeing that you recognised the spell that brought us here. I trust you also have some plan to return us to where, and more importantly when, we began?"

"I have some thoughts on that," Dorian replied cheerfully. "They're lovely thoughts, like little jewels. But let's get out of here. All this glowing red is giving me a headache."

They found the key out of the prison on one of the guards who had attacked them moments ago,
which was convenient, really. But the red glow followed them through the gate and past more prison cells, red lyrium growing like fungus, creeping through the cracks in the masonry like tree roots. The lantern light was superfluous, the way the lyrium let off a light of its own, thick enough to illuminate the halls.

Dorian hoped the amount of lyrium would thin out once they climbed the steps to the upper cells, but if anything it only got worse. "This is a mess," he muttered. "It's like they adopted a dog and let it run loose and piss all over the furniture."

"Sounds like my brother," came a tired voice from one of the cells. "Except his problem was peeing on demons."

Fen'Din picked his way around the lyrium in the floor. "Mack? What are you doing here?"

"Same thing everyone else is. Where have you been?" Cormac dragged himself to the barred door. "We thought you were dead!"

"To be fair, I thought we were dead," Dorian muttered, examining the lock, before opening it.

"To be fair, I am dead," Fen'Din pointed out, holding out a hand to steady a much-thinner Cormac, as he stepped stiffly out of the cell. "Magister Alexius tried something entirely experimental and threw us through time. It's been minutes, for us. How long have we been gone?"

"I don't know," Cormac admitted. "Probably almost a year. I've been in here since you didn't come back -- we tried to bring up an assault through -- well, through here, actually -- but there was a massive rift, demons everywhere. Even the Templars couldn't handle it. We've been split up, since, but I know Anders is that way. I can hear Justice. I'm surprised they haven't killed him, but nothing's quite made sense, here."

"YOU HAVE WRONGED US ALL." The unmistakeable sound of Justice echoed in from a side passage. "AND WE WILL RISE. WE WILL CRUSH TEVINTER AND ITS LEGACY INTO THE EARTH AS TEVINTER ONCE CRUSHED ARLATAN."

Cormac pointed down the hall. "If you've come to crush the legacy of Tevinter, we should probably get him. I don't think he'll forgive either of us, if we leave him behind, for this one."

"I'm not certain I would forgive us, either," Fen'Din joked, taking in the room and its assorted implements. "We'll need to find you some kind of armour, maybe a staff, but if the Venatori are mostly mages, those should be easy to come by. We'll see what falls off the next one we set fire to."

"That's how I like to solve most of my problems," Dorian quipped, trying not to stare at Mack. Only a year, he'd said? He looked like he'd aged ten. "Set something on fire, wait to see what drops."

For all his joking, he clutched his staff tighter as they followed the sound of that booming voice, a voice Dorian could feel in his bones, and he assumed the 'Anders' Mack was referring to was Jan, considering he didn't know many people from the Anderfels and fewer still mage Anders. If the change in Mack's appearance was startling, it was nothing compared to Anders, who barely looked human. He wasn't sure if it was the lyrium's light that made his eyes and the fissures along his skin look red or if they had turned that way themselves, but either way the light deepened the shadows along hollow cheeks and a gaunt face.

"Who's got the keys?" Cormac asked, gesturing to the lock on the door. "He'll perk up a bit once we get him out of there. It's blood magic, I think. I tried washing it off the walls in my cell, but that's not just blood. It's like it's been sealed into the stone, somehow."
"He'll perk up?" Dorian looked gobsmacked at the idea. "If this isn't perky, I have serious questions about Southern mages."

"He's... not just a mage." Cormac waffled about telling Dorian the truth. "The runes... well, you saw me. I can just about feel my legs again, now. He's carrying a lot more power than I am, so he's still standing and shouting, but I think that's about all he's got. Once we get him out of there, he'll be better. He's the best healer in Thedas, as far as I know."

Fen'Din plucked the key from Dorian's hand and tried it in the lock, jiggling it a few times, before the rusted metal gave way. "Come out here, so I can see you. I don't want to step in that." He gestured at the markings on the floor, as he swung the door open with his other hand.

Anders stared at him as though trying to decide if he could trust him -- or maybe trying to decide if he could trust that he was there -- before stepping over the markings of the floor, back onto the other side of the bars. His eyes still glowed, the cracks up and down his skin still glowed, and the air around him smelled like a thunderstorm, heavy with magic.

"Now, when you say he's 'not just a mage'..." Dorian asked, leaning towards Cormac.

Cormac elbowed Dorian out of his way and wrapped his arms around Anders. "We've won, before. We'll win again," he promised. "It will be good and righteous."

"He's possessed," Fen'Din answered, with a lazy glance at Dorian. "That was once a spirit of Justice, but I'll take bets on what it is, now."

"A de--" Dorian started and Fen'Din's hand clapped over his mouth, sharply.

"Do you want to survive this experience, in your current form?" Fen'Din demanded. "Don't use that word. Or the 'a' word."

Dorian opened his mouth and slobbered all over Fen'Din's palm, to absolutely no effect. Finally, he batted the hand away and wiped off his face. "Am I wrong?" It wasn't an actual question.

"Yes," Fen'Din assured him. "Or you would have been, a year ago. I have some faith you still are."

Beside them, Cormac had dragged Anders into a smouldering kiss, whispered promises spilling out from the corners of his mouth, every time he took a breath. The contact had always calmed Justice, and he hoped it still would.

Dorian thought he saw a flicker of something in Anders's -- Justice's? -- eyes, something that spoke of recognition, though he still seemed nothing like the man Dorian had met.

"THEY WILL PAY FOR THEIR TRANSGRESSIONS," Justice boomed with a determined set of his jaw.

"My thoughts exactly!" Dorian chirped, only to wonder why he did when that drew the attention of those glowing eyes. "Or, better yet, we find a way to reverse what has happened, and then there will be no transgressions to punish. Or fewer transgressions, at any rate."

"Is that something we can do?" Cormac asked, his hands still wandering Anders's body lustily. "If that's something we can do, I think we should. I like the world you left much better than this one. Cullen brought everyone down from Haven, marched on the castle, but by the time he got down here, there was a fucking dragon. I don't know how many of us survived. Not many, I'd wager, but I know the Elder One wanted the mages -- as many as he could get. Still don't know who the guy is, but apparently he's got dragons at his disposal, so he's a little more dangerous than any of us"

"A fucking dragon. That's just great. We're going to go back, and there's going to be a fucking dragon." Dorian turned a bland look on Fen'Din. "I don't suspect they teach dragonslaying hexes in the South."

"Unfortunately, no. But, the difference is that this time, we'll know there's a dragon. We'll have an awareness of the strategies in play right from the start." Fen'Din's eyes narrowed. "But, we still have to get back. And to do that, I expect we need more people willing to assist us in this venture." He glanced around at the empty cells surrounding where Anders had been kept. "Are there other survivors?"

"NO ONE WAS KEPT HERE," Justice filled in, finally responding to something that was happening. "THE VENATORI FEARED MY REACH, AND NOW THEY WILL FEAR MY STRENGTH." One hand unclenched and the arm shakily gestured to a hallway, before Justice reasserted his control.

"There'll be more guards down there," Cormac pointed out. "I'm not sure why they haven't come up to see what's going on, but I'm betting they have no idea what to do if he gets loose."

"Well, then why don't we pay them a visit before they figure it out?" Dorian asked with a sweet smile, adjusting his grip on his staff.

As they wandered through red-lit halls, Dorian had to wonder if the dungeons had always been this extensive or if Alexius had built them up to house prisoners of the war he'd started. An optimistic view, considering how many cells were empty. Dorian suspected that was because at some point, someone somewhere had decided that keeping that many prisoners alive wasn't worth it.

Dorian reminded himself that was this was all a 'what if', a 'maybe', but it felt real in the moment, with a Venatori guard's shouts echoing back to them from further down the hall.

"So much for stealth," he sighed, stepping to the side to evade the bolt of ice streaking towards his face.

Not that stealth had been an option anyway, with the way Justice glowed and bellowed.

"Are we taking prisoners?" Cormac asked, shields springing to his fingers as blades and spells came toward them.

"No," Fen'Din replied, as Justice lunged forward, tearing the sword out of a guard's hand and punching it up through the man's skull. "Apparently, we're not."

Two more guards burst into flame as they raced down the hall, and a third slipped and caught himself on the sword still jutting from the first guard's head.
"Andraste blessed me. Andraste blessed me." The Chant crept through the silence as the sounds of fighting died down. "My tears are my sins, my sins, my sins. Andraste guide me, Andraste guide me..."

Fen'Din turned toward the sound, recognising the messenger who had first welcomed them to Redcliffe.

"He's lost his fucking mind." The second voice was almost Niall's. "It's no good talking to him."

Almost, but the lips forming the words weren't Niall's at all. They were Asha's, and they turned to see her leaning against the bars, her eyes an inhuman black. The red glow made her look blurry around the edges, red wisps floating around her.

"I suspect I might have too, to be honest," Dorian said, creeping closer to peer into the cell, but no, there was no one next to Asha.

"Took you long enough." There were traces of Asha's voice there too, in the undertones, though not nearly as strong. She was staring at Fen'Din. "How many times does a guy have to die to get out of this mess?"

"Hopefully, only one." Fen'Din unlocked the cell. "Not to be rude, but why are you still... alive?" He wondered if that was quite the word he was looking for, considering both that they were all dead anyway, and that Niall was especially dead -- dead even by the rules of this kingdom.

"Same reason he is." Asha pointed to Anders, her voice rising through Niall's. "A question of whether possession makes us less vulnerable to the red lyrium."

Niall returned a moment later. "It's hard. The lyrium remembers, and it screams. We've been lucky. Fenris... wasn't."

"Wasn't or isn't," Cormac asked through clenched teeth.

"Wasn't, I think." Niall shrugged Asha's shoulders. "We can't hear him any more. We haven't heard him in... how long have we been here?"

"About a year," Fen'Din replied.

"Months. It's been months, then." Niall rubbed their face. Her face. His face. "I lost track after the Elder One took Orlais -- the Empress is dead and there's an entire army of demons out there doing his will. Whoever he is. I thought it might just be a magister, but... that level of control over that many demons? There's something else going on here. It may be a demon, and I say that with a certain knowledge of what demons are like."

"A demon with that much power?" Dorian asked, somewhere between dubious and concerned.
"Demons have whatever power they're given," Niall said, and Dorian wasn't sure which he found more unsettling: the black eyes or the mismatched voice. "There's much ugliness to be found in the Fade. Or outside of it now, I guess, but that's what happens when you start poking holes in the Veil." Asha's eyes drifted down to Fen'Din's glowing hand. "Might be a bit too late for you to try to patch it up, too. What happened to you?"

"Alexius and time magic happened," Dorian sighed. "It's only been a few minutes for us. And I mean that literally, not in a 'time flies when you're having fun' way."

"You're still going to try, aren't you?" Niall asked, eyes drifting up to Fen'Din's face. "You always were that way -- you and him and Karl."

"I WILL TEAR DOWN THE IMPERIUM ONE MAGISTER AT A TIME," Justice promised, his voice ringing off the stone.

"I feel like I should be much more frightened by that pronouncement than I am, but we have much larger problems to deal with before I have to figure out if I'm a magister, yet." Dorian offered a half smile and shrugged. "We came in that way, and the only other way out is this way, so I'm just going to assume any more prisoners in need of a rescue would be through the door we haven't opened yet."

"He does like one magister," Cormac muttered, following Dorian into the next bank of cells. "But, I'm not sure an appreciation of Magister Tilani's really going to save anyone, today. It's definitely not going to stop me from ..." He glanced back over his shoulder at the rest of the group and sighed. "But, keeping shields on all of you might."

"You know Maevaris? Wonderful woman. Maybe I'd have stayed at home, if my father wanted to marry me to her. I feel like we'd have gotten along on the important issues." Dorian stretched out a hand, fire leaping from his fingers to knock a guard off the bridge ahead of them. "Somehow, I feel like this wasn't part of the original construction," he noted, examining the metal pathways that hung over a steep drop beneath.

"I'd hope not, or I would have questions for the last Arl," Niall said, walking for a moment like he was trying to remember how. "I take it this isn't standard Tevinter construction?"

"No, thank Andraste. Though you could have added that to the list of reasons why I left."

The bridges were open without so much as guard rails, leaving them exposed when more Venatori poured out of the door. Magic sang past them in streaks of hot and cold, lightning sizzling past Dorian's face close enough that he raised a hand to make sure his moustache was still intact.

Justice didn't even slow, taking the occasional hit as he charged, his roar of outrage enough to startle the Venatori back a few steps, to give his friends the time they needed to cross.

A grey cloud burbled around Asha, as she grew closer to the Venatori, and several leapt off the bridge to get away from her. Away from Niall, Fen'Din realised, watching the cloud develop far too many rows of teeth. At least it wasn't close enough to--

Cormac wavered, eyes filling with grief, and Fen'Din began to sing, just loud enough for Niall and Justice to hear him, as Dorian nudged another Venatori into the depths. Justice pulled a sword from the grasp of a guard, before backhanding him after his compatriots with the other hand. Then he turned on Fen'Din.

"ENOUGH." Justice's voice echoed in the tall, bare chamber. "THE SONG IS DEAD. THE SONG IS LIES."
Beside him, the cloud still faded around Asha, until only Niall's expressions on the wrong face remained.

The last few Venatori collapsed in on themselves with sounds like bursting eggs, as Cormac's vision cleared and his eyes found focus.

Dorian winced at the display. The battle was necessary but brutal in a way that told him his companions had seen too much over the past year. "Everyone alright?" he asked, eyeing Justice and Niall-Asha -- Niasha? -- carefully.

"WE LIVE," Justice answered as amicably as expected, pressing on.

Asha's body was still blurred with a smoky outline, but at least there was only the expected number of teeth. "Mostly," she said with Niall's voice and a thin smile.

With the bridge deserted, they passed through the opposite doors without further incident, only to find themselves in the midst of another set of mostly empty cells, red lyrium squeezing its way through cracks in the floor.

"To what do I owe this pleasure? It's taken you long enough." A commanding voice, like silk and razors, poured out of one of the cells.

"Time travel," Fen'Din replied, unlocking Vivienne's cell. "Alexius tried to erase me. He missed."

"Don't be ridiculous, dear." Vivienne moved like a woman twice her age. "Time is a constant."

"Unfortunately, that's not true, any more," Dorian sighed. "And I worked on that development, so I'm very familiar with the forces involved. It's not a good idea, but it's definitely possible, to a point."

"Well, if you know what's going on, how do you suggest we fix this?" Vivienne asked, relief spreading across her features as she made it out of the cell. "I hope you're not counting on Fiona for assistance. She's been otherwise detained."

"No, I thought we'd find Alexius, and then I'd hit him until he saw sense," Dorian drawled, with a dramatic flash of one hand.

"The guards say he never leaves the throne room, any more." Vivienne stretched, subtly, trying to get the feeling back in her limbs. "Given what I've watched happen here, I'd wonder if it's even possible to reach him, any more, though I expect we'll find that out."

Dorian glanced back at Justice, Cormac, and Asha and almost pitied anyone who tried to stop them. "Oh, I think we'll be able to figure something out between the lot of us."

Vivienne smiled like someone who had almost forgotten how.

"You said something about Fiona?" Dorian pressed, and that smile twisted back into something bitter.

"She's around here somewhere. But like I said, she will be of no use to you."

Ominous, but it wasn't until they found her that Dorian understood what she meant.

"Maker," he breathed, the red glow coming from her cell almost hurting his eyes.

Her cell was bloated with lyrium, but so was her body. Pain had added lines to Fiona's face, and she leaned against the wall, unable to move. Sluggishly, she looked up and stared at Fen'Din.
"You're... alive? How?" Just the act of breathing seemed to pain her, but she continued talking anyway. "I saw you... disappear... into the rift."

Dorian darted a look at Justice, wondering if there was enough left of his host to try and heal her, though he suspected they were too late for that.

Fen'Din stepped closer. "It's really you..."

"What's left of me."

"How do we get you out of that?" Fen'Din asked, eyeing the crystal. "Being lyrium, it's likely no more safe for me to touch it than for you to be stuck in it."

"You don't." Fiona shook her head, where it rested against her trapped arm. "It's too late for me, just as it's too late for him." She nodded at the bars across from her, which held another crystal, this one with just a dim shadow in it, three fingers lined with red lyrium hanging unmoving from its surface.

"Fenris..." Cormac staggered and Niall recoiled from his grief.

"Can you tell us the date?" Dorian cut in, stepping up to the bars of Fiona's cell. "It's very important."

"Harvestmere... 9:42 Dragon." Fiona managed, blinking slowly with the effort.

"That's well more than a year!" Dorian sounded surprised.

"Time flies when you're having fun," Cormac muttered, hands still pressed against his eyes. "Do you know what happened to my-- to Lord Hawke?"

"Oh, shit." Niall leaned heavily against the bars, and Asha spoke. "I wish you hadn't asked. We know. Fenris told us. They took his skull."

Cormac's legs went out from under him. For a moment, he stayed motionless, crumpled on the floor, and then he reached out for Dorian's boot. "If I help you... If you go back... If you take him back, none of this ever happens, right?"

"That's the theory. We go right back to where we were, and punch a few people in their soft bits, and all of this stops before it starts." Dorian gestured with a flourish, but Cormac never looked up.

"Good. I'll give you my life to make that happen," Cormac promised, and Justice glowed brighter as he crouched down to help Cormac up, something other than vengeance in his eyes, if only for a moment.

"Please..." Fiona said, voice little more than a wheeze, "stop this from happening. Alexius... serves the Elder One. More powerful... than the Maker. No one challenges him... and lives."

"Again with this Elder One!" Dorian said with a nervous smile at Fen'Din. "You leave for five minutes, and someone else takes over as most popular." More somberly, he added, "Our only hope is to find the amulet that Alexius used to send us here. If it still exists, I can use it to reopen the rift at the exact spot we left. Maybe."

"Good," Fiona breathed.

"I said maybe," Dorian replied. Looking at Cormac, he wished he had more to offer than that. "It might also turn us into paste."
"WE MUST TRY," Justice boomed.

"Your spymaster, Leliana..." Fiona went on. "She is here. Find her. Quickly. Before the Elder One learns you are here."
Chapter 96

Chapter Summary

Leliana is found, and the situation is little improved.

They moved on, noting what Vivienne had said about if they could still get through. More passages were blocked than open, here, which seemed strange, though perhaps it was the reason for that distinctly new set of bridges.

"Did you do this?" Fen'Din asked Cormac, gesturing at another pile of rubble. "Seems like you might have won, with a little more force, if you did."

"Oh. Right." Cormac's smile was bleak. "You weren't here for that. It's not us. It's something a lot more powerful than us. The Breach is still spreading, and you saw what it did to the Temple."

"Demons," Vivienne hissed, putting herself on the other side of Dorian and Cormac from everyone else.

"All right, but what I want to know is if red lyrium is an infection, why in the Maker's name is it coming out of the walls?" Dorian asked, stepping behind Vivienne long enough to get through a door at the top of another flight of stairs.

"Are you sure you want to find out?" Niall asked, Asha's eyebrows arcing up.

"Of course he does," Fen'Din replied, examining the empty cells. "He's a scholar. What risk to life and limb isn't worth discovery?"

"Some of them!" Dorian countered, pressing a hand against his chest.

"Just an arm and a leg, right?" Niall went on with a smile that was as much teasing as hopeless. "Not both arms and legs?" He eyed Dorian up and down. "Potentially the arm that's already missing a sleeve?"

"It's called 'fashion'," Dorian huffed, "which I see you sacrificed before any limbs."

"Hey!" Asha said with her own voice, but Vivienne at least was chuckling in a scratchy way that said she hadn't in a long while.

Her laugh cut off too abruptly when the sound of voices reached them. "Find them!" someone shouted nearby. "They must be here somewhere!"

Dorian sighed. "Well, I guess everyone knows we're here. Or at least that someone is not where they're supposed to be."

Vivienne was already casting, eyes alight with a cold sort of eagerness to match the ice at her fingers. They had barely spotted the first Venatori before he was frozen solid.

Two more Venatori ran into invisible walls, as Cormac clenched his fists, and a moment later, they burst, crushing down into solid masses of bone and meat.
Justice slammed the sword he'd taken from a previous Venatori against the frozen one, and the ice shattered, frost-glazed shards of frozen flesh catching in the grate floor, as the glow from his skin grew brighter. Behind him, Asha surged forward, a grey cloud hanging around the body she shared with Niall, and two more Venatori fell back in horror, looking sick with something inside themselves, as they stopped seeing the battle around them. Dorian moved to step around Asha, but Cormac held him back.

"Don't get near her. That's Niall, and you don't want to step in that."

Justice, however, was happy to ram his sword through each of the dazed Venatori, flicking them into the chasm as they expired. "THEY WILL ALL DIE FOR THIS."

"Well, these were certainly a good start," Dorian said, voice faint. He was chilled by more than the aftertaste of ice magic in the air.

Justice kept walking, sword in hand, ready to plough through anyone else who stood in their path. They continued their exploration of the lower chambers, grates filtering the light and cutting it into squares, but for a while the halls were quiet save for the echo of their footsteps. They found the guard barracks, empty save for corpses well on their way towards becoming dust.

"I guess they don't clean down here much," Asha said, and Dorian hummed in agreement.

The smell was their first warning when they found the torture chambers, the air heavy with death and fear. That black cloud bent around Asha's shape again, but she murmured something to herself, to Niall, that kept him in place.

"There is no Maker." A voice echoed off the stone from behind a closed door. "The Elder One has taken all that is his and will soon rule from His city."

"Because that's not vain at all," Dorian scoffed, quietly, and Vivienne shot him a sharp look. "What? I'm a bit of an expert in vanity."

Justice surged toward the door, ready to tear it off its hinges, but a touch of Cormac's hand brought him up short, with a confused glance.

"You're too tall. If you get stuck in the doorway -- if they stop you -- we can't get past, and it's going to be really hard to aim." Cormac pointed to Fen'Din. "Let him open the door and hex anything that's moving, and then we'll come in and clean it up."

"I WILL--" Justice began, his own voice ringing from the walls, and Niall rolled Asha's eyes, as Fen'Din flung the door open before anyone inside could react to the booming spirit voice.

Calling on power he hadn't used since that night he removed himself from Uldred's care, Fen'Din poured nightmares into the room, ducking out of the way as two Venatori dropped their bows and started screaming as if they were the ones being tortured. They were, he supposed, and they probably had it coming. The third, however, reacted by driving his dagger through his victim's chest, yelling about making the sacrifices to hold back the demons.

"No!" Dorian shouted, but it was too late. The Chantry sister slumped where they had chained her to a chair, red blooming across her robes, and Dorian didn't have time to pay her any thought as lightning streaked by in front of his face, leaving dark spots in his vision.

Dorian spun out of the way, cooking the nearest sword-wielding Venatori in his armour with his own bit of lightning, squinting until he could get his full vision back. Vivienne glided by on his left, his hair standing on end from the amount of energy she was gathering, only for her to pause, shield
absorbing the attack of the Venatori mage facing her down.

"Hanley?" she said, surprise, betrayal, and anger warring for control of her voice.

"First Enchanter?" The man sounded completely surprised, and the moment of shock left room for Cormac to punch him square in the jaw, knocking him to the floor.

"Who is he?" Cormac asked, reaching for lightning, instead of his usual choice. They had to stop ruining the armour, if they were going to survive this.

"A Loyalist, disgusted by Tevinter's tactics in the South." Vivienne's smile was grim as she froze one of the screaming archers to the ground, just as a spike of ice shot up through the other one.

"Armour, Niall! Armour!" Cormac complained.

"Does it matter?" Asha's face flickered and twisted, overlaid with the ghosts of other faces. "None of this is real. We're all going to go away."

"Yeah, but we have to live that long, first," Cormac huffed, crouching to pull Hanley's knife from his loosened fingers and slit the throat of the archer with the good armour.

Vivienne snatched up Hanley's staff with a grim look, eyeing his prone form as though trying to decide whether she should finish him off. "I would say the world would be better off without him at this rate, but I suspect it would not matter all that much." She smiled, but it didn't touch her eyes. Not worth the effort, she decided.

They stripped the bodies for anything useful, for weapons, armour, for a potion or two they hoped was healing. Dorian paused by the torture victim strapped to the chair, tossing a glance at Justice, but after one look, he decided wryly that Fen'Din's magic would be more effective. "Shame," he murmured.

Justice was already out the door, impatient to continue.

A voice echoed down the hall from another closed door. "How did the--"

The sound stopped, when Justice kicked the door in, the wood bursting at the impact, metal squealing and straining as the planks tore loose, a faint smell of char and smouldering wood left behind, as Justice shoulderied through the hole in the door, interrupting a man with one thumb in Leliana's eye, and a knife in his other hand. Leliana hung from the ceiling by her wrists, her face barely recognisable from starvation and torture.

"You will break," the man hissed at Leliana, as he turned to face the intruder.

"YOU WILL DIE," Justice assured him, closing the gap between them, spirit energy and flames licking down the blade of the sword in his hand.

The distraction provided Leliana the moment she needed to swing back and bring her legs up, wrapping her shackled ankles around the man's neck. "Oh, yes, you will."

The man gurgled and choked, until a sharp wrench of her legs snapped his neck, and she let him fall limp and lifeless to the floor. Justice reached up to undo her shackles, but her eyes were on Fen'Din.

"You're alive!" she said. She was surprised, but there was no hint of relief in her voice. She barely winced when Justice let her down though her shoulders were torn and sore from hanging for that long.
"Well, that's debatable, but I am here. Again. Finally." Fen'Din plucked a potion from Dorian's hand and offered it to Leliana. "My apologies, the time just got away from us. Very literally."

She downed the potion, in no way acknowledging the joke as she rummaged in the corner for her things, her armour, her bow. "You need to end this. Do you have weapons?" For all her outward calm, her eyes burned with a rage that left Dorian wondering if she would start glowing like Justice. "The magister is probably in his chambers."

"You... aren't curious how we got here?" Dorian asked.

"No." Leliana adjusted her grip on her bow. If she still felt any pain, she didn't show it.

"Alexius sent us into the future," Dorian explained, a nervous stutter touching his words when she just stared at him. "This. His victory, his Elder One -- it was never meant to be."

"And now we're going to make sure it never happens!" Cormac clapped Dorian on the back hard enough to make him stumble.

"We have to reverse the spell," Dorian filled in, rolling his shoulders. He hadn't expected such a solid impact from a man who'd spent a year bound in blood magic, in a cell. "If we can get back to our present time, we can, as he says, prevent this future from ever happening."

"And mages always wonder why people fear them," Leliana scoffed. "No one should have this power."

"Broadly, I'd agree, but the problem is that someone does have this power and came by it naturally," Cormac argued, "which means that either the Breach or the Maker's hand is involved. The power can't be prevented, and the Circle would never be sufficient to contain it. We have to deal with the fact that it is, now, a threat." He paused, eyes glazing in stunned realisation. "And it may have been, before. During the height of the Imperium--"

"It's dangerous and unpredictable," Dorian cut in. "Before the Breach, nothing we did--"

"Enough." Leliana strode toward them, the fire in her eyes sufficient to make Niall step back. "This is all pretend to you, some future you hope will never exist. I suffered. The whole world suffered. It was real." The words came through her teeth, demanding silence.

Dorian opened and closed his mouth a few times but faltered under her stare. When she turned and stalked out the door, he followed meekly.

"So what happened while we were away?" Dorian finally asked as he followed her through the halls.

"Stop talking," she snapped.

"I was just asking!"

"No. You're talking to fill silence. Nothing happened that you want to hear."

Cormac shook his head. "No. We have to tell them. We have to tell them so they don't make the mistakes that got us here. Most of it won't ever matter, but the early parts do. They're... if this works, they're going to drop back into the middle of it. If we have anything, right now, we have time, because we're outside that. It doesn't matter when they close the loop, just that they do."

"Then they have to do it before anyone else decides to interfere. There are not enough of us to win,
now, if there weren't enough of us to win, then. Not against an army. Not even against all the
Venatori, here. You have to be done before they figure out what's going on, or you'll never get back,
and this will go on forever." Leliana's eyes flashed, but she snatched a page down from one of the
supporting posts, right in front of Asha's eyes.

"Was that real? The Elder One thinks he's a god?" Asha asked, nodding to the paper, as the grey
haze around her reached out toward Leliana's distress.

Leliana looked at the side of the paper with writing on it. "Praise His name," she scoffed. "To the
Abyss with him. If he has seen the Golden City, I'm a baby nug."

"I don't know about a baby nug, but maybe the Nug Queen," Cormac joked, his smile not quite
hiding the horror in his eyes. "Seen the Golden City? That sounds familiar in ways I don't want to
think about. But, there were seven of them, and we only killed one."

"Right now, I am only interested in killing Alexius," Leliana snapped.

Dorian shook his head, still unable to wrap his mind around the fact that someone he once knew well
was capable of causing this much death and suffering. "We have to find him first. I'm sure he'll be in
the nicer part of the castle." He looked around at the damaged walls and bloodstained floors. "If there
is one."
Chapter 97

Chapter Summary

Demons. Demons, demons, and more demons.

While he was still speaking, the chamber they walked into flared to life with a familiar green glow, a rift tearing through the air.

"Oh, well, good to see that some things haven't changed," Dorian quipped as he spun, throwing up a shield to intercept the scrape of demon claws just in time.

Asha staggered, ice spreading across the floor at her feet, as her face flickered again.

Fen'Din began to sing, low and discordant, and the demons' focus shifted to him, just as Cormac managed to produce shields -- not enough of them, but enough to protect the people closest to the rift. The wraiths faded easily, losing their concentration, losing touch with what they thought they were. Niall, too, edged closer to the song, hoping for some relief.

Still, the Terrors would not be compelled, lashing out at anything they could reach. One shrieked as a hail of arrows peppered it, and Fen'Din caught a glimpse under its arm of Leliana, armed again, standing on a table.

"Why the fuck does no one in the future fight with polearms?" Cormac complained, jamming the stolen dagger into the Terror trying to get its claws through his shield. "This is stupid, and I can't squish this thing if I can't get it off me!"

Justice solved the problem, knowing Cormac's shield would deflect the blade he cleaved the Terror with. Cormac still leapt back from it, as best he could, the Terror's claws screeching against the shield around his head and the sword bruising his ribs as the end of it clipped his shield there, despite his best efforts.

Vivienne's precise points of ice contained more demons as they appeared, and Justice and Leliana made quick work of those, as Fen'Din closed on the rift, itself, raising his glowing hand to pull it shut.

Then it was just a matter of cleaning up the mess, and they made short work of the demons Vivienne had trapped.

Asha and Niall let out the same shaky laugh, the sound layered with both voices. "It's nice to have someone who can do that again." A nod of Asha's head indicated the glowing green scar in the air where the rift had been.

Dorian hummed, eyeing Fen'Din's hand. "Wasn't there another one of you, though? A qunari? Or was that just a rumour?"

"Not a rumour," Leliana said, collecting her arrows. "Adaar tried to succeed where you failed, but we lost him in the assault, even with his small Templar army. Last rumour I heard, they'd brought him to the Elder One. He's long dead by now." She was out the door again the moment she'd finished gathering up her arrows.
"Another mistake not to make the next time around," Niall said.

"I couldn't keep them." Fen'Din stared blankly at the space the spirits had occupied, before they'd burned themselves out. "It's too wrong, here."

"It's probably for the best," Cormac pointed out, leading Fen'Din after Leliana, with a hand on the elf's back, to keep him moving. "The last thing we need is an army that might turn on us."

Leliana turned on them, jamming the arrow in her hand under Fen'Din's chin. "You kill all of them. Nothing is safe and the demons least of all. You summon nothing and you kill all of them."

Justice grabbed Leliana and hauled her back, flares and sparks of spirit energy dancing off him. "TAKE YOUR HANDS OFF HIM."

"Stop this, at once." Fen'Din addressed them as he might have addressed apprentices, back in the Circle, his voice quiet, but clear. "We have enough concerns without adding each other."

"SHE--" Justice began, but Fen'Din cut him off.

"Absolutely not. She will not cost us victory, and neither will you." Fen'Din's face remained unmoved as Cormac slowly wrapped himself around Justice's side, nudging Leliana away.

"This abom--" Leliana started, but Asha's hand clapped over her mouth.

"Now is not the time, is it, Sister?" The voice was both Niall's and Asha's, as Leliana's elbow slammed into them.

"What did I just say to all of you?" Fen'Din's voice was more firm, this time. "You can all have this argument after Dorian and I are gone."

"And this is why the Circle--" Vivienne's voice was nearly as cold as Niall's hands.

"Every one of us is a product of it, in some way." Fen'Din's eyes met Leliana's, a memory of how they'd met under circumstances not entirely unlike these.

"I'm not!" Cormac cheerfully raised a hand.

"Yes, you are," Fen'Din reminded him, pointing toward Justice. "You live with him. It changed you, just like it changed Sister Leliana."

"And this has been a delightful introduction to the internal prejudices of the South, but I'm absolutely certain we have somewhere else to be," Dorian cut in, with a flamboyant gesture to the next door. "The only way we can succeed, as the Sister says, is if we make it to Alexius before someone alerts the guard. If they're expecting us, this is going to be a lot harder."

"Afraid of a challenge?" Niall said with a smile, if only to cut through some of the tension.

Leliana didn't bother to acknowledge the question, leading them onwards, bow at the ready.

The smell of fresh air reached them before they finished climbing the next set of stairs, the door opening up onto the docks, which were as much a dilapidated mess as the halls they had just passed through. The whole cavern glowed red with lyrium, which grew in towering clusters.

A voice echoed back to them. "The magister needs more power for his rituals," it said, a woman's voice, and it sounded almost gleeful.
Leliana slipped into the shadows, moving ahead of the others and scouting around the corner.

"No! Don't hurt me, Linnea. You know me!" a young man's voice cried out, but by the time the first arrow landed, he'd already fallen, a shade rising in his place.

Justice surged around the corner, sword raised, just in time for the woman, kneeling with an arrow through her chest, to slit her own throat, another shade rising as she fell. The sword cleaved it deeply, as Justice leapt into battle, paying no mind to where Leliana was aiming, and an arrow tore through the back of his arm.

"Shit," Cormac swore, watching the blood spray, as he grabbed the other shade in a shrinking barrier. But the thing pushed through toward him, and Vivienne's ice crawled up it from the ground.

Leliana staggered as the shade Justice fought seemed to regain its strength, but Dorian set it aflame, as Asha pulled Leliana out of the reach of its spells.

"That's more than enough of that!" Dorian huffed.

Justice stepped back from the flames, sword raised though his foe was vanquished. "PUT IT OUT," he boomed.

"What?" Dorian asked with a blank look.

"PUT IT OUT!"

Ice swept over what was left of the shade, flames turning to steam, then to nothing, and Dorian looked over to find Vivienne just finished casting, rubbing warmth back into her hands. She eyed Justice warily, but he finally lowered his sword.

"Do I want to know?" Dorian asked guardedly, but Leliana cut in.

"Whatever it is, we do not have time for it." She eyed Justice as though she were sizing up a threat, but she pushed on past him, having shaken off the the effects of the shade's spell completely.

"Come on, sweet thing, he didn't know," Cormac purred, sliding an arm around Justice's waist. "He's never met us before. Not properly."

Asha's hand caught in Fen'Din's sleeve, as they moved on. "Still?" Niall asked.

"Still," Fen'Din confirmed. "I'd stand back if he moves against the Magister. I've heard stories about how much more serious he is, when he's upset."

"More serious? He set an entire room on fire and nearly killed himself and two Templars!" Niall hissed, Asha's eyes darting to Fen'Din in surprise.

"Yes, I heard the next time, he melted the room."

Dorian looked around, as they passed through the docks, evidence of blood sacrifice all around them. "This is madness. Alexius can't have wanted this."

"Does it matter what he wanted?" Leliana demanded. "It's still what he did."

"It very much matters what he wanted," Dorian argued, "if we're going to find a way to prevent this from happening."

"Oh, thank fuck," Cormac sighed, as they came around a corner to a pile of crates recently offloaded
from a boat. "Some favour from the Creators." He set to work prying the boxes open with the dagger and handing out potions and pieces of armour.

Dorian tucked a couple of potions into a pouch at his belt, looking around and trying to make sense of everything. "Are we close? I know I didn't see much of the lower levels, but this is an odd layout for a castle. Is this a southern thing?"

"No," Leliana answered curtly. "The castle has changed. But we need to keep going up."

"Yes, I imagine Alexius wouldn't sleep next to the prisons," Dorian muttered.

Upstairs brought them outside, into the courtyard, and as his steps faltered in the doorway, Dorian had questions about more than the castle's layout.

"Maker's Breath," Dorian said, his voice little more than a breath itself. The sky was a foggy, sickly green, and the castle was half-disintegrated, massive chunks of it floating overhead.

"The Breach..." Fen'Din's eyes followed Dorian's upward. "It's..."

"Everywhere," Dorian breathed, stunned. "I take back what I said about Southern architecture. This is..."

"Probably Tevinter, having had a look at its inhabitants." Fen'Din started toward a flight of stairs. "The world is a consensus of dreams, but everyone forgets that, until the edges start to come apart."

"So, this... Elder One, whoever he is, and I know who I really hope he's not, opened the Breach, killed the Divine, conquered Orlais, and completely rearranged a castle in, if we're going to be honest, a very important Fereldan backwater. This isn't Highever or even Amaranthine. This is the last thing that can really be considered a town, before you hit the Wilds." Cormac looked utterly befuddled at the idea. "Not to be rude about the places I grew up, but what's the point? One of these things is not like the others."

"It's a prison," Dorian pointed out. "Historically, Tevinter places prisons at the edges of the empire, especially for particular sorts of prisoners."

"Again?" Fen'Din sighed, looking up from the balcony he now stood on, to see a rift opening above his head. He raised his hand to it, hoping to pull it closed before it started spewing demons, but his efforts seemed to be in vain.

"Well, there's something to be said for consistency!" Dorian said, turning as a rush of cold made the hair rise on the back of his neck. He came out of the spin casting, lightning seizing through the shade that had appeared in a cloud of smoke. "Though it is getting a bit repetitive!"

He half-expect someone to make a crack about time travel and repetition, but the people around him weren't in a joking mood. Justice was merciless as more shades crowded him, and Vivienne squared off with a rage demon, steam rising where her ice tried to grip it and hold it in place. From behind them, Leliana peppered the demons with arrows.

Cormac stood back, handling shields and barriers for all of them. In such a tight space, it would make all the difference. He watched the demons fall, even as Justice burned brighter, angrier, and for once in his life he honestly wondered if the spirit hadn't finally turned.

Asha moved like a whirlwind, Niall drawing her close to where Fen'Din sang, as they spun, stunning demons as fast as they appeared. It didn't last long -- spirits were notoriously difficult to disengage from their purpose. Niall threw himself toward something that rose behind them, Asha nearly
toppling in the turn. He knew that ache as it climbed up their spine -- it was what he had once become, and tried so hard not to be again. He could feel the chill rising, his senses overwhelmed...

And then the demon exploded, Asha's hands flickering with spirit flames, where she'd grabbed it. She turned on a shade, waving one burning hand. "You want some?" she demanded, before the flame blinked out and her eyes turned black.

"She's fine," Niall was quick to reassure them, as the ice around his feet leapt up to pierce the shade. "I'll take a lyrium potion if anyone's carrying?"

"In my belt," Fen'Din told him, eyes never leaving the rift above them. "Take it and step back. I've almost got this."

Niall ducked in, pulling the vial out with Asha's fingers and drinking it down, the lyrium sharp on his tongue. He backed away from Fen'Din and the edge of the rift, focusing on Asha, on the part of them that was still human. It was hard to, the way the world around them swirled green and disjointed, so much like the Fade, but Asha had always been good at making the impossible seem within reach.

The others continued fending off demons as they appeared, throwing ice and lightning, striking out with sword or staff. Dorian's arms burned, fingers numbed in a way that said he would need a lyrium potion soon.

Fen'Din pulled harder, his arm finally snapping back sharply enough to make him stagger, as the rift above him turned into a tight pucker in a translucent swirl.

"I don't understand." Dorian stared up at the former rift. "Why would there need to be a rift, here? We're already in the middle of a Breach. There are rocks hanging in the sky, in exactly the way rocks don't. What's to stop demons from just walking in?"

"Wrong kingdom," Fen'Din replied, patting himself down to check for wounds. "This is just a disruption in the dream -- in what we all agreed was real. The King is dead, and another one has seized his seat, undoing the rules we've all come to expect. The rifts actually bring things through from elsewhere, from other kingdoms."

"Why do I feel like you're not talking about Nevarra or Orlais?" Dorian asked drily.

"Because he's not, dear. He's talking nonsense, and it's best to ignore him when he gets like this." Vivienne smoothed her skirt and stepped forward. "It doesn't matter why. What matters is that it's never going to happen, if we get you to Alexius."

"It always matters why," Dorian argued, offering Niall his arm. "You're not looking well."

"I'll... she'll... be fine," Niall answered, no trace of Asha in his voice.

Niall sounded like he believed it, but Dorian wasn't sure. At least they would both be closer to fine once they made it back to their time.

Dorian almost sounded like he believed that too.
Chapter 98

Chapter Summary

Discoveries in Alexius's books. New magic, old problems.

They were barely across the courtyard when they turned a corner onto another rift, green light blending with the light from the Breach.

"Again?" Dorian groaned, praying the rest of their advance wouldn't look like this. He fished out a lyrium potion and gulped it down, the feeling returning to his fingers.

"We don't have time for this," Leliana growled, letting fly an arrow into the first shade before it was even fully formed.

"Sacrifices," Fen'Din muttered, watching the shade fall. "You can see it, can't you?"

"I see demons," Vivienne declared, lashing ice across the field, as the first of the shades began to advance.

Fen'Din edged closer to the huge, jutting red lyrium crystal just under the rift, raising his hand to it. "They were once mages, from the look of them. Circle mages, mostly, to judge by the robes."

"Expectations," Niall warned, his own ice spiralling up the body of one of the disputed shades. "They'll be whatever you think they are, whatever you expect them to be. Just like me."

"You're an abomination," Vivienne's voice did the pointing for her, her hands still occupied with the demons pouring out of the rift.

"Stop that!" Niall commanded, the loudest anyone had heard him get. "I was an Enchanter of Kinloch Hold, and I'll be one again. Don't push that on me. Don't think you can force me into your closed-minded little world!"

"Closed-minded? Perhaps, but unlike certain acquaintances, I don't have to worry my brain will fall out when I nod my head."

Niall opened his mouth to reply, but Fen'Din cut him off.

"Niall, get me closer to it. I can't climb this, or at least I've been assured I shouldn't."

"How--?" Niall blinked, before he figured it out, and began stacking blocks of ice. "Don't slip. I don't think the healer's up to it."

"Madness," Vivienne sighed, even as she acknowledged the cleverness of the move. She focused on keeping the demons away from Fen'Din and his makeshift staircase, switching to lightning so that her ice didn't mix with Niall's.

Healing, meanwhile, was the last thing on Justice's mind, to go by the ferocious way he fended off a rage demon, herding it away from Fen'Din. It screeched at him, claws red with heat, but Justice's sword cleaved through it, again and again, until there was nothing left of it but dust.
"I don't suppose we could hurry this up?" Dorian sighed as more demons started to materialise.

Leliana paused in her shooting just long enough to stab the shade trying to surprise her from behind, her expression never changing from one of calm control.

Cormac just kept the shields up, as long as he could hold them. It was all he could do -- with this many people and this many demons, he was going to have to drop one eventually. Or more than one. He just knew it couldn't be Fen'Din, or they'd never get out of here. Well, they'd be stuck here forever. Same thing, really. They'd never have the opportunity not to be here. That was it.

Fen'Din lowered his eyes from the rift and pointed. "Disrupt that one. It's in my way."

A strange flicker of magic electrified the air around where Niall stood in Asha's body, the two of them trying to cast at once, as Asha woke into the battle. The demon staggered toward them, impaling itself on a spike of ice, as Asha's eyes cleared, the black haze retreating. "Sea's breath. Sorry, Niall, I forgot you were there. I forgot you were me."

There was no answer, but as the demon's flames sputtered out against the ice, the rift above them bowed and shrivelled inward.

Dorian wiped the sweat from his brow and shook his head in amazement as the rift turned into another scar in the sky. He was still on edge, one hand adjusting his grip on his staff, half-expecting another demon to materialise.

"Back inside," Vivienne suggested. "Before more rifts start forming."

"I don't think 'inside' will help that much," Dorian countered, even as he trotted for the door.

Inside, this part of the castle was better maintained, the halls firelit, stones intact. No glow of red lyrium greeted them this time, though the air held a chill the dungeons hadn't.

"Is the lyrium only growing in the basement?" Asha asked, walking stiffly behind the rest of the group as she and Niall negotiated bodily control.

Leliana nudged open the door on their left and snorted in answer. "No." She pushed it open the rest of the way, revealing a bedroom, a trunk of red lyrium creeping up the wall and out of the fireplace, its glow mimicking a fire.

Dorian eased past her, catching a glimpse of the books and papers spread across the tables on one wall. "Someone's doing research. Let's hope it helps us, too." He passed a book to Fen'Din and another to Asha.

"Tevene," Fen'Din sighed, offering the book to Justice.

"Common," Asha said, tapping the book she held, as she rifled the pages. "So, it's not all Tevene."

"CORMAC," Justice boomed, holding the book out, open to one particular page.

Cormac's ears pulled back and his eyes widened -- the first time anyone had called him by that name in years. He snatched the book, squinting at the diagrams, and hoping no one would notice. "June piss out the fires of the forge, this ... is this serious? He can't be serious." He flipped a few more pages, pointing at passages for Justice to read to him, not a word making sense to anyone but Dorian, who looked up from the pile of papers he held. "I should be able to do that. Blight it, I probably can do that."
"Do...? Please do not do anything else to the timeline." Dorian smiled weakly.

"Okay, fine, I won't do it here, but someone tell me I can do this, when we get back. I just never thought to use it that way..." Cormac held the book out to Dorian. "Time spiral. It's like making yourself faster, except it also speeds the replenishment of mana from the Fade, without widening the channel, like lyrium does."

"That's ingenious!" Dorian handed the papers he held to Leliana and took the book. "And Southern, according to the notes, which is very interesting."

"He has a limit." Leliana suddenly announced. "He is trying to get back to the Conclave, but there is no way to get to before the Breach. Still, if he is able to go backward in time, we have a serious problem."

"Well, we already have so many problems, what's one more?" Dorian asked with false levity.

"WHEN YOU GET BACK TO YOUR TIME," Justice boomed, and Dorian fought the urge to take a step back as he approached, "YOU WILL NEED TO DEAL WITH HIM IN A PERMANENT FASHION."

Dorian winced, but he could not argue. He'd hoped it wouldn't come to killing Alexius -- a part of him still did -- but if that's what it took to prevent this future from existing, he would do so without hesitation.

They continued their exploration of the hall, kicking open another door into an empty bedroom. They found more documents, the journal of one of Alexius's assistants, a recent entry detailing his concern over Alexius's paranoid behaviour.

"It seems he's locked himself in the Great Hall," Dorian said, brandishing the papers. "Convenient for us, I suppose, since we'll need to be there to reverse the spell. Also inconvenient, as he's likely to be heavily guarded."

"Then we know where to find him." Leliana looked up from counting her arrows. "And if he is locked in, someone must have the key."

"Mmm, rifling the pockets of corpses," Niall drawled, rolling his eyes. "My favourite."

"If it feels like magic, take it. Who knows what he's locked that door with, in a place like this." Dorian waved the papers like a distracted lecturer as he stepped back out into the hall.

"A place like this, which is mostly dreams, and yet the banners are still Fereldan." Cormac tapped on one as they passed. "Red and gold, like the Theirin crest. Not a serpent or a dragon in sight."

"Is... is that a fucking corpse?" The voice was half Niall's and half Asha's. "It's just sitting there, like it died in the middle of a lunch break!"

"And it's been there far longer than lunch." Vivienne stepped to Dorian's other side, not to walk too close to the stack of wood it sat on, blocking entrance to another room.

"It's in my way," Cormac complained. "Where's my brother when I nee--" He choked off in the middle of the sentence, grabbing Justice's arm for support. "Go back," he whispered. "Go back so that can be funny, again."

"Shit," Niall sighed, waving everyone back from the door. "I'll get this. I'm sorry about your brother, but... can you please not? Not right now?" A pool of ice crept out around his feet, Asha's face
flickering under the grey haze that clung around them. A pillar of ice lanced up between the wood and the door, throwing both aside, and knocking the corpse to the floor.

Cormac leaned to the side and threw up, as the stench of months-old blood sacrifice poured out into the hall.

"I have regrets," Niall admitted, raising a sleeve to cover his face.

"Okay, nothing to see here. We're going that way!" Dorian hurried on through the next archway, hoping the stench wouldn't follow. Cormac was the last through, and he left a barrier behind, just to be sure it wouldn't.

The semblance of order they'd found in this wing disintegrated the further they went. Doors were boarded up, scaffolds abandoned, paintings half hanging off the wall. Debris and corpses in varying states of decay littered the floor.

Dorian held a sleeve up to his nose. "Do you know what happened to Felix?" he asked Leliana, voice muffled by cloth.

"Yes," she said with even bothering to look at him. "I do."

Dorian waited, but she didn't elaborate. "And you're not going to tell me?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

Dorian gritted his teeth. He wanted to stop, to hold them up until Leliana answered him, but he knew they didn't have that kind of time. Whatever had happened to Felix wasn't going to happen to him for real, anyway. Still, he couldn't ignore the tightening in his gut.

Everything seemed still, around them. Dingy floors, dust hanging like tiny banners from the stone of the walls, and not a sound to indicate anyone had used these halls in a long time. It was strange, Fen'Din thought, wondering if they'd come the right way at all. The dungeons had been crowded with guards, and they must have come from somewhere, but clearly that place wasn't here. Still, candles and torches lit their way, and he wondered if the flames were even real, or if they were simply memories of light.

Down the stairs and around another sprig of red lyrium -- it seemed almost festive, somehow, like the hollyberries hung round the doors in winter, and just as poisonous. Nothing, nothing, nothing of use!

And then Dorian opened the only door at the bottom of the stairs. "Stop."

"What is it now?" Vivienne demanded, ice coating her fingertips.

"Runework on the floor." Dorian crouched, without entering the room, trying to get a better look at the glowing circles.

"They're not runes, Dorian," Fen'Din observed, leaning over him for a closer look. "I saw them in the road on the way to Redcliffe. They're overflow from his magic. Some of them are faster and some of them are slower, but I couldn't tell you which."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Dorian huffed, exasperated. "He's done so much damage that it's just... happening randomly near him?" He stood up suddenly, sending Fen'Din reeling, and gripped his temples with one hand. "Well, at least I can be thankful I won't have to explain this to the Magisterium."
"DEMONS," Justice boomed, lifting Dorian out of the way, so he could charge out the door after them.

"Of course it's demons," Dorian sighed, rolling his shoulders as he followed. "It's always demons."
Chapter 99

Chapter Summary

The deaths of old acquaintances, turned and burned.

Or demons and Venatori, it turned out. It was strangely satisfying to watch, Venatori mages and archers struggling to hold back the wave of demons spat out by another rift, its green glow seeming to fill the hall with wispy tendrils of light.

As content as Dorian was to let them kill each other, Justice was less patient, bowling into a tangle of shades and mages and instigating a confusing threeway battle. Arrows flew overhead as Leliana and the Ventori shot at demons and at each other. Leliana dived behind a pillar as an arrow shot past her face, and that was all the cue Dorian needed to zap the archer off his platform with a burst of lightning.

Fen'Din's singing was enough to confuse the demons, even if it didn't have the power to change them, with this much suffering in the world, and they hesitated and staggered, as the elf made his way toward the rift, dodging anything glowing on the ground.

Cormac handled the shields as best he could, muttering under his breath about never entrusting tactical decisions to a spirit with compulsions about stabbing. Beside him, Vivienne and Niall shrank the battlefield with ice, funneling the demons and Venatori into contact with each other, once again, with just enough room to strike at either side.

"Close them off," Cormac said, suddenly. "Box them in as best you can, and give ours something to stand on. It worked in the valley, and it'll work here."

"You'll trap Enchanter Fen'Din," Vivienne pointed out. "Is that truly wise?"

"Yes," Cormac assured her. "I can handle him. I can handle a lot more things, too, if the two of you can contain the Venatori, at least. If I don't have my hands full of shields, this will be over a lot faster."

"Pride," Vivienne argued, even as she raised a wall between their own people and the fight that raged on under the rift.

Cormac relaxed as the shields fell away from Dorian, Leliana, and Justice. A moment later, two more Venatori archers imploded with a squeal of metal. "No, we left Pride in the tavern."

Platforms gave them the higher ground, and from her perch, Leliana nodded in appreciation of the setup, demons and Venatori trapped and easy prey as she rained arrows upon them. Bursts of magic, lightning, fire, and ice obscured them in an almost festive display, and Leliana was deaf to the screams and pained shrieks that followed.

She breathed a sigh of relief when the air cleared and the barrier around Fen'Din still held. Without a Herald, this would have been over much too soon.

"We're getting rather good at this," Dorian said. His expression said that might not be a good thing.
"I got good at this in Kirkwall," Cormac replied, finally moving out into the room, eyes checking for
demons still resolving from the rift as he crossed to the stairs leading up to a strange door. "Do we
have keys, yet?"

"I've got six pieces of Fereldan copper and a half-eaten pasty." Asha dumped the pile from one of the
archers' pockets on the floor next to the corpse. "You probably shouldn't do that squishing thing any
more, if we're trying to find a key, though."

"... Shit," Cormac groaned, rubbing his face, as he stared up at the ceiling. "Right. Don't turn the key
into a liquid."

"Liquid?" Vivienne looked intrigued. "How much force are you exerting?"

"I once turned a magister into a diamond, and the jeweller I took it to, to have it set, couldn't tell it
wasn't the real thing," Cormac laughed hollowly. "I don't know how much pressure that is, but I
know I burned a mark into the floor. The heat's enough to melt metal easily, if I go that far. I just
don't usually. I'll stop at the size of a breadbox, because it's just not worth it after that. The magister
was personal."

"Gotta love what Alexius has done with the place," Asha drawled, looking around as the rift popped
out of existence over their heads.

"I heard it was nicer before the remodel." Cormac leaned on the swiftly-diminishing ice wall and
laughed until he had to sit down. "Dorian? Tell me the two of you can fix this."

"I don't know if anyone can fix poor taste in decorating," Dorian replied, keeping his tone light,
knowing full well that wasn't what Cormac meant. He could answer truthfully, could remind them
that this was a gamble, that any number of things could go wrong, that this simply might not work,
but Dorian settled for the possibility he was hoping for. "Yes, we can fix this."

"We will need to get through the door, first," Vivienne pointed out, noting the heaviness of magic in
the air around the door. It was an odd design, likely not Tevinter and certainly not Fereldan, its
rounded top not quite made for the doorway it sat in.

"Maker's Breath!" Dorian cursed as he stepped close enough to touch. "Where did Alexius find this?
How did he even move it here?"

"That's not Fereldan," Cormac muttered, trying to focus on the door instead of the gaping hole in the
room where his brother should have been. "Anyone? Orlais? I've never been to Orlais."

"This isn't an Orlesian design." Vivienne carefully picked her way up the steps, for a closer look.
"I've never seen anything like it."

"We don't have one of these in the cellar," Fen'Din joked, studying the patterns. "If I were to guess,
we may not be looking for a key that looks like a key."

Vivienne nodded slowly. "You're looking at the holes, aren't you, dear? I might agree. Gems,
perhaps? Certainly something that would carry magic." She paused, eyeing the engraving in the
centre of the door. "I'd almost think it dwarven, if not for the sun imagery."

"DWARVES? NO." Anders could almost be heard in Justice's booming voice. "DWARVES
DON'T MAKE ROUND THINGS."

"He knows the Deep Roads better than I do, but from what I remember, he's right. Everything's very
angular. Less spirals, more corners," Cormac agreed. "Okay, so, we're hoping I didn't squish some
magic jewels into a flesh brick somewhere."

"Okay, I'll be the one to say it: Jewels, or ... crystals?" Dorian gestured at the red lyrium behind them.

Asha blinked at him. "Please be wrong," Niall said, flatly.

"As much as I would like to be wrong this once," Dorian replied, "I never am. It's a burden." As he spoke, he stepped back towards the middle of the room where the dead bodies had piled up.

"I suppose it would be too convenient to just... tear a chunk off?" Niall asked, gesturing at the red lyrium growing out of the floor.

Vivienne shook her head. "That would be like expecting any door to open just because you have a key, regardless of whether the key goes to the door you're opening or not. And I would not touch that."

Leliana scoffed, giving Vivienne a cold smile. "What difference would that make for us now? It is not our future we are concerned with." Vivienne pursed her lips, but Leliana went on before she could say anything, bending to inspect the bodies and rifle through their pockets. "Even Alexius needs to eat. Someone must have a key. His servants, perhaps."

"Pick a door! Any door!" Cormac gestured toward the sides of the room, before storming off toward one. "I cannot wait for this day to be over. For this world to be over."

Fen'Din made a long slow gesture, with one hand, sweeping it after Cormac's wake. "After you, Master Kestrel."

Another flight of stairs led them back up, opening onto a gallery in which a man faced away from them, heavy, hooded robes concealing most of his shape. Cormac's hand began to clench, but Dorian grabbed him, silently shaking his head.

Fen'Din's hands lit up in an uncomfortable shade of purple and he looked at Asha, hoping for Niall's attention, before gesturing at the lone figure. The grim smile he received in return wasn't Asha's. Two quick flashes and the figure before them turned in a panic, before breaking into a run straight toward where the room stepped down again, plunging to its death, on the stones below. The lack of any further sound indicated that had been the only person waiting here -- someone expecting trouble coming toward the door of the throne room, not away from it.

Fen'Din looked down at the body. "Godwin?"

"Of course it is. He would," Anders sighed, finally in control of his own voice. "It's Godwin. You know what he's like."

"They must have been paying well," Fen'Din quipped as he made his way down the stairs, unconcerned until a hand reached through the railing, nearly pulling him onto a sword that was suddenly stuck in a block of ice. "Thank you, Vivienne." Fen'Din bowed shallowly, just low enough to jam a hand back behind him and ram enough lightning through the unfortunate assassin that it sparked off the chandelier and jarred a surprised shout from another concealed attacker.

"Bait," Niall huffed. "They used Godwin for bait. I suppose it's only fair someone found a use for him."

"Everyone had a use for him," Anders grumbled, slapping lightning across the lower floor and listening for the expletives when it hit. "Half the point of being a Lucrosian. Can't get rich, if you're
not useful."

"Everyone had a use for you, too. Maybe you should've ex--" Niall started, and Asha cut him off.

"Rude!"

"True!" Niall protested, and Anders laughed.

Dorian leaned over the railing and carefully set a man on fire, trying not to hit the books that still remained in some of the shelves, below.

"But, it is true! How do you think I got across the sea!" Anders kept laughing until he turned his head and saw the fire. Blue licked across his skin, and he froze, the sparks falling away from his fingers.

"Andraste's shapely ass on a magister's pike," Cormac swore, grabbing Anders's arm and spinning him away from the flames. "Keep it together, sweet thing. It's almost over."

Dorian noticed his reaction and switched to lightning, electricity arcing from one target to another, lighting them up for Leliana's arrows. Better than demons, he supposed, jumping back out of reach of one Venatori's sword. The one Dorian had set on fire was still rolling around and shrieking until Asha -- Niall? -- covered him in ice.

Anders just tried to breathe, difficult to do with the sounds of battle around him. Asha's outline was starting to blur again, but she gritted her teeth and kept fighting until all of their enemies were still.

Vivienne looked around as though expecting more Venatori to pop out of the shadows. When they didn't, she approached the half-burned and now-frozen man, breaking the ice around him with her heel. "Well, we didn't crush any this time, but we're still making our lives difficult."

"Alexius is making our lives difficult," Dorian protested. "Though I will admit I should probably stick to lightning, for now. Shouldn't have set a man afire in the middle of a library, even if it's not the time for light reading. Might have to pick something up on the way back through, though. These don't look like the volumes one tends to find in Minrathous."

"Probably bound in dog-leather," Vivienne sniped, watching Fen'Din search the corpses.

"We would never!" Cormac clapped a hand to his chest. "They're goatskin, unless they're really important. Then they might be tanned Vint pelt."

"Is he quite serious?" Dorian asked, out of the side of his mouth.

"It's Ferelden. Maybe it's better not to ask." Asha's eyes sparkled, despite one of them being a cloudy grey.

"Anything?" Cormac asked, one hand still on Anders, who hovered between himself and Justice.

"Maybe?" Fen'Din held up a necklace he'd removed from another figure in a hooded robe, a shard of red lyrium dangling from a heavy golden pendant. "Looks like it's made so you don't have to touch it to use it. Unfortunately, there's only one, and we need ... four?" He shot a glance at Vivienne.

"Five. Four more than we have."

"Oh good!" Dorian chirped, not looking forward to the thought of doing this four more times. He checked his pouch, where he had stowed his pilfered potions, but he only had one more lyrium left.
He sighed, his senses already jittery from the last two he'd had.

"We need to be quick," Leliana said.

"Oh sure," drawled Niall as he followed her back into the hall. "It's just like a game of Hide and Seek, but with crystals that can rot your brain and if you lose, you die."

"You're already dead," Asha reminded him with a similar flat tone. Even though it was her voice, parts of his speaking patterns had rubbed off on hers. The hazards of sharing a body, Dorian guessed.

"Hey--" Niall started to argue -- and it was odd, watching Asha's body argue with itself -- but Leliana held up a hand and motioned for them to be silent.

Someone nearby was shouting, arguing with something else, close enough for Leliana to almost make out the words through the wall. She crept in the voice's direction, cautiously stopping in front of door.

"I am not a child!" one voice insisted. "I can resist you!"

"I am you," a deeper, richer voice replied, and both Asha and Anders looked at the door as if they could see through it.

"DEMON," Justice declared.

"Desire," Niall clarified, breathlessly, one hand on the wall as Asha bent like they might vomit.

"Connor," Fen'Din said, a moment later, finally placing the first voice, as he threw the door open, sparks leaping between his fingers.

The young man sat on the floor in front of a roaring fire, arms wrapped around his knees, eyes squeezed shut. No demon could be seen.

"It's too late for him," Vivienne breathed.

"I won't have it! Not again!" Connor insisted, and a fresh flame bloomed around him. "Not again!" he screamed, reflexively covering his face as the fire took him.

Justice threw everyone out of the way as he forced himself into the room, healing spells sputtering out at his fingertips. Niall threw a gentle ice spell, spilling a blanket of snow onto the new fire, trying to put it out and keep it out, but the fire only burned brighter, melting through the snow, flickering as the water pooled briefly and then evaporated.

"I can't get into his head. Someone else is already there." Fen'Din stood motionless, eyes closed, the air becoming a violet plasma around him as he tried and tried again. "I was never very good at this part."

Vivienne held an ice spell at the ends of her fingers, but she didn't cast. With her jaw set like stone, she said, "Let him."

"What?" Asha hissed. Behind her, Dorian was trying to see what was going on, throwing ice on the fire instinctively, but more to keep the fire from spreading to Anders, who was standing much too close.

"Let him die," Vivienne said again, only the barest tremor in her voice giving away how difficult this
was. "Else he will become an abomination. He is doing the brave thing, here."

Her words were nearly drowned by Anders's screams of loss and frustration.

"We're too late anyway," Leliana added, voice hushed.

Connor had stopped moving, had stopped fighting.

As the fire under Connor finally burned out, hints of flame licked at the edges of Anders's figure.

"Oh, shit." Niall nudged Fen'Din, whose eyes flew open.

"Anders," Fen'Din's voice demanded a response, but he got none. "None of this is real."

Cormac finally grabbed Dorian and removed him from the doorway, pushing Leliana aside, firmly, to get to Anders. "Sweet thing, he's right. It's all a bad dream. We're in the Fade, remember? You saw it, outside." It wasn't quite true, but it was close enough. In an hour or two, it wouldn't matter at all. None of this would ever have been. "We're going to make it stop. We're going to make it right."

It was only Cormac's perpetual lingering shield that saved him, when the pillar of fire erupted around Anders.

"He's fine!" Cormac was quick to point out. "He can't hurt himself like this!"

"He could, once," Niall reminded Fen'Din, quietly. "He doesn't want to die any more."

"He never wanted to die. He just wanted to get out." Fen'Din peered through the grey cloud beside him. "And now he's free, and dying isn't going to help."

"That's fucked up," Niall noted, eyes still on Anders and the way Cormac's face had turned glossy with sweat inside his shield, both arms wrapped around the body inside the pillar of flame.

"Not everyone was as content as we were," Fen'Din reminded him.

"In case anyone was wondering why we just let the abomination die, this is what happens when one lets them live." Vivienne gestured toward the couple, disgustedly.

"No, it isn't." Asha shook her head, eyes never leaving the fire.

"He was like that long before the spirit," Niall clarified, a grim smile tugging the corners of Asha's mouth.
Chapter 100

Chapter Summary

The keys manifest, and thus the way in to the way out.

Vivienne hesitated, ice at her fingertips. An inferno like that would render her ice magic useless, but she kept it handy just in case, eyeing both Anders and Asha. The message in her eyes was clear: she didn't trust either of them.

The fire made the shadows dance, Leliana's fingers twitching towards another arrow at the movement out of the corner of her eye. "Is there a way to put a stop to this?" she asked. "The flames will draw attention we do not need."

Leliana watched the hallway behind them, arrow nocked and ready to fly, as she waited out the spell, as she waited out Anders's wrath and pain.

"Mack." Fen'Din stepped forward, speaking just loudly enough to be heard. "Plus one?"

Cormac's fingers flexed and the second shield came into being, Fen'Din walking into the flames.

"Anders--" Fen'Din reached up to tug the ends of Anders's hair. "Ket, look at me."

Rage-red flickered down Anders's arms, gleamed from his eyes, but Fen'Din's face caught his attention.

"We need your help to make this stop. We need you with us, and there are too many of us for you to be like this, now. More than that, this will kill you." Fen'Din held up a hand. "You know how I usually feel about death, but it would be extremely inconvenient for either of us, here and now. You can't burn mana like this and expect to survive."

Cormac opened his mouth, but closed it with an apologetic grimace in Fen'Din's direction.

"I know you're not a demon, but if you can't get control of yourself, what will you be? You're starting to look like Niall."

"I'm going to second that! Don't be me, Anders!" Niall called, from the other side of the room. "Not that I ever wanted to be him, either," he muttered, after a moment.

Dorian watched in horror. "I want you to know we're not all like that. I never lit myself on fire, even as a child."

Further up the hall, a door slammed open and Leliana brought up her bow, loosing an arrow into the first face that appeared. But the arrow splintered against a wall of magic.

"Kaffas!" swore the man who'd been hit. "What the fuck is going on over there?"

"Great," Dorian hissed, shooting a bolt of energy at the Venatori helmet that had asked that question, making him stagger back even though the magic didn't hit and keeping him in the doorway in case he'd brought friends. "You, Anders, Jan, Justice, whoever you are, do you think you could move that
"Don't," Vivienne warned, arms weaving gracefully if tiredly in a spell, ice cracking over the Venatori's shield. "If he had no control over stopping it, I doubt he has control over moving it! I did not leave that cell only to be burned into ash minutes later!"

The Venatori burst through the wall of ice to get an arrow in the throat. As he dropped, they realized that, yes, he had brought friends.

The motion that followed was recognisably Asha's, and the three Venatori following the first staggered back from a broad flash of her hand. The first to recover began to draw some sigil in the air, only to be interrupted by a rush of flame from Dorian, who stood where his actions couldn't be seen from inside the room he'd come from. The cowl wasn't enough to protect that spellbinder from another of Leliana's arrows, but the distraction was time enough for the next to raise a shield.

"Tired of this," Asha muttered under her breath, and another Venatori jerked back, a flash of light behind him, as Asha spread her arms. This time, she fell. Even Niall couldn't hold her up, but his ice chased after the last of her spells, clawing at the last spellbinder, who called upon the spirits to protect him.

What came, instead, were a pair of terrors.

"Move!" Cormac shouted, from the back of the room. "Sides! Sides!"

Dorian hauled Vivienne with him, to one side, pressing her against the wall, even as she kept casting, the ice pinning the demons in the path of the belch of flame that vomited Justice out of the room, like a rage demon. The terrors were on him in a flash, but they were ill-equipped for the flames.

The dying screech of the terrors was the painful kind of too-loud, like the fire from Justice burned the painful side of too-hot at Dorian's back. He tried to peek under one shielding arm but had to close his eyes against the heat. Then the heat moved, and Dorian looked to see the fire around Justice, no longer an inferno but still burning in licks of flame up and down his arms and back.

One of the bodies on the floor twitched, then went still.

"Let's hope he didn't melt the keys along with their bodies," Vivienne hissed, slipping out from around Dorian and smoothing down her dress, not quite hiding the rattled look on her face.

"Asha?" Dorian called out, eyes still on Justice until the lack of answer prompted him to look over at her prone form. "Niall?" he tried again.

A cloud of mist hung around Asha, where Justice's flames had met Niall's ice. "We're... I'm not going to say we're fine, but is anything?" Niall laughed and coughed up a bit of smoke. "Can I get a hand? I think I froze her dress to the floor."

Cormac appeared in the doorway, crouching to get a look. "Yeah, hang on. I'll get you up. Let go of the ice."

"He's standing a little close for that," Niall argued, and Justice backed away, the flames pulling in closer as he stepped into the door the spellbinders had come through.

Vivienne raised a hand with ice clinging to her fingers, as she looked at the smouldering corpses.

"Don't do it," Cormac warned. "If the crystals are there, they'll explode."
"Like glass." Vivienne closed her hand, and the ice vanished.

After a moment, Niall managed to drag Asha upright, with Cormac's help.

"What is it she keeps doing to them?" Fen'Din asked Niall.

"Slaps the magic out of them. If she can hit hard enough, she can slap the spirit out of them, too."
Niall's nervous laugh crept between Asha's teeth. "Having been slapped out of my body, I can tell
you it's not the most pleasant experience, but right now it works. Being here isn't a pleasant
experience either."

"No?" Dorian drawled. "And here I thought it was a picnic. That's a useful skill, certainly, if clearly
taxing." He edged by them as he spoke, poking his head back into the room Justice had just come
out of, the room Connor had...

"She'll be fine," Niall said, his voice brighter than his tired smile.

Dorian shook his head in amazement at the scorch-marks around the fireplace, floor and ceiling
burned black. Back in the hall, Leliana and Vivienne were gingerly poking through the remnants of
scorched bodies.

"Found another one," he heard Leliana say as he stepped back into Connor's room to look around,
just in case the fire hadn't destroyed everything.

"It's... a little chewed at the edges," Vivienne said back, "but hopefully still serviceable.

Niall went to help with the bodies, the chill of his being protecting Asha's hands from the worst of
the heat. "Show me what you're holding?"

Leliana dangled the stick of gold that had been a chain, the shard of red lyrium hanging from a clump
of misshapen gold at the end. "Probably something like this."

As they continued to search, Dorian edged into the room Justice had gone into, the one the
spellbinders had come out of. "I'm just here to see if they left anything we can use," he said to the
man with the barely controlled flames still flickering at his edges and extremities.

"Sorry." The exhausted voice was definitely human. "Sometimes I don't like the world very much."

"Useful in a pinch!" Dorian shrugged, picking up a book and paging through it. "Hm. Studies on the
Blight. More than one. Almost all these books look like they're about the Blight and the Taint. What
was he up to?"

"Felix," Anders said, quietly. "Felix has the taint. I don't know why his father hasn't taken him to the
Wardens."

"Excuse me?" Dorian nearly dropped another book, this one hand-written. "No, no. He's just been
ill. Something degenerative. There's a lot of... inbreeding in Tevinter. It was bound to happen to
someone I liked, eventually."

"I'm a Grey Warden. I thought he was one. I can ..." Anders sighed and held up his hands. "There's
a sense we get. We know where darkspawn are. A lot of the time, we know where each other are,
too. Wardens are... only a little different, but you learn the difference. He's tainted. It took me a little
bit to figure it out. Haven't seen a lot of ghouls since the Blight ended."

Dorian swallowed hard, eyes fluttering as he tried to decide what to do with that information.
"Leliana, too," Anders said, after a moment. "This Leliana, not the other one."

Dorian looked down at the book in his hands, holding it up for inspection. "I know. He's looking for a cure, and she's as close as he's found."

"Idiot," Anders snarled. "There is no cure."

"Sure there is." Cormac leaned in the doorway. "But, it only works on dogs."

Dorian stared at him blankly, wondering if that were some Fereldan turn of phrase or if he was being serious. "Dogs?"

"It's always dogs with Fereldans," Anders said, sounding almost like himself. "But Andraste's Grace can work wonders, just not for us." The talk of healing, of cures, of potions, helped him anchor himself, flames dying down just a little more.

"I suppose that would be too convenient," Dorian said with a weak smile, pushing aside thoughts of Felix dying or worse. The lump in his throat was stubborn, regardless, and he wondered if Felix was even still alive in this version of today. Dorian supposed he had to be, if Alexius was still looking into finding a cure.

With a shake of his head, Dorian set the book down and resumed their search for the crystals.

"Five," Fen'Din said, holding two of the crystals by their golden ends. "I have two."

"I have one," Leliana held up another, flat on her palm.

"One as well." Vivienne proffered hers.

"Ah! Here it is!" Dorian daintily plucked the remains of the chain out of the flesh it had melted into, peeling out the last crystal. "So, now we go and open the door, yes? I'm sure Alexius will be so surprised to see us."

Cormac laughed, a bit hysterically. "Surprised, yes, because the last time he checked, you'd been removed."

"I almost feel like I should bring frozen custard to this reunion," Fen'Din joked, with an awkward gesture down the hall. "Back the way we came. Ever so thoroughly."
Redcliffe (present)

Chapter Summary

Torrin finally draws his conclusions about Niall and Jowan. Theron waxes poetic, much to Solas's amusement.

Chapter Notes

My total and complete apologies -- somehow, the queueing got screwed up, and this should have been Monday's chapter. I've posted it today and moved it back into the correct position for anyone catching up later.

"Do you really think it's the most romantic candle in Thedas?" Kinnon asked Lily as they made their way back from the docks, still close enough to feel the breeze off the lake's surface. He felt a bit silly for asking, almost felt silly for his purchase, his thumb smoothing over the edge of the candle, tracing over the shape of flowers trapped in the wax, the shape of a buried sculpture peeking out between petals. "I mean, if someone gave it to you...?"

Lily spared the candle a glance, an unhappy laugh caught in her throat. "Not if it's Jowan."

"That's Jowan's failing, not the candle."

"I suppose." Lily looked at it a bit longer, admired the detail and the crafting that had gone into it. "I guess I just haven't really thought of 'romance' in a long time. Not unless you count Jowan's... attempts at patching things up."

"There's a very small number of things Jowan's ever managed to do right, and I think picking you was one of them. Now, if he could have gotten anything past that point right..." Kinnon shrugged. "Not that I know. He got that right, too. None of us knew. Not even Solona."

"I shouldn't have even been looking! A mage! It's ridiculous!" Lily shook her head and waved off a beetle that flew too close to her. "If I was going to be looking, I should have been looking at Templars! At least that might have been excusable!"

"The only way that would have been excusable is if you'd picked Ser Cullen, and I'm not sure he was good for it. Not the way Anders talks, anyway." Kinnon's grip on the candle tightened momentarily. "But, I'll say it again, there's nothing wrong with picking a mage, you just have to pick a good one. One who's... not Jowan. Or Godwin, really. Or Anders, if you want me to be really honest. Niall might have been a good choice, but he was a little old for us, wasn't he? Flora -- er, Finn -- was a sweetheart. He was about your age, I think. Keili, even, if you go that way. She's very absorbed in the Chant and the study of the Maker. You'd have gotten--"

"I never liked Keili," Lily admitted, after a moment. "There was something very wrong with her. She frightened me, like any minute she might turn into one of those stories they used to tell about Anders."
"She's a little cold. Even now, but she's finally learnt to take a compliment without self-destructing." Kinnon shrugged, again, turning it into a stretch of his shoulders. "I'm still right about Finn."

"How do you know? Did you?" Lily raised a sly eyebrow.

"What? No! I'm not really interested in..." Kinnon looked at the candle in his hands. "Okay, that was a terrible sentence. Let's try that again. It took me a lot of years to find a man I wanted to get that close to. Candles was a little more my taste, at the time. Solona, even. Petra, not that she was interested... Gerda wasn't into any of us. But, now? Look at me. I'm buying a candle. I'm buying the most romantic candle in Thedas, because I don't know how to tell this Templar I love him. Which, I'm... I really think I might. Differently, you know? It's my first time with someone I didn't grow up with."

Lily looked at him, a soft smile on her lips. She remembered what that felt like, being in love, and a part of her ached for that, but the greater part of her thought that this was damn adorable. "The answer's 'yes', by the way."

Kinnon gave her a blank look. "To... what question?"

"If I think it's the most romantic candle in Thedas. I would, if you were giving that to me with that lovestruck look on your face." She reached over to pinch one of his cheeks, but he pushed her hand away, face scrunching.

Lily was still chuckling at Kinnon as she pushed open the door to the tavern, the noise washing over her as she stepped inside.

Niall and Jowan stood before Torrin, at the far end of the room, both looking like boys caught casting ice spells down the stairs. Torrin looked some combination of amused and confused by what they were telling him.

"You might want to go bail Niall out," Kinnon suggested to Lily, as he tucked the candle carefully into the bottom of his bag. "I'm sure Jowan can lie in whatever hole he's dug himself this time."

"He didn't get us out of the Fade..." The words sounded like they'd been dragged through Lily's teeth.

"He did get you out of Aeonar," Kinnon pointed out.

"Did anyone ask if I actually wanted to leave Aeonar? No." Lily sighed and pressed a hand over her eyes, for a moment. "You're right, though. I should go rescue Niall. He does seem like he'd have been very nice while he was alive. But, I dealt mostly with the Apprentices. You know me; Jowan knew me. I didn't really know Niall."

"I don't think many people knew Niall. He was quiet. Kept to himself, until Irving dangled that Enchanter seat in front of him. Like Karl-- Who you also wouldn't have known." Kinnon patted Lily on the shoulder and headed for the bar, where Cormac sat with Godwin, a pile of coins in a bowl that had held popped barley.

"I am dead, Enchanter -- First Enchanter. And I lived with a demon for most of that time. I didn't even realise it. He hadn't worked my Harrowing. I had no reason to believe he was anything other than he said -- it was what I was, so why wouldn't he be, as well? And the Harrowings stopped, after that. After I died. Years without one, except for Kinnon, and I didn't end up in the bubble for his."

"So, you wish me to believe you're actually Enchanter Niall, and not a demon?" Torrin lifted his mug but never stopped watching Niall over the edge of it.
The sound Niall made was somewhere between agony and uncertainty. "I wouldn't go that far," he muttered. "I'm definitely Niall. I'm trying very hard not to be a demon. Funny thing about being dead, touching the Fade like that... I can hear everyone's regrets, the things they think won't ever get better. I have the worst headache, and the longer I stay in here, the worse it gets. It gets too bad, and I start getting cold."

"Despair," Lily filled in, keeping Niall between her and Jowan. "I watched him use that to protect us. I didn't meet him until... after he was dead, but he's been a very good friend to us, since. He's trying to just be human, again, but I don't know if that's possible. I hope it is."

"I promise you, Torrin. It's me. If I get dangerous, kill me. It'll be a relief for both of us." Niall pressed the heel of his palm against his eyebrow. "Hoping it doesn't come to that. I'm hoping it gets easier. I just want to be the man I was. You know me. I like books and vegetables. The absolute archetype of boring. I could have been a farmer and done just as well. Better, probably. My parents were farmers. I could have made something of myself, of that land."

"You do sound like yourself." Torrin chuckled, quietly, but his eyes were like ice. "We'll see what happens."

"It's all I'm asking," Niall assured him, as Torrin's eyes darted to the side and caught Jowan, who swallowed hard.

"But you, young man..." Torrin drew himself up to his full height, which wasn't that tall, but it gave him half an inch on Jowan. "Blood mage, maleficar, apostate, summoner of demons!"

"Look, that was once, all right? I made a terrible mistake, and I had no idea how bad until it was too late." Jowan held out one of his hands, the remnants of a nasty scar still creasing the palm. "Once. I... I didn't hurt anyone, right? I just needed the distraction. It was stupid, but I didn't know what else to do. He was going to have me made Tranquil!"

"You were Uldred's student, weren't you?" Torrin asked, in a moment of insight. "And no, you didn't hurt anyone. Not seriously, anyway. Frightened some people, but Templars are armoured for a reason. You put Sister Lily in more danger than anyone."

"I've apologised for that," Jowan's eyes sunk to the floor and stayed there, studying the scattering of straw and splashed beer. "And yes, I was one of Uldred's students. But, if you're thinking he taught me, that he was going to use me, you're wrong! He barely had the time to teach me to throw hexes straight. I heard what happened, but I didn't learn any of it from him. I read it in a book. Someone kept leaving them out, leaving them open."

"He set you up, boy, just as much as if he'd put you at the edge of a cliff in a stiff wind. You didn't find that book by accident." Torrin looked every minute of his age as he lowered himself against the edge of a table with a sigh. "We discovered some things, when it was all over. I found more when I became First Enchanter. That was his game -- he'd leave books on blood magic where the apprentices would find them, and if anyone else noticed them looking, well, that was it for the apprentice. He'd convinced Irving it was a good way to see who was naturally inclined toward it. The ones who didn't get caught became his army."

"What?" Jowan croaked, as his mouth went dry.

"It's still your fault you did anything with it, but it was very clear he'd been pushing you. I found your file. Went looking for it, actually, since you and Anders were the only ones we'd never found. I found him. Rather, I found Solona, and stopped looking. I asked her about you, too, but she said she hadn't seen you since you ran." Torrin stared into his mug for a long moment, giving Jowan time to
compose himself, before he looked back up. "You were his sacrifice, and I'm still not sure why, but I do know why Irving didn't fight him. But, that was then. Now, you're still an apostate. You're still a blood mage. I watched you summon demons."

Jowan went to interrupt, but Torrin held up a hand.

"As an apprentice, you'd be made Tranquil. But, I've been talking to the people you showed up with and the people you showed up in front of. Three years in the Fade?"

Jowan nodded, wordlessly.

"I think you passed your Harrowing, and if anyone asks me, I'll tell them that. So, that means you'd be sent to Aeonar, instead." A hint of a smile played at the corner of Torrin's mouth, and Niall watched him warily. "As I recall, you showed up in the company of the Knight-Commander of Aeonar, so I can safely say you're already in his care, and have been, for years. Wouldn't you say, Sister?"

"Hmm?" Lily blinked, surprised to find he was addressing her. She glanced at Jowan and found her own surprise mirrored back at her. Considering Torrin's words, she gave a slow nod. "I would say so, yes, First Enchanter."

A look passed over Jowan's face that was a mix between relieved, grateful, and apologetic. "Thank you," he said to Torrin.

"Don't thank me," Torrin replied with a grimace. "Just don't put yourself in that position again. Don't put me in that position."

Jowan swallowed and nodded humbly. The weight of the sword at his back was still unfamiliar, and he paused to adjust the way the baldric sat across his shoulder.

"And try not to put yourself in a position where you need to use that," Niall said, nodding his head at Jowan's sword. "At least not for another day or two. I have a bet going on how soon you'll hurt yourself with it."

"Hey!" Jowan protested.

"Can I get in on that bet?" Lily drawled.

Torrin called down the bar. "Godwin! You have me down for six days, yes?"

Godwin returned an affirmative gesture.

"Oh, four weeks at least," Lily huffed. "He managed not to hex his toes off in the Fade, and that was a lot more power."

"And less sharp edges," Torrin reminded her.

Blackwall pushed himself away from the wall between two windows. "Doesn't sound like they've got a whole lot of faith in you, Master Levyn. Definitely less than the people of Redcliffe."

"Yes, well..." Jowan shifted uncomfortably. "Different times and places. I'm still not sure about the sword."

"Come outside." Blackwall smiled and clapped a hand on Jowan's back. "I heard someone say the sword's enchanted to hit. I'll pull over one of those dummies from the smithy and you can show me
what you know. It's got to be safer than using a sword that doesn't know its target, right? You'll be swinging straight in no time, and once you get that, it's just practice. An awful lot of practice, but Orlais will send a man into the field after six months, and their swords aren't fancy, like yours."

Jowan nodded, nervously. Still, Warden Blackwall seemed to be genuinely interested in helping him. "Thanks, Warden. You don't think I'm too... Incompetent. Weak. Stupid. "... much of a mage?"

"You ever see those pictures of the old Tevinter armies fighting Andraste? I saw some on the walls of a chapel outside Val Chevin. They're full of mages with swords. Not that anyone wants to be Tevinter, but if they can do it, you can do it." Blackwall sounded sure of himself and of Jowan, as he led the way toward the door.

"You know, I was going to say put me in for another five hours, but if he's going outside with Blackwall, I've got money on fifteen minutes." Kinnon dropped a small spinel into the bowl of coins between Cormac and Godwin.

"You have all seen him with magic," Solas pointed out, looking up from where he and Theron were arguing over a translation across the table from Fenris and Artemis. "But, none of you have seen him with a sword. Perhaps his talents lie in places you haven't been looking for them."

"You know," said Kinnon, "you're right. There are some places I wouldn't go looking for Jowan's 'talents', and they do definitely involve a sword."

That earned him a round of laughter at the bar and a flush across Lily's cheeks as she pursed her lips shut to keep from saying anything.

"Too bad not everyone has a natural talent for swording," Artemis said from the other side of Solas, emboldened by drink.

Solas sighed wearily. "And is this the part where you tell me you think I would be good at it?" he asked, learning to anticipate Artemis's fumbling version of flirting.

Artie smirked. "No, it's the part where I challenge you to a 'duel'."

Fenris made note of the devious grin on Solas's face and chuckled, leaning in to whisper loudly to his husband. "I would be careful how you word that. You might find yourself in an actual mage duel, with staves instead of..." Fenris's words broke off into a sigh. "You are going to turn that into an innuendo, too."

"You know me so well, dear husband."

Theron cleared his throat. "A shemlen from many fine places, with a taste for the pointy-eared races, called a magical lord, for a duel with a sword, but got lightning bolts at fifty paces."

Solas snorted, a surprised smile pushing into his cheeks.

"I picked up that style on the streets of Denerim. No good for legend, but fantastic for a quick laugh." Theron grinned proudly.

"You're surprisingly open-minded for a Dalish," Solas remarked, trying once again to remove the subject from himself. "And very easy-going."

"It's less his mind that is open, and more his trousers," Fenris quipped. "Perhaps less easy-going than just easy."
"You only think that because you're married to the finest ass ever to grace Ferelden," Theron scoffed, side-eyeing Solas as he spread his hands, framing Artemis. "In the green Ferelden valleys, far below the winter's bite, a shemlen city's curving harbour bore proof of their Maker's might. Lean of limb and bright of eye, exotic curve of rounded ears; quick to blush but lusty lies beneath the rising elven spear. Rounded bottom, perfect formed, like June himself had shaped its curve; body bowed to raise it higher, wanting nothing but to serve. Raised the blades of all with eyes; a magic made of gilded lust; offering his luscious prize, an ass worth all the years of waiting."

Artemis laughed, heat rushing to his face as he saluted Theron with his tankard, his poetry earning some appreciative applause from the smattering of patrons who could hear him.

"Have you run out of rhymes for 'ass'?" Fenris drawled, sitting back in his chair, leaning far enough back that it balanced on two legs, his foot hooked around a table leg. When Theron grinned and opened his mouth, Fenris held up a finger. "That was not an invitation for you to start yet another poem about my husband's admittedly inspiring ass."

"I cannot help my muse's inspirations!" Theron said with a wink at Artie.

Artie nudged Theron. "I'll pay you a gold coin if you write a poem rhyming 'ass' with 'Solas'."

Solas squeezed his eyes shut, looking pained. "That doesn't even rhyme!"

"My muse has spoken!" Theron declared, holding a hand out for Artie's money.

The door of the tavern swung open, before Theron could work up anything worthwhile, and Cormac turned toward the sound, fingers already glittering faintly, just in case that wasn't Fen'Din -- which it wasn't. Cassandra walked in, in the middle of a sentence, speaking to the two qunari behind her.

"-- mages with swords. Even Knight-Enchanters don't use actual swords! Once you arm a mage, where does it end?"

"Seems to me like your Templars just need to be better swordsmen," Bull grinned, ducking under the doorframe and taking the elf on his shoulder with him. "A mage with a sword is still going to need to learn to use that sword. And they're real likely to learn to do it with magic -- shields, fancy enhancements, hexes on the other guy. You take all that away, and what's the chance you've still got a good swordsman?"

Which was, Cormac thought, exactly why his father had made sure none of them were too dependent on the magic, when it came to combat. Not that he'd say it.

"Well, Master Longsword Wizard out there looks like he's trying to use a sword so he doesn't have to do magic. That's good, right? Get a sword, swing it around a little, forget all about that fancy fireball shite. There's no need for it anyway. There's enough ways to make somebody dead without throwing the ground in their face or pissing fire at them." Sera twisted her ear like she had an itch, one arm resting on Bull's horn, where it crossed in front of her. "More swording. Less wizarding. Everyone's happier."

"In fairness, pissing fire sounds less like magic and more like a medical problem," Adaar replied. He knew the sigh was coming before Cassandra even took a breath. "Not helping, Adaar."

"Am I supposed to?" Adaar joked. When his smile faded, he shrugged. "Let the mages use whatever tools they have at their disposal. They're on our side, right? Against the demons?"

Cassandra hesitated, aware of the eyes on them, many of which were mage eyes. "For now, but --"
"'For now' is all I can really afford to think about right now," Adaar cut her off. He ran a hand over one of his horns, the pad of one finger tracing the notch he'd recently got at the end of a sword. Leaning against the bar, he considered buying a drink, but if he didn't hear from Fen'Din soon, he was going to march down to the castle himself. The last thing they needed was a drunk Herald waving a sword around.

"Have you heard from them?" Cassandra asked Cormac, as she looked around for any sign Fen'Din and the others had returned.

"Nothing," Cormac shook his head. "I don't like it. We should have gotten at least a messenger, by now. We have heard from Harding, though. Ser Owain should be back, in a few hours, with any Templars who can't fight. They've found Hadley and the others. No real problems in the dungeons, but that's the last we'll hear from them until it's over. The rest of them are staying behind, in case our negotiators wind up locked up. They don't move until Fen'Din leaves the throne room, from any door. Which, if you ask me, means he hasn't."

"So, do we leave it to the Templars, or do we go in and punch some Vints?" Bull asked, squeezing one hand until his knuckles cracked.

"The Templars have already proven they are not up to this," Cassandra decided. "It is time to put together another team. The Queen's army is not far, by now. With luck, we can strike quickly, before they arrive, leaving an excellent impression of our ability to handle anything that arises. Without luck, well, we will have backup."
Chapter 102

Chapter Summary

Alexius is found, at last. Dorian tries to return himself and Fen'Din to the present.

The door burst open, hard enough to strike the wall, the hard slap of wood against stone seeming to echo in the still scene they walked into. They had found Alexius, finally, and for all his paranoia, in that moment he seemed not to care. He stared blankly into the fire, his back presenting an easy target.

"It's over, Alexius," Dorian said. Next to him, Leliana had an arrow trained and ready, and he almost expected her to let fly at any moment.

"So it is," was Alexius's tired reply. He still didn't turn to face them. "I knew you would appear again, not that it would be now, but I knew I hadn't destroyed you. My final failure."

"Was it worth it?" Dorian asked, barely keeping his anger in check. "Everything you did to the world? To yourself?"

"It doesn't matter now," Alexius said. "All we can do is wait for the end."

"What if I told you we could undo all this?" Fen'Din stepped forward, addressing Alexius's back from Dorian's other side.

"How many times have I tried? The past cannot be undone." Alexuis shook his head, sadly, still staring into the fire. "All that I fought for, all that I betrayed... And what have I wrought? Ruin and death. There is nothing else." His head tipped up, as if he were addressing he mantel. "The Elder One comes: for me, for you, for us all."

Leliana lunged suddenly, seizing the young man none of them had noticed in the shadows beside the fire. Her dagger pressed against his neck.

"Felix!" Alexius turned, wild-eyed, a desperate hand outstretched toward the figure barely recognisable as his son.

"That's Felix?" Dorian's eyes rounded in shock. "Maker's breath, Alexius, what have you done?"

Alexius was the image of despair, spear hanging loosely from his fingers. "He would have died, Dorian! I saved him!"

Niall made a sick sound, leaning heavily against Anders, ice pooling around their feet.

Alexius turned to address Leliana, grief already blossoming on his face. "Please don't hurt my son! I'll do anything you ask!"

"I cannot speak for her, after what you have done." Fen'Din's voice was calm, devoid of emotion. "But, in order to make this right, we need the amulet. We can put everything back as it was. Jan believes the Wardens can save your son -- you shouldn't have waited so long, but if we can use the amulet to return, we will see to it that he gets the best help Thedas has to offer. You have already tried so much, and we won't waste time doing it again."
Alexius swallowed, fear bright in his eyes, one hand still pleadingly outstretched to Leliana. Dorian took some hope in that, in the way he seemed to be considering it. "Let him go, and I swear you will get what you want!"

His voice trembled, but Leliana's didn't, her mutilated face a mask of hate. "I want the world back." She drew her dagger across Felix's throat before Alexius could gasp out the word, "No!"

Dorian cringed at the wet thud Felix's body made at it hit the floor, but he reminded himself that this wasn't real, that this wouldn't be real. Alexius stared down at his son, the pain in his eyes turning to wild, ugly rage as he roared, "No!" A sweep of his staff sent the air rippling with magic, green light passing over Leliana as the spell knocked her onto her back. He turned to the rest of them, teeth gritted in a snarl, with nothing left to lose.

"The boy was not the target!" Fen'Din snapped at Leliana, as Cormac's shields flared to life around him and Dorian, the closest to Alexius's wrath. "What are you doing?"

"Spirits preserve us all." Asha's voice, and then Dorian pulled Fen'Din back and down, wide-eyed, as a flash of fire bloomed over their heads, reaching for Alexius, blossoming around the magister's spear, its point where Fen'Din had been.

Justice strode forward, but hesitated between Alexius and Leliana. Nothing that had happened here had been just, Leliana's transgression more recent, but Alexius's far more serious. That hesitation cost him as a glyph Anders recognised rose beneath their feet. Paralysis.

Vivienne huffed and blinked, snapped her fingers at Cormac as she passed, receiving a shield for her efforts, once he realised her intent. "Magister Alexius, please. While this assault on your son was entirely unnecessary and well outside the bounds of good taste, one could argue you are now no less invested in a return to the past than we are. And Lord Pavus has led me to believe that with your assistance, he can ensure this situation we are in never occurs."

"No," Alexius sighed, a matching rune rising beneath Vivienne's feet, as he spoke. "There is no way into the past. You cannot go back, only forward. I have tried." He looked regretful, as he loosed a simple bolt of magic at her chest.

"That's enough!" Asha cried out, reaching into the flames around Anders to liberate another potion from his stash.

Dorian, in a rare moment of directness, grabbed Alexius's arm, diverting the spell. "What, you don't think we can do it, so now we're all going to die? This isn't one of those tragedies they perform in the winter!"

"The whole world is a tragedy, Dorian," Alexius hissed in reply, tearing his arm free and herding Dorian back with a swing of his staff. Fire, ice, and lightning bounced off his shield as he began casting again.

Asha's magic hit first. Even with the lyrium potion making her fingers tingle, the spell scraped at the bottom of her reserves, rippling outward in a blast that turned Alexius's vision white. He reeled, head ringing like a bell, hands going numb the way they did when he drew on too much magic. He staggered back and away, the sting of lightning touching him this time as he swung his staff blindly at the nearest adversary.

Fen'Din ducked under the staff and leaned into it, tearing it out of Alexius's inattentive one-handed grip and tossing it to Cormac.
"Finally!" Cormac spun the bladed staff, getting a feel for the heft as Alexius continued to stumble like a drunk.

"Please sit down, Alexius." Dorian took his arm and tried to lead him back to the steps that led up to the throne. "Listen to me. We can do this. You couldn't go back because you didn't go forward. But, we did."

"Nonsense!" Alexius slapped at Dorian's hands, finally curling his fingers to land a few good punches, which Dorian took, as if he were accustomed to that sort of thing. "There's no way back. You can't go back, and even if you can, you can't go back far enough to fix it!"

"Felix is still alive, when we came from. Jan is certain the Grey Wardens can help him," Dorian argued, as Alexius's blows became more solid, and finally, he pushed the man back and stepped just out of arm's reach.

"You can't go back before the Breach! You can't go back before the taint!" Alexius's voice was ragged with grief, but he finally managed to scrape enough power together to attempt a spell. All he wanted was for Dorian to shut up.

The air splintered into green shards, a hole tearing into where Alexius had been aiming, and Dorian staggered back against the pull of the rift opening above him.

"What?" Alexius croaked. A Terror tore out of the ground in front of him, knocking a shout out of Alexius as a swing of his staff only just managed to catch the swing of the creature's claws. A new shield rippled around him in time for the next strike, and Alexius recovered enough to stumble back a few steps.

"I am getting so sick of these!" Dorian groaned, pouring his frustration into a chain of spells that kept the shades around him at a manageable distance.

"Kill him," Leliana said, arrows still trained on Alexius as demons sprang up around her. "We don't know how many rifts he can summon!"

"Please be calm!" Fen'Din urged, before picking up a melody that set everyone's teeth on edge.

"You've already tried that," Vivienne scolded, lashing out with a thick curl of ice that pinned two terrors to the ground. Despair, though, remained unaffected, gliding smoothly toward Alexius, who hesitated, before it.

"Do not." Dorian's voice rolled through the room, low and clear, and he struck at the demon menacing Alexius with a spear of fire and then another.

"I've turned against so much of myself just getting here," Alexius lamented, as the demon's long fingers traced down the side of his face.

Niall wrapped Asha's arms around Fen'Din's shoulders, as the elf raised a hand toward the rift. "We're just going to stay right here. Keep singing."

"It's just one more betrayal," Alexius continued, eyes unseeing as the demon stared into them.

Justice's sword stopped just under Alexius's chin, having pierced the demon to reach. That was a decision he could make. However much injustice may have been wrought in this room, he could stop more from happening. He could stop this demon from luring Alexius into possession, through the magister's grief.
Alexius barely seemed to notice, body slipping away from the point of Justice's sword more out of instinct than any conscious choice. His eyes stayed hollow even without the suffocating press of the despair demon, but he was no less precise in his movements, in the swing of his staff and the methodical way he continued to reach for his magic. A Terror demon sprang upon him with long claws, but then he simply wasn't there, appearing behind the demon, staff swinging in an arc of flame.

Dorian cursed. The magic was weak and didn't last, but it was still magic, a sign that Alexius was pulling at least that part of himself together.

"We can still fix this," Dorian pleaded from the other side of the same demon, his lightning stunning it. "We can still try!"

Despite the demons that fell around him, Dorian knew he was fighting a losing battle.

Fen'Din continued to struggle with the rift, hauling on the air around it, as it resisted his every attempt to seal it.

"Do you need him alive?" Leliana barked at Dorian.

"I'd prefer--"

"Do you need him?" Leliana demanded.

Alexius turned toward her and spread his arms wide.

"If I have to, I can probably do it alone, but please don't--"

Leliana loosed the arrow, piercing Alexius's chest. He made no move to shield himself, and she followed it with two more.

"Thank you," the words came out on the last breath his lungs would hold, as Alexius crumpled to the ground, face just as troubled in death as it had been in life.

"What part of 'don't' did you miss?" Dorian snapped, one hand trembling and the other white-knuckled on his staff.

"The part where it was motivated by anything more than lingering affection. Even if you can never go back -- didn't he say that? -- he is finished. There is nothing more he can do." Leliana's eyes burned darkly. "Though if I knew he was going to thank me, I might have taken longer."

Over her shoulder, the rift finally pulled shut, Vivienne and Cormac cleaning up the last few lingering wraiths.

With bowed shoulders, Dorian crouched beside Alexius's body, trying to reconcile the man he once knew with the corpse in front of him. Yet for the first time in a long time, Alexius looked at peace.

Dorian sucked in a breath. "He wanted to die, didn't he? All those lies he told himself, the justifications... He lost Felix long ago, and he didn't even notice. Oh, Alexius..." As he spoke, he pushed aside Alexius's hood, seeking under the folds of his robes until he found an amulet -- the amulet -- around Alexius's neck. The relief Dorian felt at finding it was almost enough to make him shake.

"We'll do better, next time," Asha assured him from where she stood, still wrapped around Fen'Din.
Cormac tossed an arm across Dorian's shoulders. "You really liked the guy, didn't you. he must have been amazing, once."

"Once he was a man to whom I compared all others. Sad, isn't it?" Dorian ducked out from under the arm. "It's not personal, but you haven't bathed in a year."

Cormac sniffed himself and grimaced. "Sorry. I got used to it after a while."

"Is it the right amulet?" Fen'Din asked, carrying Asha over on his back.

"It's the same one he used before. I think it's the same one we made in Minrathous. That's a relief." Dorian spun his staff, just to give his hands something to do. "You should see if you can lock that door. I'll need about an hour to work out the spell he used, and then I should be able to reopen the rift."

"An hour?" Leliana demanded, as the building began to shake beneath their feet. "That's impossible! You must go now!" She leapt back from a falling chunk of a column. "The Elder One."

Dorian realised that the rumbling under his feet wasn't just the ground moving but rather the gurgling roar of some great beast.

"You must leave now," Vivienne said, echoing Leliana's urgency, eyes wide and fearful in a way Dorian would never have pictured on her face. "We cannot hold out long against that!"

Justice straightened, standing tall as blue light crackled around him. "We will hold the main door," he said to Fen'Din. "And when they break through..." He turned to Leliana, who returned his stare. She nodded, solemn and determined.

"You'll all be killed," Dorian said, the edges of the amulet digging into his palm.

"Dorian," Cormac paused to be sure he had the man's attention, "none of this is real. Go back and make sure it never happens."

"Cast your spell," Leliana urged him. "You have as much time as I have arrows."

Fen'Din set Asha back on her feet, the black fog and creeping chill already pouring off her.

"We'll take care of it," Niall promised, and Asha's body changed as he let go of any pretence at humanity. "Go back. Justice and I will take care of it."

The battle raged outside the doors, as Dorian began to cast his spell, a sphere of dim green growing between his palms as he shaped it around the amulet. The dragon's roars rolled over him like the Maker's own wrath, but he held as still as he could, correcting any damage done to the thing that would be their path home.

"Though darkness closes, I am shielded by flame," Leliana brought up her bow as the hinges strained. "Andraste guide me! Maker take me to your side!"

The door blew in, the light of magic filling the gap, illuminating the room.
Redcliffe (present)

Chapter Summary

Our heroes return!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The doors burst open in a spray of splinters, hanging in tatters off their hinges. Artemis stood behind them, hand outstretched in the end of a spell, before Adaar shouldered his way by him, and Sera followed on Bull's shoulders, an arrow already nocked. Their bulk blocked the view of the entourage behind them, but it was enough for Alexius to see that they hadn't come alone.

"Where's the elf?" Adaar boomed, long strides bringing him across the room. The sword in his hand was taller than Alexius.

"I..." Alexius had barely managed to sputter out one syllable before the air tore open again, right above where Fen'Din and Dorian had disappeared just a bit before.

The young man who'd followed the two qunari into the room stopped in the middle of the room, squinting curiously upward. "I was going to say you needed to get off my uncle's chair, but it looks like you have much more serious problems."

"Problems like a glowing sky twat," Sera quipped, face frozen somewhere between amusement and horror as shapes began to resolve in the light. She aimed and fired just in time to miss the first creature that plummeted down and struck Adaar across his upturned face.

"Does this mean we're even?" Fen'Din asked, breathlessly, bent awkwardly across Adaar's head and caught on one of his horns.

Connor managed to sidestep the second falling figure, and Dorian met the ground with his face.

"Are we there yet?" Dorian asked, grabbing Connor's trouser leg to pull himself up.

"What are you even doing?" Sera complained, at the fallen Heralds, levelling another arrow at Alexius, just in case he decided to try anything more interesting than breathing. "People I know aren't supposed to be falling out of glowing arseholes in the sky! That's supposed to be demons! You can't just go changing the rules around in the middle of the game!"

"We really need to stop meeting like this," Adaar said from under Fen'Din, reaching up to try and disentangle him from his horns. That was going to leave a bruise.

Dorian staggered to his feet, Connor's hand on his elbow steadying him when he leaned at too much of an angle. He smoothed out his robes and his moustache, trying to regain some semblance of dignity as he stared at Alexius, legs nearly weak with relief to be back here, in this time.

"You're going to have to try harder than that," Dorian said regally, and for a long moment, Alexius merely stared back as he tried to figure out what had just happened.
Alexius looked around him, at the weapons pointed his way, at Félix, and his shoulders slumped as he sank to his knees, defeated.

"Set aside your claim to Redcliffe and let us help your son. That is all we asked at the start of this, and it's all we ask now." Fen'Din twisted himself around enough to drop onto one of Adaar's shoulders while he worked to detach the trim on his robes from where Adaar's horn had pierced it and hooked in. "We have seen the future. We know what you will try, and we know it doesn't work."

"You won," Alexius admitted, turning his eyes up to the elf perched on the glowing qunari's shoulder. "There's no point in extending this charade." He looked up at his son. "Félix..."

"It's going to be all right, Father." Félix knelt beside the man.

"I'm afraid you'll die." Alexius couldn't keep his jaw from trembling. "What if it doesn't work?"

"Everyone dies." Félix seemed calm, if melancholy, and Alexius bowed his head in defeat.

"Not to interrupt, but while there is a chance the treatment I have in mind might be fatal, you've been living with the taint for quite some time, by the look of it," Anders cut in, digging through his bag to toss Dorian a potion. "I can be relatively sure that if it were going to kill you -- the treatment, that is -- the taint would have gotten you, already. That you're still alive speaks to a much better than average chance. Assuming it works, it'll probably buy you another fifteen or twenty years. Unfortunately, having the taint untreated for so long has probably shortened your life."

"With the treatments you had in mind, Alexius, he lives another year," Fen'Din pointed out, leaving out the part where that was Leliana's doing.

"If I live, I won't waste it." Félix offered an uncertain smile, first to his father, then to Anders.

Dorian offered a smile of his own, a relieved, if tired, smile. "It's the best way, Alexius," he said, though he supposed to Alexius it was the only way left. With a heavy sigh, Dorian looked around the throne room, bearing none of the future's ravages of time, and he looked especially at Anders and at Cormac who had come in after Adaar and Bull. Beaming, he said, "Well, I'm glad that's over!"

No sooner had he spoken than he heard the steady clomp of marching feet. Adaar frowned, turning at the sound, one hand steadying Fen'Din. In marched Fereldan soldiers with a military precision, lining up down the length of the room, forming a corridor for whomever they were escorting.

"You just had to say it, didn't you?" Sera huffed, shooting Dorian an unimpressed look.

Two women entered, both dressed in the manner of nobility, the darker-haired one in a green gown and the lighter-haired one in brown and gold.

"Grand Enchanter, we'd like to discuss your abuse of Arl Teagan's hospitality," the darker-haired woman declared.

Anders turned around so fast he almost tripped over his feet. "Delilah?"

"Warden! What are you doing here?" Delilah remembered the last time they'd met, and how Anders had been trying to keep a low profile. This was hardly in keeping with that.

"Oh, you know how it is, you go for a holiday, and suddenly there's magisters and blood magic." Anders shrugged, smiling innocently. "I thought I'd come rescue Fiona and the people of Redcliffe from the Tevinter invasion, while I was in town."
The blonde woman looked bemused, and Anders thought she looked familiar. Maybe they'd met at some party.

Fiona stepped forward, head bowed low. "Your Majesty." She nodded to the blonde, and then to Delilah. "Teyrna."

"When we offered the mages sanctuary, we did not give them the right to drive our people from their homes," Queen Anora declared, eyes firmly on Fiona.

"Queen Anora, I assure you, we never intended--" Fiona began, but Anora interrupted.

"In light of your actions, good intentions are no longer enough."

Fen'Din stepped forward, holding up his glowing hand in a plea to be heard. "Your Majesty, if I may, the situation is not the Grand Enchanter's fault or doing, but that of Magister Alexius."

Anora eyed the elf, pointedly. "What are you saying? Out with it. You've interrupted me. Don't waste my time."

"I'm saying that Grand Enchanter Fiona and very likely several other of the enchanters travelling with her were turned from their purpose by blood magic, as anyone could be."

"Father!" Felix's outrage and disappointment echoed off the walls.

"When we arrived, the Grand Enchanter was confused as to the date and several other things that would have been obvious to even a child. Her explanations were disjointed, and she had no memory of having met with me in Val Royeaux -- a meeting to which I have many witnesses -- to request my assistance, and the assistance of the Inquisition, in keeping Redcliffe safe from Tevinter. Between that meeting and our arrival, she had been compelled, most likely through blood magic, and her memories were badly disturbed. Responsibility for what happened here rests with Magister Alexius, as anyone still present in the town will tell you, particularly a Tranquil by the name of Clemence. I urge you to take this into account, before passing judgement."

Anora eyed the elf up and down, her stare pausing on his glowing hand. The crease of her brow said she found that information troubling, but she was at least thinking it over. "Do not think me unsympathetic," she said to Fen'Din, to Fiona, "but whatever the cause, the result was a small army of mages threatening my subjects. I cannot allow you to stay here."

"But..." Fiona sputtered weakly, "we have hundreds who need protection! Where will we go?"

Chapter End Notes

A reminder: Rhapsody party is this weekend! Saturday, 22 December @ 17:00-21:00 EDT! If you're gonna come party with us, watch for the Discord link on my Tumblr, when the party starts! (This may be the last time it's posted on Tumblr, due to the Pornocalypse, but it is scheduled to post.)
Chapter 104

Chapter Summary

A solution is proposed, implementation begins. The missing Templars are found.

Adaar cleared his throat pointedly, and Fiona turned to look up at the towering qunari. He offered his friendliest smile. "I'm sure we might have an option for you." Recruiting both Templars and mages; what could possibly go wrong?

Fen'Din stared blankly for a long moment, before it occurred to him. "Yes, I suppose we do. I had intended to come to request help from First Enchanter Torrin, but we can offer you the same proposition. Still, I know you have many travelling with you who are unfit for this kind of work, and we will have to find a home for them, as well."

"What are the terms of this arrangement?" Fiona asked, cautiously.

Dorian cleared his throat. "Hopefully better than what Alexius gave you. The Inquisition is better than that, yes?"

"I suggest conscripting them," Cassandra cut in from further back in the room. "They have shown they are incapable of managing themselves."

"We offer you no different than we offer to anyone who chooses to work with us." Fen'Din's face showed not even the slightest ripple. "I know we haven't had the opportunity to really work together in the past, Fiona, but I hope we can work something out, now. I'm sure we can find somewhere to shelter the rest of your people. It may just take a little time to arrange that."

"The ruins!" Delilah said, suddenly. "Didn't I pass Lord Hawke on the way in? Lord Hawke, how much room do you think is available? I recall you mentioning that there was far more than enough for the numbers we had from Kinloch Hold."

"Ruins?" Fiona looked uncertain, obviously concerned with the thought of moving the young and the infirm into buildings that might collapse.

"They were ruins," Artemis said, squeezing his way to the front of the crowd and tossing Fiona a reassuring smile. "Dalish ruins, which we've been working to restore." He tipped his head in Theron's direction. "They should be perfectly safe and functional, provided Junar hasn't broken anything in my absence." He twisted the staff in his hand with a strained laugh that said he wouldn't be surprised. "And... provided something is done about the glowy red Templars we spotted on the way here."

Artie glanced at his brother as he spoke, wondering if they would have to take matters into their own hands, but then Adaar started laughing.

"Been taken care of," Adaar said with a grin at Bull and Sera. Sera replied with a salute that seemed friendly but looked like it could have been a rude gesture. To Fen'Din, he added, "We made some new friends."

"Oh." Artie blinked, relieved. "Well, that solves that problem."
"That's why they pay me," Adaar said with a wink, only for his smile to freeze as he thought that over. "Oh right. I'm not getting paid."

"I'm sure we'll get paid once there's anything to pay us with." Fen'Din peered up at Adaar. "You will, anyway. You're still holding a contract. I'm just here for the dainty cakes."

"Assuming the contract survived the Breach," Anders pointed out.

"Don't be ridiculous, Jan. Josephine knows we owe him money." Fen'Din turned to Anora. "We'll take them off your hands, Your Majesty. I apologise again for any damage we may have caused, but we can offer a few people with experience to get things back in order for anyone Alexius managed to force out of the village. Which reminds me, we need to find the Tranquil, as well. There are reports they were driven out of town, but I expect some were used in a particular set of experiments, sadly fatal. We discovered the remains of several recent Tranquil on our way to the docks."

Fiona covered her mouth, hoping to contain a ragged gasp.

"We'll do our best to find everyone, Fiona. And to discover who we've lost." Fen'Din's eyes remained on Anora.

"You have been very generous, Herald." Anora nodded, her eyes darting to Delilah. "These ruins of yours, they were to be the new Circle Tower?"

"They still are. As Lord Hawke says, there should be room enough for more mages than we originally anticipated." Delilah kept her eyes down and tipped her chin toward Artemis.

"Then the building should be safe to contain any magical accidents? Another Enchanter Uldred? Demons?" Anora inquired, clearly hoping to wash her hands of this.

"A Tower's walls are only as strong as the Templars in it," Brynn's voice cut in, as Harding led the Templars in through the back of the throne room. He raised a hand in greeting and then bowed deeply. "Captain Brynn of Aeonar."

"Aeonar?" Anora echoed, blinking. "You've come a long way."

Those who knew Jowan heaved a collective sigh.

"It's a long story, Your Majesty," Brynn said. "Just know that the Breach affects more than you might realise."

Anora gave him a considering look. Much of her earlier anger had bled out of her, which Fiona took as a hopeful sign. "I trust you are volunteering," she said. "That might be an acceptable solution, or at least the best we can hope for so long as there are demons falling from the sky. Teyrna?"

Delilah straightened at the mention of her title. "I agree. It would be good to give the ruins a use again."

A Templar who had been leaning heavily on another, suddenly looked up, as if he'd become aware of the room. "Where's my sword? I can't find my sword."

"You gave it to Ser Owain to carry, Commander Hadley," Peryn reminded him, looking mildly concerned. "Come, I see Jan. Let's have the healer look at you."

"I'll look, but I don't know that I can fix this," Anders said, laying the accent on thickly. "Captain Hadley couldn't find his own ass with two hands if he had a spell wisp charmed to point to it, the last
time I saw him."

Anora's eyes narrowed. "From where do you know him, Warden?"

"Kinloch Hold. I worked with Commander Amell for a little while." Anders smiled brightly at the Queen, hoping she wouldn't recognise him. Hadley, he was pretty sure, wouldn't.

"He has been without lyrium," Peryn explained. "They all have. They are very sick, but some of them wanted to come up in case you needed help."

"Thanks for keeping them out of the way." Anders squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head, before he put his hands on either side of Hadley's face. "I can't help you with the lyrium, but I can do something about the rest of it."

"Your Majesty, I would honestly advise riding back out, tonight. After what has happened here, we need time to see to all of Alexius's still living followers, and I would not guarantee even this castle a safe place, right now." Cassandra made her way up the length of the room. "After all, we just broke into it. It is barely eight years since Ferelden last lost a ruler, and I would hate for anything to happen, if we let you stay in a place we cannot secure, where Venatori may still be concealed. A Tevinter strike of this calibre seems mild, until one recognises that you have come to handle it yourself. Then it becomes--"

"The perfect conditions for an assassination," Anora finished, with a small smile. "I might think you were trying to run me out of town, but I agree. Let us help you secure things, while we are here. I would hate to think of returning my countrymen to a village still infested with Tevinter agents."
Word preceded them, and the tavern was abuzz before the Heralds arrived with their small army. First Enchanter Torrin didn't know what had happened beyond the few half-chewed rumours that had made it to his ears, but his main concern was in hoping he had heard right, that everyone had come back alive, if not necessarily unharmed. That hope was realised when the doors burst open.

"First Enchanter."

Torrin was already on his feet and halfway across the room when Seeker Pentaghast called out to him, marching his way with her jaw set in determination.

"You were successful, I hope?" Torrin asked, noting the relief on the faces behind her.

Cassandra glanced back over her shoulder, and Torrin followed her gaze to Commander Hadley, who leaned against Anders at an angle, eyes glazed in confusion.

"He's alive," Anders said, unnecessarily. "And he's probably going to be all right. All of the survivors need about three days in bed and a steady supply of lyrium. Probably just a bit less than they're used to getting -- I don't want us to accidentally kill any of them."

"Yes, if he kills them, it should be on purpose," Fen'Din joked, easing around Hadley to get to Torrin. "That's the first of several problems. The Queen has ordered the mages out of Redcliffe, but I'm told Teyrna Howe has already arranged a place for you to lead them."

"Teyrna Howe has been generous, since Kinloch Hold became unfit for decent living." Torrin gave Fen'Din a dry look. "Does that mean construction is complete?"

"Have you met Lord Hawke?" Fen'Din asked, looking around the crowd of people pouring into the tavern. "He claims the ruins are no longer ruined."

"I have heard Lord Hawke speak of this place," Solas cut in, squeezing between two Fereldan soldiers and a table. "Do these ruins have a name? I know only that they are in the Brecilian Forest, and I am left curious which settlement has been restored -- whether Telinan, Vhenas Atish'an, or one of the smaller places."

The room opened up a bit, as Anders began herding confused Templars up the stairs, and Theron appeared at Solas's shoulder. "They have names! I knew they had names! How do you know them? And which one is which? I spent some time in the Forest, when I was younger, and I've seen more ruins than the one we got to work on."

"I, too, spent time in that forest, when I was young." Solas managed a small smile. "Did you find a mirror the size of an oxcart? Or maybe a well and a fountain? If not, it will be one of the others."
Theron raised his eyebrows at the mention of the mirror and made a note to ask Solas more about that later. "The one with the well and the fountain."

"Telinan, then," Solas said with a decisive nod. "It has been many years, but I know the place. It would be good to see it restored to its former glory."

"'Telinan'?" Theron repeated with a crooked smile.

"'The place with nothing in it'," Solas translated with a matching smile.

Theron laughed. "We will have to rename it 'the place with mages in it' instead! Or 'the place that used to have werewolves in it'."

"Oh, it's that place?" Anders said. "Solona talked about that. Or rather she grumbled about it one night while she was trying to get drunk."

"So, we're being offered a place that was once full of werewolves and sounds like an ancient elven curse?" Torrin gave them all a look dry enough to drain Lake Calenhad. "I don't suppose it's also littered with Tevinter artefacts of unfathomable evil? If not, I'm sure we'll be moving our own in, once it's possible to get a cart across the Bannorn, without bandits and wild Templars besetting it."

"Well, you're taking the tamed Templars with you, right? I'm sure they'll offer some protection against their wild brethren," Anders quipped. "Assuming we can get them supplied with lyrium, but I know just the woman to see about that, if she's still in town. Smugglers everywhere, and all we have to do is beat the going rate. Reminds me... where's Kinnon?"

"Should I be concerned that you've put Kinnon in the same sentence with money?" Torrin asked, slowly raising an eyebrow.

"He's... got some excellent skills in negotiating with certain sorts of people. Not my kind of negotiating at all. He's also always got more coin than one might expect, in his position." Anders gave Torrin a pointed look.

"Kinnon's unfathomable fortune aside, we must locate the Tranquil who were in the village."

Fen'Din glanced around, but Clemence appeared not to be in town. "There's a man who speaks to the Stone, in the hills, and his new assistant was the only Tranquil I've seen in Redcliffe. This Tranquil, Clemence, reports that the rest of the Tranquil were driven out of town by Magister Alexius. I would like them to go with you, if we can find them." He paused. "The other thing you need to know is that Alexius's men created more Tranquil and then killed them, in an attempt to use their skulls to find... something I don't quite understand. Crystals of some sort, from what Dorian and I could tell. Harding should have brought the book to you, before she set out. Did you receive it?"

"I did," Torrin said heavily. He hadn't been there to see the skulls, the waste of life, but the look on Harding's face had been heartbreaking enough. He tried not to think of the faces those skulls once had. "Alexius was a sick man. Or is it 'is'?"

"He's still alive," Anders said, and he watched Torrin tuck away his disappointment and rage behind a polite nod.

"He hardly deserves it," Torrin sighed, "but at least this way you can ask him what he'd wanted with those skulls. I have to assume there was a reason beyond decorating the shelves."

"Whatever he's pursuing, it's either a cure for the taint or it's for the Elder One." Fen'Din paused, realising no one in the room had been with him in the future. "His son is infected, and he made a deal with the person who opened the Breach, in exchange for the cure. But, the cure will never manifest -
- only an army of demons sent to conquer Orlais."

"How do you know this?" Torrin asked, wondering what spirits Fen'Din had been speaking to, this time.

"I'll let Dorian explain the mechanics, but Magister Alexius managed to send the two of us a year into the future, by accident. I've seen what's coming, or at least what would have come, if we hadn't stopped Alexius. This 'Elder One' seems intent on expanding the Breach until it covers Thedas. Redcliffe, one year from now, seemed to be loosed from its moorings -- parts of the castle dreamed into existence, rocks hanging in the air. No fixed desire to hold the place as it was built."

"Maker preserve us," Torrin breathed, eyes widening.

Chapter End Notes

*confetti* One year of Assquisition!
"So, not to interrupt your heartfelt reunion," Harding cut in, her entrance nearly invisible through the taller crowd, "but we've lost some scouts sent south. The locals -- the few who haven't fled or been eaten by demons -- report that there are demons everywhere and there's some more of those glowy green rifts spitting them out. Might want to get someone down there to take care of that, before it gets any worse. And, you know, maybe find my scouts, if they're still alive."

"I'll go," Asha volunteered, from behind her, a mug filled with fruit and a strong-smelling liquor in her hand. "Maybe Sister Lily will help me. She has an unusual strength in the face of demons."

"If she's going, I'm going," Niall called out from where he sat at the corner of the bar, surrounded by soldiers relieved that the battle had ended before they arrived. "I can't just... stay here. It's a lovely village, but I really need to scream, now."

"What do you think, Blackwall? Have I got this sword thing down well enough to take on demons?" Jowan asked, eyeing the blade that leaned in the corner behind him.

"I'll go with you," Blackwall volunteered. "But, demons may be somewhere your magic will serve you better than any sword."

Harding looked up at Fen'Din expectantly when he said nothing. "We'll need someone who can close the rifts, or this is going to be extra difficult."

"Can I take a day for soup and beer? I've just come back from a demon-infested future, and I feel like a few good meals should go into my mouth before I get back to yet more demons." Fen'Din stepped back onto a chair, looking for horns above the crowd. "Adaar! Harding's got a proposition for you!"

The correct pair of horns turned his way. "Does she?" he shouted back. He almost tripped over her before he saw her in the crowd. He gave her an assessing look, humming uncertainly at the height difference.

"Not that kind of proposition!" Harding protested around a laugh, a blush showing up in red splotches behind her freckles. "And my eyes are up here!"

"I'm looking down either way," Adaar said with a shrug and his own laugh.

"How do you feel about killing demons and closing rifts with some of these..." Harding grappled for the right noun as she gestured at their volunteered. "...these fine people?"

Some of the humour left Adaar's face, but he forced another smile a moment later. They would only need one Herald, and a glance at Fen'Din said he had not volunteered or at least was even less enthused than he was. "Well, I'd say it must be Wintersend, because those are two of my favourite things."

"Great," Harding said like she believed him.
"Speaking of my favourite things," Adaar teased, "are you sure that isn't your only proposition?"

"Herald, I don't think you're really my... size." Harding chuckled, and Asha pressed a drink into her hand.

"Qunari are rarely so much as the penny pamphlets would have you imagine, but still..." Asha leaned back to look Adaar all the way up and down. "You might be right. He's a little tall, if nothing else."

Niall opened his mouth, a crack about Anders on the tip of his tongue, and then swallowed it down with a swig of Jowan's beer. He wasn't drunk enough to admit to that. He wasn't sure there was such a thing as drunk enough for that.

Dorian stumbled out of the crowd as one of the Queen's guard elbowed him in the back of the head in the middle of a toast. "I'm surrounded by barbarians, and everything smells like dog!" he protested, spotting Fen'Din.

"The land of dogs and dogshit, Jan calls it," Fen'Din informed him, amusement in his eyes.

"A wise man," Dorian said with an appreciative nod in Anders's direction. He fussed with his hair with one hand, held his drink in the other. He looked at Fen'Din with a heavy sigh, the unhappy edge of his smile a reminder that they were the only two who would ever know that other Redcliffe. 

"As much as I would like to kick back and have a drink or six after our... ordeal, there are some loose ends we still need to tie up before we can consider the whole Alexius issue neatly wrapped like the present it is." He paused to contemplate both meanings of the word 'present', then decided he'd much rather contemplate his beer. Or drink it.

"Of course," Adaar sighed. "They never make it easy, do they?"

"They don't," Dorian agreed. "And right now, the 'they' in question are some of Alexius's lackeys, more Venatori. People I know personally. I would call them 'friends', except that would imply I didn't want them dead. Which I do."

"Tomorrow," Fen'Din said, firmly. "Should they come for us in the night, we're packed in with Templars, though the Fereldan soldiers will be out of the way in a few hours, I expect. One doesn't take a Smite lightly."

"The Templars who failed to defend themselves or anyone else the first time?" Dorian drawled.

"The Templars who were attempting to be polite and accommodating, the first time, and are now very angry." Fen'Din managed a grim smile. "I'd expect, after all we've seen, that the Venatori are not interested in killing us. Well, perhaps killing you, but Adaar and I are meant to be brought before the 'Elder One', whoever that may be. And what is death, really, but a minor inconvenience, at this point? The Fade is a broad place of many kingdoms, and the rifts seem to permit passage back to our own." He gestured at Niall. "Not something I advise doing, but certainly not an unrecoverable loss."

"I don't know how to feel about someone who takes my death so cavalierly," Dorian remarked, studying Fen'Din with equal amounts curiosity and consternation.

"He takes everyone's death cavalierly," Niall filled in, still nursing Jowan's drink. "He's pretty sure he's dead, and right now, I'm not so sure any more that he's not. I did it. If he's done it, it just means I have something to work toward. I mean, I'd be less weird about it, after, but... he's always been like that."

"I am not weird about it. I am simply paying attention." Fen'Din glanced at Niall, remembering what he'd seen in the future. "Are you sure you should be chasing demons?"
"I'll never be able to make it stop, if I don't." Niall shrugged. "I think you're right about the Venatori, though. They're not a threat, right now, but they might be in a week. You've probably got until tomorrow. I can't see anyone being stupid enough to come at us, after that scene you must have put on in the castle."

Theron looked up from the conversation he was having with Solas. "Yeah, if they want Alexius back, they're going to wait until we're on the road."

"Would you mind if I joined you?" Solas asked Dorian. "I have noticed some ripples in the Veil, as we travelled, and I believe there is another rift yet to open, nearby. I would like to study it, before it does so. Should this go the way I've planned, it opens up the way for more in-depth studies to be performed later. There are devices dating back to times the Veil was stronger that can be enabled and coordinated. With mages spread across the land, we may come to understand what causes rifts and how we can prevent them."

Dorian's eyebrows twitched up in something like interest. "Oh? That would be a handy thing. Do you think our Herald here would be able to waggle his fingers and keep it closed? Or at least close it once it's opened before any demons spill out?"

"One hopes, but if not, that's why we have you."

Dorian sighed dramatically. "Is that what I am now? Demon bait? My mother would be so proud."

"So sorry I'll be missing all of that fun," Adaar said, not sounding sorry at all. Something seemed to catch his eye as he looked around. "Now, if you will excuse me, I'm going to go see if the Lady Vivienne would like a drink."

Solas raised his eyebrows at Adaar's grin and shook his head at Adaar's retreating back.

"It's the horns, isn't it?" Harding said, gesturing over her head, hands sketching the shape of Vivienne's signature headdress.

"I don't believe she's wearing it at the moment," Solas said, scanning the crowd for her familiar horns and finding the elegant shape of her shaved head.

Dorian followed his line of sight and hummed. "Not to cast any aspersions, but she wears that look better." He gestured at Solas's head.

Solas rolled his eyes, a ready retort on his tongue until he noticed Dorian and Harding leaning back, wearing matching looks of consideration as they stared at his bald head. It took him a moment to realise what they were envisioning. "I am not wearing a hat. Particularly one with horns."

"Not even if your head gets cold?" Harding asked, her question meeting his back as he turned to escape in the other direction.

"No."

Dorian clucked his tongue as he watched Solas leave. "I don't think a hat would save that outfit anyway."
Chapter 107

Chapter Summary

Kinnon and Peryn take a bit of time to celebrate being alive. (it's porn. you know how we are.)

Kinnon paced the length of the hall the Templars had been roomed along, waiting for Peryn to finish helping Anders. He, Captain Brynn, and Ser Owain were the last three Templars standing, and Anders needed people who understood the lyrium to help him with the others. By the time they'd finished cleaning up Alexius's footprints in Redcliffe, the Templars would be ready to march -- or that's what Anders thought, anyway. Kinnon had no idea, and he didn't much care. What mattered was Peryn.

He'd taken supper with Fen'Din and their new Tevinter acquaintance, listening to stories of the future that now would never come, and it had made him realise how grateful he was that Peryn had come back from that secret mission beneath the castle. Soon. He was going to have to tell Peryn everything soon. But, they'd be closing up the Breach, when they got back to Haven, and then everything would be back to normal. That was when he'd break the news. That would be the best time -- they'd be heroes. But, for now, all he wanted was--

The door to one of the rooms opened, and Peryn stepped out, looking tired and troubled. "I will return in the morning, but now I must sleep," he told Anders, over his shoulder, as Kinnon grabbed the front of his robes and pulled him out of the doorway.

"I'll bring him back in one piece. I promise!" Kinnon leaned into the room and pulled the door closed, the smell of sick-sweat and lyrium filling his senses, in that brief moment. He choked and wiped his face trying to clear the stench from his lungs, before he wrapped his arms around Peryn, holding his breath.

Peryn was tired enough to be surprised, but his arms knew what to do, curling around Kinnon and holding him close. Peryn wished he could say that Kinnon fit in his arms like he was made to be there, but he was all angles and long limbs, so Peryn adjusted his grip to fit him instead.

"Let us walk away from here, yes?" Because if Peryn could taste the lyrium in that room, then so could Kinnon. Keeping an arm around Kinnon's shoulders, he steered them down the hall.

Once they had turned away, Kinnon dared to breathe again, the corner of his sleeve filtering the smell. "I keep trying not to think about it, that almost-future. Everything could have gone so wrong so fast." Not that Kinnon cared about 'everything' so much as he cared about Peryn, at least just then, pressed against his side.

"We have stopped the 'almost', yes? And we will stop it again, if it tries again. This 'Elder One' is the problem, but he is just Tevinter. Jan and I, we come from the Anderfels. We know what to do with Tevinter, in the Anderfels." Peryn managed a tired smile. "They are all just men, even if they are mages. We can fight them and win."

"You're so sure, just like Fen'Din." Kinnon allowed himself to laugh with the cleaner air. The corridor only smelled like the tavern below, and their room, at the end of it, would smell like the
pine-covered hill behind it. "Maybe I should believe you both. An Enchanter and a Templar are both
telling me they're sure we can stop things from getting that bad. Maybe it's true, then. But, just in
case, I think I want to appreciate you while you're still alive -- while I'm still alive. While the sky
only bleeds demons sometimes."

Peryn opened the door and let Kinnon sweep him into the room, one long leg stretching to kick the
door shut after them. "I do like to be appreciated."

Kinnon hid the grin that wanted to form behind a close-lipped kiss, hands still curled in Peryn's
robes. Kinnon steered him through the room with that grip, and Peryn allowed himself to be pulled
towards the bed in the middle of the room, hands stroking Kinnon's sides through the robes.

"You will appreciate me when the sky stops bleeding demons too, yes?" Peryn asked, a teasing
lightness in his voice and in his eyes.

"Of course," Kinnon said without hesitation, tugging at Peryn's robes in a pointed suggestion.
"Otherwise, what would be your incentive for helping the Inquisition?"

"That is good," Peryn said with a soft laugh after the short pause it took him to place what the word 'incentive' meant.

"So, while we're both alive and in the same room..." Kinnon started unbuckling Peryn's belt, to more
easily get the rest of the robes and armour off him. "How much appreciating can I get away with,
hmm? You're looking a little tired."

"No," Peryn said, tugging his robes up from the waist, as Kinnon opened his belt. "Not tired. Just ...
It is a long day, full of bad things. I would like to end it with a good thing. It is good you are here
with me."

Kinnon stepped back, unwrapping his own belt and setting it aside as Peryn stripped off the robes,
leaving him clad in simple leather. "Should I have called for the bath to be filled? I can run up the
hall and grab a mage..."

Peryn chuckled. "You wish for me not to smell like that room. I will haul the water."

"Nope." Kinnon extracted something from his belt and pointed a finger at Peryn, as he ducked out
the door. "You'll stay right here. Won't be a moment." His voice could be heard in the hall. "Connor!
Can you do me a favour?"

In a matter of moments, the bath was filled with hot water, Kinnon was lighter by a single small
emerald, and Connor had managed to express his disapproval of the entire situation several times
without saying a word.

"I owe you!" Kinnon called after Connor, as he left the room.

"You owe me a pint and a very good explanation," Connor retorted, pulling the door shut and then
checking to be sure it wouldn't swing open. The last thing he needed was to think too long about
what Kinnon had gotten himself into.

Which would soon be a warm bath with a very attractive Templar.

"Hot enough for you?" Kinnon asked, turning around to find that Peryn had already peeled off the
top of his armour and was already unbuckling the knees.

"I think, you must be hot in those robes," Peryn said with a suggestive look down the length of
Kinnon's body.

"But I would be hotter out of them?" Kinnon quipped with a laugh. But Kinnon didn't touch his robes yet, helping Peryn take off the rest of his armour first, setting it all aside in a pile that was almost neat and out of the way.

Peryn was equally helpful and unhelpful in helping Kinnon disrobe, hands exploring as much as helping him pull the fabric over his head, but with perseverance, they ended up naked, sinking into a warm tub.

Peryn all but melted into the water with a sigh, feeling his muscles relax. "I feel appreciated," he announced, pulling Kinnon down next to him.

"Already? That was fast."

"Who else would go half dressed to bring a mage to fill the bath? Only you, I think." Peryn brought up a damp hand to Kinnon's cheek, brushing back the ends of his hair. "You are unusual. I like it."

"Well, I'd hope you like it! You've put up with it long enough!" Kinnon teased, shifting to kneel over Peryn's thighs. "You're not exactly the most normal Templar in Thedas, either, you know."

"Not if you are accustomed to these strange Templars in the South!" Peryn looked genuinely troubled. "I am just like any of my class. We are all taught the same way. But, not like the lessons here." He waved a hand dismissively and forced the confusion from his face. "No, I am just a regular Templar. But, that is not what we are in this bath to discuss, is it?"

"I hope not," Kinnon purred, pouring warm water down the sides of Peryn's neck, before leaning in to press a kiss just below one ear. "There are so many more enjoyable things we could be discussing, like whether we are going to do all the appreciating right here in the bath, so I don't have to get someone to reheat the water, before we go to bed."

"That sounds efficient," Peryn replied, the water softening his hands as they traced over Kinnon's thighs.

"Just the adjective I was hoping for after taking off my clothes." Kinnon poured water over Peryn's shoulders, his hands lingering over them as he admired the breadth of them. His hands slid down to Peryn's chest, feeling the rise and fall of his rib cage around a hitched breath.

Peryn chuckled, and Kinnon could feel that under his hands as well. "Maybe efficient in taking off clothes?" he teased, hands sliding to Kinnon's hips and holding him close against him. He pulled Kinnon in to kiss his jaw and his neck the way he wished he could kiss his lips.

"I'm sure that could've been more efficient. I'm easily distracted by how good you look in every layer, and how much better you look with all of it off." Kinnon's hands clutched and squeezed at Peryn's chest, and he marvelled once again at the soft bulk of the man beneath him. "But, you know that, obviously," he teased. "You with a beautiful woman in every village along the river."

"Not all of them." Peryn laughed breathlessly against Kinnon's neck, hands sliding down to knead the bony bottom digging into his thighs. "Many less than you think. And not all at once. Just one, and then another, and after a few more, I found you. And you are not going to marry for a farm."

"Is that all it takes to keep you?" Kinnon nuzzled Peryn's ear, before he sat back to get a clear breath, shifting his hips forward so his knob rested against Peryn's.

"Should I meet your father?" Peryn asked, with a small smile. "Would he be very angry? I do not
like to stay where there are angry fathers."

Kinnon’s laugh was a huff of breath against Peryn's skin. He couldn't remember what his father looked like, just an impression of strong hands and a gentle voice, the earthy smell of horses that always clung to him. "Angry? No. Just as long as you don't piss off the horses."

"They do not spit half so much as camels. I see no reason to upset them." Amusement danced in Peryn's eyes, quickly turning to desire when Kinnon moved against him. "Is that your way of saying yes, I should meet your father?"

Kinnon's next laugh had an edge of exasperation. "I really don't think my father is what I want to be talking about right now," he said, voice dropping to a low purr as his hand dropped between them, wrapping around them both and coaxing a hitch of breath from Peryn.

"I think I like this conversation much better," Peryn agreed, leaning back against the metal of the tub, one hand sliding firmly up Kinnon's chest from the hip to the nipple he caught between his knuckles.

Kinnon writhed, open mouthed, panting just above Peryn's ear. His hand quickened, wringing them together harder and faster, as Peryn's thumb toyed with his flesh. He loved the way Peryn touched him, as if there were all the time in the world to tease and play. But, Kinnon was always quick through the first one -- certain they'd be interrupted, even though it had never happened -- wanting to take as much pleasure as he could before something got in the way.

"We have time," Peryn promised, his voice a breathy whisper as he rocked his hips into Kinnon's fist. "Time for this and then more, if you want it."

"Like there is ever a question of 'if'," Kinnon said, lips quirked in a half-smile around his pants for breath. Peryn's suggestion sounded positively decadent. He considered following Peryn's example and slowing the movement of his hand to draw this out, but then Peryn's hips met his rhythm perfectly and Kinnon was lost in the gentle rolling waves of pleasure, water lapping against the sides of the tub.

"Peryn," Kinnon breathed, the name almost a plea. The hand not working over them clutched the edge of the tub for balance, for something to anchor them both as each roll of his hips knocked him closer and closer to the edge.

Peryn murmured something in Ander, as his eyes rolled back and his head followed, one shoulder catching him on the edge of the bath, and Kinnon decided, in that moment, that he'd make an actual effort to learn the language, once they were home again. A moment later, he realised the words were on his lips.

"-- hearing is good, but knowing is better. I want to understand every word you say, not just the ones in Common, and I'll learn the dirty words first, if you'll teach me. Learn them all while you show me what they mean." Kinnon's breath stuttered as he felt Peryn throb against him in the water, and the words felt gummy on his tongue.

"Will you say them back to me?" Peryn panted, as Kinnon's hips thrust harder against him, water slopping onto the rug.

"Maker, yes. I'll say them. I'll do them." Kinnon's back arched, his knees clacking against the sides of the tub as his body tensed. Definitely better underwater, he decided. Definitely best underwater with Peryn, though he thought maybe he'd see what Candles thought, when he got back home. 'Home', and wasn't that interesting. Here they were in Ferelden, and all he wanted was to get back to the Anderfels. And to get into bed with the Templar smiling up at him.
Arling of Edgehall

Chapter Summary

Samson and Calpernia meet with the last of Alexius's followers.

Samson sat beside the fire, figuring the trees were heavy enough to hide the smoke from the local lords, if maybe not some outlying farms. But, farmers generally had enough on their minds they wouldn't be too concerned about people just passing through -- as long as he kept his men away from those farms, they'd all come out of this all right.

And the men had been surprisingly stable, so far. He'd brought what regular lyrium they could spare along with more than enough red for Paxley's men, and those who chose to switch were faring well, though he kept his eyes open for signs of the change. It was early, yet, but the younger men seemed to change faster and angrier. So far, though, he had nothing but red eyes and a thirst for battle, and those were the good signs.

Beside him, the witch sat with Paxley, entertaining the man with stories of what Ferelden had been like under Tevinter -- histories, if you could trust Tevinter to record anything that didn't make them look good. After he'd sent word to the Elder One that Denam had lost half their forces at Therinfal, Calpernia had come to them at the Fortress of Geese and brought new orders. Something about some magister taking too long in Redcliffe, and that the two of them should march down there and help out. He had a bad feeling about it, if only because he knew how he'd have handled it, from the other side -- if you've got two commanders and two targets, and your forces are sufficient, you go both ways. Which meant they were probably walking into a trap. But, he knew that, which he figured gave him the advantage.

"But, it couldn't have been Lake Calenhad, back then, right? There was no Calenhad yet," Paxley said to Calpernia, a mug of quail broth hanging from his fingers.

"Kinloch, the Avvar called it. The place where their sacred mountain once stood. Apparently it got up and walked away, one day, if you can believe those old stories, and it left the lake behind." Calpernia picked at a few bits of meat still stuck to the bones of the pigeon she'd cooked for herself. "In some places, they say Tevinter created that lake, but everything I've read about the invasion says the lake was already there."

"I wonder if the murder geese were already there too," Samson muttered, focusing on the sight and smell of the cooked pigeon to keep from thinking about the taste of lyrium and how much his body was already aching for it.

The look Calpernia shot him was not impressed. As far as Samson knew, it was the only expression her face could make. "I cannot speak to the wildlife of the region, but I suspect that wasn't Tevinter either."

Samson gave a noncommittal hum, not really interested in her answer. Paxley was about to ask her to continue when they were interrupted.

"Lady Calpernia!" a voice cried out from between two Templars. A young woman hung from their grip on her upper arms.
Calpernia handed the rest of her pigeon to Paxley, with a small smile, and then stood, wiping her hands as she met the Templars halfway. "Do I know you?"

"We were told to find you, if anything went wrong. That you'd know what the Elder One wished of us," the woman went on. "My name is Linnea. We've never met, but one of Magister Alexius's men kept a picture of you in a locket."

"Something's gone wrong, then?" Calpernia asked, and Samson sighed and heaved himself to his feet, positioning himself just a bit behind Calpernia.

"The Heralds came. Both of them. They brought the Queen's army with them and slaughtered most of Magister Alexius's men. Some of us are still loyal, though. Many of us came to believe as he did. The world must change! Magic must regain its place in the world!" Linnea seemed fervent in her belief. "We aren't many. We couldn't have fought and won, so we retreated to bring news and regroup."

Samson did not look impressed with her little speech. That they still had 'some' of Alexius's entourage was not reassuring. "First Therinfal, now this," he said, the words between his teeth, just loud enough for Calpernia to hear. "It looks like the Heralds know what they're doing after all."

Calpernia's huff of breath said she wasn't quite convinced, but behind her firm-jawed exterior, Samson could see she was unsettled. "We will need to regroup," she said, speaking to him over her shoulder. "And reconsider our strategy."

Samson rubbed the gathering tension in his forehead and tried not to think of the Elder One's wrath or the taste of the lyrium he wished he had on hand.

"Kinloch Hold is empty," Linnea offered, trying to twist out of the grip of the Templars at her sides. "It's just over the lake. Some of the mages who came with us are from that Circle, and the tower is empty. They're all in Redcliffe with their First Enchanter. I heard part of the tower fell, but better some walls than no walls, right?"

"She's got a point," Samson admitted after a moment. "We can't keep sitting around out here and hoping Arl Edgelord of West Buttfuck isn't going to send an army to investigate what a large number of well-armed people are doing in his woods."

"Arl Lendon of Edgehall," Calpernia corrected, automatically. "No, I suppose we can't keep imposing on his hospitality, especially since he hasn't offered it. We can't afford to lose anyone else in pointless battles."

"We agree on something," Samson said with a carefully neutral tone that Calpernia still took as an insult to go by the cool glare she tossed over her shoulder. Samson bit back a sigh.

With a nod of her head, Calpernia motioned for the Templars to let Linnea go, and Linnea nearly stumbled at the sudden lack of resistance before pulling herself upright, standing tall as she smoothed out her robes. "To Kinloch Hold, then," Calpernia said. "We'll bring the next battle to them."

Samson didn't even bother faking enthusiasm at the thought.
The Fallow Mire

Chapter Summary

Adaar and the Fade mages descend into the swamp. Jowan is still a moron. No one is surprised.

The Fallow Mire, it turned out, was exactly what it sounded like: a swamp in which little grew that was worth eating. Jowan winced with every step, as the ground sucked at his boots, and the smell of overripe decay swept toward them on the weak, wet winds.

"Just to put it out there? This is gross." Niall looked around, hoping for a path just a little further above the water line. "And there are demons. I can feel them in my bones. And if I'm that sure, there are a lot of them."

"It's all right, Niall," Asha assured him. "They're weaker than they were in the Fade. I still wish Lily had come with us, but I know she has a lot of work to do, back in Redcliffe."

"Work," Niall scoffed, gesturing at the back of Jowan's head. "Right."

"If there are demons, there are rifts," Adaar pointed out, frowning at the wet slop clinging to his boots. "All I have to do is strategically flap my hand in the right direction, and then there will be fewer rifts, then fewer demons. Not so bad."

He'd been told staying positive was important around Niall, though they all knew Niall wasn't fooled by his falsely cheerful tone. Inspiring speeches weren't really his thing, especially not when surrounded by swamp and the buzz of insects.

"Still gross," Niall insisted. "How likely do you think it is that our missing scouts are alive?"

Adaar swatted away a bug that had landed on his shoulder. If the demons hadn't killed them, he suspected the bugs had. "We'll find out."

"What's that up there?" Blackwall pointed up a hill a bit further up from them. It looked like a fork of the road went toward it. "Looks like something important."

"Probably a shrine." Niall shrugged. "We're in Ferelden. Everything's a shrine."

"Yeah, but if it's a shrine," Jowan pointed out, "it probably has lanterns. A hill like that, I bet you can see the lamps from pretty far out."

"So when we get lost in the mire, we'll have something to tell us how to get back." Niall nodded. "That may be the smartest thing I've ever heard you say."

"Oh, come on, Niall, he's said some bright things before!" Asha laughed easily, sliding an arm around Niall's waist. "We were just in the Fade at the time."

"Well, I say it's up to our bold leader what we do with that shrine." Blackwall nodded firmly, as if he had any say in it. "What say you? Do we go try to shed some light on the situation?"
Adaar groaned. "Now, you see, I was all set to agree until you had to go and make a pun. Now you're just going to have to wander through the swamp in the dark forever."

Asha laughed and steered Niall in that direction anyway.

"Are you seeing this?" Adaar said to Blackwall, gesturing at the mages picking their way towards the shrine. "They're going anyway. Insubordination!" He trudged after them, his longer legs quickly bringing him back alongside them.

In the dark and the muddy sounds of their steps, Adaar almost didn't even notice the arrow that whizzed past him.

"Company," he said, drawing his sword, moving to shield the mages with his bulk before a shield shimmered to life around them.

"Undead," Blackwall said, peering into the dark.

"My favourite," Adaar muttered, catching sight of the archer and picking out a few similar shapes moving in the shadows. "The crazy elf isn't with us, right?" He glanced back at the mages. "Keep the shield on me?"

"What are you...?" Niall started to ask, but Adaar had already taken off charging, roaring into the night. He drew the archers' fire, arrows plinking harmlessly off the shield that shimmered around him. "Did he just...? Of course he did."

Jowan drew his sword and looked at it, then at the archers. "This is stupid," he sighed, hands swirling with black and purple. "Step back!" he shouted after Adaar, before hurling a fog thicker than the one around them at the skeletons.

Almost at once, the sounds of battle changed -- bone on bone and snapping bowstrings, within the murky haze surrounding the archers.

"Shit," Niall sighed. "You hit the Herald." For the first time in years, a spell that wasn't ice leapt to his fingers, and he squinted into the haze until he found horns to aim for, warding Adaar against the effects of Jowan's Entropic Cloud.

After a moment, as the air cleared around Adaar, Asha laid several well-aimed bolts of raw magic into the cloud, and the sound of shattering bone said she'd hit.

Blackwall stalled in the wake of that cloud, wanting to help Adaar but not wanting to race into that either. He muttered a curse under his breath and looked around in case there were other archers.

The sound of metal hitting bone said that Adaar was still upright and hitting the right things with his sword, though his battle cry had turned into swearing. When the cloud dissipated, only bits of bone remained of the archers, half-sticking out of the swamp water, while Adaar stood among them, blearily shaking his head.

"That was... an angry cloud," Adaar called back to them as he waded back to relatively solid ground. "I'm not sure how I feel about that." He looked down at his hands as though making sure they were still there.

"Sorry, didn't realise what he was doing until he did it," Niall apologised, rubbing his forehead. Something about this place had been giving him a headache since he set foot on the first part of the path that went squish. Demons, he supposed, though Mouse had never given him a headache. "With a little warning, I can make sure it doesn't affect you."
"Hey, I said 'step back'!" Jowan argued.

"I stepped back." Blackwall cleared his throat. "You might want to be more specific."

Asha covered her mouth against a laugh. "He's used to Brynn and Owain, and they're used to him."


"And now I definitely want some light," Niall decided, picking his way across the bones on his way toward the hill. A skull's eyes lit as he stepped over a pile of broken ribs, and he kicked it into the water. "Nobody asked you."

Asha decided not to mention the trail of frost that followed him, slowly melting in the natural heat of the marsh.

Adaar thought the beacon's flames looked blue because of the fog in the air, but as they crested the hill, he realised that they were, in fact, a ghostly shade of blue. "Fade stuff," he sighed. "Solas had mentioned something about fire that looked like this." He tilted his head back to look at the column that stood as the focal point on the hill.

"The memory of fire," Asha said with a small nod. "The Veil is thin here."

"Yeah, I think our first clue was the sky shitting demons," Niall sighed, "particularly the number of them walking around, using dead bodies as puppets."

Asha gave him a dry look. "I suppose there was that too, yes."

"You think it's bad, now, just wait for the height of summer." Jowan shuddered, looking around. "Walking corpses, ceaseless stench, and temperatures that'll boil you in your skin! Have I mentioned I hate swamps? I hate swamps with darkspawn in them a little more than regular swamps, but swamps with demon corpses are definitely up there."

"So, more of a holiday in Antiva type?" Blackwall teased, going in for a closer look at the actual pillar. Nothing jumped out at him as he passed between the guide flames. "Right, so, the one on the shrine's not lit. You want me to light it and see if we get better light down below?"

"Go for it," Jowan called up to him, turning to look out across the marsh.

The click of metal and flint could be heard, again and again, interspersed with Blackwall's swearing. "Ah, I don't think this is going to work with real fire. I guess it only takes the spooky fake fire."

Niall sighed and ducked around Adaar. "Here, I'll do it. Spirit fire courtesy of the spirit, right?"

His hands glowed, as he remembered Anders -- the way things always seemed to burn, when he was in the room. The bins, the curtains, occasionally a book or someone's notes. The bin fire in the infirmary -- he'd been there for that -- the way the flames licked out of the metal basket in the shape of a bogfisher's foot. Ghastly thing, really. The fire sprung to life between his hands and he raised it to the iron lamp, the blue flame catching instantly, lighting the hill and much more than it should have, he thought, even with the height. The light was strong. And something was very wrong, behind him -- it hit like a spike through his already throbbing head, and his hands chilled, the memory of fire washed away with ice.

"Demons!"

"Of course there are demons," Adaar growled, bringing his sword around before the Terror had
finished clawing its way into existence. "Where aren't there demons?" His question ended in a grunt of effort as his sword met the meat of the creature's shoulder, the Terror's screech loud in his ears. "That vacation in Antiva is sounding great right about now!"

"There might be demons in Antiva," Niall pointed out, more ice at his fingers catching another skeletal archer, freezing its joints in place as it moved to draw back on its bow.

"I'm beginning to see the 'Despair' thing," Adaar grumbled, tearing his sword free and leaping back before the Terror's claws could catch him in the neck.

"At least it would be sunny and dry?" Asha suggested, throwing rapid-fire bolts of energy at the nearest Terror. "Just imagine..." She paused to shove back the demon with the butt of her staff. "...fighting demons in sunshine!"

"Warm, sunny Antiva!" Jowan laughed as he lobbed hexes at everything he didn't recognise. "Where the demons are also warm! Rage demons, probably. Not sure that's an improvement... Then they'd be on fire."

"Toasting ham on your enemies!" Blackwall managed a grim smile as he lopped off a Terror's claws at the wrist, trying to keep his voice loud enough that no one else would hear what the thing was saying to him, the accusations it laid at his feet with its ichor. "Has to be better than this. There's no use for these things at all."

Jowan's laugh turned into a shriek when a Terror demon tore out of the ground beside him, its breath smelling like something rotting, and he spun, casting the first spell that came to mind amid all the talk of warmth and burning Rage demons.

Adaar saw the flames sprout from Jowan's fingers, and he had just enough time to shout, "No, no, no!" before the flames engulfed the demon... and set everything around it alight. Jowan's shriek rose in pitch as he scrambled back.

Niall was there a moment later, ice emanating out from him before he even started the gestures for a spell.

"It's a swamp!" Jowan squeaked as Blackwall finished up the final demon. "Why is the swamp flammable?"

"It's a bog," Adaar said as though that made any difference to Jowan. "Flammable even when wet."

Niall opened and closed his mouth, determinedly not making a joke about Anders at that statement.

Blackwall nodded and tipped his head at Adaar. "Man's right. All those bubbles coming up from under the muck? They'll light right up like a signal flare. Get a big one, and you get fires reaching the heavens. The muck, too. They carve that stuff up to burn it. Cheaper than having wood shipped in or trying to burn what passes for wood around a place like this."

"Great, so it's the bog of eternal flammable stench," Jowan muttered, brushing a rain of ash off himself.

Niall turned back toward the pillar to make sure the lamp was still lit, and spotted something else. "Something written on here," he said, trying to angle himself to read it without blocking the light. "I can't even understand it, but it's making me nervous just looking at it. Somebody else want to give this a try?"

Asha waved him back and took his place. "Runes and numbers. I can't make sense of it magically."
Maybe it's actual written dwarven? But, you're right, there's something unsettling about it. A terror written into the symbols."

"Well, it gave us Terrors when I lit it," Niall ventured.

"Lovely," Adaar grumbled. "I love when there's weird shit going on around me that I don't understand."

"Then you must be having the time of your life since the Breach opened," Blackwall quipped.

"It's just like Wintersend, except the presents are demons."

Asha shook her head with a soft huff, using their new vantage point to gaze out across the Mire. She spotted more hills and more beacons amid the muck, but fog obscured everything else. "I wish I could say 'we're close!' but I honestly don't know."

"At least we're on relatively dry ground for the moment," Niall said, frowning down at the mud caking his shoes and the bottom of his robes. He looked up to find everyone else in the same state, except... "Adaar. You went charging into this stuff earlier. How are you not covered in mud?"

"Mm?" Adaar looked down at his boots, which bore no trace of mud. "Guess I was just more careful. Or more lucky." He offered Niall a disarming grin, but Niall continued to eye him.

"Bog demons, and he's spotless. You'd think it's because he's fresh from the Fade, but so am I," Niall complained.

"It's the glowing hand," Jowan whispered loudly, nodding.

"I think I see houses," Blackwall said, crouching next to Asha and pointing toward some uncertain shapes, further out. "If anyone's still alive, maybe they can help us figure out what's going on, here. Maybe they've seen our scouts."

"I think I don't see a road going that way," Niall pointed out.

"So we'll get a little muddy! Who cares? We're already covered in it." Jowan threw his hands up.

Niall held up a finger, bent down for a rock, and winged it into the swamp. Within seconds, five skeletons had risen out of the muck, looking for a fight. "That's why you care." A flick of his wrist froze them all in a group, and Jowan summoned a large rock to drop on the frozen skeletons, blasting bits of them across the face of the mire.

Blackwall breathed in sharply. Niall slapped Jowan across the back of the head.

"Do you ever think?" Niall demanded, storming down the hill as a blizzard billowed around him.

"Well, nothing's on fire," Adaar pointed out with a shrug as he watched more skeletons rising out of the swamp. "I'd say that's an improvement."
The Hinterlands

Chapter Summary

The slaying of a magister and his entourage. Dorian realises something terrifying about one of his companions on this journey.

"A part of me still never thought that Alexius would get it to work," Dorian was saying, carrying on a discussion about magic theory with Solas that had carried them up much of the hill. "And nothing he tried did, you know, before the Breach. I'd begun to think it wasn't possible."

"Well, of course it is possible," Solas said as casually as though he were describing the weather. "Time is a mortal construct. It doesn't exist in the Fade. I have walked among spirits stuck in a different age, reliving the same event, over and over. The Breach simply brings this world closer to the Fade, which would make such magic easier."

"The Veil between our kingdom and the next has been thinning for centuries," Fen'Din pointed out, looking up at the recently-deceased pigeon he'd sent up to be their eyes. "Five hundred, a thousand years ago, Alexius might not have been able to achieve even what he'd managed before the Breach."

"Oh, he could have, but it would have been much more difficult." Solas shrugged. "There is always a way. The difficulty is the cost of the journey."

"Some prices are not worth paying," Fenris muttered from behind him.

Solas looked over his shoulder, waited until he caught Fenris's eye. "I agree."

The pigeon spiralled down to perch on Fen'Din's shoulder, cooing and twittering.

"Tevinter banners," Fen'Din said, after a moment, pointing at an angle to where they'd been headed.

"You speak pigeon?" Fenris asked, finally voicing the question that had bothered him for weeks.

"No, no. I speak to the spirit. It just makes noises to focus the conversation." Fen'Din put on what was supposed to be a reassuring smile.

"I'm not sure if that is more or less impressive than 'I speak pigeon'," Artie said, walking in step with Fenris. "Though if it had been me, I would have said 'yes' and then started making up wild stories about what the pigeons were saying."

"He could technically still do that, but with spirits," Fenris drawled.

"Yes, but do spirits generally stare at you balefully as they eat crumbs and shit on unsuspecting passers-by?"

Fenris opened and closed his mouth before quirking an eyebrow at Anders.

"I'm a Warden," Anders huffed, feigning offence at the look and its implication. "You know I eat more than crumbs! And, Artie, you're starting to sound like Shale."
"Yes, you eat more than crumbs, but if you've started shitting on passers-by, it's news to me," Fen'Din looked faintly amused around the eyes.

"Whatever you may have heard, that is not a Warden thing," Anders assured Dorian.

"Oh good! Someone's on the defensive about something other than Tevinter!" Dorian smiled brightly. "Of course, with the stench in the air, in this country, it might take a little more to convince me the local barbarians aren't shitting on passers-by."

"Artemis lived here for many years," Fenris pointed out, putting an arm around his husband to prevent any magical backlash. "I don't think he'd have come back, if that were the local custom."

"You're smelling sheep shit," Anders said, after a moment. "It's all farmland and sheep-herders out here." He squinted at the edge of a banner just becoming visible over the next rise. "And Venatori, also a kind of shit, if of a more northern vintage."

"Whether or not we are surrounded by shit," Artemis said to Dorian with great dignity, "you, serah, are full of shit."

Solas heaved a sigh and shook his head, wondering how they had gotten here from an intellectual discussion of how magic works, even as he adjusted his grip on his staff, getting ready for a battle. Dorian opened his mouth to reply, but Fenris held up a hand, forestalling him. "Please, everyone, stop saying 'shit'," he sighed, drawing his sword with his free hand.

The glow of Anders's hexes at their feet was the Venatori's first warning before the Inquisition descended in full fury.

Solas moved much faster than Fen'Din had expected, one moment between himself and Dorian, and the next toppling several Venatori with a well aimed barrier around himself. Fen'Din's own hexes turned the staggering combatants into a ready danger to themselves and each other, and Fenris rested his sword on his shoulder and watched, for a moment.

"That's definitely one way to handle the problem." Fenris chuckled as the ill-aimed swing of an axe cleaved a Venatori mage in two. His laughter stopped as Solas's barrier vanished, along with the hex marks.

The flicker of black cloth was the only warning before another mage flashed into existence just before where Dorian stood, Fenris's fist meeting his chin before he'd fully settled back into the world. Fear flashed through the mage's eyes as he recognised the lines along the fist and then the face.

"Stealing other magisters' toys, Dorian?" the fallen Venatori taunted, as behind him, Anders tore a sword from the hands of an iron-bound warrior and made short work of the shield-bearing brute beside them. "Too dainty for combat, after all those years in research? Need to thieve another man's slave to do your killing for you? Is this the 'better Tevinter' you've been wailing about, all these years?"

Fenris felt the spell start, as the fallen mage tried to cast it without moving. The lyrium felt like it was trying to crawl out of his skin, and the last thing he wanted was to get any closer to it. Still, he dropped into a crouch and plunged a hand into the man's chest.

"I am no one's slave."

He tore his hand free before his lyrium lines could start flickering -- the last thing he needed was to get his hand stuck in someone else's chest again -- and the magister's heart made a satisfying
squelching sound as Fenris crushed it in his hand. He looked up and found another mage in front of him, clearly rattled by the display from the way he stuttered in his casting, fumbling his spell. The mage turned as though to make a run for it when a heavy wave of Force knocked him flat on his back.

Artemis caught Fenris's eye and quirked an eyebrow. "All right?"

"I could have gotten that," Fenris huffed, half teasing, half frustrated.

A grin crept over Artie's lips. "You were too slow," he said before moving on to the next target.

Dorian lingered a moment over the magister's corpse. "As heartless in death as he was in life. Couldn't have happened to a better person."

Anders gave off a blinding blue glow that seemed to extend down the sword he held, as he surveyed the remains of the Venatori camp. Within the circle of gear, only he and Solas remained standing. And Solas was looking at him very strangely.

"WHAT?" Justice asked, before Anders could settle back into his own head, in the absence of any further attacks.

"You remind me of another spirit I once knew." Solas offered a small smile and shook his head, calling out to Dorian, "What do we do with the mess?"

"Look for correspondence! I want to know who else is here!" Dorian called back, crouching beside the heartless magister at his feet, taking a moment to appreciate the damage done.

"'Leto', my ass." He looked up at Fenris. "You're the wolf. I thought you might be, but it isn't my place to speculate about someone else's tattoos. This, though... He made sure we all knew about this. You killed him, didn't you? Can't say I'm sorry, in the least. I had the opportunity to review some of his research. You've done Thedas a favour very few will ever know enough to thank you for."

Fenris flexed his bloody fingers, nodding in acknowledgement of the words but unsure he wanted the reminder of Danarius's 'research'. "He came to our wedding. He did not leave alive. I care not for Thedas's thanks, but I enjoy the peace of mind of knowing he will not be coming for me."

His smile was not the friendliest thing, a reminder that Dorian was a mage from Tevinter, if not a magister. Dorian tried not to picture a glowing hand reaching into his chest.

"Well, it's one less villain we have to hunt down," Dorian said, keeping his tone light as he started to rummage through the dead magister's pockets.

Anders approached with a few books and a stack of loose pages in his hands. "So, I think they're mostly here to offer backup to Alexius, but there's some research notes you should see. I don't read modern Tevene well enough to get the details, but generally, it's something about stars and ancient Dreamer cults hiding secrets 'far from the reach of the Archon'. Might just be this guy's pet project, but ancient secrets of potentially great power might be something to look at, especially if it's actually for someone else."

"Dreamer cults?" Solas sounded interested, even though he failed to take his eyes off the trunk he was sorting through. "Before or after the Transfiguration? Dreamers were a great deal less popular during the Transfiguration. Still, if something survived from before, it may be worth investigating. Tevinter has historically had a way of recognising value in things, even as they failed to discern their proper use."
"Which you'd know?" Dorian looked up from the body with a bloody letter in his hands.

"When one converses equally with spirits rather than compelling them to perform, one learns all sorts of interesting things," Solas drawled, examining a bottle of shimmering green liquid.

Fenris glanced over at Anders to find him biting his tongue against a comment. With a heavy sigh, he said, "We all know you want to say something about spirits 'performing'. Let us just pretend like you said it, so you can stop making that face."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Anders said primly, making a show of flipping through the books in his hands. He paused to actually read then, brow furrowed in concentration. "And to answer your question, Solas, it's... after?" He paused, read some more, and his brows furrowed further. "No, wait. Before. Or... this document is contradicting itself." Muttering under his breath, Anders shuffled through some of the loose-leaf papers, looking for clarification.

Dorian handed the bloody letter to Fenris and held out a hand to Anders, accepting the pages, once Anders realised there was a hand to put them in. "You've said you don't read modern Tevene. That's probably the problem. That or the horrific state of education in the southern nations." He paged through, blinking quizzically at a page. "Oh! Yes, it's before, but there's only about three hundred years this could possibly fall into. I mean, that marks it fairly precisely. If I took the time to read all of this, I could probably determine the families involved. Some of them may still hold seats."

"Some of them may stop holding seats very soon," Fenris remarked, holding the bloody letter in his bloody hand, as he read it. "Your friend, here, appears to have been pursuing the same purpose. Restoring the Dreamer families to absolute power, by means of whatever is in these caches. Part of the Old Man's plan."


"I know what that says," Fenris retorted. "And in Common, it would say 'Old Man'."

"Naming a thing grants it power, defines it," Solas remarked, clinking a great deal more as he approached the rest of them. "Taking its name lets it be forgotten. Forced into obscurity."

Anders shuddered like he had spiders crawling down his spine. "Old Man it is!"
It had started raining, which added little charm to the Mire, but at least it helped wash the mud off of Niall's boots. He continued to frown at Adaar's as he walked, still suspiciously clean, and only half listened to the conversation around him.

"It's another case of 'did the demons cause the crazy, or did the crazy cause the demons'?'" Adaar said, tucking away the journal they'd found under his coat, shielding it from the rain though it was already smudged past the point of recognition in most places. "Something to look out for, at least."

"'Another'?' Blackwall asked, one side of his beard twitching up in a smile.

"Well, for a while I wasn't sure with Fen'Din, but I now have witnesses that assure me his particular brand of crazy came before the demons." Adaar tipped his head at Jowan and Niall. "I'm sure others would say the same of me."

"He's a special kind of crazy." Niall shook his head. "I'm not sure he's ... as wrong as I used to think. Journal mage, though? Definitely crazy."

"Oh, I don't know." Jowan tipped his head from side to side, considering. "I can't advise summoning demons, for obvious reasons, but the potion to visit the deep Fade? That sounds like it might be something. I wonder if there's a reward if we find the missing book. I also wonder if it's even possible to find the missing book, if it's lost somewhere around here. For all I know, it's a mossy clump, by now."

"Drinking strange things in demon-infested swamps," Niall scoffed, groaning up at the sky. "This is how you keep getting yourself into trouble, J-- Levyn. You have no sense of when something is a bad idea."

"Unlike some people, I didn't pick a fight with Frick's Orlesian princess," Jowan retorted.

"What were you, six when I did that? How would you know?" Niall shook his head and crossed his arms. "They had to re-set Serault's teeth after that, so I still think I got the better end of it."

"I heard about it. Everybody heard about it. 'Oh, he looks so boring, but I heard he got in a fight with Frick and Faney.'" Jowan pressed his fingertips to his chest in an impression of one of the tower gossips.

Asha quirked an eyebrow at the two of them. "I don't believe this is a story I have heard," she said, clearly intrigued.

"And you're not going to," Niall said with a sharp look at Jowan.

Jowan held up his hands, palm out. "I don't know what the problem is. It made you popular for a week!"
"Only a week?" Asha asked.

"It was Kinloch Hold. There was always some new person doing some stupid thing."

Niall cleared his throat and made a point of not looking at Jowan.

Jowan's sigh was almost a groan. "Myself included, I know. More than once, I know."

Niall was about to add to that, when Adaar caught their attention, tipping his head in the direction of a figure they could just make out through the fog.

"Avvar?" Blackwall suggested as they approached, his hand on his sword.

From the size of him, Adaar almost thought 'qunari'. "Avvar," he agreed once he could make out the man's face. "A really tall Avvar."

The Avvar carried a heavy hammer, which he leaned casually against his shoulder, battle-ready but non-threatening as he watched them approach. "So you're the Herald of Andraste," he said.

"So they say," Adaar said with a shrug. "Nice to have someone I can talk to without hurting my neck."

"My kin want you dead, Lowlander," the Avvar went on, just as casual as you please, "but it's not my job. No fears from me."

"Because that's reassuring," Jowan muttered. "Oh, I'm not going to kill you because it's not my job."

"It's better than 'hrrrrarrgh, I'm going to kill you because you knocked a rock off the path'," Blackwall murmured, keeping his lips as still as possible and his eyes on the Avvar.

"I thought the Avvar wanted to fight me," Adaar said, straightening his usually hunched posture to his full height.

"Our chieftain's son wants to fight you," the Avvar corrected, the barest hint of disgust in the way he talked about the man. "I'm called in when the dead pile up. Rites for the gods, mending for the bleeding, a dagger for the dying. That's what I do. I don't pick up a blade for a whelp's trophy hunt."

"So why are you out here?" Adaar asked.

The Avvar looked past Adaar's shoulder to the wispy green line than hung in the air like a scar. A unopened rift. "Trying to figure out this hole in the world."

"Aren't we all?" Blackwall quipped.

The Avvar looked him dead in the eye for a moment and then turned back to Adaar. "Never seen anything it's like. They spit out angry spirits. Endless. What the sky's trying to tell us, I don't know."

"Stop suffering so loudly," Niall suggested, resting his head on Asha's shoulder.

"I see you are also travelling with an angry spirit." The Avvar nodded at Niall.

Adaar looked back at Niall and hummed. "Less angry and more gloomy, generally."

"I'm angry that I'm covered in mud and you're not," Niall retorted. "Seriously what kind of enchantment have you got going?"
Adaar shrugged. "Well, if that's his angry face, I think you have nothing to worry about here. As for the sky." He gestured up at the glowing green wisp. "This stuff is apparently caused by the Breach. Hard to see it through all this fog, but... It was some kind of magic gone wrong, I guess."

"I know that, lowlander," the Avvar said with mild impatience. "I'm talking about the Lady of the Skies."

"Lady?" Adaar asked.

"Do you not know her? Can't you see the warnings she writes through the bird flocks in the air?"

"I... can't say I've paid too much attention to birds unless they were trying to build a nest between my horns."

"Birds as augury?" Asha nodded. "Some of my people do that. I was more interested in reading what was beyond the sky."

"They are sent," the Avvar declared firmly. "You see them or you don't."

"Not to cut into this fancy magic stuff, but we're looking for a missing patrol," Blackwall mentioned, stepping forward.

"I have seen no Warde..." The Avvar paused and squinted into the distance. "I have seen one Warden. She wasn't dressed the same as you, but she had the big griffon in the middle of her chest. I don't know where she went."

"Solona?" Jowan whispered to Niall.

"Not every female Warden is Solona," Niall said, even as he wondered. "I wonder what a Warden is looking for out here. I mean." He gestured apologetically at Blackwall. "Another Warden."

"We'll keep an eye out for her," Adaar said, "but we meant an Inquisition patrol. Are they all right?"

The Avvar's eyes lit in understanding. "A few were injured in the skirmish, but they were alive, last I saw them."

Adaar let out a relieved breath. The Mire was full of enough corpses.

"Someone's trained them well. They killed more of us than I thought they would." The Avvar sounded more impressed than bitter at that.

"Good," Adaar said. "I'd hate for our journey here to be a dead end." He paused at Niall's groan behind him. "Pun unintended but appreciated."

"And changing the subject entirely, is that what these things are supposed to look like?" Niall moved toward the slowly fluttering swirl of green that hung in the air, circling it, squinting up at it. "I walked out of one, but it was open at the time. Lots more spirits that didn't want to come through got pulled in before we found it. Looked like a lot more glowing."

"And if it's closed now, is it going to open later?" Asha asked, cautiously waiting a bit back, where she could see all of it.

"Maybe we're too far away for it to come all the way through." Niall shrugged and poked at the edges of the thickened air, testing the density. And then it split open like an infection from under a scab, the edges parting as the rift spewed green light across his face.
It felt like panic and loss, and it drowned out everything.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Adaar hissed, his sword already in hand as he pulled Niall away, ignoring the way his fingers went cold and then numb as he swung his sword, one-handed, at the first wraith to come screeching into existence. "This is because I made a terrible pun, isn't it? The demons were sent to torment me?" Hardly paying attention to what he's saying, focused on keeping his tone light, casual, and distracting as Niall wavered, a blurring, mostly-human shape.

The Avvar took a step to the side, his great hammer swinging for the ground in a crunch of bone, flattening the corpse archer Adaar hadn't seen crawl its way out of the ground.

Asha raised a shield for Adaar and followed with a glyph that glowed brighter than the green-lit ground it landed on. Something flickered there, for a moment, but coiled down into a wisp that seemed to dissipate into the low-hanging fog.

Beside her, Jowan leapt into action, swinging his sword in a way that made Blackwall sigh. Still, the weight of the impact worked wonders against the skeleton that approached from behind them. Blackwall finished it with a hard blow of his shield.

"Okay, okay, we can kill demons!" Jowan shouted, uncertain where Adaar was from where he continued doing his best to stab anything he didn't recognise. The runes helped quite a bit, he thought, and maybe Blackwall's lessons, as well. "But, you have to close it, before there's more demons!"

Ice crept out from around Niall's feet, crawling up anything it touched, and the wraiths finally recognised him as a threat.

It took physical effort for Adaar to not chase down the next demon. Right. That's what the others were for. He had something more important to do. Shifting his sword to his free hand, Adaar raised his glowing palm, bracing himself for the pulse of energy, for the tearing pain that came with connecting to the rift. The rift slammed shut, Adaar braced not to stumble at the sudden lack of resistance. He shook out his hand, his fingertips prickling.

"Lady of the Skies!" the Avvar breathed, eyes wide in his painted face. "You can mend the gaps in the sky?"

"Surprisingly, this is more than just a fashion statement," Adaar said, waving his glowing hand.

The Avvar gave him a long, considering look. "Maybe you do have a god's favour."
The Hinterlands

Chapter Summary

Trying to find an unopened rift, our heroes trip over a demon that seems very angry with Solas.

Fen'Din paused at the entrance to the cave. "What happened here?" he asked, staring into the depth between his eyes and the side of the cliff that rose above them. "I can almost hear them, but weak and distant."

Solas managed not to look surprised, having become accustomed to unusual sentences from the elf beside him. "This was once part of a larger settlement. Now, it is all but forgotten. Another cursed cave in the hills."

"Cursed," Fenris scoffed. "Does that mean the Stone is waiting for a speaker, here, as well?"

"No, I don't think so," Fen'Din lit the brazier in the entry with a flick of his hand, the blue flame lighting almost none of the interior, and he picked up a rusted torch from a nearby bracket and lit that as well. "Spirits. The other memory of events, though perhaps the Stone has thoughts on the matter, as well. I don't hear the Stone, like you do."

Fenris hummed, head tilted to listen, but in the end he shook his head. "I hear nothing just now, though that might change further in." His tattoos stood out in the dark, letting out a soft, low-level glow, and he disliked the exposed feeling of knowing any enemies would see him before he could see them.

"We spend an inordinate amount of time underground," Artie said. "You know that, Fen?" He nearly hesitated on the name, used to calling him Leto in front of everyone, but after Dorian guessing who he was, he supposed it was a moot point. "We should be honorary dwarves by now."

"I believe I already had that honour, Amatus," Fenris said with a smile in his voice.

"I'd say you two should consider becoming Wardens," Anders said with a cheerfulness that was forced, "if I were to actually recommend that sort of thing. Which I don't. Be dwarves instead."

Fen'Din led the way, lighting braziers along the wall, and as more of them were lit, the details of the place rose out of the darkness. High, pointed arches marked the stairs leading down, and at the bottom, shattered tile marked what had once been a very nice floor.

"Elves once lived near here," Solas noted, pointing up a statue that seemed to depict a skull and sword with a tall, partially bloomed lotus blossom. "You can recognise the stonework."

"We're far from the Dales," Dorian observed, borrowing the torch to take a closer look at the statue.

"Because it isn't Dalish." Fen'Din continued lighting braziers with his hand until the room became nearly bright enough to see easily. "Where is the original light?" he asked Solas, who smiled slyly.

"Long gone, now. These torches are from after the light faded."
"It's a consuming kind of darkness," Artemis murmured, looking around and just barely avoiding walking into a wall. The lit braziers only carved out islands of light in a sea of darkness.

The green glow through the next doorway looked like more veilfire until they wandered close enough to make out its distinctive shape, the floating, crystalline mess that indicated a rift. Solas murmured a curse under his breath.

"Weren't we looking for an unopened rift?" Dorian asked. "Or is that what unopened rifts look like too?"

The roar of a demon answered that question.

"Oh, wonderful," Dorian drawled.

"Who is it talking to?" Fen'Din asked, suddenly focused on the shadow of the demon, stretching toward them in the light of the rift.

Dorian took a large side-step toward Artemis, to put distance between himself and the elf listening to the demon.

"It wasn't opened, before. I think it may have just opened, now. We are barely too late." Solas looked pained. "I'm sure it is calling for someone who influenced it, at some point. It cannot tell who we are."

"It is unwell," Fen'Din agreed, clearing his throat and starting to sing.

"Is this some sort of elf thing?" Fenris muttered to Solas. "I don't remember Merrill doing this -- singing to demons."

"No, it's a very particular and very old kind of magic," Solas replied.

"It's not an elf thing, it's a this elf thing." Anders pointed at Fen'Din. "Well, these elves. Somebody's gods gave us two of them."

Fen'Din gave Solas a curious look, but Solas seemed wary about joining the song, this time.

Dorian watched the way Solas seemed to hang back, out of the demon's line of sight, even as Fen'Din moved forward as if to greet it. "You know what it's talking about, don't you? I can't even make words out of it, but you understand it, and you don't want it to notice."

Artie recognised the jagged, hulking outline of a Pride demon, and his knuckles went white where he gripped his staff. Fen'Din in contrast was a slender, fragile thing, but the demon did not move to attack, at least not yet. Its guttural growlings shifted, almost sounding like words. After a moment, Artie realised they were words.

"Is that... Elvish?" Artemis asked.

"Can you understand what it's saying?" Dorian whispered, eyes glued to the scene in front of him.

"Well, my knowledge of Elvish mostly consists of dirty words and 'I'm hungry'."

"In which case we hope the answer is 'no'," Anders drawled. "It is no, right?"

"It's no," Artie assured him.

"Vir garas solasan, harellan!" the demon called across the room. "Garas!"
Solas took a deep breath and shook his head, before stepping out from behind Anders, to approach the thing. "Tel'harellan. Harillen evanuris."

"Didn't your brother name the camel 'harellan'?" Fenris asked Artemis, but Anders answered.

"Trickster or something. I promise he didn't just call Solas a camel."

"Ma banal las halamshir var vhen," the demon accused, pointing a finger, even as it became less demony. It started to look like a large elf in strange armour. "Ma ghilana Dirthamen elgar'arla. Ma ghilana din'anshiral."


Even as the demon resolved into a strangely tall elf, the anger never left its eyes. A spell formed easily, in its hands, its power clearly drawn from the rift. "Enansal in mala din'an."

They didn't have time to brace, half a spell on Solas's lips as the creature struck, hands clenching into fists as the air flashed Fade-green. The strength of the spell knocked them all to the ground with the air punched out of their lungs, all except for Artie, who skidded back on his heels halfway across the room.

"Maker's Balls," he breathed as he steadied, more startled that the demon had been able to move him than harmed. "That's my move, you know!" While everyone was still down, Artie sent a burst of magic at the demon, strong enough to make the demon stagger this time. Almost too strong, in fact, knocking anyone who had been trying to sit up flat on their backs again. "Oh, shit! Sorry!"

Fen'Din just stayed down. From where he was laying, he could still easily target the demon with hexes. Whether they'd work was another matter entirely, but he definitely couldn't sing. After two hits, it was enough effort to breathe.

Solas's fingers curled, a subtle motion, but one that drew the demon's eyes down, away from the mass of stone that slammed down from above, disintegrating into sand after the initial impact, gone before it could strike the ground.

And still, it was only Solas the demon came for, ignoring Dorian's flames as it slammed a foot down over Solas's body. For a moment, the room stilled, and then Solas struck again, from behind the creature, pulling hard enough to pin it to the ground, but still it did not fall.

With a scrape of metal, Anders stood up, looking like a broken puppet, with glowing lines of blue like cracks along his skin. He took a moment to heal himself and stretch a leg, before he lunged at the demon, the Venatori sword in his grip adapting easily to his magic and Justice's power. Slash its ankles, while Solas held it, he thought, and it wouldn't be able to hold itself up! Unfortunately, he'd forgotten just how hard that was to do to a Pride demon. Still, the beast roared, ichor spilling from its shallow wounds.

Fenris staggered to his feet with a growl of determination, tattoos glowing as he charged, sword leading. He attacked from the opposite side from Justice, forcing the demon to step back, twisting between the two of them. The demon gathered more Fade-green magic into its hand, only for the stone fist rocketing towards its face to interrupt the spell.

The demon stumbled back, shaking its head dazedly as the stone crumbled at his feet, only to screech in outrage when Fenris's sword bit into its leg. Its counterstrike was immediate, fists clenching on another spell that burst out of him, knocking Fenris and Justice back a few steps as it washed over the room.
"Oh fuck," Artemis breathed, recognising the heavy, dragging sensation.

"What did it just do?" Dorian asked, voice a bit shrill.

"I think that was a Smite."

"Mana Cleanse," Fen'Din called out from where he still lay on the ground, glowing hand raised toward the rift. "It's Smite for mages. Do they not teach that in Tevinter?"

"I have never felt this disgusting in my life, and I have had many an opportunity for disgust," Dorian complained, ignoring the question, as he straightened his infinite belts, trying to figure out what to do about an actual demon, now that he had no ability to cast spells. A man, he could handle. A demon was something else entirely.

The aura of rage around Anders burst into veilfire, in apparent opposition to everyone else's loss of magic, the flames licking down the blade he held, highlighting and activating runes that were meant to respond to a wielder with just this sort of power. The next strike cleaved a middling slice from the demon's leg, but the beast barely kicked at him, knocking him away, as it turned to strike at Solas, again, a mass of raw Fade energy tearing free of the rift and following the sweep of the demon's hand.

But, again, Solas was behind it, before the strike could hit, and when it struck the wall, the power flickered between ancient tiles, pouring upward to bestow a heavenly glow upon the domed ceiling.

In the sudden glow, Fenris almost didn't notice his own tattoos lighting up to match, but he charged regardless, his blade hitting the weak spot where Justice's sword had already hit. The chink in its armour turned into a gouge, and it stumbled with an ear-piercing shriek.

At the show of weakness, Dorian's hands moved instinctively in a spell that never made it past his fingers. He cursed, glaring down at his hands as though they had done him personal harm.

"Not yet," Artie told him, eyes on Fenris and on how close the demon's hand had gotten to grabbing him and picking him up. He tried not to think about the combination of Fenris and Pride demon, or that time Fenris had given in to one when they had tried to help Feynriel.

Yet, the demon barely swatted at its attackers, its focus still almost entirely on Solas, who dodged and dodged again, every time a little more visible between appearances, as if there were slowly becoming less to hide behind, in motion.

Anders lunged into battle, again, not so much as a scrape on him, to stop the demon from turning to follow Solas. He turned his back to the beast and jammed his sword back under his arm, leaning into it, once he was sure he'd struck true. This, the demon could not ignore and its hand clamped around his shoulders, squeezing.

"Don't you dare die, Roundear!" Fen'Din shouted, from where he lay grappling with the rift. "I don't have time to go fetch you from some far kingdom!"

Solas took advantage of the chaos, working two handed to pin the demon down and sprinkle snow from above. As the beast threw Anders aside and looked up, a spike of ice lanced down to catch it in the teeth, spraying shards of ice and frozen ichor as the spell took hold of everything it touched.

Anders stumbled to his feet, Justice obviously entirely in control as his shoulders took on a more usual shape, his grip on the sword firming as the healing raced through him, undoing the demon's work.
Fenris waded back in, striking before the demon could push itself up, his blade opening the exposed skin of the creature's neck. Its dying cries spilled out in the form of gurgles as it choked on its own ichor before its body faded away into dust and memory.
"Well that was fun," Artie said cheerfully, only then feeling the rush of magic returning to him. He toed aside a particularly large frozen chunk and eyed Solas curiously. "It really did not seem to like you."

"Yes," said Dorian, eyeing a bit of ichor that had hit his sleeve distastefully. "Speaking of you and whatever that was, how was your magic not affected by the... Mana Cleanse, Smite, whatever it was?" He waggled his fingers helpfully.

Solas shook the ice out of his sleeve and stared at them both. Nothing happened. He slowly raised a finger and pointed across himself at the rift Fen'Din continued to struggle with. "There is a hole in the world. I do not need to wait to make my own magic." He glanced at where Anders stood, still glowing blue, still staring angrily at his own shoulder as the bone seemed to writhe beneath the cloth and skin. "And many things are confused by passing into this world. I look like someone that spirit remembered from long ago. Faces repeat, over time."

"You may go directly to the Abyss," Fen'Din remarked, with no real venom, and Solas looked back to see something trying to press through the closing rift.

"It is just one," Solas decided. "Allow me."

A quick spell and the pressure released, allowing Fen'Din to finish closing the rift, before another demon could push its way through.

"Thank you." Fen'Din sat up and looked at his hand, where the skin hung loosely from the glowing rift in his palm. "Roundear? I think I broke something!"

On the other side of the room, Fenris looked through his leg. "Shit."

"Shoulders have moving parts, Justice!" Anders barked, suddenly. "Give it to me, before we end up with a permanent angle!" He sighed, and the burbling at his shoulder ceased. "Working with spirits, sometimes, I swear on the Maker's name... I'll get to both of you as soon as I'm sure I actually have two arms and they both work."

Artemis approached his husband, concerned by the look on his face. "Are you...?" He trailed off when he reached for Fenris's shoulder only for his hand to pass right through it. "Oh." Fenris gave him a helpless look. "You can't turn this off, can you?"

Fenris answered with a growl of frustration, and Artie forced back the instinct to panic. The healer was here to keep this from turning into something Bad.

"It would seem the rift is having an effect on you, too," Solas said, head tilted curiously as he looked at Fenris.

"I cannot say this has happened near other rifts," Fenris grated out, pacing in a tight circle.
"It's all right," Anders assured them all. "There was a lot going on here. It's probably the same thing as the blinking, which means it's happened before in a lesser form."

Fen'Din kept his hand tipped down, to keep anything from falling into the thing he thought might be a wound, even though it didn't bleed, and made his way over to Fenris. "What, exactly, am I seeing?" he asked, circling Fenris with a studious eye.

"He's passed himself into the Fade, partway," Anders clarified, passing the sword to his other hand, so he could test the arm he'd just healed. "It's something to do with the lyrium in his skin. I don't recognise the rune, but that's not saying a lot. It's Tevinter work."

"It's the work of one former magister Danarius," Dorian cut in, staying where he was, as it was decently far from Fenris. "The lyrium was supposed to destroy his memory and turn him into a mindless attack beast that could not be contained by anything but his master's will. I am pleased to see that Danarius was unsuccessful in at least some of those regards. Still, that was what the man said at all the parties. That he'd turned an elf into a beast to be feared."

"Frankly, Dorian, your fear of elves should be innate." Fen'Din looked over Fenris's shoulder. "We are not mere trifles to be toyed with, whatever the case appears to be in the Imperium."

"You should probably be afraid of that elf, at the very least." Anders cocked his head toward Fen'Din. "Reports have him responsible for a Templar massacre, before he was brought to the Circle. He was very small then, and he's much larger, now. Of course, he has much better control, now, so if you get killed, you can be sure it was intentional."

"Wonderful," said Dorian cheerfully. "I feel very reassured now, thank you!"

Fenris's lips twitch into something that was almost a smile. The Herald was clearly not stable, but something about putting fear into the heart of a Tevinter mage warmed him.

Artemis cleared his throat. "Perhaps we should move away from the rift, see if that helps with the..." He gestured at Fenris and sighed. Clearly just closing the rift hadn't been enough.

"And here I thought you liked it when he glowed," Anders teased.

Artie felt his face heat, and Dorian gave him a curious look. "Not in this context, no."

Solas cleared his throat. "Perhaps we should go. We can always come back to study these ruins in less interesting times. I think it is far more important to study his runes, right now." He attempted to herd the group back toward the exit and sunlight, rather than the radiant magic above them. "The pattern seems almost familiar, as if someone tried to copy it from a dream. I have seen this before, but not in recent history. And I have never seen it do... quite that. Are you feeling well?"

Fenris gave him a look that was lost in the darkness of the room ahead.

Anders glanced back at Solas. "Well, I'm glad someone knows what's going on here, because I actually have Danarius's journals, and I still don't know. The only thing I've figured out is that he's supposed to be dead."

"A dwarf," Solas replied, passing Anders to lead them back out into the sun. "He's supposed to be a dwarf. The original applications were ancient armours that bound to the flesh. At some point, elves adapted the patterns to join with the Fade -- a means of warping the Veil. Obviously the intent, here, but I've never seen this pattern, exactly, and the exact pattern matters very much. As with any writing, it is all about the story you are trying to tell the world. This does not look like it was done well or stably."
Fenris laughed dryly. "There was little stable about Danarius. I was not his first attempt, whatever his intentions, but I was the only one who survived." He looked down at his hands, at and through the ichor-covered gauntlets and had to trust that this was not permanent. "Know that if I am stuck like a ghost, mage," he said to Anders, "I will haunt you for the rest of my days."

"Where you will scowl at me across the room and try to knock things over to annoy me and get my attention?" Anders replied. "Sounds a bit like having a cat, really."

Even with the way Fenris glowed, it was difficult to make out his features in the dark, but Anders could picture the unimpressed look the elf was throwing over his shoulder.

"Wonderful, we have two people who almost know what's going on, and neither of them are me."

"If you really want to be sure no one misses a single flick of your fingers, try glowing," Fen'Din suggested. "It seems to work well for at least two other people, here."

"I don't think I have the necessary accoutrements for that," Dorian decided, after a moment. "Nor am I sure those are enhancements I desire. In fact, I might venture those are enhancements I am better without."

"Illusion works just as well." A violet glow seemed to spread out from around Fen'Din, illuminating nothing but himself and fading away as he stepped out into the light.

"You can't create light with illusions!" Dorian protested.

"You can't *cast* light. You can self-illuminate a slightly larger copy of yourself, same as the sparkles." Fen'Din turned back to Fenris, who stood between Anders and Solas. "Speaking of illumination... are you channelling less Fade light, yet?"

Anders offered a weak smile, one hand splayed across three junctions of the lyrium lines on Fenris's neck. "I think he's a little dimmer. Don't worry, Leto, dear. No matter what your husband thinks, I'll always find it sexy."

Fenris gave him a glare, but one that only promised pain and not murder. Their friendship had grown so much over the years. "And no matter what everyone else thinks, I will always find that beard repulsive."

"Everyone *does* think that," Artie protested.

Dorian pointed at him with one sparkling finger, nodding in agreement.

Anders shot them both an offended look. "This is how you treat Grey Wardens in Ferelden's time of need?"

"Grey Warden," Solas corrected with the barest twitch of a smile.

"Yes," said Dorian. "I am not much a fan of Blackwall's beard, but it is much better suited to his face, I think."

Fenris chuckled at the look on Anders's face, his lyrium lines starting to flicker softly.

"Reach into my bag and get the green jar on the right. My right." Anders caught Fen'Din's eye.

Fen'Din fished the jar out and opened it, sniffing the contents. "Spirit balm?"
Anders nodded, dipping his fingers into the paste and smearing it along the lyrium lines as the glow stopped, and they solidified. "It seems to be a good idea, with the holes in the sky. I need to make more, when we get back to Haven, but I probably have enough to get us there."

Dorian nodded, looking intrigued. "Blocking the influence of the Fade. It won't last long, but I can see where it might serve to stabilise the rune." His eyes drifted up, settling on Fenris's face. "You can usually control it, can't you?"

"That would be a good assumption, as this is the first time you've seen me in this condition." Fenris smiled unpleasantly. "Most Altus will only see this once."

Dorian laughed nervously.

Fenris looked down at his hands again, found them whole again, and some of the tension eased out of his body. For all that he had acted calm, the thought of being stuck like that had been...

Fenris shook his head. It was fine now. Though he knew sooner rather than later it wouldn't be again.

Artie slid a hand into his, and the way he gripped it said he was thinking much the same thing.
The mage's body lay beside her campfire, and Blackwall crouched beside it, in the shadow of the chest and tent to his side. "She was a Grey Warden." Horror had been etched across his face since the moment he got a clear view of the griffon plate in the centre of her chest. "We found a Grey Warden, and then we killed her."

"I just want to point out that she attacked us," Niall noted, shaking ice from his fingertips. "We tried to reason with her."

"In her home." Blackwall gestured at the cliffs that rose up around the dry patch in the swamp. The sight of a fire had drawn them in -- the only place they'd seen that was dry enough to hold flame at ground level.

"In a swamp," Niall shot back. "I don't see a door. It's the driest land for a mile in any direction. Anyone walking through here would have tried to rest there."

"I want to see her notes," Jowan said, quietly. "I wanted to ask questions about what she was studying, but..." He gestured at the corpse and sighed.

"You have to burn the body," Asha reminded him. "Especially here and now. The spirits already know what's happened here."

Blackwall wiped a hand over his face, fingers tangling in his beard. "What a mess," he said with a sigh, opening his mouth like he wanted to continue arguing but didn't have the strength to.

Adaar shuffled closer as subtly as one of his size could. He cleared his throat. "From what we've found so far of her writings, I don't think she was in her right mind. I doubt reasoning was ever going to be an option."

As he spoke, the mages worked, making sure the corpse was somewhere dry enough that the whole bog wouldn't light up, opting to just keep her near her own campfire before flames swallowed her whole.

Jowan crouched beside the chest that presumably held the dead mage's belongings, prying it open with his belt knife. He lifted out a stack of pages wilted from the damp air and skimmed them. "There would have been no reasoning with her," he concluded, holding up a page and whistling in amazement. "She's been drinking blood lotus."

Niall leaned over Jowan and snatched the document. "Don't be ridiculous. No one in Thedas is tha--"

"He blinked at the page in his hands. "She... was drinking blood lotus. You're not going to try to recreate this, are you?"
"Not like that I'm not!" Jowan scoffed, twisting out from under Niall's arm as he stood. "Here, give that back, so we can keep these all in order. You know who else we know who used to experiment with blood lotus?"

"Yes, and he's crazy, too. The only difference is that he started crazy." Niall handed back the page, eyes catching on Blackwall's vigil over the burning corpse.

As they came upon the road that led up to the castle's foggy outline, Adaar wished everyone had given their own dead the same courtesy. Instead of on fire, the corpses were upright and shuffling towards them, swords in their hands and nothing in their eyes.

"Ah, great," Adaar said cheerfully. "The one thing I probably hate more than regular demons!"

Blackwall ploughed past him, shield up like he meant to carve a path through them. "Don't waste time on them! Head to the castle!"

The ground glowed green with hexes around the clustered corpses, and Adaar dodged them as he followed Blackwall's lead, opening a path between the bodies for the mages to get through.

Niall took a deep breath, flickering with grey as he slipped between Blackwall and Adaar, ice racing out from his feet in a long wall that followed the path Blackwall was trying to carve. He threw his hands out to the sides and the wall parted, chasing the gesture both ways, forcing the corpses off the path and back into the mire. "Move quickly. I want to close this behind us."

Asha heard the change in his voice, spotted the ghost of another visage shimmering through his face. "Is this wise?" she asked, shoving Jowan ahead of her as she moved.

"It's fast," Niall replied. "I just want to get out of here. Too many people died badly, here. The fever took so many of them, and the others killed each other to keep it from spreading. They did not die happy, and I have the worst headache, so please just move, so we can do this and leave."

"Go, go!" Blackwall called out, becking the mages onward with a wave of his shield. They raced between the ice walls, and Adaar tried not to think of how easily those walls could snap shut on them all. Better than drowning in a sea of corpses, he supposed.

The castle took shape in front of them, details emerging from the fog, and they ran through the open gate. Asha hovered under its arch, turning back to watch Niall, hoping that the blurring of his shape was just from the weather. The ice cracked and shattered where the corpses beat against it, and Niall flew more than ran after them.

Through the gate was no sanctuary, though. Avvar warriors met them with a hail of arrows and swords drawn.

"Take their heads!" came a shout from the back of the crowd.

"For Edvarr Hold!" came another, as a large man with a larger shield surged forward to slam that shield against Adaar, recognising the glow of his hand and the danger he posed.

Asha's attention finally diverted from Niall, as she raised shields for Blackwall and Adaar. With what remained of her concentration, she launched raw magic against the archers, one at a time.

"Ow!" Adaar said to the man who had body-slammed him with his shield, sounding more offended than hurt as magic shimmered blue over his skin. He braced his shoulder against the front of the shield and shoved back, sending the man toppling over onto his back like a flailing turtle. A vertical
swing of his sword finished him off.

Adaar looked around him, nodding in satisfaction at Asha's efficiency as each archer crumpled, and he noted more shielded warriors hovering, waiting for an opportunity. Adaar tugged the shield off the dead man as they started to charge, putting all his body weight behind it as he ran towards them with a blood-freezing roar.

The first warrior slowed and tried to brace, but Adaar ploughed into and then over him, knocking him onto his back and stepping on his shield, using it as a springboard to send him into the next warrior.

Blackwall watched this over his opponent's shoulder and burst out laughing. "Perhaps we should have given you a shield to begin with!" he called out.

Jowan looked up as an arrow sliced across his arm -- an extremely narrow miss that could have been much worse. Three archers on a wall to the opposite of the ones Asha was dealing with. Options rattled through his head, but he clenched his fist and pulled. Reality buckled and rippled around him, and the three archers plunged off the wall, slamming into the ground, followed by a final kick from above, as the scene settled.

"And I still can't do it, out here," he huffed, offended that they'd come to him, instead of the other way around.

"A little warning next time?" Blackwall roared, obviously shaken as he plunged his sword through one of the Avvar warriors equally impressed with whatever Jowan had just done.

"Yeah, sorry! It wasn't supposed to do that!" Jowan shrugged and slid a hex past Blackwall to the two warriors beyond him. "Worked, though!"

"I'm not sure I trust your definition of 'worked', Jowan!" Niall shouted from where he still stood just inside the gate, freezing it over to block the shambling corpses that tried to follow them. Jowan didn't like the way that second face still hovered over his, but at least Niall sounded like himself.

"Right now, my definition is 'no one died'!" Jowan shouted back, just barely pulling back a spell as Adaar charged into its trajectory, still barreling into people and roaring like a maniac.

"Archers," Blackwall pointed out, his shield catching his opponent in the jaw before his sword caught him in the gut.

"Okay, no one I like died, then!"

As Blackwall finished off another warrior, Jowan made for the stairs, waving for Asha to follow him up. Without the archers, it would be a perfect perch to get a view of anything moving below -- which explained why the archers had been up there. Below them, the battle slowed. Niall had sealed out the undead and the last of the warriors fell under the onslaught of their own forces.

"Well, that was fun, but now we're stuck." Blackwall rapped his shield against the inner portcullis that prevented them from getting further into the fortress.

Asha pried open boxes with a discarded sword until she found a case of potions and tossed one to Jowan. "Before your arm gets any worse."

Jowan drank the potion and left the bottle on the battlements, moving toward the end of the path. "That's a door." He pulled on it. "That's a locked door, and it's about to not be."
"Wait! Wait!" Asha lunged from behind him, grabbing the lever she spotted. "Pull the lever! Maybe that opens it! Or opens something!"

Jowan looked between her and the door he was about to smash into splinters.

"That's probably safer," Adaar called up to him, "but a bit less fun."

"Why does the combination of 'Jowan' and 'lever' not feel safe to me?" Niall drawled, and Jowan pretended not to hear.

Pulling the lever produced the sound of grinding gears, the screech of metal against stone drawing their attention as the portcullis lifted, then again to the opposite side where another portcullis closed upon the gate. A few walking corpses crowded the portcullis, but they could do nothing but claw through the metal bars.

"Well, I hope no one forgot their lunch back at the camp," Adaar said cheerfully.

"Door's still locked." Jowan pulled on it again and then kicked it. Squinting intently, he stepped back, and Asha darted back to where Niall waited.

"You're going to do something stupid, aren't you?" Niall sighed and pulled a tall crate into the doorway of the room he and Asha waited in.

"No," Jowan retorted, as a large stone slammed through the door, shattering on impact. He shook the shards and splinters off his robes. "Maybe."

He stepped into the wreckage of the door, picking through the remnants from a toppled bookcase. "Lots of Fereldan history and military strategy. Oh, hey, this one's about Grey Wardens!"

"Has it got griffons in it?" Niall called out, shoving the crate back out of the way, now that he was relatively sure they wouldn't be sprayed with debris.

Jowan rolled his eyes. "Come see for yourself, you idiot."

But Blackwall was more interested than Niall, kicking aside bits of wreckage and poring through the books and papers Jowan managed to salvage. He tucked anything that looked useful into his pack.

"Good on you, opening that door," Blackwall said with a nod of approval, "or we never would have found these."

Jowan gave Niall a look as if to say 'see?'

"Yes, the one time Jowan blowing shit up worked in someone's favour," Niall drawled.

"Oh, I'm sure there was at least one other time," Asha replied before Jowan could protest.

"As long as he doesn't start throwing corpses again," Niall sighed, raising his eyebrows at Asha.

"Once." Jowan held up one finger and stormed toward the stairs. "I threw one corpse. By accident. Once."

"Do I--" Blackwall started, but Niall cut him off.

"No," Niall put an arm around Asha, his colour improving at the contact, and followed Jowan down to the open gate leading deeper into the fortress.
THIS SATURDAY join us for the first Rhapsody Party of the new year! Or, well... join me... there's been some mayhem, but the party is on!

Saturday, 26 January @ 17:00-21:00 EDT (What time is that where you are?)
Chapter 115

Chapter Summary

The Hand of Korth loses his grip...

A muddy path stretched before them, and a light rain seemed to start just a bit further along than the gate, the sound of water striking trees and stone drifting back in the murky air. Still, the path was solid, and it wasn't sided by a bog full of corpses just waiting to spring up and start trouble.

"I think it's fair to assume we're about to walk into some shit," Blackwall noted to Adaar. "There's no way we fought all the Avvar staying in this fortress, on the way in."

"No? You don't think they all came out to greet me?" Adaar pressed a hand to his chest. "I'm hurt."

"Oh, I'm sure they have a surprise party waiting, just for us," Jowan sighed.

"That's nice of them." Adaar considering the now-battered shield he'd borrowed and finally tossed it to the ground, squaring his shoulders as he walked ahead. The blue shimmer of magic around him let him know he was still being shielded.

As they climbed a sweep of stone steps, the crackle of electricity was their first warning that there was someone waiting for them at the landing. Adaar charged, knowing they would see his horns before he saw them, and the shield absorbed the lightning coming for his face, dispersing it out into the air.

"He's fucking nuts," Jowan hissed, rushing to get a view over the top of the steps, so he could lay hexes under whatever was at the top that wasn't Adaar.

"Because you're one to talk?" Niall retorted, quietly, the beginnings of a terrible idea breaking across his face. He drifted, more than walked, up the steps behind Adaar, shedding humanity as he moved, the demon in him blossoming in the pain of the headache that had followed him from the edge of the swamp.

"Get back! Get back!" Asha shouted as Niall slid to the side, out of Adaar's shadow, ghostly black robes billowing around his horrifying form.

Niall opened his mouth more times than should have been possible and just screamed. Every ounce of agony that had screwed itself in behind his eyes poured out of his mouth, washing over the Avvar warriors Jowan had already hit. Ice and grief rolled across the ground like a fog, and the first of the warriors wavered in its wake, three of them staggering with the weight of it and the ice around their ankles, as Niall drifted past them, slowly becoming a man, again, until he could take steps.

"Maker's Breath, I feel better." Niall rubbed his face and stepped back, waiting for the miasma to clear, so everyone else could get through.

The Avvar were shaken, more than shaken to go by the way they struggled to focus on the battle in front of them, lightning and stone raining down upon them from Jowan and Asha. Adaar stood at the edge of the chaos, eyes wide and horrified as he stared at Niall, sword still raised to strike. Blackwall came up next to him, shield in front of him.
"Well, I can thank Niall for my nightmares tonight," Adaar said conversationally. When the air looked clear he dived in, sword cleaving through the spellcaster who had thrown lightning at his face. Blackwall was close behind, and the rest of the battle was ugly but quick.

"More stairs," Niall observed, gesturing toward the dog-headed pillars that flanked the base of them. "Do I need to go up first, or can you handle this? I'm a little tired."

"You stay down here. I don't want you getting close to any more killing." Asha put an arm around Niall and kissed his cheek, some of the grey leaving his face.

"A little late for that." Niall gestured at the corpses behind them.

Jowan shook his head. "She's right. You've had enough. I'll go first. Hex everything that moves, before we move the swords in." He glanced at the sword in his own hand. "The other swords. Trust me, it'll be easier if I loosen them up a bit, up there."

"Trust you." Niall looked unimpressed, but conceded the point. "Do it."

Jowan looked at Blackwall, who nodded.

"If you're in front of me, you're not going to hit me," Blackwall sensibly noted.

"And now we know who the smartest person in the group is," Niall said, while Jowan sighed and pretended not to hear either of them.

The staircase was steep, and Jowan stepped carefully on the wet stone. It led to more ruins, and he crept into the remains of a great hall, thick fog making it look as though the ceiling had disappeared into the clouds. He spotted more Avvar with tower shields down at the far end, and his lips started to move in a spell.

"Herald of Andraste!" another voice boomed. "Face me!"

"If they are such great fans of mine," Adaar sighed, "you'd think they'd at least know my name by now."

"You mean your name isn't Herald?" Niall drawled.

"I am the Hand of Korth himself!" the voice boomed again, and some of the humour left Niall's face as he caught sight of him, letting out a low whistle. From the man's sheer size and the horned helmet he wore on his head, at a distance, he could have been qunari.

"More like the Ass of Korth," Adaar grumbled, rolling his shoulders and he hefted his sword.

"Pounding the Ass of Korth," Jowan drawled, sword in hand, "exactly what I woke up thinking I'd do today."

Asha couldn't resist laughing as she tugged at the Avvar, checking for magic she could drain from them, before they had a chance to wield it, but no mages faced them. This would be a slaughter, if they chose not to surrender. She closed her eyes and focused on the ancient spirits of the place.

"I hear you!" she told them, and their interest shifted from the Hand of Korth, who seemed unable to hear them, even as they advised him. "You don't want him to fight us. You know what we are."

The spirits chattered at her, but the thing she most understood was that they were bound to aid the Hand of Korth by generations-old promises, even as he pursued his own demise, blind and deaf to
the advice they offered and the danger he faced.

Niall arched an eyebrow at Asha, who shook her head and sighed.

"Can you handle the short ones?" Adaar asked, turning his head so that he could watch their enemies' approach while keeping his good ear turned towards his companions. "I'll take the Hand of Korth." He paused, brows knitting. "You know, that really doesn't sound very intimidating when you say it that way."

"Short ones?" Blackwall echoed, throwing him a confused look.

"I think he means normal, reasonably-sized ones," Jowan answered, tipping his head at the half-circle of shielded Avvar. As he spoke, the ground around their enemies glowed green. "Also, saying 'I'll take the Ass of Korth' isn't any better, if that's any consolation, Adaar."

"It's not," Adaar cheerfully informed him before taking off, skirting the shielded Avvar and Jowan's hexes, angled to plough through anyone who tried to get in his way.

Niall hung back, resting his head on Asha's shoulder as he tried to ignore the spirits that called out to him, instead of her. He was tired, for the first time in recent memory, and it was a strange comfort.

Asha focused her attention on Jowan and Blackwall, amplifying their abilities as they lunged toward the shield-bearers, and noted the difference in styles. Jowan was clearly accustomed to a larger weapon and no armour -- as mages so often were -- and the sword wasn't always pointed outward as he spun around shield edges and hammer blows, blade in one hand and entropy so heavy she could almost smell it in the other. Blackwall fought like he expected to power through things -- shield first and the sword as almost an afterthought, to finish the job. The steel held up fairly well as he batted a hammer aside and stabbed his opponent in the armpit.

"Are we winning?" Niall murmured, elbows resting on Asha's hips.

"Oh, we will be," Asha assured him, as Jowan lashed out with the sword turned back against his forearm, carving a deep slice through one warrior's side as he lunged past. "This will all be over, soon."

Adaar trusted his friends to take care of the other Avvar as he stared down the Hand of Korth. Normally he barrelled into battle when the fight was against humans, but this man was closer to his size than to Blackwall's, the hammer in his hand a heavy, ornate thing, the details in the animal head carving pristine enough for Adaar to assume it had some sort of magic. Adaar thought of the times he'd sparred with Sata-Kas, the number of times he'd taken a maul to the head, and tried not to think about how much he missed the asshole.

When the hammer came for his head, Adaar side-stepped, the impact of his blade against its shaft enough to knock it off its trajectory and to put him in line for a stab to the face. Adaar's sword caught on one of the Hand's horns instead as the man dodged.

"You know, you remind me of a friend of mine," Adaar said, stepping into the Hand's reach instead of away as he pulled his sword free, not letting him have enough space to swing his hammer. With a roar, the Hand brought his hammer lengthwise in front of him and shoved him back. "Now you really remind me of him."

"And you remind me of a fool!"

"Must've been a handsome fool!" Asha laughed and Niall groaned at the volume. "You're all right. Just a little more," Asha promised him.
Jowan and Blackwall met back to back, both looking for anyone they’d missed.

"If these are supposed to be the best of their warriors, something's wrong here," Blackwall noted.

"They weren't prepared for mages," Jowan reminded him. "I have hexes. She has spirit blessings. It wasn't a fair fight, but it was extremely effective. I'd probably feel bad about it, if they weren't trying to kill me."

"Magic threw a fight like that?" Blackwall blinked and counted bodies. "Maker's Breath, how'd we ever get rid of Tevinter?"

"Contrary to popular belief, Tevinter hasn't always had a monopoly on battle magic," Jowan pointed out, trying to figure out if he could get a spell in without hitting Adaar.

Their weapons were locked, Adaar's sword pinning the Hand's hammer, as they snarled into each other's faces. Adaar watched his body tense, saw the move coming before the Hand rocked forward to slam his helmeted head into Adaar's face. Adaar braced and caught the blow on his horns instead.

"They're like goats vying for dominance," Jowan muttered as he watched the two of them with their horns locked. He sighed in frustration but kept a spell on hold just in case.

Abruptly, Adaar spun out of the lock, making the Hand overbalance at the sudden loss of pressure, if only for a moment. But a moment was all Adaar needed, his pommel striking the man's back, then his blade striking his neck.

Niall slid down Asha's back, tucking his head between his knees as he crouched on the stone. The spirits howled their lament, and someone out there would hear it, besides just him and Asha. But, right now, that noise was crushing. The spirits had served generations of this family, and now they would have to report the death of the Hand to his father, who still lived and ruled. But, first, they would sing his memory, and Niall found himself battered by it on all sides.

Asha raised a barrier around Niall, hoping to dampen the worst of it, but her eyes said she couldn't hear a thing going on around them, over the storm of spirits.

"Wind's picked up a little," Blackwall noted, watching tattered banners flutter above them in what sounded like the wind whistling through the ruin. He glanced at Jowan. "Think you can avoid murdering people with doors?"

"I have never killed anyone with a door," Jowan said, primly. "If you're asking me to open the doors without hitting anyone who might be behind them, I can probably do that. I'm not sure we really have any other way to open them, if they're locked, and I'm assuming they are, or the scouts would've just... walked out."

"In the meantime, we'll just hope that Korth only had the one Hand," Adaar sighed, rolling his shoulders before picking up the Hand's hammer. He gave it an experimental swing with one arm, hummed and shrugged, resting it on his shoulder.
Chapter 116

Chapter Summary

A rescue and a magical horse.

"I found some doors back here for you to not kill anyone with, Jowan," Blackwall said, peeking out from behind a ruined wall by the stairs. He pounded the door with the side of his fist. "If you're in there, stay back from the door!" he called out to what he hoped were their missing scouts.

"What if there are more Avvar?" Jowan asked with an amused quirk of his lips as he lined himself up.

"Well, then at least they'll know the Inquisition is courteous."

"I'm going to try something a little different," Jowan decided, remembering how he'd torn the archers off the wall. "You should probably stand back, but I'm a lot less worried about anyone behind the doors."

As Blackwall backed away, Jowan's eyes darkened in concentration. He grabbed like he meant to tear another hole in the sky, but when he twisted his fist, the doors to opposite sides of him ripped off the hinges and slammed together in front of him. He nodded and wiggled a finger in his ear, trying to get it to pop. "Okay, so that's what happens if I do that on purpose."

Niall leaned to the side, peering at Jowan around Asha's knees. "What did you just do? The spirits are freaking out."

"Snapped the Veil like a wet towel." Jowan grinned, lopsidedly, as he recognised the Inquisition armour on the scouts, having seen it on Harding's team.

"You're not the Herald..." one of the scouts observed, peering at Jowan.

"No, I'm the guy who opens doors. The Herald's behind me." Jowan waved Adaar forward. "I think they want to be sure it's really a rescue!"

"I'm so important people are opening doors for me now," Adaar said, approaching now that it seemed there would be no more flying doors. He ducked under the archway and offered the scouts a crooked smile.

The scouts scrambled to stand at attention despite the way dirt and fatigue masked their faces, and Adaar wasn't sure how he felt about that. Shokrakar would have probably found it hilarious.

"We've dealt with the Avvar," he said, tipping his head back over his shoulder. "Is everyone all right?"

"Yes, Your Worship," said one scout, and Adaar wasn't sure how he felt about that either. "The injured need some rest, but we can return on our own."

He frowned at the word 'injured' and saw a couple standing less steadily than the others, though thankfully no one looked gravely wounded. "Here," he said, leaning the hammer against the wall
and pulling out the rest of his potions from his pouch. "We can stock up back at camp."

"Okay, I'm glad you're all fine -- more glad than you'll ever know -- but can we please get out of this bog of stench and death?" Niall complained, leaning heavily on Asha as he got up. "The spirits are mourning, and I can't keep doing this."

Asha wrapped an arm around Niall as his face flickered, suddenly. "We'll wait for you by the gate. It won't be as difficult, there."

Niall groaned pitifully. "Back toward the demon-inhabited people who died badly. You're still probably right."

"He needs rest," one of the scouts observed, clutching a blue and grey banner around her shoulders for a blanket.

Jowan shook his head. "He can't rest, here. It's... a mage thing."

Blackwall stepped around the group of scouts, squinting at the woman wearing the banner. "Is that a Grey Warden banner? Did you find anything else?"

"Nothing from the Wardens," the scout replied. "Why?"

"I'm one of the last Wardens we can find. I was hoping that was evidence another group had camped here. I might've been able to follow them." Blackwall nodded in acceptance, looking like he'd half expected that answer. "Are you going to be all right, here, with all the undead? I'm afraid we might have to get Niall out of here, but I don't want to leave you without help."

"The gates still work," Jowan reminded him. "They should be able to lock the swamp out for a night or two."

"If you've cleared out the Avvar, we should be safe," the woman said with a grateful nod. "Thank you again for coming for us."

"Just stay out of trouble," Adaar said amiably. "I'd rather not have to come rescue you again."

Asha got to the front gate, first, Niall close behind her, as she checked on the figures waiting outside. "Oh my goodness!" she suddenly cooed, peering out through the grate. "Is this a friend of yours?"

"It's a fucking dead horse. It's that guy from the rift, and he's got a dead horse."

"Your gods look after you, and so do mine," the Avvar beside the partially-skeletal horse replied. "And this one is impressed with your will to continue, against the odds. She is a force of nature, born of the earth and sky, and you would do well to treat her with respect."

"What in the blight?" Jowan blinked and then sprinted to catch up to Asha. It was, indeed, a dead
horse, but one that still snorted and squinted at him in a way he wasn't sure he liked. He found himself even more disturbed by the sword jutting through its head.

Blackwall stared at the horse -- if it could be called that -- with his mouth hanging open like he wanted to say something, but no words came out.

Adaar, on the other hand, nearly fell over laughing. "It's... it's a unicorn," he said, his voice holding that high-pitched, strangled quality that said he was fighting back giggles.

"That's not a unicorn," Blackwall insisted with a slow shake of his head. "That's... that's a nightmare waiting to happen."

"Night..." Asha started to say before Niall placed a finger across her lips.

"Please don't point out the pun," he begged.

"It's... hold on, are you giving the unicorn to us?" Adaar asked the Avvar.

He shook his head. "She is not mine to give, but she has chosen to follow you."

Adaar raised a hand like he wanted to pet the horse's flank, only to think better of it. "Thank you. She's perfect. I know just what to do with her."

The horse nosed Jowan in the side of the head, nibbling at his hair as it dripped bog water down his neck. Jowan's eyes rounded and his lips thinned as he started at Niall, silently pleading for some assistance with the thing.

"You're the Entropy specialist!" Niall hissed, winding himself around Asha.

"Good horsey?" Jowan squinted at it as he patted its nose and it nickered at him.

"Have you seen to the Hand of Korth?" the Avvar asked. "I can hear his name among the spirits."

Blackwall nodded. "I regret that we had to kill him."

"Then the brat lies dead. His father, chief of our holding, would duel me for the loss, if he cared enough." The Avvar sounded as if he approved of the outcome.

After seeing him at work fighting demons, Adaar wouldn't want to duel him either. "You know," he said, seeing an opportunity, "the Inquisition has a purpose your chief doesn't."

The Avvar looked inward, and when he finally spoke it was as much to himself as to the others. "Is this why the Lady of the Skies led me here?" He looked back over his shoulder, looking outward again, far outward, towards the Breach in the sky. "To help heal the wounds in her skin? Aye. I'll join you." He nodded decisively. "Let me make peace with my kin, and I'll find where you set your flag."

Resting his hammer on the ground, the Avvar saluted Adaar with a fist over his chest, a salute which Adaar returned a moment later.

"So... do you have a name?" Adaar asked. "You brought us a dead unicorn and joined the Inquisition, but I still don't know what to call you."

"Skywatcher," the Avvar said, and Adaar supposed that made sense.

"Adaar. Literally means 'Fire-Thrower', if you prefer that."
"I'm not sure you're the one who should have that title," Blackwall said with a dry look at Jowan.

"I only set the swamp on fire once!" Jowan complained as the horse nosed his ear. "You don't care, do you, swamp-horse? Good horsey."

"Just don't light the horse on fire like you did with the curtains," Niall drawled, lifting his head off Asha's shoulder to give Jowan a pointed look.

"You know, all I had to do was get out of that shitty tower, and my aim improved," Jowan huffed.

"If this is improved, I've got serious questions about what you were like before." Blackwall raised his eyebrows.

"An idiot." Niall stuck out his tongue at Jowan. "He really is a lot better. I think the walk in the Fade helped. Nothing like an endless supply of power to make you realise what you shouldn't do with it."

"I'm still getting used to things not working the way I expect them to. I was finally getting used to the Fade," Jowan muttered, face twisting in bleak horror as the horse licked his cheek with a slimy, rotting tongue.

"Respect, lowlander." Skywatcher pointed at Jowan and nodded at the horse. He pressed his fist against his shoulder and nodded to Adaar, next. "We will meet again soon, Adaar."
Vigil's Keep

Chapter Summary

Finding some old friends and some help for Felix.

They rode through the first gate, taking in the feel of an active Fereldan fortress. Felix looked up at the stubby towers that sprung from the body of the main building. Not at all like Tevinter design with its skyward-stretching spires. He recognised a statue of Andraste, but the other statues were opaque to him -- probably local heroes -- though one was clearly a mage wielding a bolt of lightning against a cowering darkspawn.

"This place is very well kept," Cassandra observed, dismounting from her horse as they came to the stables. "Are we sure no one can find any Wardens? I would think they are all right here. This keep is still living."

"The keep lives with or without its lords," Connor corrected, handing the reins to a boy who smiled at the coin that accompanied the transfer. "A hundred people or more live in these walls, regardless of what goes on inside, just like Val Royeaux doesn't fold up when the Empress goes on holiday."

Theron reached up to help Felix down from his horse. The severity of Felix's illness had become apparent as they'd ridden up through the Bannorn, and some days they'd ridden with him tied to the saddle, just to get to Amaranthine and the Vigil faster. To get here before he got any worse. "Well, we're here to find Wardens, so I guess we'll find out who's left. Jan says someone has to still be here, and he's put in to Starkhaven, in case there's not."

Looking at Felix's wan smile and the exhausted way he tried to keep himself upright, Cassandra hoped Jan was right. She came up on Felix's side opposite Theron and offered an arm of support. They were close to the open gates, but even those few steps seemed arduous.

Connor hesitated, wanting to help, but instead he trotted ahead to announce their arrival and to figure out whom they should be talking to.

"Almost there," Theron assured Felix cheerfully. "A few more steps, and you can sit. In a chair, even!"

Felix offered a breathless laugh. They'd just made it inside when his legs folded underneath him.

A woman in heavy armour jogged up to meet them. "Do you need some help, here? What's happened?"

Connor offered her the letter explaining their arrival. "Our friend is very ill and, er, Warden Buttz thought we might find help here."

"Hey! You found Warden Buttz!" The woman laughed and scooped Felix off the floor, lifting him much more easily than Connor found at all reasonable. "I always thought he was the Commander's favourite." She glanced down at the man in her arms. "So, who're you, handsome? You look like you've got those dark good looks Buttz favours."

Felix laughed, weakly. "He's a friend of a friend. My name is Felix." Despite his breathless
presentation, the Tevinter accent came through clearly.

"Captain Maverlies," the woman introduced herself. "I keep the guard in order, here."

"The guard." Cassandra sounded uncertain. "But, what of the Wardens?"

"Oh, two of 'em are here." Maverlies cocked her head, indicating Cassandra and the others should follow her in. "Let's get your man Felix some water, and I'll go find them for you."

They found a chair for Felix as promised, which he didn't so much sit in as fall onto, the sweat on his brow obvious against wax-pale skin. He accepted the water handed him with a sheepish smile that looked like he wanted to say 'Sorry' instead of the 'Thank you' that came out.

Maverlies offered him a smile before she disappeared, all business as she walked down the hall.

"So this is Vigil's Keep," Cassandra said, more to herself than to the men with her as she looked around, trying to visualise the battle she knew had taken place here. "I've heard so many stories..."

"I'd say you'd have to ask Oghren if they were true," said another voice, approaching from down the hall, "but I suspect he was too drunk to remember much of it."

"Hey!"

Cassandra turned to find a man and a dwarf in Warden armour, the dwarf with wild red hair that looked like it had been slept on, the man with a tired smile and hair the blonder end of red.

Connor's face lit up in a brilliant smile. "Ser Alistair!"

The man looked Connor over, as if trying to remember who he was.

"Connor Guerrin, Redcliffe?" Connor raised his eyebrows, slowly, waiting for it to sink in.

"Cousin!" Alistair's smile broke across his face like he'd forgotten how to do it. "How have you been? Has the Circle treated you well?"

Connor gestured around him and sighed. "What Circle? But, if I'd known you'd be here..."

"What can we do for you?" Alistair asked, turning to Oghren and pointing excitedly at Connor.

"Do I have to go punch more demons?" Oghren asked, coughing his way into a laugh. "Best part of that trip, punching demons. Worst part of that trip? Punching darkspawn."

Connor reddened, wishing he hadn't brought it up, suddenly. "This is Felix. Warden Buttz advises he be offered the Joining."

"Nothing against the healer's judgement, but ... was he drunk?" Oghren squinted at Felix. "I mean, I'm drunk, and I can still ask that question."

"He could never hold as much as you could," Alistair agreed, absently, looking Felix over. "He's a ghoul, isn't he? It might be too late."

"Well, if he's a ghoul, he's got two choices, and both of them might end in 'die horribly'. One of them's guaranteed to end in 'die horribly'. Gotta give a man credit for trying. I say we do it." Oghren nodded and looked up at Alistair. "What do you think?"

Alistair sighed, scratched at the bit of goatee on his chin. "People have tried for stupider reasons, I
should think."

"Stupider people, too," Oghren decreed.

"Which you illustrate rather nicely," Alistair said, moving right into addressing Felix before Oghren could realise he'd been insulted. "You understand what you're undertaking here? I mean, I think you have an idea of what will happen if it doesn't work, but if it does, you're a Warden. It's not exactly a party."

"Says you," Oghren grumbled, patting and then frowning at his hip, looking for a flask that wasn't there. "Dammit."

"I do," Felix said, willing himself to sit up straighter. "I've seen the darkspawn up close and the horrors they bring. They took my mother, did this to me. I would like to do what I can to make sure fewer families suffer as mine has."

Alistair nodded through a few deep breaths. "It will take a little while to get everything together. You and your friends should eat and rest."

"Thank you." Felix held out a hand and Alistair shook it with no pause. This was a man unafraid of the taint.

"How's Buttz doing, anyway?" Oghren asked. "Still chasing every ass that isn't mine?"

"Practically married," Theron answered, leaning on the back of Felix's chair. "To a nobleman. A few of them, if I don't miss my count."

Oghren roared with laughter, holding onto his thighs to stay standing. "What'd he finally catch back up with Howe? Those two always acted like nobody could hear them."

"Not Howe, Hawke. The Kirkwall Hawkes. They're very fond of him." Theron smiled broadly. "Lord Hawke keeps quite a collection."

"Lord Hawke collected you, too," Connor pointed out.

"Because he has excellent taste, even if his husband disagrees."

"Hawkes? Plural?" Alistair said before grimacing and shaking his head. "Never mind. I don't need the visuals. I'll just end up picturing two Howes instead, and no one wants that."

Oghren guffawed, head thrown back and spitting with laughter. "I wouldn't say 'no one'."

"Did you have a crush no one knew about?" Alistair drawled.

"Not me, you cheese-headed idiot!"

"Speaking of cheese," Alistair said cheerfully, "let's get you set up somewhere, and we'll have some food brought."
Redcliffe

Chapter Summary

An unexpected visit from the family no one wanted to hear from.

Eadric had finally loosened up in this filthy shem town to have a few drinks. And then a few more drinks. And then some drinks designed by the pretty archer with the Denerim accent, who was trying to get him drunk enough to consider shem girls, 'because they have fantastic tits'. And now his head rested on the table as he tried to drum a rhythm for the song she was singing with that qunari who wasn't the other Herald.

"Where's those titties I like so well?" Sera bellowed, leaping onto a chair and slamming her foot on the table.

"And my bas-made beer, so I started to yell!" Bull finished the line, raising his tankard to smack it against Sera's.

"Then I heard this noise like a crunching twig..." Even after that many drinks, they timed it perfectly.

"And up jumped a demon!" Bull splashed beer on the floor beside him, as he gestured with a mostly full tankard.

"He's about this big!" Sera gestured at Bull.

Eadric reached out and poked Sera's ankle, pointing toward the stairs. "Hey, who's that guy?"

"No tits! Who cares?" Sera bellowed, drunkenly.

Bull turned to look anyway, just to check, halfway through a hearty chug of whatever he was drinking this time. The man certainly didn't have tits. What he did have were fine-quality robes and a look of extreme discomfort.

Bull narrowed his eyes, tried to swat Sera's shoulder but accidentally ended up hitting her boob instead.

"Watch it!" she squawked, slopping beer over his hand and her feet. "You don't get to grab my tits unless you have grabbable tits of your own! You know, tit for tat!" She paused, only to nearly fall into the puddle of beer laughing at her own genius. "Tit for tit!"

"My tits are perfectly grabbable!" Bull huffed. "But look, I think that man's a 'Vint."

"Vints fuck everything up," Eadric complained. "They're almost as bad as Orlesians. They should make a ward for that. Ward against Orlesian treachery. Ward against Tevinter everything. They're like weevils, always getting into everything."

"Hey, Titless Tevinter!" Sera shouted across the room. "Didn't we already throw you people out of here?"

"I'm just looking for my son," the man replied, holding up his hands, defensively. "He came south
with Magister Alexius, and I just want to see that he's all right. To ask him to come home."

"Can't argue with that, I guess," Bull decided, after a moment. "Gets him off our lawn. What's he look like? Maybe we can tell you if he's alive."

"Well, he's about--"

The door swung open and Anders ducked through it, laughing at something Solas had said. Solas and Fen'Din followed just behind him, the pages in their hands suggesting a long debate on some point of magic and history. As Dorian crossed the threshold, a look of relief crossed the Tevinter man's face.

"Dorian!"

And a look of dread crossed Dorian's. "Father."

Solas paused in the middle of what he was saying, eyebrows arched in surprise. They had stopped just inside the doorway, blocking the Hawkes trying to peek around the elves' shoulders.

"What is this, exactly, Father?" Dorian snapped, slowly making his way into the room. "Ambush? Kidnapping? Warm family reunion?"

The tavern had quieted as though the entertainment had arrived, and Dorian's father seemed painfully aware of the stares around them."Perhaps we could speak somewhere more private?"

"What's going on?" Artie whispered, worming his way around Solas to see for himself, but the way Fenris stiffened and growled the word 'magister' told him everything he needed to know.

Fen'Din squeezed around Solas and ducked under Anders's arm to put himself beside Dorian.

"You'll excuse me, Magister Pavus, but I have no intention of permitting you out of my sight, in Dorian's presence, now that kidnapping's come into it. That is not how we settle family disputes in the South." His face remained expressionless as he spread his hands, revealing the glow in his palm.

Magister Pavus sighed, shaking his head sadly at his son. "This is how it has always been. Forgive me, Inquisitor, I never meant for you to be involved in this. My son is simply being dramatic."

Dorian seethed, biting his tongue against a 'dramatic' response, as Anders's arm dropped across his shoulders.

"I'm not really big on dads, personally, but this is up to you, Dorian." Anders squeezed Dorian's shoulder. "If you want to talk to him, we'll make sure you're safe. If you don't want to talk to him, we'll make sure he leaves. If you want to leave the disposition to Leto, we can do that, too."

"Do not imagine it is me you have wronged, here." Fen'Din finally addressed the magister in a voice generally reserved for his students.

"You do not know the half of it," Dorian spat, shoulder tense under Anders's hand. "But maybe you should."

Magister Pavus looked uncertainly between the men around Dorian, eyeing the sword in Anders's hand, clearly of Tevinter make. "Dorian, there's no need to --"

"I prefer the company of men," Dorian interrupted, voice calm in a way he hadn't been a moment before. "My father disapproves."
That startled a laugh out of Artemis he tried to cover with a cough. "Seriously? Of all things to disapprove of..."

"I can think of a few other things I disapprove of," Fenris said in a low growl, his pose all the more threatening for how casually he stood, leaning against the doorframe.

"What are we disapproving of?" Cormac appeared at the bottom of the stairs, unwittingly cutting off one path of retreat, as he gestured to Magister Pavus. "And do we know this guy? I've been considering introducing myself, all day."

"Dorian's father, apparently," Fen'Din replied, still without the faintest flicker across his face.

"Wow, I am... just..." Cormac cleared his throat, cheeks darkening as he held up his hands in obvious embarrassment. "I'm just going to grab a beer I can crawl under. Don't mind me."

"Too late," Fenris muttered, as Bull started to laugh, watching the scene unfold.

The Magister's eyes never left Fenris. "You belong to Danarius, don't you?"

Fenris's markings flared, and he tensed like a coiled spring. Magister Pavus was wise enough to take a step back.

"He doesn't belong to anyone," Artie said, cutting in before Fenris could get the same point across with fewer words and more blood.

"The only part of me that belongs to a magister is my fist in his chest," Fenris said through his teeth, unblinking as he returned Pavus's stare.

The Magister paused, blinking as though trying to make sense of this information. "I see," he said slowly. "I begin to understand why Danarius never returned to Tevinter."

Fenris's unfriendly smile said he might not be the last Magister to suffer that fate.

Magister Pavus shook his head, returning his attention to his son. "This is not what I wanted."

"I'm never what you wanted, Father," Dorian snapped. "Or had you forgotten?"

Solas took a seat across from Eadric, where he had an excellent view of the proceedings, in case things got more interesting than necessary.

"Is it some kind of a big deal up north if you like cod-shoving with floppy noodles?" Sera asked, still standing on the table, one hand on her hip and the other holding the drink she was still working on. "Maybe I should move there. More of a titties and beer kind of place, is it? I mean, except for you people magicing all over the place."

"It wouldn't help. You'd have enough... 'titties and beer' for any relationship, all by yourself," Dorian replied, bitterly. "Of course, that's only if you're trying to live up to an impossible standard, which wouldn't apply to you. Soporati don't have these problems. But, nearly every other family in Tevinter is intermarrying to distill the perfect mage, perfect body, perfect mind."

"They've done a pretty good job, so far," Anders cut in, giving Dorian an obviously appreciative look that even Magister Pavus couldn't be uncertain about.

"Ah, but I am 'flawed'." Dorian spat the word. "And every perceived flaw -- every aberration -- is deviant and shameful. It must be hidden. The perfect leader is flawless."
Sera brought her shoulders up as square as she could and firmly blew a wet razz. "Good thing you came down here, where the nobles are a different kind of poncy stuck-up pricks!" She rested a foot on Bull's shoulder, half as a demonstration and half to maintain her balance. "We've got beers, steers, and queers!"

"Yeehaw!" Eadric raised his drink off the table, but not his head.

Magister Pavus was looking more and more uncomfortable by the minute.

"Seriously?" Artie scoffed as he made his way over to the bar to order some beer for himself in celebration of Sera's statement. "That's what all this is about? Who you sleep with?"

"That's not all it's about," Dorian said with a black look at his father. Artemis noticed that look and ordered a beer for him too.

"Dorian, please," the Magister begged, "if you will only listen to me--!"

"Why?" Dorian spat, hands clenching into fists at his sides. "So you can spout more convenient lies?"

There was the barest catch in Dorian's voice, and his father just looked achingly sad. Dorian jabbed an accusing finger in his direction, eyes stinging with unshed tears.

"He taught me to hate blood magic. 'The resort of the weak mind'. Those are his words!" Dorian squared his jaw, calming himself. "But what was the first thing you did when your precious heir refused to play pretend for the rest of his life? You tried to... to change me!"

Anders squeezed Dorian's shoulder as his voice broke again.

Fenris flickered, threateningly. "Magisters. They're all the same."

"I only wanted what was best for you!" Magister Pavus pleaded, trying to ignore Fenris.

"How many people died for you to exert your will upon your son?" Fenris demanded, coming around Anders's other side. "How many lives did it take before you realised it couldn't be done?"

"You only wanted what was best for you!" Dorian spat, emboldened by both rage and the unhesitating support of those around him, as he jabbed a finger at his father. "For your fucking legacy! Anything for that!"

Dorian's voice broke again, and this time his shoulders followed, curling in toward his chest as Anders's stance turned protective.

"Must you be so dramatic?" The Magister's sad eyes flashed as he turned them on Fenris, instead. "No one died. It was all my blood, from beginning to end. My blood to save my blood."

"Creators, my dad would've punched you right in the face," Cormac observed, dispassionately. "If you want, I can do it for him."

Fen'Din finally moved, resting his non-glowing hand against Dorian's arm. "Dorian, there is a time and a place for forgiveness, but if the one being forgiven has made no effort to right what they have done, to speak against their own actions, then it is likely not the time. Let us give him one chance to speak reasonably, and then I leave the decision with you, what shall be done."

Dorian sucked in a steadying breath. "Tell me why you came," he asked his father.
"If I knew I would drive you to the Inquisition..." Magister Pavus started to say.

"You didn't," Dorian said, voice ragged with frustration. "I joined the Inquisition because it's the right thing to do. Once, I had a father who would have known that."

Dorian started to turn away to storm back outside, but Magister Pavus responded quietly, "Once I had a son who trusted me. A trust I betrayed, I fear. I only wanted to talk to him. To hear his voice again. To ask him to forgive me." He fidgeted with a seam on his gloves, hardly the expression of Tevinter glory.

Dorian looked back at him, something in his expression softening around the eyes.

"We are too much alike, you and I. Too much pride runs in our blood." Magister Pavus held out his hands, inviting Dorian to step away from the Southerners around him and take those hands.

"Kaffas," Dorian huffed, folding his arms. "No. Not now. I have no reason to believe you, now. I have no reason to trust you. Make an effort -- more than words."

"I have crossed the whole of Thedas just to see you!" the Magister protested.

"Yes, deep into the barbarian wilds, where everything smells like wet dog." Dorian continued to sound unconvinced. "Help me save the world, and maybe we'll talk about this. Once, you knew better. Once, you deserved my trust."

"What more would you have me do?" Magister Pavus looked at once as if anything would be a great imposition, but that he would do whatever he was asked.

"Push back against the Venatori. Push harder. Even our friends are falling to their lies! Gereon Alexius, one of the best men I knew, invaded Ferelden for this 'Elder One'!" Dorian gestured in disgust and exasperation. "You hold a seat in the Magisterium. Use it!"

Magister Pavus looked like he would protest for a moment, insist that he was already doing all he could against the Venatori, but a look at Dorian turned those words into a heavy sigh. "The Venatori are a blight of their own, though I can't say I know much about this Elder One. I will see what I can do."

Though it was a politician's answer, it was backed by a father's earnestness, and Dorian believed he meant it. Wanted to believe he meant it.

"I will... trust in your judgement regarding the Inquisition," Magister Pavus said, though the uneasy look he cast around the tavern said that was against his better judgement. With a teasing smile and an attempt at levity, he added, "I imagine they're not all like this."

"Like what?" Sera huffed. "Beers, steers, and queers?"

Before Magister Pavus could respond, another voice cut him off, the voice of the other Herald approaching the tavern door.

"Husband mine!" Adaar shouted. "I have a present for you!" He poked his head into the tavern, looked around until he spotted Fen'Din, and smiled.

Anders cleared his throat and tried not to laugh. "No, I'm afraid most of the Inquisition is 'like this'."
Chapter Summary

The Fade mages witness the Breach for the first time. Torrin and Vivienne meet trouble they hadn't expected. Samson and Calpernia make plans.

The Heralds made quite a sight, leading what could only be described as an army of lunatics through the shadow of the Frostbacks, with Adaar on his trusty druffalo and Fen'Din perched regally on the back of a long-dead, swamp-foul horse, the implement of its death still jutting from its face. The Hawkes rode close behind, near enough for Cormac to sing along with whatever bawdy ballad Sera started on the other side of Adaar. Still, it seemed that Anders knew even more of them, though he was interrupted every few lines, by Fenris elbowing him in the ribs.

Jowan rode a bit back from the main group, staying closer to Asha, Niall, and Blackwall. Brynn and Owain seemed to be getting on well with Ser Peryn, to judge from the hand gestures and laughter, but Lily had stayed behind in Redcliffe, insisting she had work to do. Of course, given their arrival had trashed the Chantry, he supposed she was right. And the last thing she wanted was him hanging around to try to help. Once more into the breach, he supposed. Maybe literally.

The Breach itself yawned bigger as they approached Haven. "Wow," murmured Jowan, getting a better scope of the size of the thing. After Maker-knows how long of trying to open a rift large enough to send them home, he had a better understanding of just how much power must have gone into creating that breach. Rather, he knew it was the sort of power he wouldn't be able to touch in ten lifetimes.

"An eyesore, isn't it?" Blackwall said, noting his stare.

"It's... it's something," Jowan darted a look at Niall to make sure he was wearing the right face. He was for now, though Asha was doing a good job of distracting him.

"Maker willing, soon it'll be nothing," Blackwall replied. "Assuming this works."

"It should work," Jowan assured him, remembering how Fen'Din had closed the rift he'd come out of, remembering his own attempts at borrowing magic in the Fade. "There's enough of us. I mean, I hope there's enough of us. If there's not enough of us, I can't even imagine what it would've taken to open that."

"I don't think we can imagine it, anyway," Blackwall shrugged as if overwhelmed at the thought. "They say it was blood magic that sacrificed everyone at the Conclave, that there's blood-stained lyrium that got summoned from the earth right through the floor of the temple."

"Andraste's holy ashes." Jowan shook his head. "That's... Well, we'll see it for ourselves, right? We'll have to go there to close it, and then we'll know."

Kinnon looked back at Jowan and Niall from where he rode at Peryn's side. They'd gotten good at this riding together thing, having done it across nearly the whole of Thedas, by now, and he'd learned to handle the horse so it wouldn't spook, so close. And Peryn had become so dear to him. He'd have to say something soon. After the Breach. Once the Breach was closed, there would be a
celebration, they'd sleep it off, and he'd ... he'd break everything down. And if Peryn couldn't handle it, well... Kinnon decided he could just stay in Ferelden and let Peryn ride back alone.

Behind him, Dorian raised his voice at something Solas said, and Kinnon glanced behind him to make sure it was just a scholarly disagreement -- which it was. He exchanged a look with Peryn, who shook his head and chuckled. Another Templar would have had a different reaction to arguing mages, a thought that gave Kinnon hope, even as the fond edge in Peryn's smile made his chest feel too tight to breathe. Suddenly the thought of staying alone in Ferelden was harder than it was a moment ago.

Slowly, the smile left Peryn's face. "You looked worried," he said, almost a question.

"I'm not," Kinnon lied with a smile of his own.

"Your Aequitarian leanings have always made me wonder if you could be counted on, Torrin, but I can see that in a crisis you still think clearly. Still, do you think these Templars will be enough for a whole Circle?" Vivienne gestured toward where Hadley's men rode alongside the mages. "They are still sick from their captivity."

"They are all we have," Torrin reminded her. "We didn't lose many to the rebellion, but not all of them returned from Redcliffe's dungeons. And with the rebellion still happening, where would I request more assistance? The Templars have abandoned the Chantry, and the Chantry has abandoned us all. It is only by the graciousness of the Queen of Ferelden and the Arl of Redcliffe that I have kept what remains of our Circle safe. And I intend to continue to keep them safe -- those who have returned with us, instead of joining with the Inquisition."

"Herald Adaar reports having brought a large number of Templars back from the rebellion," Vivienne pointed out. "Surely once the Breach has been closed, he would be happy to supply you some replacements."

"I think that is a question for the Heralds once the Breach has, in fact, been closed," Torrin countered, and Vivienne noted the way he was certain to mention 'Heralds' in the plural. Fen'Din was, after all, once a resident of Kinloch Hold, and for all that he and Torrin didn't always see eye-to-eye, he, at least, was a known quantity where Adaar was not. "And that is, perhaps, an optimistic view. We do not know that they will succeed or what the cost will be. And surely there will be need for Templars elsewhere as well."

"There's nothing wrong with being optimistic," Vivienne said through a smile that had often graced the Orlesian courts, "as long as one also prepares for the worst."

A smattering of arrows hit the lead Templars, enough force behind them to pierce shields and drop horses, and then the first glimmer of red appeared between the trees. Sharp crystalline shapes that moved like men, swords in hand.

"Fall back!" Hadley shouted, trying to decide if trampling the things would work. But, the sudden resonance in his bones was distracting.

The mages who'd ridden out this way had done so to avoid combat, age and temperament making them ill-suited for it, but the response was still nearly instant, the ground sweeping up like a wave to swallow the first line pushing down toward them. Templar horses tripped on the unsteady ground, some rolling onto their riders, but their bulk intercepted the next round of arrows.

Lightning and fire rained down upon the riders who managed to skid to a stop in front of the
turbulent ground. The light show seemed to worsen the Templars' red glow and highlight the swollen crystalline messes that were their faces.

"I'm glad they're on our side," said the Templar next to Hadley, who hummed in agreement as they watched the mages' destruction. He was unsurprised when the Smites fell and the magic stopped, and he braced himself as the power of it washed over him.

Hadley and his men formed a shield around the mages, but behind them the mages readied their staves anyway.

"This is foolishness," Vivienne hissed to Torrin, drawing the bladeless hilt of a sword from where she wore it at her hip and spurring her horse around the outer edge of the group. One of the crystalline nightmares raised a sword to meet her, bracing itself to cut down the horse, but she pulled back on the reins and the horse reared and skidded, hooves smashing the blade and the hand that held it, before the horse's body collided with the creature and trampled it underfoot, shards of crystal scattering. Her sword burst into brilliant light, and she beheaded another beast in Templar armour with the spirit blade as a splash of ice caught the next volley of arrows.

Another Smite landed almost immediately, and she slammed the hilt of her sword into the eye of the half-man that delivered it. Still, her horse took a wound before it trampled the man into a wet pudding.

"They are not so many!" Vivienne cried out, putting the horse in motion again, as the few archers in the trees launched another volley. "Take the archers!"

Lightning flew the moment their magic returned, striking a couple of archers and leaving the trees between them scorched and smouldering. Another archer froze while reaching for his quiver, his skin hardening to stone. He toppled from his perch and shattered into pieces.

All the while, Vivienne was fearless at the head of the battle, wresting a sword from an enemy to use in place of her Spirit Blade when the Smites kept coming. Hadley shook his head in amazement at the women in elegant Orlesian dress cutting down their foes.

Vivienne had to pull hard on her reins when another monster lumbered towards her. What human parts were left were swollen and misshapen, its hands deformed into glowing red crystal spikes.

Two spells hit it at once, from mages far enough back to have missed the worst of the Smite -- a spike of stone shattering the crystal across its abdomen, denting the armour beneath, and a bolt of lightning lancing down from above, lighting the crystals with aterrifying glow. Again, her horse reared, striking down the dazed creature and crushing it underfoot.

Within minutes, however long those minutes seemed, the battle was over, no more glimmers of red lurking in the trees. Aside from Vivienne's horse, few were badly wounded, all of them Hadley's men, and the mages were quick to lend what aid they could, digging potions out of saddlebags when magic wasn't enough.

"I would think them demons, but the bodies remain." Vivienne stood beside her horse, keeping it still as Torrin tried to close its wounds with potions.

"Even Templars can be possessed, Vivienne. I have seen it with my own eyes." Torrin shook his head, sadly.

Vivienne shook her head, more in an expression of frustration than in disagreement. "Templar abominations?" she asked, thinking aloud, one hand smoothing down her horse's flank where she felt
"I would steer clear of that red crystal," Torrin said, raising his voice to address Hadley, who had approached to get a better look at the bodies.

Hadley nodded, taking a step back from the fallen behemoth he was standing over. He stared at the symbol of the Sword of Mercy on the former Templar's chest, one of the few pieces of the creature's armour that was still recognisable. "Just how much did I miss while we were held at the castle?"

Torrin shook his head. "Whatever this is, we all missed it, but I'm reminded of reports from Kirkwall. Knight-Commander Meredith, and the supposed 'red lyrium' that claimed her life."

"There is lyrium here," Hadley noted, cautiously. "An uncomfortable amount, and if that's it... That's definitely an uncomfortable amount."

"We should send someone back with a report," Vivienne proposed, scanning the crowd for a likely candidate.

"We should get where we're going, and make sure it's still there and not occupied, before we send any reports," Torrin countered.

"If we send someone now, and someone after we arrive, we double the chance that at least some of the news will reach Haven," Vivienne pointed out.

"Godwin!" Torrin called out, waving the man over. "Carry word to Haven! Should we meet more trouble than we can handle, Fen'Din should know where he lost us."

The ancient fortress had served them well, and most of Corypheus's forces had gathered, preparing for the assault that would claim the Herald-thieves and return their power to the Elder One. Samson watched his own men joking with mages clad in Tevinter robes, and he wondered when things had changed so much that this no longer seemed strange to him.

The woman he'd come to think of as the Elder One's daughter stood at his elbow, watching out the same window. She'd asked a question, but he hadn't been paying enough attention.

"Sorry?"

"The Heralds will be returning soon. It's almost time," Calpernia repeated. "Will your men be ready?"

"My men have been ready for months, they've been ready since this whole thing went wrong in the first place." Samson rested his shoulder on the edge of the window and shifted his weight, crossing one ankle over the other. "We'll take them on the road. An ambush. Quick and deadly, especially with your help."

Calpernia hummed as she looked out at nothing in particular. It wasn't an agreeing sort of hum. "Or, we could wait for them to try and close the Breach again. It will kill most of them and cripple their defences. An easy victory."

"An ambush would be an easy victory," Samson argued.

"And a bloody one," Calpernia countered, turning to look at him. "The so-called 'Heralds' march with a small army. How many men and women are you willing to sacrifice?"
Samson considered his Templars, considered the way many of them were deteriorating towards madness, and wondered if that mattered, only to hate himself for having that thought the next moment.

"Come, we'll let them kill themselves, and then we'll clean up the rest." Calpernia placed a friendly hand on Samson’s shoulder. "Besides, we haven't heard from Denam, yet."

"To the Abyss with Denam, and I'll send him there myself!" Samson spat, surprised at the power that surged through him with that burst of rage.

"Wait for him. Let him lead the charge." A small smile, just as friendly as her touch, curved Calpernia’s lips. "You know you'll lose whoever goes in first. Heavy losses in the first charge are inevitable, so let him lead the worst of his men. The ones you'd have to put to the sword. Let their deaths serve you, if their lives will not."

There was something undeniably soothing and undeniably confident in that small smile, and Samson found himself nodding. He wondered where Corypheus had found someone like her.

He still itched to get this over with, but... "We'll wait, then. And we'll make it worth the wait."
The Breach is closed, celebrations begin.

The remains of the Breach hung overhead, a glowing green scar like a ribbon across the heavens, and around them people were dancing and singing as if this were a festival. Which, Peryn supposed, it would be, now. A celebration of the time Andraste's chosen healed the sky and saved the world. He would bring the date back to the Anderfels with him, himself.

Beside him, Kinnon was recklessly drunk, having gotten that way just to kiss him, and the kisses kept going on -- every time they passed some shadow the firelight didn't quite stretch into, Peryn found himself pressed against a wall, Kinnon's tongue between his lips. Not that Peryn had any complaints about that situation, his hands under Kinnon's heavy winter cloak, stroking and squeezing his favourite parts of the robed Initiate panting and purring into his mouth.

When the next kiss broke, Kinnon stayed where he was, leaning on the wall over Peryn's shoulder, lips a finger's space from Peryn's ear. For a moment, Peryn wondered if the drink had finally caught up, if they were about to suffer for their delicious indiscretions, and then Kinnon spoke.

"You know that I've kept my past to myself, because it shames me." Kinnon spoke slowly, carefully enunciating every word. "And I thank you for never asking me. It means so much to me. But, it's time for me to tell you everything. Tomorrow, I'll have a potion for the hangover I don't have, yet, and then you'll know. And then you can decide if this is something you really want."

"I cannot imagine what you would say that would turn me from you. You are a good man, now, whoever you were before. You are kind and you are beautiful. You do not need to explain yourself to me." Peryn wrapped his arms around Kinnon, under the cloak, wondering what evils this kind and gentle man could possibly have committed, that would leave so little mark on him.

"I do have to explain. But, not tonight. Tonight is for kissing until I forget where my lips are." Kinnon laughed. "Tell me you have some of those potions, or we'll have to find Jan before I can't stand up any more."

"I can find your lips for you. Have no worries about that." Peryn kissed Kinnon again. "But, we will go see Jan. We will make sure you are only as drunk as you wish to be."

Peryn was as much support as comfort as they skirted the crowd laughing and dancing, his arm a warm weight around his waist that Kinnon could feel even if he couldn't feel his own toes. They found Anders in a small crowd of his own, wearing the small, wistful smile he wore when talking about his time with the Wardens.

"So it's official?" Cassandra was asking when they staggered up close enough to hear. "Felix is a Warden, now? Alistair was a bit mysterious about the whole thing."

"If he lived through the Joining, yes, he's a Warden," Anders answered with a shrug. "There's not much more to it than that, or at least there wasn't when I signed up. Then again, Solona had been in a bit of a hurry at the time."
"We weren't sure for a bit," Theron admitted, "but he lived. I'll sing it for you, later. It's a great story."

"When he was carried out of the room, I was certain we had lost him." Cassandra shook her head. "But, the dwarf told us this was normal. That we would need to wait and see if he woke."

"Oghren would know." Anders snorted. "He chugged the entire chalice and blacked out, like an idiot. I-- oh, right. You have no idea what I'm talking about. Sorry. Warden secrets."

Fenris looked up from where he was wrapped around Artemis, Artemis's cloak pulled over himself and his cloak against the chill. "Ser Peryn," he greeted the Templar coming up on the other side of the group.

"Fereldans Bran. Fereldan Brans? Which is the way?" Peryn shook his head. "We have come to get a potion from Jan."

Anders gave Kinnon's foolish smile and the way he leaned on Peryn a long look. "I'm sure you did." He reached into the case behind him, pleased that Adan had thought to stock up, just in case they succeeded. "One for you and two for him. He looks like he needs them. Go find a chamberpot or a dark corner before you drink that."

The end of his instructions were trampled by an elf quick-stepping up to their group and calling out, "Seeker Pentaghast!" He wore the robes of an Enchanter and the bearing of someone who expected to be heard.

Cassandra let out a sigh like she hadn't had nearly enough to drink. They were all getting used to that sigh. "Yes?" She turned to face the elf and his pursed lips.

"We need to discuss the mages' living arrangements."

"We do, do we?" Cassandra drawled. Anders and Peryn exchanged a look, almost feeling bad for the man. Before he could reply, Cassandra held up a hand for silence. "The mages will have to make do with what they have. If you have a serious complaint, you can discuss it in the morning. Preferably with someone else."

"And what are we supposed to do, exactly?" the elf asked, voice rising in pitch.

Cassandra's response was immediate and merciless. "What you always do: complain."

"We've already spoken to Commander Cullen. No one listens." The elf's eyes narrowed, the next breath widening his chest.

"Cullen will listen to me," Anders cut in. "Jan Kasselmann. Mage-Warden."

"Archivist Banon, Val Royeaux," the elf replied. "What makes you think he'll listen to you?"

"We've worked together, before. He knows I haven't given him bad advice, yet." Anders wiped a hand on his cloak before offering it to Banon. He wondered how much leverage Cullen's guilt would actually give him, if he needed to pull a 'you owe me'. "What's the problem?"

Theron elbowed Artemis. "You're thinking about it, aren't you?"

"Mm?" Artemis pulled his eyes up from where he'd been trying to make out the shape of Banon's ass through his robes.
Fenris chuckled. "When is he not thinking about it?"

"Plenty of times, I'll have you know," Artemis huffed. "And don't give me that look." He didn't even glance at Fenris to see what look he was being given, but he knew his husband that well, at least.

Fenris just laughed and huddled closer under his cloak.

"We want better quarters," Banon was saying. "We want Templars kept at a distance, and some respect for --"

"This is not the Circle," Cassandra cut in, clearly at the end of her patience. "You mages are our allies, not our wards."

Anders's light touch to her arm stalled her mid-rant. "Why don't you let me talk to Cullen?" he offered Banon diplomatically.

Theron waved. "Why don't you come have a few drinks with us? A couple of beers and at least you'll be less cold!"

"Five minutes with my husband, and you'll be less cold." Fenris snorted.

Banon eyed the apparently Dalish couple and their human friend. "I should really..."

"Have a drink with the Lords Hawke and Hahren Shem-tamer, over there," Cormac suggested, and the mention of 'lords', plural, turned Banon's head. "You deserve a good time. We'll take care of the problem, though probably not before tomorrow, if anyone's handed Cullen a glass of cordial."

Banon studied the two humans offering to help him, spotting the faint glow around the second one's hand. Both mages, then. Probably as good as their word, though he wondered how they'd come to have such influence with Ser Cullen. Probably better not to ask, in case it was something he didn't want to know. "Thank you. I'll be back to see you in the morning."

"Afternoon, if you're drinking with them," Anders laughed and pressed a potion into Banon's hand. "For the headache you'll have when you wake up."

Banon looked more uneasy than grateful, but he took the potion and left with the Hawkes and Theron just the same.

"Thank you," Cassandra sighed, fingers massaging her forehead. "That could have turned into quite the headache."

"It still might," Anders cheerfully reminded her.

"Yes, but for Cullen, not for me. Tonight, I am fine with that."

Cassandra saw the fall of Adaar's shadow before she saw him, turning to find him standing at her shoulder, a pair of drinks in hand. He grinned and offered her one with his non-glowing hand.

"I don't know what Library Elf was all worked up about, but you looked like you could use one of these."

"Thank you." Cassandra barely paused to deliberate before accepting the drink. "And his name is Banon, it seems."

Adaar tilted one ear towards her. "Did you just say his name was Bran? How many Brans are there?"
"Banon," Cassandra corrected while Anders sputtered out a laugh.

"Too late. He's in my head as Library Bran, now." Adaar edged just a bit closer, just close enough for Cassandra's eyes to narrow as she took a drink. "So I don't suppose the hero of the hour could ask for a kiss?"

Cassandra cleared her throat and blamed the flush on her cheeks on the drink. "I don't think bringing me alcohol makes you 'hero of the hour'."

"What about closing the Breach?" Adaar drawled, pointing over his shoulder at the scar in the sky.

"Right," she said, lips curling in a smile. "In that case, the next time I see Fen'Din, I will be sure to pass on my affections."

Adaar laughed and saluted her with his drink. "What about you, Jan? Can I get a kiss?"

Anders blinked a few times, considering the offer, before he stepped up to Adaar. "It's time for a change. Come here and make me feel short." He tipped his head back to look up at the qunari towering over him, trying to ignore the sense that this was a terrible idea and one he'd come to regret in the morning.

"Making people feel short is what I do best," Adaar said with mock solemnity, wrapping an arm around Anders's waist.

Cormac failed to contain a laugh. "Now you know how I feel!" he announced, as Anders rose up on his toes to try to make this work.

Kinnon slapped a hand over his mouth, trying to cover the hysterical cackle that burst out of him at the sight of Anders being shorter than someone. Anyone. Especially like this. As he staggered back from the impact of his own hand against his face, Peryn's grip faltered, and Kinnon toppled into a snowbank, wheezing with laughter.

Peryn crouched down beside him, trying to help him sit up enough to drink a potion.

Anders hiked up his robes and tucked them into his belt, to free up his knees, as he put his arms around Adaar's neck and hoisted himself up the foot or so between them, grabbing Adaar's hips with his knees for balance. "I've been climbed," he admitted. "I can pretend I know what I'm doing."

Adaar's shoulders started to shake with suppressed laughter at the awkward length of the human wrapped around him. "Can't say I've ever been climbed by a Warden before."

"No?" Anders said, a smirk pulling at one corner of his lips. "I'm disappointed in Blackwall."

"Well, the night's still young," Adaar said, leaning in to plant a kiss on Anders's lips. "I'm disappointed in Blackwall."

"Well, the night's still young," Adaar said, leaning in to plant a kiss on Anders's lips.

That was all it was, a press of lips on lips, but Anders was never one to disappoint an audience. He tightened his grip around Adaar's shoulders and brought tongue into the equation, surprising a squeak out of Adaar and a burst of laughter from the onlookers.

"You should've seen the time he did that to Ser Cullen." Cormac laughed and elbowed Cassandra.

"They should both be glad I witnessed no such thing." Cassandra's eyebrow arced skyward as she recoiled from the thought. "There are no circumstances under which that would be in any way appropriate!"
"Who said anything about appropriate?" Cormac shrugged and laughed more. "Nevermind appropriate, it was hilarious. And they're both terrible at cards."

"Remind me not to lose to you, if this is the sort of thing that comes of it." Cassandra continued to look ill-impressed, as Kinnon suddenly sprung up from the snow, stumbling hurriedly back toward one of those shadowed places, this time leaving Peryn behind.

Peryn noticed the look, but not the cause. "He will be better soon. Too much drinking. Now it goes the other way."

Adaar came up for air with a dazed grin, still supporting Anders with an arm around his waist. "Do all Wardens kiss like that?"

That startled a laugh out of Anders, who licked his lips. "Why don't you kiss Blackwall and find out?"

"Please don't," Cassandra groaned, covering her eyes with one hand. "My eyes have seen enough."

"If you had accepted my offer, you would have seen none of it," Adaar teased, finally setting Anders back on his feet.

The glare Cassandra sent him was unimpressed. "If I had left, I would have seen none of it. I am now going to correct that mistake."

Adaar smirked as he caught the flustered edge in her voice before she disappeared, stalking off in the opposite direction Kinnon had staggered off to.

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Fen'Din stood on the battlements, looking out across the frozen hills, with Cullen at his side. "Are we going to have a problem, Ser Cullen?"

"We already have so many. Which one do you mean?" Cullen rubbed the back of his neck and managed a strained chuckle.

"You have brought back Templars. I have returned with mages. We do not want a repeat of the past, particularly given our own experiences and recent events. This must not become the Circle all over again. The damage done there is not irreparable, but it will take centuries to heal, if proper care is taken. If not, it may fester for an eternity. Of course, we cannot let that happen, but we have other concerns, first, however related they may be."

"My first duty is to ensure the safety of everyone here," Cullen assured him. "All of you have put yourselves in danger to attempt to stop whatever is happening, here. I mean to do my best to prevent the kind of accidents we've both witnessed."

"And the malevolent intent where accidents were less accidental, I would assume." Fen'Din's eyes landed firmly on Cullen's face, an impenetrable lack of expression around them. "But, you know as well as I do that this close to a point at which the world has bled demons -- and where I have restored as many spirits as possible to their original intent -- it is not only the mages who are dangerous or in danger. You may know even better than I do."

"I do," Cullen agreed. "But--"

"Hey, it's Enchanter Crazypants and Ser Sputtery!" Jowan's voice preceded him and the two heavily cloaked figures behind him, all of them bearing tall mugs filled with questionable combinations of strong drink.
"Ser... what?" Cullen asked, scowling when the question came out sputtered. He cleared his throat and fixed a hard look on Jowan. "Jowan, isn't it? I had heard you'd returned with the others." His voice was coolly polite in a way that said he wasn't too pleased with this.

"Don't worry, Ser Cullen," said one of the heavily cloaked figures. "He's working on making a better second impression than he did the first time. Not always succeeding, mind you, but he's trying." He knocked his hood back a little to give Cullen the full force of his smile.

"Thanks...?" Jowan said, drawing out the word as though unsure of it.

Cullen, meanwhile stared at his friend, knowing he knew him but unable to place... "Niall?" The blood drained from his face as he realised just how impossible that should be.

"Niall's decided to rejoin us." Fen'Din sounded faintly amused. "Apparently, his dedication to Isolationist thought took him a little too far out of the way."

"He means I tried being dead and didn't like it." Niall cleared his throat and rubbed his forehead as the rush of Cullen's existential uncertainty and horror washed over him. "Don't get used to this. It's the rifts."

"The rifts and the fact that after ten years, he could still remember who he was, which I understand to be an uncommon state of affairs," the voice from under the other cloak remarked. "I definitely wouldn't expect your dead grandmother to suddenly walk out of a rift for a visit. Enchanter Niall seems to be possessed of unimaginable presence of mind and strength of will. As well as a very handsome face, if not quite up to my own."

"If I give you a black eye, would it bring you down to my level?" Niall grumbled, hoping the headache wouldn't change him in front of Cullen.

"Niall's good people," Jowan promised, as if he expected his word to carry any weight.

Cullen didn't look reassured, his face taking on a grey tinge. The horrors wrought by Uldred were still there behind his eyes, and if he closed them he could almost see Niall's corpse the way they'd found it. He sucked in a breath and shook the thoughts away. "So you're, what, a... spirit?" He choked back the word 'demon' though it was there in his mind. "And you just walked out of one of the rifts?" He glanced back at where the Breach had been as though he expected to see other dead people floating down from it, regardless of what their companion had just told him.

"I wouldn't say I 'walked' out," Niall said with a dry look in Jowan's direction.

"'Fell' may be a better verb," said the other hooded figure.

"Dead people falling from the sky." Cullen took a deep breath and rubbed a hand across his eyes.

"You say this like you haven't already seen it happen." Fen'Din waited until Cullen looked at him, baffled, and then gestured at himself. "Dead enchanters descending from the Fade is becoming a theme."

"I'd say he's not dead, but I might have to give that to him, this time." Niall shrugged and sighed.

"Who do I not know here?" Cullen asked, trying to take back some small amount of control of this situation. "Possibly dead, definitely dead, a maleficar, and...?"

"Dorian Pavus, House Pavus, Tevinter. Not a magister; that's my father." Dorian held out a hand, but didn't lower his hood. "Forgive me, but it's cold in the South and I'd like to continue to have a nose
in the morning."

"And 'not-a-magister'." Cullen looked at the hand he was offered, debating whether any of this would be worth it, in the end. Somewhat dismayed, he shook Dorian's hand, pleased that it was, at least, solid, real, and the hand of a living person. "Someone is eventually going to question our choices, and it may be me."
Chapter 121

Chapter Summary

Samson and Calpernia bring the Elder One's might to bear.

The command pavillion had been pitched just inside the line of trees that faced the valley where Haven lay. A small group had come up first, to get the lay of the land and decide how the deployment would proceed. The bulk of their forces followed maybe half a candle behind.

Calpernia leaned over the table, moving markers along the map their scouts had drawn. "You will lead the first charge, and I will send a line of mages behind your men. You will push back the defenders and move to hold open the gates."

"I don't know how it is in Tevinter, but I don't take orders from mages," Denam scoffed, glancing around the room at his lieutenants.

"You do take orders from me."

Denam wasn't sure when Samson had appeared behind him, but he did his best to look unsurprised. "For now. What are your orders, Ser?"

"My orders? I don't see anything wrong with her orders." Samson crouched down to get a look straight across the table. "They're not expecting us, so I don't expect much on the walls. They moved the catapults out, probably to make room for more people, so those aren't really something we're worried about -- not if you get in there and take out everything outside the walls. And then just hold the gates open until the mages can jam them. The second wave will go right through, and I'm thinking lead with the Behemoths?" He looked up at Calpernia.

Denam scoffed. "You can't even form your own opinion without checking with her first?"

Samson showed him how little he valued his opinion by simply waiting for Calpernia's response. She nodded, gaze flitting from one marker to another. "The Behemoths will tear holes in what's left of their defences. That should work nicely."

"Assuming we leave anything left for the Behemoths, you mean," Denam cut in.

"Of course," she said, tone politely neutral. They hadn't expected the Heralds to succeed in closing the Breach and certainly not without more heavy losses. They'd had to adjust their plans accordingly, but it only made Calpernia even more certain that Denam and his men wouldn't survive the first round. She could put up with his disrespect in the meantime.

"We need to take the Heralds alive," Samson muttered. "Probably a mage problem. First wave's focused on defence. Who do you trust?"

"We will use Linnea," Calpernia decided, with barely a moment's thought. "She has proven to be cunning and resourceful. I have little doubt she can choose a proper team from among people she already knows." She glanced at one of the Templars. "She should be with the scouts. Call her in to me."
The Templar shot a look at Denam, registering his disapproval, before turning to obey Calpernia's order. There was no sense in bringing down the General's displeasure.

"This is why the men under your command are weak." Denam looked down at where Samson still crouched. "This is why you need stronger hearts and minds to lead your battle."

"Like you, I suppose?" Samson asked almost boredly, adjusting one of the figures on the map and nodding to himself.

Denam's armour clanked as he shifted his weight, straightening his back to stand even taller over Samson. "Do you doubt my conviction?"

"It is not your conviction I doubt, Ser Denam," Samson sighed as he straightened, clearly unimpressed by his height advantage. "But I am certain you will show us precisely what kind of leadership you mean on the battlefield."

Samson had looked like he'd been winding up to say more, only to clearly decide that his energies were best directed elsewhere. Linnea ducked into the pavilion shortly after.

"You called for me?"

"We have a need for your expertise," Calpernia said, diplomatically, stepping aside to make room for Linnea, closer to the table. "The Heralds must be taken alive, that we may deliver them to the Elder One. You know the mages we have been travelling with. Those who came from Redcliffe trust you. I need you to select a small group to assist you in neutralising the Heralds."

"We've heard rumours," Linnea ventured, warily, "but what do they actually do?"

"They have some small power over the Veil, it seems. Reports have them able to close the rifts in the Veil, but we do not yet know what other power may come of this." Calpernia looked grimly at the temple on the map. "You will want blood mages, at least. Some who are willing to die. There is power unlike anything we have seen, and you will wish to be certain you have the necessary force to suppress it."

"Is there any reason Entropy wouldn't work, here?" Linnea asked, already considering the benefits of blood magic and mind control, to induce a peaceful surrender. The sacrifice of everything other than the targets would provide enough power to take out most of Haven, as far as she could tell. If they could get enough control, the blood would come easy.

"Not from what we have observed," Calpernia replied.

Linnea nodded. Enchanter Fen'Din would not be easy quarry, but if a little blood magic was all it took to overcome Fiona, then she was not terribly concerned. "I am familiar with the elf. What can you tell me of the other one?"

"The qunari?" Samson arched an eyebrow at Denam. "I believe our Knight-Captain has some personal experience in that area."

Denam scowled at the reminder, but he turned to address Linnea. "He's a warrior and a reckless one at that. He's fond of charging into battle and drawing fire, which should make your job laughably easy."

"A shame that was not the case for you," Samson drawled.
On the wall, Cullen was pleased to have been joined by Captain Brynn and Ser Peryn, even if Peryn was thoroughly distracted by 'Brother' Kinnon. Brynn's assurances about Jowan eased his mind more than a little. Perhaps it was true. Perhaps Jowan had come to his senses and turned away from blood magic. Peryn was just as suspicious of Jowan as he was, but Brynn had spent three years travelling the Fade in Jowan's company. Time would tell, and Cullen assured himself his blade would be quick, if needed. Just like that time he'd stabbed Solona.

Niall stayed a little too close to where Kinnon and Peryn were enjoying each other and the evening air, and not even Dorian's incessant flirtations could ruin the flood of joy that seemed to block out the worst of Cullen's churning uncertainty. Even here, there were little flashes from Kinnon, but Niall knew what those were about. Those little darts of despair, the fear of what would happen when Peryn learned the truth. He felt bad for Kinnon -- to have found something so good, but so treacherously.

Dorian's voice cut through his reverie, loud enough to be heard where the others still stood, further down. "Are we expecting pilgrims?"

Cullen's eyes rose to the double line of torches coming down the mountain. "What the-- Forces approaching! To arms! Archers high! Into the walls!"

Adaar was still enjoying his drink, laughing at a joke Anders had just made, when Cassandra came rushing back, shoulders squared and hands folded into fists in a way that meant business. Adaar saluted her with his drink, wood clanking against his horns where Sera had hung her empty cup.

"Change your mind about that kiss, Seeker?" Adaar called out to her.

Cassandra's lips thinned like she was considering telling him to kiss her ass, but instead she said, "We must get to the gates. Now!"

Adaar turned, watching her march past, and finally looked up to see the line of torches coming down the mountain. The smile died on his lips. "Shit." He took off after Cassandra, finishing his drink along the way.

Anders loaded his bag with hangover potions, gesturing for Cormac to do the same, before he ran out through the few streets of the little village, pressing them into all the hands he could reach, trying to get as many people into fighting shape as possible, in the least amount of time.

"Barricades!" Cullen called down from the wall. "We need barricades!"

Kinnon dropped his robes and turned from where he'd been pissing over the wall, a good bit more sober than he'd been minutes ago, and he took Peryn's face in his hands. "I want you to go help people. Get the merchants and the refugees. Get the children. Bring them to the Chantry."

"Come with me. There is no need for you to be here. What can you do from the wall?" Peryn clutched at Kinnon's wrist.

"Don't worry about me. I used to be something special. Just do what I'm asking you, please." Kinnon leaned in for one more kiss, this one fouled by his own sobriety and the taste of lyrium. "Peryn, whatever happens... I love you. I want you to know I love you, no matter what."

"I..." Peryn started to say, but Kinnon was already pushing him away.

"Go. I know," Kinnon said to the aching look on his face. "But you need to go." Another shove, and Peryn took off for the merchants. Kinnon sucked in a shaky breath and turned back to the wall, not allowing himself another moment of sentimentality.
Cassandra and Adaar caught up with Cullen at the gates, easy to find from the way his voice carried as he shouted orders. Josephine met them there, cheeks rosy and hair a mess from sprinting straight over.

"One watchguard reporting," Cullen told them, looking far out at the torches in the mountains as he paced. "It's a massive force, the bulk over the mountain."

Adaar breathed a curse. The force looked plenty massive enough on this side of the mountain.

"Under what banner?" Josephine asked, still catching her breath.

"None," Cullen answered.

"None?"

The gates shook as some massive force hammered on them. "I can't come in unless you open!" a voice cried from the other side.

"He's alone!" Jowan called down from the top of the wall. "Or he sure as Andraste's ass took fire is now!"

Niall had stayed close to Fen'Din, taking what comfort he could in the emptiness around him, but something sang on the other side of the gate. "That's not a--" he started and then completely rethought the sentence, in light of his own situation. "Spirit?" he called up.

"Oh!" Jowan sounded surprised. "Probably. Like you!"

Fen'Din gestured for Adaar to open the gate, beginning a low song that drew Niall even closer to his side. Whatever came through, they’d be ready for it. Absently, he wondered where Solas had gotten to.

Adaar opened the gate, one arm poised to draw his sword, aware that he knew that voice but not sure where... until he caught sight of a familiar broad-brimmed hat.

"Cole?" Adaar sputtered, opening the gate wider. It took him a moment to recognise how off that was, that the last time he’d seen Cole had been in his head, that the only time he’d seen Cole had been in his head. Niall's 'spirit?' echoed back to him. "Oh. Great."

"I came to warn you. To help." Cole was so earnest as he spoke, stepping in close to Adaar. "People are coming to hurt you. You probably already know."

"Yes, the massive army on our doorstep was my first clue," Adaar drawled, ducking his head to try to see more than just the lower half of Cole's face. "What's going on? Who are these people?"

"The Templars are coming to kill you," Cole said, looking up at Adaar. He looked like he had another sentence in him, but Cullen cut him off.

"Templars? Is this the response of what remains of the Order to our negotiations with the mages? Attacking blindly, in the middle of the night?"

"The Red Templars went to the Elder One. You know him? He knows you. You took half his mages and half his Templars. The mages are coming, too. Everything he has left." Cole suddenly turned and pointed out the gate, to a single figure standing in the distance. "There."

Cullen squinted into the dark, taking the looking glass Josephine pressed into his hand. A flash of red
light revealed a familiar face. "Samson? I know that man. But, this Elder One..."

Another figure joined the first, tower-tall and studded with red crystals. Further into the village, a cry of pain rang out, and Cormac's voice followed.

"Jan?"

"He's very angry that you took his mages," Cole warned. "Even if he blames the Templars for their failure."

Adaar stared out at the torches in the distance, the numbers seeming to grow by the moment. This was far beyond what his mercenary group had ever dealt with, and he tried not to look as overwhelmed as he felt. "Cullen, give me a plan. Anything." His voice almost sounded steady.

"Haven is no fortress," Cullen said, thinking fast. "If we are to withstand this monster, we need to control the battle." He turned to address them all, every part the calm collected leader. "Get out there and hit that force. Use everything you can!" He raised his voice to address the stunned crowd behind him. "Mages! You! You have sanction to engage them! That is Samson. He will not make it easy!"
Chapter 122

Chapter Summary

Haven begins to defend itself. Anders identifies the enemy.

"Leave me the mages, Cullen!" Cormac called out, coming down to the gate with Anders glowing blue at his side. "Elemental and Force to the walls! Stone-shapers with me! Stormbringers to the walls! You can reach farther than they can, especially together! We've been here longer, and we're equipped for this cold. I see men in armour with no cloaks, out there. Ice and lightning! Take them down! Force, help the archers! Stone, we're going to go make walls! This is no fortress, now, but it can be!"

"Spirit and Entropy to me!" Fen'Din called. "Where is Solas? I need more singers! We have an army of spirits with us, get me the Chanters!"

Cullen watched the two mages before him take control of the rest, dividing labour swiftly and, he thought, rather sensibly, all things considered.

Kinnon appeared at Cormac's side. "I've got as much as I could reach. There's one more wall, out there, but it's not complete. It angles out and it's sharp as a sword at the top. We can seal it. We can turn this into a siege," he said quietly.

"We can't survive a siege," Cormac reminded him. "We don't have enough to feed the armies, yet. But, once we're out -- all of us who can fight -- seal it behind us. You can let us back in, when it's over."

"If I'm still alive."

"Kinnon, you have the best idiot luck of anyone short of my brother. I'm starting to think it's a Primal skill." Cormac clapped him on the shoulder. "Speaking of my brother, I hope he's on the wall. Nothing is ready for that kind of mayhem, including me, and I grew up with him."

"You're certainly not ready for the kind of mayhem I'd unleash if you decided to go fight some Venatori and glowy Templars without me!" Artie called out as he trotted to catch up with his brother, staff in hand and eyes alight like he was ready for a fight. "Speaking of glowy..." He eyed Anders up and down and offered Justice a smile.

"WHERE IS YOUR HUSBAND?" Justice boomed.

Artemis tipped his head in the direction of a motley crew gathering by the gates, Bull and his Chargers. "He made some new friends." Artie tried not to worry about him, with his lyrium so erratic, trusting Theron to look out for him. From here, he had a better sightline of what they were dealing with, and he let out a low whistle at the sheer numbers. "Well, this is going to be a mess."

"Let's go clean it up." Cormac grinned and tossed an arm over his brother's shoulders and nodded at Kinnon. "If we head up toward the alchemist's, I think the two of you can get a clear shot at the road. We'll throw some shit in the way, and figure out what to do next. We can't afford a siege, but we should at least buy everyone else a little more time to sober up."
Kinnon nodded in return. "I can definitely slow them down. Just have to stay out of range. Which way are we--?" he started to ask, but Anders had already started up the road.

"MAKE STAIRS. WE WILL CLIMB THE RIDGE," Justice decided, Anders's awareness raising a hand to count the potions in their bag. "WE WILL CRUSH THEM."

"Depends on where we hit them," Cormac argued, following after, a twitch of his arm suggesting Artie keep up. It was impossible to move him, but gentle suggestions sometimes worked. "If we roll the ridge down, we'll either smash them against the other side or sweep them into the lake."

"I don't like the sound of 'roll the ridge down'," Kinnon admitted, easily keeping pace with Anders. "I'd be more inclined to something that ends in a steep cliff on our side. You don't want to give them anything to climb."

"If they try, I'll shove them off," Artie promised. "Either way, problem solved."

Back by the gate, Adaar was considering his options. His eyes swept up to the trebuchet that loomed nearby, and Cassandra followed that look.

"What are you thinking?" she asked, pacing with nervous energy.

"I'm thinking all those people who want to stab us need to cross a bridge in order to do so." Adaar slid his gaze back to her. "Personally, I'd rather make them swim."

Cassandra considered the size of the trebuchet, considered the distance, and finally nodded. "Let's go."

As she started off, Adaar glanced around at the people around them, spotting Blackwall and Varric, who were still trying to work out their places. "Hey!" he called to them, easily drawing their attention. "You two, come with me!"

"I suppose I should start asking 'where' instead of just mindlessly following," Varric said, mindlessly following.

Fen'Din kept Jowan at his side, even after they found Solas, the Chantry Sisters in their wake fairly easily picking up the sound of the song, as the two elves passed it back and forth, and skeletal beasts of all sizes wandered in from over the road and hidden corners of town. The Sisters shied away from them, at first, but as the group grew larger, they found themselves drawn to carry little birds and shrews in their hands, smiling as the creatures glowed brighter blue with their consideration.

Cole, too, stayed close, swaying with the song. "They're surprised you know it. But you know that, don't you? The story isn't yours, but it could be. It makes no difference. You hear the song. You hear the voices. You know all of these things and so much more, and you want to help." He paused. "I want to help."

"In any way you can," Fen'Din replied, noticing Niall making his way over, in the midst of a group of what might once have been fennecs, "we will accept it."

Niall slowed as he caught sight of Cole, seeing more than the human shape he was taking right now, seeing the glow of something warm past corpse-pale skin.

"You like the song, too," Cole said with a stare that made him feel stripped bare. "It aches to hear it, sometimes, but it's a good ache, like a bone being reset."

"Who are you?" Niall asked, darting a look at Fen'Din, at the other spirits called together. This boy
was clearly a spirit too, but solid in a way the others weren't, in a way only he was.

"A friend."

Cullen caught Josephine. "You should get as many people back to the Chantry as you can. It's huge and it's stone, and if anything goes wrong, we can probably hold it. Find Leliana and get a message out to Denerim, and to anyone else she thinks should be aware of what's happening here. I have no doubt we're going to be all right, but we may have to rethink our supply lines, after this."

"And where are you going?" Josephine asked, eyeing Cullen curiously.

"I'm going to go help Adaar take out a bridge. I should get our Templars ready to face what's going to come down that road if the mages fail." Cullen looked grim.

Kinnon looked down into the valley. "Cutting it a little close, but we can do this," he decided, glancing at Artemis. "You do stone, too? Help me. I'm trying to pull the cliff straight across the road to that ridge. Then we can clean up the mess."

"Of course," Artie said, eyeing the cliff he meant, assessing the distance. That shouldn't involve too much aiming, which was always promising, where Artie was concerned. "I, uh, recommend holding onto something or not standing too close to a ledge."

Kinnon looked a little concerned at how quickly Anders took a step back. He shook himself and fell into his spellcasting, the rock across the way starting to melt and shift. "You can jump in whenever you're--"

Kinnon couldn't even finish that thought before he felt the stone moving under his command give a lurch, and then he wasn't so much pulling or shaping the stone as frantically steering it. When stone met stone, he staggered from the sudden lack of pressure, and Artie steadied him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Sorry," Artie said with a sheepish smile.

"Sorry nothing," Cormac cut in, tossing an arm around his brother and gazing down into the valley. There was some genuinely pissed off asshole leading this assortment of men and weird crystal golem things, but it wasn't anyone he recognised. Classic Alamarri looks, though. Whoever he was, that guy was from around here. "Can the two of you shear off the front of this hill and drive them into the lake? Or... squish them into the other ridge, or bury them... something. Get them out of here."  

Anders stared into the distance, as if he could see something the rest of them couldn't. "HE IS NOT DEAD," Justice boomed, making Cormac jump at the unexpected loudness. "HE HAS RETURNED, BUT THIS TIME WE ARE READY."

"... Who?" Kinnon asked, blinking dumbly at Anders, instead of looking down at the Red Templars trying to climb the hill.

"CORYPHEUS."

Artemis stuttered in his spellcasting. "What?" He followed Anders's line of sight, spotting an attenuated figure with familiar feathered pauldrons, red crystals sprouting out of his body. "Oh you must be joking!" he breathed.

"Templars!" Kinnon shouted, reminding Artie what they were supposed to be doing as he sent a stone fist into the face of a Templar who had climbed too high.
"Shit," Artie hissed, resuming his casting, simply tearing off a chunk of the hill and watching the Templars scrabble at the cliffside as they fell. There was something satisfying about watching them roll their way down into the lake, plate armour weighing them down.

"Okay," breathed Kinnon, running a hand through his hair and reassessing the battlefield. "Coryphe-who?"

"Corypheus," Cormac explained, stepping back from the edge of the newly-ragged cliffside. "You know that old story about the seven magisters who started the Blight? Yeah, he's one of them, or at least that's what he says."

"That's crazy. He's crazy." Kinnon shook his head. "That was almost a thousand years ago!"

"I don't think what we found in that tower was human any more. And he didn't quite speak Common, not like you'd know it. It was like listening to someone who'd only ever read it mangle the words. His Tevene was fine, though. Jan and Leto could understand him. And Jan... well..." Cormac looked back at Anders.

"I DID NOT UNDERSTAND," Justice admitted. "I FOUGHT EVERYTHING. BUT, I KNOW HIM, NOW."

"You know how they say you can't control someone who's possessed? Yeah, apparently you can confuse the spirit badly enough that it doesn't matter, if you're a thousand-year-old magister. And that was before we woke him up." Cormac cleared his throat and squinted toward where a whole lot of people in shiny armour were messing with an enormous piece of siege equipment. "But, we killed him. Jan killed him. Set him on fire until the stone roof started to melt. There's no way that's him, but if Justice says it is... the only other thing it could be is a different one of them."

"Wonderful," Artie drawled, remembering that day only too well. "You know what? I bet this is because Anton peed on his corpse. Nothing good ever comes from Anton peeing on things."
The Red Templars push forward, clashing with the Inquisition's Templars.

Down below, the sound of cheering had Adaar looking back over his shoulder from where he was putting his weight behind cranking the trebuchet. He just caught the last of the Red Templars plummeting into the lake, looked up to see the group of mages at the top of that hill -- cliff, now. Adaar shook his head and grinned in disbelief. He was appreciating mages more and more by the minute.

"Almost," Cullen instructed him, reminding him to finish turning the wheel.

Ser Lysette stood by the water's edge, trying to work out if the aim was right, if they could hit the bridge or if they'd need another tick on the rotation. It was with confusion that she noticed the spreading red stain in the lake, and confusion became horror as the red resolved into crystals, and the crystals moved like men.

"They're coming! They're coming through the lake!" she shouted, bolting from the shore to where more Inquisition Templars stood, watching the winding of the trebuchet. They'd all thought it would be so simple. Take out the bridge and then aim across the lake. But, no one had imagined the corrupted templars could not only swim but march underwater. "To arms! To arms!"

Cullen echoed the call to arms, as he watched the first crystals breach the surface of the lake -- these monsters had once been men, he reminded himself, but now... And he wondered if the men he was with were strong enough to resist the call of it, to fight the urge to touch the red lyrium, to taste it. But, they were on regular doses of clean lyrium. He, himself, then was the weak point.

"What in the Maker's name is this?" Ser Mattrin breathed, fumbling to draw his sword at Ser Lysette's orders, stating what the Templars all around him were thinking. The creatures coming at him didn't look undead, but they didn't look completely human either.

As he staggered to avoid the first swing of a crystal-covered fist, he just hoped they bled like humans. A swing of his sword carved a dent in the spikes at the creature's shoulder, but it wasn't enough to slow it down.

Luckily the heavy swing of a greatsword did, nearly severing the creature's arm, and Ser Mattrin looked up to find one of the Heralds at his side, looking more irritated than rattled.

Adaar certainly felt rattled, however, after watching these monstrosities simply walk out of the frozen lake. At this point, however, he'd learned to simply roll with it.

"You know what I know about those things?" The Iron Bull bellowed across the camp, speaking not just to the Chargers, but anyone who could hear him. "You hit 'em with a hammer, and they turn into shiny gravel!"

Fenris tightened his grip on his sword. He'd done this before, then he'd done it again. And it looked like there was at least one more time in the immediate future. Theron's hand caught him, as he lunged...
"Shakes and Quakes is going to end me if anything happens to you."

"Then you'd better keep up with me," Fenris snapped, shaking the hand off and surging forward to strike a blow against one of the towering crystal behemoths. Beside him, a young man switched from a sword to a mace he snatched from the ground, hammering against the spikes of crystal.

"Krem! To the left!" came a shout from behind them, and the young man pulled Fenris out of the way, just before the explosion hit between where they'd been standing.

Fenris offered him an appreciative nod, dusting debris off his shoulder. "My thanks," he said, stepping in with a downward cut at the Templar coming at Bull from the side. The sword cleaved through lyrium and armour to bite the skin beneath, and Fenris darted back to avoid the spray of pulverised lyrium.

"Nice sword," said Krem, hardly missing a beat as a swing of his mace dented the helmet and skull of another Red Templar.

Fenris's ears pricked at the hint of a Tevinter accent, his lips curled towards a smile. "I like to think so. I doubt they appreciate it, however." He indicated the still-charging Templars as he brought his sword to bear again.

Varric remembered the last time, and the time before that, as he raised Bianca, angling upward for the eyes. The things were slow, at least. The crystal didn't move easily. He just hoped hitting them in the eyes would have any effect -- it had already been demonstrated they couldn't drown. What if they didn't need eyes to see? What if filling their skulls with crossbow bolts didn't matter because they weren't human any more?

They may not have been human, but they definitely still felt pain. A shriek like ringing glass poured across the battlefield as Varric's first bolt slammed directly through an ill-shielded eye.

The second, third, and fourth shots splintered uselessly against the crystal faces as more eyes turned toward him.

Nearby, Cullen kept his sword swinging to distract as well as defend himself, even as he found himself staring up at a behemoth that was more lyrium than man now, its hands fused into crystal spikes. Cullen tried not to think about the way the lyrium seemed to glow, thrumming with a pulse he could hear in his ears. A jab of that spike-hand was easy enough to side-step, but when his sword met a lyrium-crusted shoulder, the spray of lyrium dust was harder to avoid. He held his breath but knew he had to press his advantage, ducking in close enough to jab through a weak point in the creature's armour, where his allies' weapons had already worn down the crystals into dust and splinters.

The creature fell, and Cullen backed away quickly, all too aware of the red that dusted his armour.

"Commander."

The voice to Cullen's side sounded like it had been strained roughly through a barrel of broken glass, and a crystalline fist slammed into his chest as he turned toward it.

"Have you changed your mind, yet? Have you seen the truth the Elder One offers?" This one seemed smaller than the others, as if it had changed less, but that also seemed to be changing rapidly. "Are you prepared to surrender?"
Cullen lashed out, splintering crystals away from the thing's face -- a face he knew he'd seen before, but not for long enough to recognise, now. But, that seemed to be where flesh still existed, and he thought if he had a chance of taking it down before it got any larger, any more dangerous, going for the parts that were still flesh would serve.

Across the lake, Samson watched Denam command the survivors. He had to admit, the lake had been an unexpected tactic, and one that might have worked, had these men not been prepared to undergo that final change. Some hadn't been, obviously, as the number who came out of the lake was far smaller than those who went in. Denam, somehow, had made it through only half changed, and he had the voice, yet, to lead. Samson could almost respect that determination. Almost.

He watched Denam single out one Templar, in particular, cornering the armoured figure against the cliffs. Who was that? He held a hand out to Calpernia, and after a moment, she handed him the spyglass.

"What do you see?" she asked him.

"I'm not sure... Denam's getting up somebody's ass, I just can't see who, through all the red."

Denam just laughed, even when Cullen scored a hit, even when he should have been crying out in pain, and Cullen wondered if the man was even less human than he appeared. Cullen could not as easily shake off Denam's blows, though his armour absorbed the worst of it.

"Do you see now, Commander?" Denam said, and even his teeth glowed red. "Do you see that--?"

The swing of a heavy hammer shut him up, crushing his skull down between his shoulders in a spray of lyrium dust and splinters. His body crumpled in a broken heap.

"All I see is a corpse," Bull said with a shrug, shaking the lyrium off of his hammer.

"Thanks," Cullen drawled as Varric stepped up next to him, taking off a glove and using it to dust the lyrium off his face and shoulders.

"Cullen?" Samson hissed from where he was watching through the spyglass, Denam's broken body falling to reveal a familiar Templar.

"You know this man?" Calpernia asked, stepping closer to try to judge where Samson was looking.

"I thought he was dead!" Samson watched the dwarf -- did he know that dwarf? -- dust lyrium crystals off Cullen's shoulders. He definitely didn't know the qunari, and that one wasn't the one they were looking for, to judge by the lack of glowing.

"To be fair, he probably will be, before the end of the day," Calpernia pointed out.

And Samson wasn't sure how he felt about that. He liked Cullen, most of the time. The thought of finding him alive, just to watch him die left a cold stone under his ribs.
"The bridge!" Theron shouted, pointing at where the thing still stood, as some commander on the other side rallied another force toward it. His sword splintered another monstrosity's crystals.

Ser Owain made a break for the trebuchet, hoping it had been wound far enough, as he seized the release and hauled it back with all his might. The arc intercepted another of the crystal things, shattering it and flinging it over the lake, along with the stone. The middle of the bridge fell, and a moment later one of the supports crumbled into the freezing water.

A smattering of cheers went up at the well-places shot, at the gleam of red and armour that stalled where the bridge had broken off. Ser Owain allowed himself a breath of relief before jumping back into action, moving to the crank to load up the trebuchet again.

Seeing the cliff where the bridge had been a moment before, Calpernia let out a sigh, more annoyed than deterred as she called upon a few of her Venatori.

"Give us a new bridge!" she commanded, and no sooner had she spoken than the air grew heavy with magic.

Across the way, Cullen watched as the bridge seemed to grow, stone weaving into stone in a harmony of magic that made him curse, wishing the Venatori were close enough for a Smite. He looked between the approaching army and the beasts they were still fighting along the shore, before turning back to address the mages still working on the wall.

"We need something over here!" he shouted, indicating the shoreline with a sweep of his sword.

The echo of Cullen's voice reached Kinnon, and he looked down across the village, looking for Peryn -- Maker, he hoped Peryn had gotten everyone to the Chantry, like he'd asked. ... And stayed there. But, he saw Jowan responding to the request, trailing Fen'Din and Niall and that other seer whose name he couldn't remember.

"To the Maker's asshole with all of this," Jowan swore, grabbing the air and twisting it toward him.

"Oh, shit." Niall grabbed Asha and turned around, trying to shield her with his body as the shockwave rolled out from Jowan, sweeping the last crystalline creatures back into the lake. Templars rushed forward to haul their brethren out of the freezing water.

"That wasn't very nice," Cole scolded, before he darted forward to plunge a blade into the eye of the rising crystal monstrosity that seemed to have shaken off the shove.

"Well, it worked!" Jowan shouted after him, and confusion settled onto nearby Templars who couldn't figure out who he was speaking to.

Niall looked around himself and realised the next step was his own problem. The chill rose in his chest, as he let go of Asha, and his hands blackened as the lake itself seemed to pour upward and
bend back on itself, leaving a thick, high wall of ice that curled outward. It would take time to bring that down.

Cullen nodded his approval at the impressive display and turned his attention back to the trebuchet as Ser Owain let loose another missile. It bowled over a few Templars and took a chunk off the new bridge, which the Venatori simply replaced. The way the air shimmered over the area said the mages had erected a shield.

"Aim further in! Past the front ranks!" he commanded. Adaar replaced Ser Owain at the crank, and Cullen again nodded his approval. The crank moved much more quickly with his efforts.

"Thanks," said Ser Owain, shaking out hands that were sore from manipulating the thing.

"It's what oxen are for, right?" Adaar said with a crooked smile, and Owain wasn't sure if he was supposed to laugh at that or not.

Fen'Din welcomed Cole back to his side with a nod, and then pointed across the lake. "What do you see? Something out there is moving."

"People," Cole replied, watching the Venatori.

"Past them. Behind the trees."

Niall turned to look, the growing sense of victory around him chasing the ice from his hands. "It's probably just the gurns. They have to be carrying supplies somehow."


"If that's one mind--" Jowan began, and then the wings broke the treeline, and Jowan's eyes followed the black-scarred span upward. "Andraste's tits, it's the Archdemon."

The monster opened its mouth and spat a fireball at the group on the shore, and Adaar just barely managed to pull himself and Owain away from the trebuchet before it was reduced to a burning pile of splinters.

"Maker's Breath," breathed Cullen as he watched the dragon fly overhead, raining fire on the town of Haven.

"A dragon?" said Adaar, looking a bit queasy as he staggered to his feet, brushing sand and splinters off of his shoulders. He ran a hand over one of his horns as he watched the flames growing on the other side of the wall.

"This is going to be amazing! That is magnificent!" Bull eyed the dragon with no small amount of awe.

"We don't have a trebuchet, and we have a small army of mages about to descend upon us and a dragon trying to turn us into pot roast," Cullen argued, never taking his eyes from the dragon. We need to rethink this, and we need to make sure anyone who's not fighting is protected."

"Retreat to the Chantry?" Fen'Din asked, remembering Kinnon's earlier words to Peryn. "I believe anyone who isn't out here with us is already in there."

Cullen nodded and called for the retreat. "To the Chantry! The roof won't burn!"
Kinnon looked up as the dragon passed overhead, the foulness in its wake making his eyes water. "I have to go down there. We can't let them get the bridge back."

"You can't go down there. That's a high dragon, and it will turn you into toast." Cormac grabbed Kinnon's sleeve. "I've fought dragons, before. So has Cullen. If he's calling us back, it's because he has a plan."

"But, the bridge!" Kinnon threw an arm in that direction, with no mind to the building burning beside the stairs he'd shaped into the stone.

"It's going to take them a while to get the bridge, and then they still have to get through all this." Cormac gestured at the walls, all steep drops and sharp edges.

"If they can raise the bridge, they can push a tunnel straight through this, faster than we put it up," Kinnon snapped.

"We have to move, Kinnon." Anders pointed up. "It's coming back."

They darted to the side, throwing up shields of energy and rock to intercept the flames that landed just in front of them. Even with that protection, Artie winced through the heat.

Looking up at the flames rising over Haven, Kinnon thought of Peryn and for a moment, couldn't breathe. He let himself be dragged forward with a prayer that he was still alive.

"Move it! Move it!" Cullen shouted at the gates, ducked under the archway for cover as he waved everyone in who had been outside the walls. Across the way, he could see Samson's army approaching on a bridge that was growing too fast, the shadows of dragon wings turning for another pass, and Cullen was glad Niall wasn't there to feel his despair.

Cole was the last through the doors, appearing just as everyone had begun to forget he was there, as they were shoving the doors shut against the cold and the dragon outside. On one shoulder, he supported someone in terribly burned robes. "He tried to be sure you were all here. The roof fell in. He's going to die."

Anders swatted people out of his way, as he waded through the crowd toward Cole. "You got him all the way back here, but you forgot there's a healer?"

"What a charming boy," the man said, tipping his head loosely toward Cole. As his face turned toward Anders, the unburned side became clear.

"Chancellor?" Cullen looked stunned, but recovered quickly, turning his attention to the Lords Herald. "Any time you may have bought us is disappearing quickly with that dragon overhead. The Venatori are going to have that bridge back up, soon."

"I've seen an archdemon. I was in the Fade, but it looked like that," Cole observed, helping Roderick to a seat, while Anders's hands began to chase the worst of the burns with healing spells.

"See? What did I say?" Jowan huffed. "For once I was hoping I was wrong!"

"That's not an archdemon," Anders corrected, as Roderick's skin came together. "It's blighted, but it's not an Old God."

"I don't care what it is," Cullen said, face lined with stress. "It has cut a path for that army. They'll kill everyone in Haven!"
"The Elder One doesn't care about the village," Cole said from where he hovered next to Anders and Roderick. "He only wants the Heralds."

A weak laugh punched out of Adaar as he tossed Fen'Din a thin smile. "All this fuss just for us." He flexed the fingers of his glowing hand, mindful again of the ache in his palm now that he was actively thinking about it. "Do you know why?"

"I don't," Cole replied. "He's too loud. It hurts to hear him. He wants to kill you. No one else matters, but he'll crush them, kill them anyway. I don't like him."

"That makes two of us," Adaar grumbled.

"You don't like--" Cullen shook his head. "There are no tactics to make this survivable. The only thing that held them at bay was taking out the bridge, and we can't keep it down with that dragon out there."

"Cullen, you dolt," Cormac cut in, "we've fought dragons before. You and Varric and I. And this time we have the healer. All we have to do is drag it to the ground and keep it there."

"And how do you propose we do that?" Cullen shot a look at Adaar. "There's one more trebuchet on this side of the line. It's just aside from where the mages were building the wall. If you can hit the dragon, we may have a chance. If you can collapse a ridge onto the Venatori, we definitely have a chance."

Fen'Din looked at Cormac, then started barking orders. "Force and stone, to me! Any of you interested in fighting a dragon, at my side, because that's what we're going to do! Volunteers only -- you may not make it back!"

Bull threw a fist in the air. "Yes! This is my kind of excitement! This is going to be incredible!"

"I'm already dead," Niall sighed. "I don't suppose it matters."

"I've already seen the Fade. I'm in," Jowan decided, resting his sword on his shoulder. "Asha?"

"If Niall goes, I go," she declared, as if it were never in question.

Varric clapped Adaar on the elbow the way he'd normally clap someone on the shoulder. "Hey, weren't you just telling me the other day about that time you fought a dragon?" he asked, keeping his tone buoyant despite the desperation of the situation.

For a moment, even that touch seemed like it would be enough to bowl Adaar over before the qunari scraped himself together. "I was, wasn't I? I guess it's... it's time for a repeat performance!"

"Yeah!" Bull roared, raising his hammer.

"I imagine you didn't have a trebuchet last time," Solas drawled as he and Artie joined the group by the doors. Fenris started to follow, but Artemis stopped him with a hand on his arm, leaning in to whisper something before pressing a kiss to his lips and nudging him back towards Theron. For a moment, Fenris looked like he might follow anyway, but he stayed back, ears drooping a little.

After a long moment, Kinnon joined Fen'Din and the others. "I started this, and now I'm going to finish this."

"Kinnon, it's going to be bloody," Fen'Din warned, and Jowan rolled his eyes.
"Is he still like that? He'd faint looking at papercuts, and for some stupid reason, he worked in the infirmary."

"And you took up blood magic, so who's laughing now?" Kinnon shot Jowan a dirty look. "It's fine. It won't be bloody where I'm working, Maker willing."

Peryn finally made his way through the ranks of Templars, clutching at Kinnon's arm with one hand. "You are going with them? You heard what he said. You may not be coming back."

"I have to do something," Kinnon insisted. "Tomorrow. I'll explain everything tomorrow, if we're still alive."

"Then I will go with you," Peryn decided. "If we are overrun by this dragon, we will be together."

And that was... ridiculously sweet and romantic in a way Kinnon wished he deserved, and for a moment, as he stared at this Templar, he wanted to blurt out everything, to confess what he was, to confess the sham that made their relationship. But that wasn't fair, not now.

He considered another confession, one that would only take three words, but that wasn't fair just now either.

"Just know that, if you die, I'm never going to talk to you again," Kinnon replied, pushing the words through the tightness in his throat. "I mean it. Never."

Peryn accepted those terms with a kiss.

"Well, that seems a bit harsh," Fen'Din said to Niall. "Don't you think?"

"You think you're funny, don't you." Niall rolled his eyes, which were surprisingly unclouded, given the circumstances. People were frightened, but most of them had faith they'd be saved by the Heralds. That faith seemed to cut the population of the room down to only a handful of people he could hear, when they weren't speaking. And as long as he stayed away from them, he'd be fine.

"Don't worry, Niall. If you die again, I'll still talk to you." Asha's arm settled across Niall's hips.

"Even if we go out there," Cullen cut in. "Even if we have this fight, the village is in flames. If that dragon figures out the rest of the people are in here, the doors are wood, even if the roof isn't. There's scrub and woodpiles along the sides of the building. This is going to become an oven. It's safer, but I'm not sure it's safe enough, especially if we fall."

"Yes, that." Cole nodded at Roderick and looked over his shoulder at Cullen. "Chancellor Roderick can help. He wants to say it before he dies."

"Chancellor Roderick is not dying, even if he does still feel like he is," Anders snapped, the crushing pain in his head nearing unbearable levels, as Justice pushed back against Corypheus.

The tired look Roderick gave him said he didn't quite believe him, but Anders was too busy to care. "There is a path," he said, words heavy with pain. "You wouldn't know it unless you'd made the summer pilgrimage. As I have." Roderick tried to sit up, reaching for Fen'Din, but Anders kept him down. "The people can escape. She must have shown me. Andraste must have shown me so I could... tell you." He looked between Fen'Din and Adaar.

Adaar flexed his glowing hand. "What are you talking about?"

"It was whim that I walked the path," Roderick went on earnestly, "I did not mean to start -- it was
overgrown. Now, with so many in the Conclave dead, to be the only one who remembers... I don't know, Herald. If this simple memory can save us, this could be more than mere accident. You could be more."

Thinking about the dragon and the destruction outside, Adaar would have preferred to be 'less'. He exchanged a look with Fen'Din.

Fen'Din's face remained unmoved, after a moment, he looked to Cormac.

"Cullen? Take everyone who's not coming out with us. Take some who want to -- you'll need to be sure you're prepared for wildlife or a second assault down the mountain path." Cormac could predict how this would have gone in flatter land, but mountains had never been his strong point. Still, better to be overprotective than to come unprepared. "That thing out there? We've fought before. This time, it'll stay down, if I have to crush it into a stone and seal it in a lyrium vault."

"The dragon?" Cullen blinked at Cormac.

"Oh, right. You weren't there for that." Cormac rubbed his face with one hand. "You know that holiday Anton always says you should be glad you didn't join us for? There was an ancient magister at the end of the journey, and he was not pleased to see us. He called himself Corypheus, and he's standing out there, right now, because I guess we didn't kill him hard enough the first time."

"Does no one ever stay dead?" Jowan threw an arm out in frustration.

Anders looked him right in the eye. "I could ask you the same."

"I still blame Anton," Artemis muttered, close enough for Cullen to hear.

"Anton?" Cullen asked, uncertainly.

Artie opened his mouth only to sigh and dart a look at Cormac, unsure how to explain the 'theory' that Anton's pee had magical properties. "Your husband living up to the Doglord title. I'll tell you all about it later, over drinks."

If there is a later, Cullen thought but didn't say. Just the mention of Anton right then had him missing him with a tangible ache, but he knew he couldn't linger on that thought.

"Can we move him?" he asked Anders, tipping his head at Chancellor Roderick.

Anders's face was lined with pain and concentration, and for a moment, Cullen thought Anders hadn't hear him. "I don't suppose we have much choice, do we?"

"Everyone who is not going back outside, which is most of you, please follow Chancellor Roderick! We will be leaving the village!" Cullen called out, as Cole helped Roderick up.

Roderick looked at the glowing elf and Qunari before him. "Heralds, if you are meant for this... if the Inquisition is meant for this, I pray for you."

"Thank you. May they all pray for us," Fen'Din replied, face still, as he gestured at the crowd. "Belief will shape this world, now more than ever. Let your will guide the spirits and strengthen the stone. We'll need it."

Adaar cleared his throat, wishing he had some inspiring words to offer too. "What he said," he said, tipping his head at Fen'Din. "And good luck."
Chancellor Roderick dipped his head in thanks and weariness, and Cole guided him away.

"Keep the Elder One's attention until we're above the treeline," Cullen said to the group gathered by the door, his stare lingering on the pair of Heralds and on his brothers-in-law, whom he prayed survived for Anton's sake. "If we are to have a chance -- if you are to have a chance -- let that thing hear you."

Cormac could feel several pairs of knowing eyes land on him and slide back off. "I'm not sure that's what we want the dragon hearing, but if you think it would help... I mean, wasn't there that time we lured a wyvern with dead nugs and a mating call?" He wrapped an arm around Anders and raised his eyebrows.

"No." Kinnon pointed at Cormac. "Absolutely not. Spare me."

"You could always come with us," Fenris offered. "Then we would both be spared."
Chapter 125

Chapter Summary

The Heralds lead a small team against the dragon, but encounter more than they anticipated.

"They will pay a heavy price for us, if we fall," Niall decided, taking Asha's hand from his waist, as he more drifted than stepped forward. "Forgive me, Ser Peryn. Whatever you may see me do, remember that I am fighting for all our lives. I'll be well again, soon."

Peryn watched him warily. "It is always with the best of intentions that we fall to the worst ends."

A winged shadow passed overhead, drawing their gaze up. "Looks like we're going to fall to those ends with or without them," Adaar said, his voice sounding stronger than he felt. He flexed the fingers of his glowing hand, stretching out the ache and wiping away the sweat lining the rest of his palm.

The trebuchet lay in the other direction, closer to the approaching army. "Come on," Adaar said, clapping a hand on Peryn's shoulder and leading a small group through the village in that direction. A few of them would break off to distract the Venatori, reinforcing the wall, but for now there was safety in numbers.

"Niall!" Kinnon called out, seeing the perfect cover for himself. "You going after the Venatori?"

"Do you see anyone better equipped?" Niall spun to face Kinnon, arms out, slush dripping from his fingers.

"I'll go with you."

Niall looked at Kinnon in confusion, his eyes widening in sudden understanding as they landed on Peryn. "Thanks. I could use the help."

"I do not think--" Peryn started, but Kinnon kissed him.

"Please trust me. I want you to help Adaar with the trebuchet. He needs some more big, strong men. Enchanter Niall needs the Maker's kindness to keep him focused."

Peryn hesitated, but Adaar called back to him. "Ser Peryn, Iron Bull! With me!"

"It's The Iron Bull!" Bull corrected him with an almost manic grin, watching the dragon's flight and pulling a more reluctant Peryn along with him.

The trebuchet hadn't seen much use, and the crank caught as Adaar tried to move it. "Shit!" he hissed, giving it a kick.

"Something is caught," Peryn said, getting closer to the mechanism, reaching in with his sword to pry something loose. Adaar was all too aware of how little time they had, ticking by with each rapid beat of his heart.
"Artie? You up for a little stone-throwing?" Cormac asked, holding up his thumb to get an angle on the dragon.

"I don't know about him, but I am!" Jowan stepped just behind Cormac's shoulder, looking down his arm. "Wait until it gets just a little closer, and we can double it right in the wings. That'll get it down to our level."

"I'm not convinced our level is where we want that thing," Solas protested, watching it rain flames down on the tile roof of the Chantry.

"I've done this before." Cormac grinned. "Down here is exactly where we want it."

Fen'Din rested a hand on Solas's shoulder. "We must gather the spirits, before the Venatori poison them."

Solas slipped out from under the anchor, rubbing his shoulder. "Let us poison the Venatori, instead."

"Don't die, Mack." Anders squeezed Cormac's hand and then followed Fen'Din. "I'll be over there, keeping Elfhole from doing anything too stupid. Scream if the dragon bites you, and please don't feed it your arm, this time!"

"Is he serious?" Jowan asked, looking at Cormac's two firmly attached arms.

"He's serious," Artie confirmed.

"It only bit me a little." Cormac laughed and watched the dragon bearing down on them as he raised a barrier around the three of them, trusting Solas to protect the others. "Get ready. Here we go..."

The shimmer of magic caught the dragon's attention, smoke curling from its nostrils before flames came from its mouth, washing over Cormac's barrier and Solas's shields. Artie breathed through the sudden heat, sending a rock missile up through the flames, aiming for the beast's wing and clipping its shoulder instead. Jowan's rock clipped the edge of its wing, enough to make the beast falter but not enough to slow it down, let alone stop it.

"Dammit," Artemis cursed as the dragon flew by, darting around to circle back towards them, and Artemis had the impression they'd only made it angrier.

"As long as it's focused on us, it's not going to be looking at anyone else," Cormac reminded them. "I can hold it off, as long as you don't need me doing much else. Just keep hitting it."

At the wall, three mages stepped out on top of it, and the stone bent to Kinnon's will, pushing back against the Venatori who tried to tunnel through it. "Help me out, here, Niall. There's more of them than there are of me."

Niall put his arms around Asha, kissed her with ice on his lips. "Stay here. Help if you can, but don't come down there, with me."

"Are you sure this is wise?" Asha asked, making no move to stop him.

"I'm already dead," Niall reminded her. "There's not much left to fear." He stepped off the wall in a billowing grey cloud, frozen footsteps melting behind him as he climbed down barely visible ice stairs. He hadn't quite gotten over gravity, but he did recall that spirits shouldn't weigh anything.

The closest Venatori fell back from him, sobbing, grieving for all they'd lost, all the choices they could have made differently, the friends who'd fallen at Redcliffe.
"There is nothing left for you," Niall whispered, through a seemingly infinite number of teeth. "Give in."

The dark cloud spread among the Venatori, some shouting in despair, others shouting in confusion, and in the corner of his mind that was still human in that moment, Niall marvelled at the amount of chaos one person could sow.

On top of the wall, Asha watched, still feeling the ice at her lips and a coldness in her chest. Still, she had to admit it was working, the stone filling back in and undoing the Venatori's work, and she pulled her gaze away long enough to throw her own spells into the mix, beating back those closest that Niall couldn't touch.

Kinnon sank to his knees, both hands pressed flat to the stone, feeling the force from the other side letting up, as more of the Venatori fell to Niall's aura of grief. It was strong enough that he struggled to hold focus, even at the very edge of its reach.

By the trebuchet, Peryn still struggled with the winch, Bull leaning against it, while Peryn tried to figure out where it was jammed.

"It is maybe frozen?" Peryn suggested, pulling on the rope in an attempt to loosen it.

"Get me one of those mages, and it'll be unfrozen soon enough," Bull declared, glancing at Adaar for confirmation.

Adaar glanced back towards the village, where one group of mages was launching magic at the dragon, then to the wall, where another group was barely holding back a wave of Venatori. He ran a hand over a horn, a heavy breath misting in the air.

"I think this one's on us."

Anders kept a healing aura around himself, focused on preserving the two elves at his side and providing a beacon to the spirits drifting out of the burning village and in from the lake. The sound of the song grew louder, as their numbers grew, a discordant echo that rang off the walls of Haven.

Fen'Din kept his eyes on where Niall had gone over the wall. The spirits seemed distressed by whatever was happening, there, but that was to be expected. War was not gentle, and Niall could be expected to unleash his less-pleasant nature in the presence of those who wished him harm.

Light poured in at the edges of Asha's vision, and when she turned her head, she could see the shapes of spirits gliding around and over the wall. She smiled at their touch of warmth, borrowed a moment of faith from a spirit who drew near, but watched them slip around to avoid Niall's ring of despair.

"They're like a second army," she said as much to herself as to Kinnon, and in that moment, she didn't need to borrow hope.

A dark shape rose over the edge of the hill, lit with the bloody glow of red lyrium. It was much too tall, but not nearly as angled as the beasts that had risen from the lake. The shadow of what might have been a horn rose from one side of its head, and for a split second, Bull wondered if it might not be one of Adaar's company, lost to the red lyrium somehow, and come back at the worst possible time. But, qunari weren't usually so thin.

"CORYPHEUS," Justice boomed, the snow at his feet melting. But, the magister wasn't interested in him, this time, heading, instead, straight for the trebuchet. For the closer of the Heralds.
"What the Blight?" Adaar muttered, his shoulder braced against the trebuchet as the strange figure approached, its body a caricature of a mage with its feathered pauldrons and long, clawed fingers. Red lyrium grew out of the creature's -- man's? -- face in large, jagged crystals.

Bull hefted his hammer, but a wave of those clawed fingers knocked them all back, like a kick to the ribs.

"Enough!" said Corypheus. The twist of lyrium pulled his lips into a permanent sneer as he stared down Adaar. "Pretender. You toy with forces beyond your ken. No more."

"Like you know anything about my 'ken'," Adaar snapped back, straightening up but also considering what escape routes he had available. This mage spoke with an arrogance that said he was, or believed he was, in charge. Adaar knew better than to underestimate a mage who could command a dragon. "Who the Blight even are you?"

"Mortals beg for truth they cannot have. It is beyond what you are, what I was." Corypheus remained oddly still, presenting an excellent view of his far-too-large hands, arms inhumanly thin, even without the parasol-sized pauldrons making them look even thinner. Thin and frail, at a glance, but no doubt deadly. "Know me. Know what you have pretended to be."

"Get that dragon down!" Fen'Din shouted toward Cormac, his voice ragged from holding the spirit song, and in the weakening of the song for the moment those words required, some of the spirits under Asha's gaze became demons again.

"Niall! I can't keep this up!" Kinnon called down, from where he perched on the wall, fingers burning from the invisible duel he fought in the stone. He wouldn't last much longer, even channelling the spirits' power into his work, with Asha's help.

But Niall was no longer the only Despair. Asha watched in horror as many of the spirits turned, watched as the Venatori most afflicted by Niall's touch rose up again in shapes no longer their own. Asha looked out over the battlefield, looked back at the sweat on Kinnon's pale face, and knew then that she was going to die here. With a roar of rage, she unleashed her full arsenal, praying at least that the villagers would make it.

"Exalt the Elder One!" Corypheus commanded Adaar. "The will that is Corypheus!" He pointed one pointy claw at Adaar, and it wasn't often Adaar found himself looking up at someone talking to him. "You will kneel."

"I will not," Adaar replied, mimicking his tone, hands itching to reach for his sword.

"You will resist," Corypheus said, speaking more to himself it seemed than to the pair of qunari and the Templar braced in front of him. "You will always resist. It matters not."

As he spoke, he lifted his hand, slowly turning it over to reveal a black orb that hadn't been there before.

"I am here for the Anchor," he went on, and the orb lit with flame-red energy, highlighting the whirling designs on its surface. "The process of removing it begins now."

Corypheus cut his free hand through the air at the same time Adaar grabbed up his sword. The spell
was like hooks digging into the glowing gash in Adaar's hand, the usual ache turning into a tearing agony, and Adaar staggered with a ragged cry, unable to keep a grip on his weapon.

Fen'Din's hand became invisible in the sudden radiance that sprung from it, blinding all in its glow. Solas turned away, his eyes on the top of the ridge, where they lost more spirits to the Venatori by the moment. Anders finally drew his sword, wading into the fray to cut Niall loose from the clutches of a towering rage demon that melted the rock around it, Kinnon's wall slowly sliding down in gobs of lava.

The touch of Anders's hand dropped layers of billowing black from Niall's ghostly form. "GO BACK!" Justice commanded.

"It doesn't matter now," Niall sighed, lesser spirits blinking out around him. "It's too late. I'll take as many of them as I can."

"NO," Justice insisted. "GO BACK. YOU MUST TAKE ASHA AND KINNON UP THE HILL."

"And you?" The next sweep of Niall's arm slammed a wall of ice through the rage demon, but the wall wouldn't stabilise. Cracks began to spread from where the ice struck the hot stone.

"I WILL KEEP THEM ALIVE."
Chapter 126

Chapter Summary

When things go wrong, they go very wrong. Our heroes face a whole new set of troubles.

Jowan looked at the dragon coming back toward them, the barrier still terribly stable around them, even as each pass heated the air. It was a Tevinter summer, inside the shields, but they hadn't been harmed. They also hadn't managed to get the dragon out of the sky. A terrible idea began to come together in his head, as he saw Niall and Kinnon come back over the ridge, Anders and Asha holding back the demons.

He looked at Artemis. "We have to get everyone over here, but I think we can put a stop to this." One finger traced a line along the mountainside. "If we hit that, we'll bury everything. They're not going to be able to do it with the trebuchet, now. Dim side, we also bury us."

"Kinnon," Cormac said, without thinking, and then called out to him. "Kinnon! We need you up here!"

Artemis nodded, staying the spell he had started to cast as he looked out over that ridge. He spared a thought for Fenris, guilt squeezing his heart at the thought of leaving him alone, but Jowan was right: this was their own shot.

By the trebuchet, Adaar had slid to his knees, veins popping in his forehead as he clutched his burning hand. Peryn and Bull hovered uncertainly, weapons in hand but with the suspicion that they wouldn't do much here.

"I do not know how you survived," Corypheus went on, the spell still pulsing in his palm, "but what marks you as 'touched', what you flail at rifts, I crafted to assault the very heavens."

The spell released with a flare of light, a grunt of pain squeaking through Adaar's teeth, but then he was able to breathe again. His hand still throbbed and pulsed, but it seemed no different than it had been before. There was something satisfying in the frown Corypheus turned upon his own hand.

"And you used the Anchor to undo my work!" Corypheus growled. "The gall!"

Peryn watched, quietly, before deciding this ... thing was both definitely Tevinter and definitely a mage. And if there was one thing an Ander Templar knew what to do with, it was Tevinter mages. Further along the ridge, he could see Kinnon waving desperately at him, the demons rising up from the road. They would win this fight, and he knew it. He had faith. He had the Maker's will in his hands. And with that thought, he unleashed it, bringing to bear the Maker's light, and driving it down onto the maleficar before him.

The creature, once a mortal mage, staggered, confused, blinking in amazement as it turned its eyes from Adaar to him, and Peryn began to suspect he'd made a mistake. Possibly even a mistake with a capital letter at the start. But he held onto his sword and braced himself for whatever might come before he could do the same again.
As Corypheus turned, Bull decided if the little human was crazy enough to engage, he might as well. There was no glory in dying while you were busy trying to figure out what the Blight was going on, instead of taking the battle to the enemy. His hammer smashed down on one of those ridiculous feathered pauldrons, just force enough to bow the Vint. The second strike took it in the head.

"Go! Go! Go!" Bull shouted. "Regroup!"

The blows would have killed anything lesser, but Corypheus merely staggered under them, trying to right himself and shake off the confusion, the very arrogance of lesser beings assaulting him was nearly unfathomable.

Peryn helped Adaar stumble to his feet, half-dragging him along until he'd righted himself, and under any other circumstances, he would have marvelled at his own ability to drag a qunari that far that quickly.

Bull joined them, and Adaar didn't know where they could possibly run to but "away" was a good option. When he looked up to see the mages gathered together, he just prayed they had a plan.

Past their shoulders, Jowan watched Corypheus bristle in outrage, curling his freakishly long hands into fists as he stalked after them, and Jowan knew they had a small window. "Now!" he said to Artie, who'd already begun to cast.

Kinnon had just grabbed hold of Peryn when the earth trembled under them with the movement of Force.

Jowan pulled at the Veil, hoping he had the timing right as he met Artemis's spells in the middle. A stone so massive a gurn would normally be needed to move it rose from the earth, rounded and weighty. He let go of the Veil as Artemis raised the stone above them, and the thing raced toward the ridge that would sweep down and bury everything in the valley.

The magic came slowly to Kinnon's fingers. There was barely anything left of him. But he would not let go of Peryn, as he focused that last of his power and prayed for the best, the rumble of falling snow and stone drowning out everything around him. "I love you. I'm so sorry."

Across the lake, Calpernia grabbed Samson's arm. "What have they done?"

"The prophet's piss for a silver a jar." Samson whistled, watching the mountain fall. He didn't call for a retreat -- in the face of something like that, it was implied. He didn't think anyone was going to make it back over the bridge, either. Not at the rate the snow was coming down. "The Elder One had better survive this."

Grip tight around Kinnon, Peryn had closed his eyes to the incoming avalanche and braced himself for an impact that never came. He'd felt the earth shake, heard the roar of crumbling ice and rock rushing past, but when the noise hushed and the ground stilled, he was still standing. He opened his eyes to darkness undercut by the ghostly glow of magic coming from some of his companions, and when he reached back a hand, it was to feel solid stone behind him.

"What's...?" Peryn started to ask Kinnon, only to feel Kinnon slipping from his grip and sagging to the ground. Peryn brought both arms around him again, trying to keep him upright. "Kinnon?"

Anders lit a fair bit of the room, as he stepped forward, kneeling beside Kinnon. "Stupid. Stupid, but we're still alive, so I don't know how stupid I get to call it." He pulled a potion out of his bag, one of the last few he'd been holding onto, in case things went off. Taking Kinnon's head into his lap, he uncorked the bottle, with his teeth.
Peryn grabbed Anders's arm. "That is not a healing potion. The lyrium makes him very sick."

"The lyrium is the only thing that's going to keep him alive, right now," Anders argued, one hand touching Kinnon's lips, feeling slow breaths ghost across his knuckles.

"But, that would only work if he were--" Peryn stopped, withdrew his hand from Anders's arm. His face hardened, eyes pained. "Do what you must."

"He saved us all, Peryn."

"Can you agonise about this later?" Niall snapped, from where he was pressed against the furthest wall from Peryn. "I don't need this headache."

"He loves you, Peryn," Jowan said, quietly, barely sitting up, himself. "I don't know why, but he does. It's not going to be easy, but you can make it work. Just don't bleed on him."

"He lied to me." Peryn made no attempt to move away from Kinnon's side. "I have broken my vows, without knowing."

"You know, I don't know a whole lot about the Chantry. Not really my thing," Bull admitted, scraping one of his horns on the ceiling, as he tipped his head. "But, I think there's not a Templar alive who hasn't broken their vows, right now, and a lot of them in much worse ways than who they fell in love with."

"This is not a conclusion you need to come to, now," Solas pointed out. "We have more pressing problems, like how we're getting out of here."

Peryn kept silent, but the way Niall grimaced said how well he was handling this.

"I imagine we're buried under tonnes of rock and snow," Adaar said, pain making his voice tight as he cradled his glowing hand, the green lighting his face from below.

"Burrowing straight up would just collapse the dome and bring it all down upon us," Artie pointed out. He had pressed close to Cormac during the avalanche and hadn't quite let him go just yet. "Can we make our way back to the Chantry from here?"

"Which way is the Chantry?" Jowan asked. He hadn't lost his life in the avalanche, but he had lost his sense of direction.

"Um." Artie opened his mouth and pointed in one direction, only to close his mouth and frown.

"We're not going anywhere without Kinnon," Asha pointed out.

Cormac rested his head on Artie's shoulder. "What do you think, Lord Hawke? Can you get us out of here, or do we wait for Kinnon to recover?"

"We have to get him out of here." Anders shook his head. "We'll be fine for hours, at least, but not long enough to get Kinnon all the way back on his feet. He's not going to be able to use magic for a while, so if anyone else in here has an idea of how to get us where we're going, I'm going to vote we try it."

"If we had a shovel, I could do some good," Bull apologised.

"The spirits will guide us," Fen'Din decided, crossing to the wall Artemis had indicated. "Someone just needs to move the ground out of the way. Niall?"
Niall shook his head. "Rock armour was the best I got with stone. I could try, but it's not a good idea." He sighed, eyeing Jowan in the blue-green light.

"I think that's a horrible idea. We're supposed to survive this, right? I just... break things. Usually, on purpose."

"I have power to offer, but not skill with stone." Asha shrugged and glanced around the room.

"If we absolutely have to I can make sure we survive straight up," Cormac offered, warily. "It's a bad idea, but I think we could do it with no casualties. Hopefully." He rubbed Artie's back, absently. "What do you think? Can you do it?"

Artie blew out a heavy breath, running a hand through his hair. "Well, I suppose there's one way to find out. We'll save your disaster for Plan B." He offered Cormac as strong a smile as he could manage, which wasn't very, and tried not to think about words like 'trapped' or 'suffocating'.

Those same words rattled in the back of Anders's head, but Anders was focused on Kinnon, Justice hovering just under his skin in case the distraction wasn't enough. There were no darkspawn here, at least.

Artemis started to cast, praying he'd gotten the direction right. He kept a tight leash on his magic, not wanting to push too hard too fast and accidentally bring the mountain down around them more permanently.

"Great," Anders sighed, carefully lifting Kinnon. "Down in the dark again. I was hoping I was done with that part of my life..."

Fen'Din followed close behind Artemis, as the tunnel grew, reaching out to the spirits outside for direction. A few feet at a time, they moved deeper into the earth.

Bull brought up the rear. "If I get stuck in here, nobody's getting past me. So, let's just make sure that's not going to happen in a bad way."

"Jan and I can keep us alive, even if the tunnel cracks," Cormac promised. "As long as someone can still move stone, we're all going to be just fine."

"Unless the Chantry's fallen in," Niall muttered.

"The back of the Chantry cellar leads up to a mountain path," Fen'Din pointed out. "You heard the Chancellor. We don't even need to get into the Chantry, we just have to get past it, and then up."

"I would like to get into the Chantry, if it's still standing," Asha admitted. "It's probably safe to spend the night there. We'd have air and walls, and probably water, too."

Jowan nodded. "Whatever food they couldn't move should still be in the cellars. Whatever's still out there probably didn't fare as well as we did. We can afford to take the time Kinnon needs."

"Corypheus lives," Anders said, after a moment. "And he's very angry. It's going to take a while for him to get out of there, but I can't sleep until we get away from him -- until I can't hear him any more. So, yes. We'll rest -- we all need it -- but not too long."

"He survived that?" Adaar grumbled, taking up the rear with Bull. He rubbed his shoulder where Corypheus had thrown him into the trebuchet, his other hand clenching and unclenching around the mark -- the Anchor, Corypheus had called it. He glanced at the matching mark on Fen'Din's hand, but if the elf felt the pain he did, he was good at hiding it. "What the Blight are we up against?"
"A mountain, at the moment," Solas replied. "It is best to focus on the problem at hand, for now."

Adaar aimed a pained look at Solas's bald scalp. "Pun intended?" he drawled, waving his glowing hand.

Solas smirked but didn't answer.
Chapter 127

Chapter Summary

Things are looking up, after our heroes travel down.

The words washed over Artemis, but he didn't pay them much heed, focused still on the stone around him, pushing it slowly, carefully outward. He’d fallen into a rhythm now, but after a while, his fingertips started to burn, then to tingle and go numb as sweat dripped down his temples.

"Lyrium potion?" Artie asked hopefully without slowing.

Anders produced one. "If anyone can do that thing we did to close the Breach, now might be a good time to contribute. I don't have many of these left."

Asha stepped forward, taking Niall's hand and placing her other hand on Artie's shoulder. "We can do this." She shot a pointed look at Fen'Din, who nodded and joined her.

"Jowan?" Fen'Din held out a hand. "Mack and Jan may wish to step back. They will protect us if this does not work as we wish it to."

Jowan took Fen'Din's hand, possibly the first time he'd ever been in physical contact with the man. Something unspoken passed between them, some ghost of recognition, as the magic strengthened, even as it poured forward. Niall wiped a chill fog from his hand and grabbed Jowan's wrist.

"Begin slowly," Asha warned Artemis. "This is no small power you wield."

Between sipping the lyrium potion and the rush of energy they were sending him, Artemis felt rejuvenated, more than rejuvenated, teeth buzzing and bones humming with the sudden influx of power.

Slow, Artie reminded himself, flexing his fingers now that life had come back to them. The magic became less a push and more a pull, like he was only stemming the flow instead of trying to shove it along. The rock tunnel didn't so much as grow around them as flow, rippling like water.

"Oh, that is a nice trick," Adaar murmured, noting the change. He had no idea what the others were doing, but it seemed to be working.

Artie hummed a vague agreement, not daring to unclench his jaw in case his teeth started to chatter.

Cormac watched nervously, well aware of the power his brother already wielded and the multitude of ... accidents that power had been at the centre of, over the years. But, the work Artie had been doing with the restorations must have improved his control, because nothing had exploded, shattered, or shot off into the distance, yet. "Do you remember that time we wouldn't let him throw a Templar off the roof?" he muttered to Anders.

"You think we should have?" Anders was having similar thoughts, between Corypheus's attempts to catch hold of him. Justice was so very clear on which ones of them belonged, this time, and though the defence was tiring, it was less so than it had been the first time, and less difficult.
"I think maybe we should have let him toss that blighter off the roof of the Tower and straight through the Commander's window."

"Captain's window," Anders panted, shaking his head in the wake of a more forceful strike. "Commander's window faced the sea. You remember."

"Other way," Cormac insisted, easily keeping a slow walking pace in the wake of Artemis's radiant train of mages. "Cullen got the courtyard window after he moved across the hall."

"Are you sure?"

"We'll ask Cullen when we find him." Cormac eyed Anders. "Do you want me to take Kinnon?"

Anders shook his head. "I can't let go of him."

Peryn walked behind him, saying nothing, his mind a mess of worry and anger he hadn't begun to sort through. What he could see of Kinnon's face was ghostly pale in the green and blue light.

Artie lost track of how far they'd walked, could only spare a moment to pray that they were going the right way, that he wasn't leading them into the mountainside. He also tried not to worry so much about making sure the walls of the tunnel were even, but old habits died hard.

He almost didn't notice at first when the flow of magic reached into something that wasn't snow. He paused, the train of mages behind him nearly clipping his heels, and laid a hand upon solid stone.

Artemis opened his mouth to say something, but in his distraction he lost track of the spell, if only for a moment. It chewed at the stone, tearing through it as though it were paper, and Artie was hit with the smell of damp cellar air.

"Whoa," he said to the mage train behind him, as though he were calling a horse to halt.

Jowan leaned around Fen'Din to see past Artie's shoulder. "I smell incense. I'd know that smell anywhere -- it's that wet shrine stink."

Some of the ice melted from Niall's shoulders, hitting the ground as slush. "It's fresh air. Move, move! There are still people alive behind me!"

"And to think: this is why mages are feared," Solas offered, resting a hand on Anders's elbow.

"Far more than this," Anders replied, knowing himself to be a step too far, even for Tevinter.

Cormac started nudging people forward, so he could get to his brother, who couldn't be moved. "I take back all the shit I ever gave you, when we were kids," he said, slinging an arm around Artie's shoulders and gently tugging, to get him to step out of the way of Anders and the two qunari.

The flood of energy ebbed as the mages broke apart, and Artemis swayed as his body tried to find its equilibrium, leaning into Cormac's side. "And Maker knows you were full of shit," Artemis said a beat later than he normally would before straightening back up and stepping into the cellar, into the stink of incense that smelled like fresh air and freedom. He still held tight to Cormac's robes, a reminder that they were both alive.

Anders followed, blue energy rippling over his skin in a way that said Justice sat close to the surface. He set down Kinnon for a moment to rest his arms and to get a better look.

The rest of their group spilled into the cellar, and Bull straightened his back and stretched, letting out a long groan. "That was good work," he said to Artie, rubbing his back. "But next time? Make a
"How bad is it, Jan?" Cormac asked, holding Artemis close against him. "Do we have time?"

Anders nodded, eyeing the cells that lined this part of the cellar warily, even though they were loaded with nothing but supplies. Cullen had either taken Alexius or executed him, and there was no blood on the floor. Some part of him appreciated that little signal that Cullen had learnt something, all those years ago, in another dungeon. "We can rest here. But, when I say we're leaving, we have to go. I'm not far enough away from him. Even if it were safe to leave Kinnon for more than a few minutes, it's not safe for me to sleep."

"How long can you go on?" Peryn asked, curiously, having watched Anders expend a great deal of magic, with no sign of flagging and no signs of blood magic. If anything, the man seemed brighter, purer, more appealing.

"Days, usually. Like this... I don't want to wait more than a day. The longer we stay still, the easier it becomes for Corypheus." Anders found an empty bucket and filled it with ice, slowly melting it with both hands. "There's still fresh food. The others took everything that would travel. Eat as much as you can, and let Mack worry about the rest. We'll leave here with whatever we can carry."

Their respite was short but welcome, and somewhere in the midst of gathering supplies, someone brought Anders food so he wouldn't have to leave Kinnon's side.

"I still can't believe that actually worked," Artie murmured as he rested sitting propped up against the wall, staring at the hole in the wall and the tunnel that led out of it.

"It might be an extension of Jowan's weird anti-luck," Niall said, looking more flushed, more human since they'd made it to the cellars.

"Anti-luck?" Artie asked blankly.

Niall grappled for the right words. "It's not quite good luck and it's not quite bad luck, either. Let me put it this way: the man broke into and escaped from Aeonar. How? By summoning geese and accidentally ending up in the Fade."

"I am never going to live that down, am I?" Jowan sighed from the other side of the room. "You're welcome, by the way, Niall."

"Jowan once summoned demons. It's how I became a Warden." Anders left out the middle part, where he'd knocked a Templar unconscious and escaped in the man's armour, pretending he was going out to hunt Jowan. "I meant to thank you for that. You know, aside from the demons part. Great distraction."

Peryn muttered something under his breath, the only audible word 'maleficar'.

"Now, Ser Peryn, that's hardly fair. Everyone makes bad decisions in their lives," Asha chided, roasting another chicken in her hands. She didn't have the power to take fire into combat, but any seer's child knew how to cook. "Just look at him, now -- a hero to the people of Redcliffe. One of the two mages who saved us from that dragon. Some people just need to make mistakes before they learn."

"Some people make more mistakes than others," Niall grumbled.

"Hey!" Jowan complained.
"It's me. He's talking about me." Anders looked up from Kinnon and raised his eyebrows at Niall. "But, I'll tell you one thing that wasn't a mistake."

"Or I could have been talking about you both," Niall said, neatly side-stepping. "It certainly described you both."

"Hey!" Jowan said again.

"My mistake was taking the job at the Conclave," Adaar said. He wiped a hand over his face with a weak laugh. "And now all our mistakes have brought us here."

"To the cellars?" Bull drawled. "Hey, at least there's wine down here!"

"To the Inquisition," Adaar said, for once steering away from the joke. "To... whatever the flying fuck that thing was out there." He held his non-glowing hand up in the air, curling his fingers to mimic claws. He darted a look at Niall to see his face turning grey again, and he shoved the rest of that thought aside. "But yes, also to the wine. Mostly to the wine."

"To our survival!" Cormac picked up a bottle of something that looked dusty and valuable, neatly shattering the top around the cork and shielding the broken edge, before he took a swig and passed the bottle to Artemis. "To Lord Hawke!" He paused. "Wait, was that not a toast?"

"It's a toast now," Jowan decided, grabbing a bottle for himself and launching the cork across the room. "To a lack of demons and not being in the Fade!" He drank and shoved the bottle at Solas.

"To mistakes we've yet to make." Solas took a bare sip of the wine, made a face, and passed the bottle to Fen'Din.

"To the wisdom to turn any mistake into a profound success," Fen'Din countered, taking a swig and rolling the wine across his tongue a few times before he swallowed. "Seleny, mid-Blessed age. Half a bastard a bottle, if Serault can be trusted."

"I wouldn't trust Serault to piss with his own knob," Niall grumbled, reaching over Fen'Din's shoulder for the bottle. "To Faith, and Hope, and Grace!"

Asha smiled, taking the bottle after Niall. "To the freedom to make our own fate!" She took a swig and hummed, holding the bottle out for whoever wanted it next. "Not bad. Better than any Orlesian pisswater, anyway."

"To fighting a dragon!" Bull proclaimed with a manic grin, holding the bottle high in the air before taking a drink. He shrugged at the incredulous looks that got him. "What? It was awesome!"

He offered the bottle to Peryn, who abstained with a small smile, then started to offer it to Artie, only to realize he already had a bottle of his own. Since Anders was busy, Adaar took the bottle and gave the toast he would have.

"To Kinnon, for saving our asses."
Chapter Summary

Important dreams and strange revelations.

Solas looked at the Fade around him, only slightly surprised not to be alone. Jowan and Fen'Din seemed caught up in their own dreams, but far closer to conscious than he tended to credit those who weren't Dreamers with being. It wouldn't take much, he knew, to wake them into this world. But, that was not a step he was willing to take. Certainly not in the circumstances they were in.

Instead, he reached out, under the Stone, over the sea, seeking someone he could touch. Someone who would hear him and carry word.

A dreamer met him atop a mountain he'd once known. Long ears, large eyes, flowing golden hair.

"Solas," the man addressed him, recognising him at once.

"I see you've changed the face you wear," Solas replied, after a moment.

"I turned to non-Tevinter sources. The libraries have gathered much -- Dalish tales, mostly, but some older books, from before. I'm learning to read them," Feynriel smiled sadly. "You may have been right."

"And when you dream, you are an elf. This form you've chosen for yourself. There was a time you might have been, when we were still as we had been, instead of what walks in the streets before you." Solas shrugged broadly, open handed. One spirit to another, was there really much to say about the shape one took? As long as that shape wasn't chosen through some misunderstanding -- some thing that might come to corrupt it -- he thought not.

Feynriel nodded, and Solas knew that he understood in theory, though that was as far as his experience would take him. "You were calling for me?" Feynriel asked.

"For anyone who would hear," Solas said with a nod. "You answered. I am in need of your help. We are in need of your help."

Feynriel's ears twitched up in curiosity, a bit exaggerated still from how an elf's would really move, but the boy was relying on outside knowledge. "We?"

"The Inquisition. We were trapped in an avalanche while trying to defeat a great evil. I will show you."

The ground moved out from under them, and Solas brought Feynriel to Haven, showing him the devastation and what little remained in the town and on the battlefield.

"The rumours are true then?" Feynriel asked, picking out the apparent leaders on the battlefield. "A qunari and an elf? Is he Dalish? Really?"

"Not of the Dales, he has no clan. The marks he wears by his own hand. A Circle mage who declared himself apostate," Solas corrected, turning the scene back to the Chantry, and the plans for
escape. "They left before the final call to battle 'neath the dragon's maw, and I cannot say we know what's happened to them. They chose a path we follow now, but days before us, they set out. The snow is too thick and we cannot follow."

"Is that the Commander?" Feynriel's eyes lingered on Cullen. "And Lord Hawke?"

"Lord Hawke is with us. One Lord Hawke. His husband travels with Commander Cullen."

"Fenris," Feynriel supplied, remembering them and nodding. He remembered what they had done for him in the Fade, what they have done for him since, and he was relieved, at least, that Artemis Hawke had survived the battle. "What do you need me to do?"

They watched together as the avalanche fell, swallowing Haven and the attacking army. A flicker of light signalled the start of Kinnon's spell, and then they were swallowed too.

"I need you to send a message," Solas said as stillness settled back over everything.

It was the dream that woke him, and Peryn found himself already sitting, when his eyes snapped open, breath caught in his chest. How had he not seen it sooner? But, Jan was no maleficar... Of that he could be certain. He burned too bright for that. And that, as it turned out, was the problem. He glanced around the shelter Niall had made for them, the curve of the ice holding out the worst of the cold, and found Jan, still awake, leaning against one of the walls, with Kinnon draped across his lap.

There was no question Kinnon was sick, Peryn had seen mages die of that kind of foolishness. But, Jan kept him alive. Jan who was not Jan, but Anders. Jan who was not Jan, but the Spirit of Hector. He was sure of it, now, watching the dim blue light that surrounded Jan, that lapped like flame from his hands. But, what was he? A spirit like Niall? Niall, who Peryn still regarded as barely more than a demon. The alternative was worse. If Jan was an abomination, it was Peryn's duty as a Templar to strike him down.

And that gave him pause. He had never known Jan to do evil. The man was a healer -- an incredibly powerful healer -- and had been nothing but kind, anywhere Peryn had seen him. He didn't give off that foul miasma one found around those with ill intent or evil methods.

He crossed the room, made smaller with the number of people sprawled across the floor, asleep.

"Jan?"

"If you want a sleeping potion, you're out of luck." Anders looked up, noting the obvious pain on Peryn's face. "Sprain something?"

"Hector." The name was half an accusation, tainted with disbelief.

With the stress of the past day and his focus on keeping Kinnon alive, it took Anders a moment to work through that. Justice got there first, reminding him of Anderfel nights where they'd masqueraded as a ghost. He considered playing innocent, keeping his face blank and asking Hector who? but he knew Peryn wouldn't believe him, not with Kinnon's revelation still sore in his mind.

Instead, Anders blew out a sigh, shoulders sagging. "I never called myself that," he pointed out. "Someone made an assumption, and it just... stuck."

"You never said you were not," Peryn replied. So that hadn't been Hector watching over them after all. He felt like a fool for believing otherwise, and the knowledge just added to the sticky lump of disappointment Kinnon's betrayal had put in his chest.
"Why would I?" Anders looked up at Peryn, at the Templar towering over him, unhappily. "What would that have solved, for anyone? I could hear what people wanted; I knew what was just and right to provide. What does it matter who they decided to thank for it? The faith of the community in something greater, in the Maker's grace and goodness was worth more than taking credit for that work. I helped people, Peryn, and I asked for nothing in return."

And Peryn knew that was true. Villages lived and died on matters of faith. But, it still sat wrong with him, somehow, that this man, this mage, had credited an ancient spirit with his own work. Or rather, that he'd allowed it. But again, had he done anything wrong? It was a situation Peryn had never faced, from either side. "Hector is not with them, now. They will make the sacrifices and be without help."

"The Maker's hand is still with them." Anders offered a somewhat regretful smile. "I wouldn't have left them without somewhere to turn."

And Peryn supposed they still had the Maker and Andraste… but the way Anders worded that gave him pause.

"Are they all mages?" Peryn asked in a quiet voice, thinking of the abbey, of Kinnon's friends. He'd thought them simply efficient workers when the abbey had gone up as quickly as it had, and it seemed that he was three times the fool.

Anders considered him for a long moment, considered that he was a Templar, asking after his friends, but considered also that he was a good man. "They are not a danger," he said, "and you knew that or you would have picked up on this much sooner. More than that, we left the town thriving."

"Anders? 'S Wynne?" Kinnon's voice was weak.

"Wynne's not here, Kinnon." Anders propped Kinnon's head up on one arm and held a bottle to his lips with the other hand. "Do you remember what happened?"

And Peryn could feel the tug at the centre of his chest, as Kinnon spoke. Kinnon who had saved them, Kinnon who had been his friend, Kinnon who loved him… Kinnon who was a mage. But not a maleficar, something in the back of his head reminded him, unless he was suddenly losing his touch. And his reactions to Niall and Levyn suggested he wasn't. He thought back to Hosberg, to the Warden he'd begged the sisters to send away. They told him he had come for forgiveness, that he had done terrible things to save innocent lives from the darkspawn. And he wondered, now, if this was how that began. Where, truly, was the line, that he now travelled in the company of mages and spirits, who meant well, but were as flawed as any man. Was it not those flaws the Chantry taught him to fear in the minds of people of great power? But, only spirits could be perfect. Only the Maker's first children. And even then, it seemed, some were not so easily classified.

Anders was still trying to figure out how Kinnon's mind had fared. "Why don't you recite a bit of the Chant for me?"

"All men are the work of our Maker's hands, from the lowest slaves to the highest kings. Those who bring harm without provocation to the least of His children are hated and accursed by the Maker," Kinnon recited, slurring the words as he started to drift off again.

Peryn's mind filled in the next verse, the one about truth, which ended in 'all things are known to our Maker and He shall judge their lies'. He would speak with Cullen, once they caught up to the others. Another Templar would ease his mind, would help him judge what he should do. For now, he told himself that these mages had helped him, had preserved as many lives as they were able, that their
purpose and motives were good -- and that if ever he felt they had strayed, his sword would need to be swift.
Kirkwall

Chapter Summary

A message delivered, a journey begins.

After travelling by boat for so long, Val was not used to the ground standing still, and he held his hands out in front of him when the solid stone under his feet seemed to sway with the waves. He disguised the movement by brushing imaginary dirt off his robes, but the smirk Isabela flashed him as she sauntered past said she'd noticed.

"Bit ominous, isn't it?" Candles said to Keili, following her gaze back to the towering bronze sculptures that hung from the cliffsides, greeting anyone who sailed into Kirkwall's ports.

"I imagined it was called the City of Chains for a reason," Keili replied. "I just didn't think it would be so... literal." She gestured wryly at the chains that passed overhead.

"The first time we sailed into Kirkwall, I thought I'd been stolen away to some secret pirate lair," Daylen confessed, coming around Candles's other side. "The Captain said she was taking me to meet my cousin Anton, but I started getting a little nervous with all the chains. I guess they're used to block off the harbour."

"Wait, wait. Your cousin Anton? This isn't Mack's brother, Lord Dog the Fereldan Prince of Kirkwall, is it?" Candles looked Daylen up and down.

"Viscount," Daylen corrected, a motion between piers catching his attention, as two mages on the docks flung fish out of the water and an elven archer tried to shoot them out of the air with arrows. "It's almost like some parts of Rivain, here."

Keili followed his gaze. "Someone's going to get hurt like that."

Candles ducked around her, both hands on her shoulders. "Live a little."

"I'd rather not end up dying a little," Keili huffed.

"Ah, honestly, if this doesn't sum up Kirkwall, I don't know what does," Isabela said with some fondness, resting an elbow on Daylen's shoulder as she watched the fish and arrows fly.

"Izzy? Izzy!"

Isabela turned at the address to find the Viscount of Kirkwall trotting towards them.

"On second thought," Isabela said with a grin, "a harried-looking Hawke traipsing about the Docks? That sums up Kirkwall."

"Not nearly enough things are on fire for that," Anton said as he came up to the group. "At least, not literally. Figuratively? Everything's on fire!"

Anton kept his tone light, but he flashed Isabela a smile that was a little cracked at the corners.
"Nobles not taking your Dalish Baroness seriously, still?" Isabela asked, waiting for the extended political synopsis that would no doubt end up with Anton stealing something or stabbing someone.

"My husband may be dead." The words fell out of Anton's mouth, before he could stop them, and he looked dizzy enough that Keili leapt forward to catch him, in case he fell.

"Cullen?" Isabela looked stunned. "How?"

"He went to the Conclave." Anton held up a hand. "No, I heard from him after that. Or the Gazette did, anyway. A few nights ago... I'm not sure I understand what happened. My contact is a Dalish dreamer who got the message from another Dalish dreamer who was actually there, but... Tevinter attacked and the mountain fell. There may have been a dragon. There are only a handful of survivors confirmed, and one of them is Artemis, but Cullen..."

Isabela let go of Daylen and put her hands on Anton's shoulders, concern clear on her face. "They haven't found him?"

"He was with another group. No one knows where they are, but the pass they were taking is filled in to half a day's walk, if the story is true." Anton's breath finally caught in his throat and a shaky inhale followed.

"It was only a few days ago," Daylen reminded him gently. "Maybe it's just taking a while for him to send a message the more traditional way."

Isabela squeezed Anton's shoulders, words of reassurance sticking in her throat, not wanting to give him false hope even as she tried to wrap her head around it herself. "Where was this? Near where the Conclave was?"

"Haven," Anton confirmed, barely choking out words now. Under her hands, Isabela could feel him shaking as he tried to hold himself together. "In the Frostback Mountains."

Isabela nodded, jaw squared determinedly as she slipped an arm around Anton's shoulders, holding him close. She turned back to Daylen and the others standing around helplessly. "We're setting sail for Ferelden. We'll find him, even if we have to dig him out of the snow ourselves."

Val returned from a foray among the dockside merchants, looking a bit more stained and rumpled than he set out. "Who are we digging out of the snow?"

"My cousin's husband," Daylen explained, giving Val a long look as he gestured to Anton. "Pick a fight with the urchins?"

"The local merchants seem incredibly rude." Val shook a goblet of fish entrails off himself. Anton recognised the accent at once. "The local merchants aren't too friendly to Orlesians, at least not in this part of town."

"What foolishness! And the prince of this city allows it?" Val looked as if he might begin one of his rants.

Anton looked at Isabela. Isabela looked at Daylen. Daylen looked back at Anton.

"Viscount," Isabela corrected, and Daylen pointed to Anton.

Val could feel his stomach drop. "Lord Serault," he introduced himself, holding out his hand, in an attempt to change the subject entirely away from his own critical misstep. "Let us go find your
husband, Viscount. It's a loss no one should suffer."
The Frostbacks

Chapter Summary

The lost are found, hope regained. Kinnon has a strange conversation with Mother Giselle.

Adaar prayed they were going in the right direction, but with snow this thick it was hard to tell. He also prayed that Cullen's group had made it to safety, and, really, that was quite a bit more praying than Adaar was used to doing, even if he had no idea whom he was even praying to. He walked at the front of their procession, his strides clearing a temporary path for his companions with shorter legs, and the snow seeped into his pants and the cold into his bones. He couldn't feel his feet any more and could only tell they were attached because he was still moving forward.

Justice's blue glow bounced off the snow, and he lit their way better than a lantern. Adaar only wished that glow could let off heat like a lantern.

"How is he?" Adaar turned his head to ask Anders, his glance indicating Kinnon, who he still carried in his arms. Cold made the words as stiff as his face felt, and it took effort to move his lips the way he knew they were supposed to work.

"HE IS ALIVE," Justice boomed, snow shifting precipitously on the rocks above them.

"He's in pain," Niall pointed out, from where he walked with Asha and Fen'Din. "Who wouldn't be?"

"I've done that to myself," Jowan volunteered. "It's like the worst hangover you've ever had, except for about three days. You can't do anything, in that condition, except drink broth and occasionally throw up."

Peryn listened, walking close to The Iron Bull, who struck him as by far the least magical of everyone in the group. Even Herald Adaar had that glowing thing in his palm. Kinnon had promised to reveal his secret the day after the Breach was sealed. And Peryn was willing to believe he would have done so -- that he would finally have told the truth about his magic. But, instead, the man had used that magic to save their lives, and while he could be grateful for that, he still found himself angry, deeply betrayed, and unsure of his own abilities. Kinnon hadn't said something sooner, and Peryn hadn't been able to tell. And it wasn't that Kinnon was slight of power, where it might be overlooked -- he'd fought off a Tevinter assault on a stone wall, alone, and then nearly sacrificed himself to save them. But, save them he had. It was no small amount of power. How had he not noticed?

"It's not just you," Niall said to Jowan. "I think we've all done it once or twice. You know Frick died, right? That's what killed him. He burned out and then the desire demons got him."

"Jan's done it," Cormac said. "Of course, Jan does it because he doesn't eat and sleep, like he's supposed to."

"Does the spirit not protect him?" Peryn asked, surprised to hear the words leave his mouth.
Cormac rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Justice is... well... a spirit. He's not used to having a body, or at least he wasn't used to it for a long time. He kept trying to be a spirit, but Jan's body got in his way. They're... better, now. It took them a long time to figure it out. I have to help them, sometimes." He looked back at Peryn. "So, yes, Justice protects him, but not from himself."

And Peryn hadn't really thought about that, hadn't thought about how spirits didn't eat or drink or understand all the little annoyances that went into being human. Watching the glowing form wade through the snow, Peryn again swallowed back his disappointment at the truth behind 'Hector'. As he walked and fell into the rhythm of sliding one foot in front of the other, Peryn looked inward and prayed to the Maker for guidance, aware that there was too much going on for him to make sense of alone.

One arm shielding his face from the blistering wind, Adaar trudged on ahead. The pass up ahead looked promising, and he aimed for that, hoping it was part of whatever path the others had used or that it at the very least led somewhere better than here.

At the first hint of a campfire, Adaar paused, Anders nearly walking into him, and squinted. "Please tell me that's what I think it is."

"I suppose that depends on what you think it is," Jowan said, wading through the snow to peek around Adaar.

"Took you cocks long enough!" echoed across the snow toward them, as two well-bundled elf-sized figures moved toward the group.

"Sera!" the other one exclaimed, and then, "Oh, no. Is that Kinnon?" The layers of scarves were peeled back to reveal a young elven woman that Fen'Din recognised -- Ellana, who'd gone with Kinnon to sort out that trouble in the Bannorn. "Is he alive?"

"He needs to rest," Fen'Din answered, struggling toward the front. "We're all here."

"Oh, good, great. I mean, it is great. It's real good you're all still here. But, now, we're going to sit through more singing about the Maker is great, the Maker is good, the Maker has delivered His messengers from evil, blah blah Chantry shite," Sera huffed, looking them all over. "It's real good you're not dead, though. I'd be pissed."

"I'd be pissed if I were dead too," Adaar said, aching with relief.

"Yes, I don't recommend it," Niall drawled.

Adaar considered asking more about the 'more singing' he needed to worry about, but he was too numbed, too tired to put the words in the right order fast enough to care. "They could sing about Corypheus's left nut for all I care, as long as there's fire and food." As he spoke, he started walking again, making for that promising glow.

"Oh no, that I'd like to hear," Sera said. "Or sing. Maybe. Need more booze to figure it out."

"Honestly, 'need more booze to figure it out' could be the name of my biography," Jowan sighed as they all started to trudge the last few steps to safety and solace.

"What would you have me tell them?" Cullen's voice rang out into the night. "This isn't what we asked them to do!"

"We cannot simply ignore this!" Cassandra shouted back. "We must find a way!"
"And who put you in charge? We need a consensus or we have nothing!"

"Please! We must use reason!" Josephine argued, hands out to stay the argument around her. "Without the infrastructure of the Inquisition, we're hobbled!"

"That can't come from nowhere!"

"She didn't say it could!" Leliana cut in.

"Enough!" Cassandra groaned. "This is getting us nowhere!"

"We agree on that!" Cullen huffed.

Kinnon groaned and rubbed his eyes with one hand, trying to figure out where he was and why people were yelling. The last thing he remembered was something vague about Anders and some chicken. Before that, everything was falling. White. The snow. Peryn!

Gasping, he tried to sit up, falling back on his elbows.

"Shh, you need rest." A calming voice he recognised, but couldn't place.

Kinnon looked at the woman sitting beside his bed. "How long have they been at it? Where's Jan? Where's Peryn?"

"They've been discussing the future since the Heralds returned. Jan's taking a rest of his own. He carried you here, you know, and told us you were a hero. You saved everyone you were with." Mother Giselle offered a soothing smile and gestured to the argument outside. "And because of the people you saved, because of you, they have that luxury to argue. The enemy could not follow, and with time to doubt, we turn to blame. Infighting may threaten as much as this Corypheus."

"Doubt that," Kinnon muttered, having seen Corypheus far more closely than Mother Giselle. "Do we know where Corypheus is, now? Where are the parts of his forces we didn't bury?"

"We are not sure where we are," Mother Giselle admitted. "Which may be why, despite the numbers he still commands, there is no sign of him."

"Oh, I wouldn't put too much of an army with him after that," Kinnon scoffed. "Jo-- Levyn did what he's best known for. I'm not sure even an ancient magister could survive the power of good old Levyn fucking up magnificently."

"It's possible, if Corypheus survived, which Jan believes he did, the Heralds may be believed dead. Or even that without our stronghold at Haven, we are helpless. Or, perhaps, he girds for another attack, and time is our only advantage." Mother Giselle shook her head. "I cannot claim to know the mind of that creature. Only his effect on us."

"Jan knows more than any of us," Kinnon remembered. "And he knows that thing can't be killed with fire." He finally managed to sit up. "But, if they're going to argue about what to do next, I'm sure Jan and Fen'Din will settle it. Jan knows what's going on and Fen'Din's been handling squabbling apprentices since before the Blight."

Mother Giselle offered him a patient smile, and it was almost peaceful on this side of the tent, with canvas between them and the arguing, between them and the rest of the world.

"Our leaders struggle because of what we survivors witnessed," she said. "We saw our defenders stand... and fall. And now we have seen them return. The more the enemy is beyond us, the more
miraculous these actions appear. And the more our trials seem ordained."

Kinnon shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know how much was 'ordained' and how much was sheer
dumb luck. We kind of specialise in that."

But Mother Giselle just kept smiling. "It is hard to accept, no? What 'we' have been called to endure?
What 'we', perhaps, must come to believe?"

"We didn't die and come back," Kinnon insisted, shaking his head and instantly regretting the
motion. "I'm a mage. You have to know that, by now. There's a room under all that snow, and it's
the last thing I did before I ran out of power. We didn't die. We walked away from it."

"Of course, and the dead cannot return from beyond the Veil."
This time, Mother Giselle raised an
eyebrow and paused for her meaning to sink in. "But, the people know what they saw. Or perhaps
what they needed to see. The Maker works both in the moment and in how it is remembered. Can
you truly say the heavens are not with us?"

"You saw Corypheus -- that... thing. Do you really believe he assaulted the heavens, speaking of
heavens? Do you think he's what he claims to be?"

"You know as well as I do what the scripture says. If this Corypheus claims that action as his own,
then he is a monster beyond all imagining. All mankind continues to suffer for that sin. If even a
shred of it is true, all the more reason Andraste would choose someone to rise against him."

"You've been doing this a long time, haven't you," Kinnon realised, listening to the words she chose.
"You lay the Maker's hand in memory."

"I remind people of what they have seen, of what good they may yet do," Mother Giselle demurred.

"Yes, well. Whatever they believe, Corypheus is a real, physical threat. We can't do much against
that with hope alone." He wobbled to his feet to get some fresh air, surprised when her voice
followed him out.

Adaar was huddled by the fire, the blanket he was given too small for his frame, when he first heard
the singing cleaving the night air.

"Do you hear that?" he asked, tilting his head to turn his good ear, unsure where the sound was
coming from.

"Are you only just now hearing it?" Solas sighed, looking less than enthused with the makeshift
concert, particularly when a lone woman's voice swelled into a chorus.

All around them, more and more people joined in, clearly already knowing the words. "What is
happening?" Adaar asked, sliding a look over to Fen'Din. "Are they possessed? Is this Corypheus's
doing?"

"They're praising the Maker for delivering us from Corypheus," Fen'Din explained, holding his cup
of beer over the fire to warm it. "It's a traditional Andrastian thing. When something incredibly good
happens, sing praise to the Maker. Everyone knows the words. They've probably been singing it
since they were children."

Solas looked like he might be debating a headache potion or maybe a direct assault on a barrel of
brandy. He stood and stalked away from them, toward a single torch that stood at the edge of the
camp, raised on a small ridge.
Fen'Din looked curiously after him, but continued explaining to Adaar. "I don't know how much
time you've spent in Chantryes or even out in Andrastian festivals, but they're surprisingly consistent,
even after all these centuries. The songs remain the same. And in keeping with the Song of Andraste
-- I'm assuming you're familiar with the basic legends, at least -- everyone sings when things happen.
Songs of joy, songs of sorrow, songs of absolutely nothing is different today than yesterday. They
pay people for that, you know. Chanters who just stand out all day and sing the Chant."

Solas returned, looking deeply contemplative. "I know where we are."

"And the--" Fen'Din leaned back and looked up. "Oh, do tell."

The blanket twisted around Adaar as he turned, giving Solas a surprised look. "How would you
know where we are? You've been this far up the mountains?"

Solas's indulgent smile said this was hardly the most remote place he'd ever been. "I've seen a great
many places in my travels. This is one. Though I was much more interested in what lay to the north."

He glanced back again at the torch, which glowed blue with veilfire.

"I'm hoping that's not as ominous as you make it sound," Adaar said, squinting into the dark past the
torch but seeing only vague shapes. "I don't suppose you found a sunny paradise to the north?"

"Not that far north, I'm afraid. I was not en route to Seheron." Solas chuckled and picked up a stick,
drawing in the snow that hadn't yet been trampled into mud. "There is an ancient fortress near here,
on a high peak. We need to go up and north, and it will become clear. You must be their guide."

"You know where we're going," Fen'Din pointed out. "That suggests you should lead us."

"I have listened, this night, as the Revered Mother spoke. She is a wise woman, worth heeding. Her
kind understands the moments that unify a cause. Or fracture it. The two of you are the figureheads
of this movement, and you must remain so. Your link to the rifts, to the Breach, will ensure you are
used in this fight, whatever comes, but for now, I think it best you remain in control." Solas paused,
looking up from the building he'd traced in the snow, in the ancient elven style. "The orb Corypheus
carried. The power he used against you. It is elven. When he unlocked that power, he could not
contain it, and it destroyed the temple on that hill, your Conclave in it. I do not yet know how
Corypheus survived, but Jan's story is suggestive. ... Nor do I know how people will react, once they
learn of the orb's origin."

"We're elves. They'll come for us. Isn't that how it always happens?" Fen'Din gestured for Solas to
sit. "But, what is the orb? What do you know and what have you heard?"

"They were foci," Solas explained, "used to channel ancient magicks. I have seen such things in the
Fade. Old memories of an older magic. Corypheus may think it Tevinter. His empire's magic was
built on the bones of my people. Our people," he amended with a nod in Fen'Din's direction.
"Knowing or not, he risks our alliance. I cannot allow it."

"What a mess," Adaar muttered, his sigh of breath misting in the air. "And humans like to shift the
blame when they can, so I'm sure this won't do the elves any favours."

"All the more reason for us to win," Solas said with the barest smile.

Adaar had to laugh at that. "Right. Because we're the Heralds of Andraste," he said with some
amusement. "An elf, and a Tal Vashoth."

"And this is where Mother Giselle will be our finest piece in play." Fen'Din's face remained terribly
still. "I have seen what the Sisters can do with a closed group. This time, we must be certain we control the message, but it will be best served from her hands. The people will want to hear it. We don't need them to like us, we just need them to believe we are the solution to the problem at hand, and that attacking us will not serve them."

"You've done this before," Solas observed.

"I'm a Senior Enchanter of a Circle that escaped annulment. I know exactly how this is done." Fen'Din rinsed his mouth with warm beer and turned to Adaar, firelight shining in his eyes. "North, then?"

"To Seheron?" Adaar teased. To Solas, he added, "Are you sure we shouldn't lead the Inquisition into the tropics? Seems like a great place to fight ancient magisters."

Solas chuckled. "Why don't we settle for getting everyone out of the snow first?"
Chapter 131

Chapter Summary

Hiking through the Frostbacks with the injured.

"Not all mages are Magisters," Fenris argued from over Peryn's shoulder, where he'd been pressed against Peryn's back for half the day, carried since he'd fallen into the snow, "neither in skill nor in temperament. And they are trained to lie, in the South. No Southern mage would ever admit being one, outside a Circle. My own husband ..." He laughed weakly. "Artemis, come tell the Templar how you bought my house. He wasn't going to tell me, either. Maybe it would have been better if he hadn't. I'd never have known."

"Come on, Fenris, you know I was right," Cormac argued, Peryn and Fenris on one side of him and Anders and Kinnon on the other. "He had to tell you. It would've been worse if you found out by yourself."

"I wouldn't have found out! Who was going to tell me?" Fenris coughed and laughed, delirious with the cold.

"You have too much faith in my ability to keep a secret," Artemis said, forcing out a chuckle as he pointedly didn't look at his brother. He shouldered both his and Fenris's belongings, trying to mask the worry he felt at his husband's state. Anders was here, Artie reminded himself. Anders wouldn't let it get too serious. "These things have a way of coming out. You would have heard the truth at some point and then been even angrier. And I was always planning on telling you, just... at the right time. Clearly that was not the right time."

"You were... angry at him for buying a house?" Peryn asked, voice a bit strained from the walking and the effort of carrying Fenris, no matter how light the elf was. "I do not understand."

"Tevinter," Cormac pointed out. "He's a Tevinter elf. My brother's a mage."

"It is a house, not a person." Peryn still sounded baffled.

"See, that's what I thought," Cormac sighed. "Who's not going to be happy you bought them a nice house that they're already living in? That guy, I guess."

Fenris snorted and paused, taking stock of himself. "Potion?"

Cormac ducked around Artemis, pulling a healing draught from his bag. "We need to stop a few minutes!" he called up to the Heralds. "A rest before that ridge!"

The caravan slowed, carts turned to block the wind, and Cormac traded Peryn the bottle for Fenris, hefting the elf across his arms. "Just hold it for him. He can drink. I just don't want him dropping it in the snow."

Somewhere to the side, the sound of Chancellor Roderick arguing with Mother Giselle began again, strident words about the Maker's will and magic.

"That man is at it again?" Artie muttered, hovering close to his husband as he craned his neck and
tried to see what the fuss was about.

"He is loud," Peryn agreed softly.

"Good thing Anders saved his life," Artie added with false enthusiasm, but Peryn was paying less attention to the shouting and more to the figure in Chantry robes standing stiffly just to the side of where Chancellor Roderick was making a scene.

"I hardly think this is the time or place, Chancellor," Mother Giselle said, her voice calm and measured but carrying just as well as his. "Andraste has delivered us through her Heralds, one of whom is a mage. I do not think she chose them lightly."

"It's always about mages," Fenris quipped once he'd swallowed the potion, a tired smile curling his lips.

"I guess we're just that interesting to talk about," Artemis drawled.

Cormac helped Fenris sit beside him and stood to whistle at Kinnon, waving him over. Peryn might not be thrilled having him so close, but better to get him out of Roderick's line of fire. "You know what would be funny? Fifty-year-old Chantry bigwig manifests magic in the middle of an argument with a Revered Mother. He looks like he's going to blow fire out his ass any second."

"Manifestations are much younger," Peryn protested, faint amusement curling the corners of his lips. "It is very not probable for an old man."

"Maybe he's never had enough emotion until now. Look at him! He's turning red! Besides, there's rifts straight into the Fade. Maybe he's never been strong enough." Cormac laughed at the idea, as if joking about magic with templars was a normal part of his day.

"I will pour a beer on the snow for Andraste, if fire springs from his buttocks," Peryn decided. "For it would be a sign of the Maker's hand at work, for such an old man to suddenly come to magic."

"Or demons," Fenris pointed out.

"I think we would know about demons." Peryn looked down at the elf sitting beside him in the snow.

When Fenris felt the rumbling in the ground beneath him, he looked automatically at Artemis, not immediately registering that an earthquake could be a problem here, not after the more... pleasant associations he now had with the sensation.

Artie blinked back at him, and then he noticed it too. "That's not me," he assured Fenris, Cormac, and a confused Peryn.

"The Maker has something else to say?" Peryn said with a weak smile, looking around him nervously. Parts of the mountain were unstable, particularly after the avalanche they'd brought down upon Corypheus.

Artie tensed as he looked around, wondering how much stone he could move, how much he would need to move to protect them if there was another avalanche.

Kinnon was halfway between the argument and his friends when the stone beneath him shifted. Confused, he put out a hand to stop it, before realising he couldn't. The mana burned in his hands, in his arms, useless as he saw the slide start above the edge of the path. "Run!" he shouted, sure the sound would bring down more snow, but knowing they'd at least stand a chance.
"Is it him?" Peryn wondered aloud, frozen in horror, knowing he was too far to help until after the ridge came down.

"There's no way. It'll be days before he can even warm his own hands." Cormac's eyes widened as the ridge crumbled and Kinnon stayed still. "Kinnon, you idiot, move!"

Mother Giselle ran past, grabbing Kinnon's arm and hauling him with her, as the slide caught on some invisible stone and turned, the whole of it pounding down on where Roderick still stood with his eyes closed, praying to be delivered, once again.

"Go back!" Kinnon tried to turn away, but in his condition it was all he could do to stay upright. "Go back! We have to get them out!"

"Artie? You and me, we'll go help Anders?" Cormac lowered his voice and put his hands on Kinnon's shoulders. "You need to sit down. Right now. We'll go look."

Artemis nodded, face ashen. He made sure the ground beneath them was solid, smoothing over new weaknesses in the stone as he rushed to the mess of rubble and snow.

"Careful!" Anders said, following at Artie's heels. "The wrong move could send the rocks tumbling again!"

"No pressure," Artie muttered as he reached out to the stone, aware that Kinnon would have been better suited for this under different circumstances. He rubbed his hands to bring life back to his cold-numbed fingers, thinking to move the rubble in pieces, only to decide that all at once might be less messy. He fused the stone together and managed to leverage it and the snow to the side, teeth gritted with the effort of the spell, careful not to weaken the ground further.

Anders reached out with both magic and his hands, looking for something to hang the magic on, something that could be healed. He pressed further and further, hoping for something, for anything... and found a small nest of fennecs, already digging their way out.

"There's nothing here," he said, finally, sinking to his knees in the snow and gesturing to a corner of the pile. "There's some fennecs, if you want to rescue them. They'll make it, though."

As he curled forward in defeat, his eyes caught the way the snow shifted, the way it melted, the rivulets of slightly warm water soaking into his trouser legs. "Artie, don't melt it. It's--" And then he felt the spirit, tasted the foulness of the demon in Justice's mind.

Anders scrambled to his feet while Artie pulled his staff from his back, the demon roaring out of the snow in a cloud of steam. Its skin glowed red hot, but the snow and cold tempered the flames that would normally sprout from it.

Someone called out 'demon!' behind them, and a moment later, an arrow whizzed by them both to hit the demon in the centre of the chest. A glance back revealed Leliana nocking another arrow, jaw squared in determination. Battered or not, the Inquisition was a small army, and one rage demon stood no chance against that.

Anders shot off a bolt of energy at the demon, but Artie ended the battle quickly and decisively by flipping the massive stone he'd just moved back the other way, crushing the demon with the rubble it had just crawled its way out of.

"That poor man." Mother Giselle shook her head, sadly. "Even in death, he could find no peace, but only anger with his fellows."
"Hardly his fellows," Peryn protested, helping Fenris up. "He argues the place of magic in a just world."

"Are mages not men and women like the rest of us?" Mother Giselle asked, pointedly. "The Chant does not teach us to hate magic, or even mages. It teaches us that those who turn their power against the undeserving will be cursed in the Maker's eye. There are just as many nobles as mages who might take a lesson."

And Peryn knew she was right, knew he'd recited those same verses in the defence of mages. So, why was he so willing to make the distinction some past Divine had made, now, instead of holding himself to the word of the Chant, as he'd always done? Perhaps because his friends had all been mages, and they'd hidden that from him. But, if this was how mages were regarded, here, could he blame them? They were not pulled aside to become essential in the fight against the darkspawn, from what he'd seen and heard. Not like things were in Hossberg, at all. It did not sit well with him, and the ease with which he found himself sliding into that mind sat with him even less well.

"We should move on," Fenris suggested, standing under his own power, once again. "If we cannot recover that body to burn it, we need to get away from it, before it draws anything else down on us."

"He is right," Leliana agreed with a regretful look at what was now Roderick's tomb. "Are we ready to move?"

"I guess Cole was right after all," Artie muttered, and Anders supposed he was.
Skyhold

Chapter Summary

Skyhold, at last. The beginnings of a long argument.

Solas followed just behind the Heralds, nudging them subtly toward his goal -- to the place he knew was here, but they had to seem to find. As they came to the top of a ridge, looking down on a lower peak, he hung back, waiting.

Fen'Din tapped on Adaar's head, pointing just beside his eye, as the clouds shifted around them, between them and something that lay below. "Is that a wall? Past the clouds, I think that's a tower..."

Adaar looked up from where he had been minding his steps, hands on Fen'Din's shins securing him on his shoulders. He'd been trying not to look out and down and could have done without the reminder of just how far up they were, but the hope of a solid roof overhead was enough to dampen that anxiety. He squinted out where Fen'Din had pointed, and a slow grin split his face.

"That's a tower," Adaar agreed, nodding carefully so as not to poke the elf with his horns. "I can see the battlements from here and... Other there." He pointed down at what looked like a bridge, long arches holding it up. "Looks like that's the way to get in."

"Can you get us down there?" Fen'Din asked Solas.

"I don't know. You might want to ask one of the other mages. Steps would be extremely useful, though I'm sure we'll want to remove them, later, once we've found the actual road." Solas looked back along the line of exhausted people behind them. "Artemis, perhaps. I don't think Kinnon is well, yet, and I'm not sure who else I'd trust with structural work."

Fen'Din looked back, trying not to unbalance Adaar. "Mack! Artie! We could use your help!"

Cormac drew his brother away from Fenris and Theron. "You'd better not tell me we've got dragons," he joked as they came close enough to avoid shouting.

"We've found shelter. We've found an entire ancient fortress, from the look of it." Fen'Din gestured for them to step forward and look down. "We just need a way to get down to that bridge without losing anyone or anything."

"A fortress?" Artie repeated, some of the exhaustion slipping from his shoulders at that. "Out here?"

"Apparently!" Adaar said, waving broadly in the fortress's direction.

"Okay so, stairs," Artie said mostly to himself as he inched closer, eyeing the gap between where they were and where they needed to be. "A lot of stairs. Also I'd like to note that you didn't tell Mack that you didn't find any dragons. Just throwing that out there."

"If there are dragons, we haven't found any," Adaar said with a crooked smile.

"Well, let's hope it stays that way," Artemis said distractedly, moving to their other side as he examined the angle. "I suggest you find something to amuse yourselves in the meantime. This could
take a while." He looked up at the Heralds with wide eyes. "Just please don't let anyone start singing."

Theron looked around wide-eyed, wider-eyed than he'd been even at the gates. "It's in better shape than we got in Gwaren!"

"Many things are," Fenris reminded him, looking all the more tired at the stairs that stretched up at the far side of the courtyard.

"And we're sure no one's living here?" Cullen looked around them, waiting for a trap to spring. "We're not walking into an Avvar hold?"

"The Avvar called it 'Skyhold', but there have been none here in a very long time," Solas said, looking more relaxed than he had since the first torches were spotted on the mountains facing Haven. "It, like so many things, was once elvhen. It has changed from its reflection in the Fade."

"If it's got a roof, the walls are thick, and we can start a fire, I love it already," Kinnon decided, leaning heavily on Jowan.

Artie chewed his lip as he looked around, an arm around his husband's waist. It was overgrown, enough debris scattered about the courtyard to make his hands itch, but Theron was right: from what he could see, Skyhold was in better shape than the last set of buildings he'd worked on.

As he eyed a bit of wall that needed patching up, Artie wondered when he'd decided this was his job. But, well, of course it was. No one else would do it right.

"You are already thinking of how to clean it up, aren't you?" Fenris teased Artemis with a tired smile.

"No," Artie said unconvincingly, tearing his eyes away from a particularly overgrown bush by the stairs.

"Who do I have to carry up the stairs?" Cormac asked, holding his arms out as he turned to the crowd behind him. "Kinnon? Fenris?"

"I think I'm--" Kinnon's demurral turned into a shriek as Bull swept him over one shoulder.

"Never leave a human to do a qunari's job." Bull grinned broadly and offered his other arm to Fenris. "My options are the bear or the Bull. Delightful." Fenris peered up at the tower of meat at his side.

"There's a joke about trading in Antiva in there somewhere, but I'm too tired for it." Varric chuckled, breathily. "What do you say, Shouty? You want to carry me up the stairs?"

"No, but I will." Cormac laughed as he knelt to let Varric climb onto his back.

Behind them, a squabble broke out as Sera hoisted herself onto Anders's shoulders.

"You can't just jump on people!" Anders protested, staggering to the side, under the sudden imbalance.

"Sure I can. Just did." Sera folded her arms on top of his head. "Shouldn't be so tall if you don't want people climbing you for a lookout."

Anders sputtered. "I'm pretty sure this isn't what I meant when I was talking about the oppression of
mages, but I'm also pretty sure it counts."

Cullen looked at Cassandra and then at the stairs. "I'm not getting involved in this. Shall we?"

Cassandra gave him a once-over. "I'm not carrying you," she said with nearly convincing seriousness before starting up the stairs.

Cullen sputtered and groaned. "I am actually fine with that, thank you!"

Adaar patted him on the shoulder on his way by, just hard enough to rock Cullen forward a step. "She probably could, you know," he said admiringly.

"'Probably'?” Sera repeated on her way past with her 'steed'. She dug her heels in in a bid for him to go faster. "Hyah! Come on!"

"I will drop you," Anders grumbled.

"Well, at least wait until the top of the steps to do it," Sera suggested. "I wanna see how far I can roll!"

"You are not rolling down the stairs!" Cullen called after her, horrified.


At the top of the stars, Bull set down the two men he was carrying and gave the ancient doors a long look. "These things are huge. There's really not a smaller door cut in them?" He shook his head.

"If you doubt your strength, perhaps you need an elf to show you the way," Fenris teased, checking to make sure all his pouches were still attached and still closed.

"You can't even carry yourself up the stairs," Bull pointed out.

"Me? No, I meant Solas." Fenris laughed and stepped back to let Solas pass him. "Some things just need a magical touch, and I have learned well enough that an even smaller number of those shouldn't be handled by my husband. Isn't that right, Amatus?"

"You seem to enjoy my 'magical touch' well enough," Artemis said with a saucy wink. "But, I don't think that's going to help us open any doors."

"No need for all that fancy sparklefinger shit," Bull decided, throwing his shoulder against the door, to no avail. "Okay, maybe some fancy sparklefinger shit. Is this thing locked?"

Solas crouched down and studied the metal bracing the door. "Rust. It is probably in the hinges."

"Here, lemme at it," Cormac volunteered, staggering to the top of the stairs and dropping to his knees to let Varric down.

"It is a simple enough spell. I would be surprised if any mage among us did not know it." Solas stood and gently patted the door, which remained stuck shut. "Strength alone may move this, now. But just think, if it moves so little for us, how well might it face our enemies?"

"This is a point," Adaar said, wondering how the battle at Haven might have gone if they’d had similar defences.

"What I lack in hair, I make up for in knowledge," Solas drawled, a sly glance in Sera's direction indicating he'd said that to undercut whatever joke she was about to make.
"Oh! Is that why you have no hair?" she asked, undeterred. "All the brains just... pushed it out?"

Solas sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I wonder what that implies about our hairier friends," Fenris quipped, quirking a smile in Anders's direction.

Anders gave him an unimpressed look, still slouched under Sera's weight. "Could you get down now, please?"

"Nah."

Cassandra let out an exasperated sound and pushed the doors open herself. They were heavy, and she had to lean into them, but they opened readily enough.

"So this is where it begins." Cullen trailed in behind those in front of him, taking in the thick stone walls and the half-fallen balconies. As fortresses went, he was prepared to credit this one with being well-designed to hold off a siege. The walls seemed to be thicker than his forearm, in most places, and the stonework had held up to centuries of weathering and abuse. Even with the windows broken out, the hall was warmer than the courtyard, if only because it stopped the wind. Sunlight filtered down from little holes in the roof, lighting a fallen chandelier big enough to have slain a qunari scouting party, when it came down, had one been unlucky enough to be standing beneath it.

"It began in Haven," Leliana corrected. "Where we raised the spectre of a new Inquisition. This is where we turn that promise into action."

"We have already begun," Fen'Din reminded her. "Ferelden knows us, and whether or not all of it rushes to our aid, like the Hinterlands, there is not a nobleman left in the nation who does not respect what we are capable of."

"But what do we do?" Josephine had crept up the steps so quietly that Adaar hadn't even noticed her until she spoke. "We know nothing about Corypheus except that he wanted your marks."

Adaar flexed the fingers of his glowing hand, stretching out the dull ache that had settled there, pain that had become just more background noise to ignore. "Well. We know he's Tevinter and a magister. Do we need to worry about the Imperium? Because that's... that's just what we need, on top of a mage and templar army and a dragon."

"Well, who doesn't like a challenge?" Artie muttered, only half-listening as he looked around at the sheer mess. Not as bad as their home had been when Fenris was squatting in it, but still bad enough to make him itch.

"I get the feeling we're dealing with extremists," Cullen reassured them, "not the vanguard of an invasion."

"I can confirm that." Dorian nodded. "But, you mustn't underestimate the power these extremists wield. We're talking about not the people of Tevinter, but a not insubstantial portion of the Magisterium. These are powerful mages with strong political and trade connections, as well as essentially personal armies of slaves and free men. This is not a handful of revolutionaries from the University of Orlais, drinking in the cheapest bar that will put up with them and stringing together wild theories about the secret war between the dwarven empire and the Scaled Ones, and how they're going to unlock the mysteries of Halamshiral to stop the ancient evil."

"Tevinter is still not the Imperium of a thousand years ago," Josephine pointed out. "What Corypheus yearns to 'restore' no longer exists."
"If it existed, he wouldn't need to restore it, would he?" Dorian scoffed. "Enough of the pieces remain, and of all of these lunatics, he knows where they are and how they work."

"Like that idiot who wanted to be Archon." Varric nodded and stepped into the circle by the chandelier, as the rest of the crowd slowly piled into the building behind him. "I got it all written down somewhere, because it's all full of weird Tevinter words, but he got some ancient dragon contraption and put the former King of Ferelden in it, and sent us all into the Fade, so he could restore the Dreamers to their rightful power or some lunatic shit. He's crazy, but he almost made it work. And then we killed him."

Adaar stared at Varric as he processed all of that. "I would accuse you of making that up, but that's no weirder than 'Andraste shoved me out of the sky, and now I have a glowy hand that can close rifts, except an ancient Tevinter Magister is envious'."

Varric smirked. "Incidentally, that's going to be the title of my next book."

"You're writing another book?" Cassandra asked, an odd, strangled quality in her voice that had Adaar furrowing his brow.

Varric quirked an eyebrow, smirk creeping higher with a tilt of his head. "Are you a fan, Seeker?"

"Hardly," she said too quickly, with too much disgust. She turned away immediately, looking intently at the rubble. "And I believe we were discussing Corypheus..."
Chapter 133

Chapter Summary

An Inquisitor is chosen. The other glow-handed misfit is granted a supporting role.

"Whether or not it is possible to restore, or at this point resurrect, the Imperium of old, I'm sure Tevinter would shed no tears if the South fell to chaos," Josephine observed.

"So, the thing is, Corypheus claims he wants to enter the Black City, so he can become a god."
Cormac slid an arm around Anders's waist. "Now, we've met, before. The last time he started raving about the Black City and the glory of Dumat, he said he'd been promised godhood, but didn't find it in the Black City -- and he swears it was already black, when he got there, which raises some questions."

"The answers to those questions do not matter, if he is willing to tear this world apart to enter the next. Either way, we will all die," Leliana was quick to point out.

"Yes, but what if he's not wrong?" Cullen demanded. "What if we deny him the Heralds' glowing hands, and he finds another way into the Fade?"

"Then he gains the power he seeks or unleashes catastrophe on us all."
"Leliana looked curiously at Cullen, wondering if he realised he'd just made her point.

"I don't think that's an either or," Anders reminded them both. "And there are other ways into the Fade. Jowan and I have both travelled there."

"There is chaos beyond the bounds of our kingdom, and this Corypheus means to draw upon it to raise himself until he can rule the whole of it, in dreams and out. I do not believe, given that he has returned from death at least once, that killing him is the answer. We may need to bind him once again, and more firmly. Still, whatever we choose, we must get past that dragon." Fen'Din looked around the circle. "Is it an Archdemon?"

"Yes." Cole appeared, as if he'd been standing there the entire time. Perhaps he had been. Only Fen'Din didn't look surprised.

"No," Anders retorted. "It's not an Archdemon. If it were an Archdemon, it would be blighted. Having almost been eaten by that dragon, I can promise you it's not blighted -- or at least not blighted in the way darkspawn and ghouls are." He left out the part where Wardens were also blighted. No need to leave himself and Blackwall carrying that around, with everything else.

"Then it is less likely that Corypheus has started another Blight, at least," Leliana observed, a hollow look behind her eyes reminding them that she had fought beside the Hero of Ferelden against the last Archdemon.

"Whatever it is, it's dangerous," Cullen said. "Commanding such a creature gives Corypheus an advantage we can't ignore."

"Clearly the answer is to get our own dragon!" Bull suggested, a grin splitting his face.
"That is... not what I was suggesting, no," Cullen said with a grimace. Somewhere, he was certain, his husband's ears were ringing.

"No," Leliana said, shaking her head as Bull geared up to protest.

Adaar tried not to look too amused at Bull's answering pout. "The dragon is... something else. Do we have to worry about an attack on us here? I don't think the Inquisition could survive another Haven. I'm personally done dragging my ass through the snow for a while."

"Skyhold has the bones to withstand Corypheus. After what we did to him at Haven, with just three mages, I'd bet against a direct attack." Cullen looked thoroughly impressed.

"We do have one advantage," Leliana offered. "We know what he intends to do next. To judge by the strange future encountered by Enchanter Fen'Din and Master Pavus, he intends to assassinate Empress Celene."

"Imagine the chaos her death would cause," Josephine speculated, looking up from her notes. "With his army..."

"An army he'll bolster with a massive force of demons, or so the future tells us..." Cullen tipped his head toward Josephine, with a pointed look.

"Corypheus could conquer the entire south of Thedas, god or no god," she finished.

Leliana sighed. "I wish we knew more about what we were dealing with."

Varric cleared his throat and pointed at Anders. "As the Warden says, he's got experience with this kind of thing."

"That was the worst holiday ever. Let's not do it again." Cormac laughed, tiredly.

Cassandra's eyes narrowed, as she looked from Varric to Anders to Cormac. "I should wring your neck! You told me you couldn't find the last Hawke!"

"To be fair, I couldn't." Varric held up his hands and backed up, tripping over Cullen. "It's not my fault he showed up later."

"You conniving little shit!" Cassandra hissed, showing just how much she believed that, lunging for him as he scrambled to put himself behind Cullen.

"I am not a shield!" Cullen protested, leaning away from the angry Seeker.

Cullen managed to wriggle out from between them, only for Adaar to step in his place, pulling Cassandra up short when she tried to spot Varric around the qunari's bulk.

"He's leading this Inquisition! First Leliana and I searched for Warden-Commander Amell, but she proved... difficult to locate, and more than that, staunchly unwilling. We could not get to her, but someone told her we were looking, and she contacted us. I understand the Wardens answer to neither queen nor Chantry, but I thought her tone wholly unnecessary." Cassandra pointed
at Cormac. "And then we came looking for the Champion of Kirkwall, but he told us we were better suited looking for his brother. And you told me his brother, standing right here, couldn't be found! You said you didn't know where he was!"

"I didn't," Varric insisted. "And after he showed up, you didn't ask again."

"Just so we're clear, Commander Amell is my cousin, and in this instance, I think she speaks for the family," Cormac cut in. "We're one of the largest and most politically powerful mage families in southern Thedas, not including Rivain, and I won't have us taking the name of the organisation that tried to have us wiped out."

"But, we need--"

"Am I unclear, Seeker? The Maker could not move me." Cormac pulled up to the whole of his height, and folded his arms, hands hidden under his sleeves. Under other circumstances, he might be willing, but he had to protect Anders; he had to protect Bethany. Drawing the attention of all of Thedas, with its gossip-mongers and zealots would do none of them any favours. "We'll help you with Corypheus, because he's a threat to us all. But, you're not smearing the Amell name like that. You're not dragging us down after centuries of facing down hunters and Templars alike, no offence, Cullen, but you had all the sense of a spooked bronto when we met. Find someone else to look good on your half-sheets and commemorative plates. I will not be your figurehead. Not under this banner."

Cullen half-expected steam to rise from Cassandra's ears. "The Inquisition is what we make of it, now," she said, clearly fighting to keep her voice measured. "If you wanted it to represent something different, you could have had a say in that. Honestly? I do not care. What I care about is the fact that the Inquisition needed a leader, and instead of receiving a 'no' from the one I'd -- we'd -- hoped could be that leader, I was sent on a wild goose chase looking for him. I do not appreciate being deceived, but it seems there is quite a bit of that going around."

Anders barked out a laugh, blue light starting to ripple over his skin, but Adaar cut in again.

"As charming as this all is, none of this is going to help us defeat Corypheus." He ran a hand over one of his horns. "Leading or not, the 'right Hawke' is here now, and on our side." He made eye-contact with Cassandra, Cormac, and Varric to remind them of that.

"Does that make you the wrong Hawke?" Fenris whispered to Artie.

"No, that's Carver," Artie whispered back.

"We still have no leader," Cullen pointed out, looking around him, at the faces he'd come to know.

"Do we really need one? I mean, we mostly make decisions based on whoever knows the most about what we're facing. More of a council thing." Kinnon sat tiredly on the floor, leaning on Jowan's legs.

"Hey, I've got an idea." Jowan pointed at Fen'Din. "Why don't we give it to the Senior Enchanter? There's somebody who knows how to lead."

"I could, and I would be happy to shape the course of this Inquisition, to alleviate the fears of the masses and the mages," Fen'Din volunteered, stepping forward.

Cullen eyed him in horror.

"You're the freakiest mage here," Anders pointed out. "Not to be rude, but if we're trying not to scare people, better me than you, and I don't want it. What the Blight's wrong with Brother Kinnon?"
"That he is a mage, not a Chantry Brother?" Peryn's displeasure could've melted a despair demon. Niall stepped even further from him.

"We have a charming and polite option, touched by Andraste, herself." Leliana stepped into the circle, and Cullen thought she might be referring to herself. That would be all right, he thought. And then she went on. "I believe Herald Adaar is our obvious choice, here."

"The qunari?" Blackwall finally spoke, his surprise reflected on most of the faces around him.

"I'm cuter," Bull joked, in the awkward silence that followed.

Adaar blinked and tugged at his bad ear, certain he'd misheard that. "I'm sorry, you want who now?"

Leliana just smiled up at him and placed a hand on his arm.

"Glowing in the dark is... is really not a good basis for choosing a leader," Adaar went on, voice rising in pitch. "Or if we're going by height, the horns really shouldn't count..."

"A moment ago, when everyone was at each other's throats, you de-escalated the situation before it could get too ugly," Leliana patiently pointed out, as much for the benefit of those gathered around as for Adaar himself. "When you speak, people listen. And many people already believe you were touched by Andraste herself. It is difficult to dispute that."

Adaar would certainly like to try. "I... erm..."

Solas smiled, and it was impossible to tell to what end. "I think he's an excellent choice. You have inverted a majority of the expectations of the people, but in such a way that they will be forced to consider their prejudices. After all, we represent one of the oldest and largest still-operative institutions in southern Thedas. If we believe he's good enough, why shouldn't they give him a chance?" He looked up at Adaar. "I hope you're sufficiently versed in human custom to avoid the obvious traps laid under the metaphorical Orlesian carpet."

"And that is why I'm here." Josephine stepped forward and hooked her arm around Adaar's, the ridiculous height difference made all the more obvious by the gesture. "If there is one thing I do well, it's putting the nobility in their place, and making it look like a benefit. We'll make a political dervish of you soon enough."

"And our other Herald?" Cullen asked, knowing questions would be raised about the other man with the glowing hand.

"Will remain Herald, of course," Leliana laid a hand on Fen'Din's shoulder, "A spiritual advisor who was drawn up and instructed by Andraste, herself, and then returned to us, whole, to aid us in our battle against the evils from the other side of the Veil."

"Levyn will accompany me, of course," Fen'Din decided, at once, wanting to keep hold of the group who could remember the worlds beyond the Veil, but more to keep a close eye on Jowan. "And Solas, I hope?"

Solas bowed his head respectfully. "Of course."

Adaar still looked a little dazed, thumb nervously toying with a notch in his horn. "Politics. That's... I'm just the guy who swings a big sword around."

"From what I understand," Bull said with a lascivious grin, "that's the Orlesians' favourite way of... politicking."
"That is... not what I meant," Adaar sighed. "But, also true."

"This could work," Cassandra said, nodding to herself. She paused, flushing, and stammered to add, "Not the 'big sword', I mean, but Adaar being Inquisitor."

Adaar sighed helplessly, seeing the decision had already been made for him. Shokrakar would be laughing her ass off at this. "I still don't really know what we're Inquisiting but... sure."

"We should announce this to the rest of our loyal retainers, or whatever you call a bunch of people who ran screaming into the snow with you when their entire town was wiped out by some guy who thinks he's a legend," Varric decided. "But, you know, probably tomorrow. Nobody's going to care until they eat and sleep."

Anders's stomach complained loudly, and the sound echoed through the stone room.

"Eating and sleeping! I favour these things!" Kinnon threw a fist into the air and dropped it on his own head mid-arc.

Cormac elbowed Anders. "Come on, let's get some fires lit and see if we can't turn whatever's left into food."

"Should they be allowed to cook? I mean... Mages... cooking... that's rarely a good idea," Niall pointed out, but Peryn and Kinnon overruled him instantly.

"Yes." Kinnon tipped to the side, curling up on Jowan's feet. "Wake me up when there's magic food."

"I ate their cooking when I did not know they were mages, and I will eat it now," Peryn declared. "It is good food."

Niall continued to look like he might need to be convinced.
Haven

Chapter Summary

Anton arrives in the ruins of Haven, where the dead are being dug from the snow and burned.

The horses they'd gotten in Highever didn't like the cold, and Anton wasn't too thrilled with it, either. The higher they got into the mountains, the thicker the snow became and the lower the fog hung around them. It was like riding into a cloud. But, he could still see the wagon ruts where the traders had apparently been doing business with something up here, and he followed them along the empty road, surrounded by mages he barely knew and a woman he'd once thought he might run away with.

Pillars of smoke rose from beyond the trees they were coming into -- huge billowing columns of grey and black, against the white sky -- and he thought that might be where they were headed. He thought of the flames in Kirkwall, after the Chantry came down, after Meredith had betrayed the entire city. He thought of the flames behind his family, as they'd fled Lothering. In the end, everything went down in flames.

"We'll find him, Tony," Isabela said, probably for the hundredth time, stretching out her gloved fingers to squeeze his elbow. "Dead or alive, we'll find him."

"They're burning the dead," Val said, sniffing the air. "I'll never forget that smell. But, they'll have taken everything of value off, first. You'll be able to see if he's there."

Anton nodded, or at least he thought he nodded, his body numbed from more than the cold. He didn't want to find Cullen like this, but it had to be better than never finding him at all. He kept telling himself that as the snow crunching underfoot, as his eyes tracked the spirals of smoke reaching towards the heavens.

The stink was horrendous as they approached the pyres, and Isabela held a fold of her cloak over her nose to dampen it. The stink brought her back to Kirkwall years ago, the city in chaos, the Tome of Koslun a heavy weight under her arm.

Isabela shook the memories aside when she caught sight of life, of the people wearily setting the pyres. She gave Anton's elbow yet another squeeze as she called out to them.

"Hello!" A couple of figures paused and turned to look, bundled up too heavily for her to make out their shape. "We're looking for someone."

"Alive or dead?" It sounded like a woman's voice.

"We don't know," Val said, putting an arm around Anton's shoulders. "Ser Cullen of Kirkwall?"

"We don't know either," another woman told him, with a shrug. "There's a lot of Templars. Most of them are being handled over there. That's where most of them fell. But, you can't touch them too much. There's some weird shit there. Red and nasty."

Anton's breathing stuttered audibly. Red and nasty? Don't touch them? He thought of Meredith and wondered if this was why Cullen hadn't written, if he'd fallen to the same scourge they'd fought in
"Glows, right? They look like freaky crystal statues?" Isabela sounded like she was having the same thoughts, but with much less attachment to the end result.

"That's the stuff. Infected a few of us, before we knew what it was. They're the only ones handling the Templars, now. We won't get too close, but someone has to do something about the bodies. There's demons everywhere, these days."

Candles stepped forward, face almost invisible in her deep fur-trimmed hood, so far from the light robes she'd worn in the Anderfels. "Do you need help? I was one of Kinloch Hold's pyrelighters. I've done this, before, with just as many demons."

The woman shrugged, somewhere under the piles of fabric that covered her. "We certainly wouldn't say no to more help," she said. There wasn't much enthusiasm in the answer, but then Candles doubted there was much enthusiasm to be found here.

Anton was barely listening, staring out in the direction the woman had indicated earlier, where she said most of the Templars had fallen. Val squeezed his shoulders tighter, but Anton could barely feel it. Keili and Daylen hovered awkwardly behind them, huddled close against the wind.

"Do you want to go over there?" Keili asked Anton gently.

No, but he needed to. Anton simply nodded, and they led him on, their own solemn procession in the snow.

"You know, I do know what your husband looks like," Isabela pointed out. "You can sit by a fire with no bodies on it, and I'll look for you. Anything that might be him, I'll have them put aside so you can check. I'm closer to you than I am to him, Tony, and you look like fresh bronto shit."

"Izzy, be nice," Daylen sighed.

"I am being nice! He looks like shit! Someone else should do the hard part!"

It was so tempting, but Anton shook his head. "I have to know. I can't let myself hope you're wrong."

As they approached the rows where the fallen Templars lay, two of the people cleaning the bodies ran up to wave them back. "You can't come closer!"

One peeled off a glove to show the back of his hand, the lines of unnatural red curling outward from what looked like a puncture, probably from handling the crystals. "It'll turn you. You have to stay away!"

Anton shook his head. "I'm looking for my husband. Man about my size, blond hair, Knight-Commander?"

"You sure he didn't die at the Conclave?" the first man asked.

"I heard from him after." Anton leaned into Val. "He was here."

"What happened to the survivors?" Daylen asked. "I assume there were survivors."

The first man pulled his glove back on, exchanging a glance with his friend. "It was a mess," the other man said, shaking his head. He turned as though searching for something. "But I hear some
people made it out through the pass." He pointed. "Towards a place called 'Skyhold', a fortress from what I understand."

"An odd place for a fortress," the first man muttered, "but, I haven't been there."

"Skyhold," Isabela repeated, nodding. She watched Anton out of the corner of her eye as she said, "We'll try there if we don't find him."

Anton nodded numbly. They wouldn't be able to search the Templars too closely, not with the red lyrium, and there was too much guesswork here, too many unknowns, for him to get an answer with any certainty. And that was worse, the uncertainty, worse still than looking over all these dead bodies and trying to decide if one looked enough like his husband to be him.

"The air is thinner up here, isn't it?" Anton said with a shaky laugh, tugging at his cloak where it bunched around his throat, as though that could loosen the band of anxiety around his lungs.

"If he's wounded, and he made it through the snow, he'd be up there," the second man said. "It's a long shot, but almost everyone living is there. I mean, besides us and some merchants, mostly. Maybe some mercenaries. It's probably easier to tell if he's alive than if he's here." The man gestured along the line of bodies, faces split and distorted with the lyrium, hair tinged red or fallen out, bodies damaged by the wind and snow.

"We can go count the survivors," Val suggested, softly. "Even if he was here, the pyres have been burning for days."

"Show me what you've found on the bodies," Anton decided. "I'll know what's his."
Skyhold

Chapter Summary

Cullen and Peryn have a chat about mages. Anton arrives at Skyhold.

More patrons trickled into the Herald's Rest as sunset approached, but even across the bar, Cullen could read the misery in the slope of Peryn's shoulders. He could guess what had put that distant look on his face, and Cullen knew what that weight felt like. The bartender slid a drink in front of Cullen, and Cullen slid into the seat next to Peryn.

Immediately Peryn sat up a bit straighter, tucking away some of his sadness behind a warm smile, but Cullen wasn't convinced.

"Have I ever told you how I met my husband?" Cullen asked.

Peryn's thumb toyed with a chip in his tankard. "No," he asked as much as said, head tilting in curiosity.

Cullen took a moment to wet his throat before going on. "I was Knight-Captain in Kirkwall at the time, and rumours reached my ear about an apostate in the Hawke household. The Hawkes are a fairly large family, and the rumours conflicted over which one was the apostate." He paused for a shrug and a wry smile. "I know now that that's because three of them were apostates. But, at the time, I was only searching for one, so I invited myself to the next Hawke party to investigate. Ask any Kirkwall resident, and they'll tell you that every Hawke party is an event."

"Your husband, he is not a mage?" Peryn eyed Cullen a bit sideways.

"No. I checked, though. I thought he might be a demon, the way he pushed me. I Smited him, thinking him a desire demon, but he was just a man." Cullen smiled sadly, thinking of that first night in the closet and then up in Anton's room. "A man I fell very much in love with, to my surprise. And he ... was very clear he was only after my body, for a very long time. I didn't understand, for a long time, and then the pieces began to fall into place. I was a danger to his family, and he wanted to be with me anyway."

"I do not see this as a danger! You wanted to do what is right! You would have brought them to your Circle, where they might one day be chosen for Wardens!" Peryn protested, but Cullen shook his head.

"It's not like that, in the South. The Blight's been so long off us that people forget what the Circles were for. They don't teach combat magics any more, to prevent rebellion. And in Kirkwall..."

Another drink went into Cullen, a longer one. "In Kirkwall, we had troubles that went to the top. My Commander had twisted the law so far she'd broken it, and it took me too long to notice. If it were my sister who was a mage, I wouldn't have wanted to bring her to The Gallows. It wasn't safe, and I couldn't pretend it was. I promised him I'd try to make things right, first."

"The Gallows?" Peryn repeated in a more subdued voice.

"That's what they called the Kirkwall Circle."
Peryn looked somewhere between alarmed and confused. "That word... I thought..."

"It means what you think it means," Cullen assured him with an unhappy smile. He took another drink in the hopes it would keep certain memories at bay. "It was a place of execution during the Imperium. Not the most... welcoming of atmospheres."

Cullen remembered his first impression of the place, remembered staring up at the bronze sculptures, the twisted, miserable figures of shackled slaves. It had unsettled him even then, and, in hindsight, that was his first clue, the first hint he'd gotten at Kirkwall's injustices. It only took him years to acknowledge it to himself.

"Meredith -- my Commander -- would have mages made Tranquil for the slightest of infractions, even imagined infractions, towards the end. I was angry at Anton for not telling me about his siblings, so angry I couldn't look at him, but I couldn't fault him for it, either."

"Kinnon is not from your Gallows, right?" Peryn asked, having gotten the impression Kinnon was Ferelden, not a Kirkwaller.

"He's not, but I know him. I started out at Kinloch Hold, which was..." Cullen paused, debating what he could say without involving Anders, without telling stories he shouldn't. "Better. I can genuinely say it was better, and mean that. But, as I look back, better wasn't good. Better wasn't even acceptable. There was less harm done, and usually to people we were told 'deserved' it, but I'm not sure anyone deserved some of the things that happened. Things I didn't stop." His thumb traced the rim of the tankard. "I think Kinnon loves you, and I say that because I know he's terrified of Templars. Nearly all the mages are. But, I've seen him with you, and that's not fear."

"If he is not afraid," Peryn asked, "then why did he not tell me?"

The miserable bow of Peryn's shoulders returned, and Cullen considered his words. "A different kind of fear, I think," Cullen replied. "The fear of what you would think of him. The fear that you would reject him, which..." He gestured vaguely, with a shrug. "Clearly it was not an unfounded fear."

Peryn nodded, staring into his drink as though it had all the answers. "I think... I understand that," he murmured. "But, much of what we are together -- what we were -- was from a lie. I do not know who he is."

"Start again," Cullen suggested. "Go right back to the beginning. How did this happen? How did you meet him, in the first place? What was the first thing that made you think he was the one for you?"

"Not the one," Peryn protested, deciding the drink would look better in him than it did in the mug. "A one. I am not ... so dedicated, in some ways. But, I am away from the Circle. I ride the river. The people are friendly. Sometimes, I am more friendly with some of them, for a little while. They are good people. Still my friends. I saw Kinnon dance the Spicy Shimmy -- he says it is a Ferelden dance. And I thought maybe I would like to be more friendly with him for a while."

Judgement clouded Cullen's face, first, before he realised he really had no business saying anything about Peryn's choices. He'd gotten married, after all. "See him again. Watch him. Ask yourself if this is something you still want, now that you know."

"But, he is a mage. And that is a rule I have never broken." And that was something Peryn agonised about the whole way from Haven: he'd had a relationship not just with a liar, but with a mage.
"He is not a mage from your Circle, in your charge," Cullen pointed out. "And honestly? I grow less and less sure those sorts of 'rules' matter right now, with the world as it is. Demons falling out of the sky, ancient magisters returning from the dead..." Cullen shook his head with a helpless laugh. "One Templar loving a mage doesn't seem like so great an infraction, next to all of that."

Peryn hummed and nodded faintly, his gaze far away, and Cullen wasn't sure if the man was agreeing or just nodding to humour him.

"And the Spicy Shimmy, hm?" Cullen teased.

That drew the barest smile from Peryn.

The snow had started again, as they came down into the valley by the ancient fortress that looked every one of its years, scaffolding supporting part of the wall by the gate. Isabela led the procession, her horse draped in black blankets and a deep blue cloak concealing most of her body. At first, the guards took her for a demon, but she threw back her hood and reeled off a string of titles, first her own and then those of the two men just behind her, riding in bleak silence.

"We have come to claim the body or ashes of Knight-Commander Cullen of Kirkwall, whose husband rides at my left hand!" she announced loudly to the courtyard.

"Cullen...?" One guard looked at the other, deeply confused.

Anton struggled to keep his bearing, back straight, shoulders square, face the same noble mask he turned on unsuspecting Orlesians who came to petition him. Beside him, Valery reached out and squeezed his shoulder reassuringly.

"It will be over, soon," Val murmured, raising his voice just above the wind.

The other guard stared up at the riders. "Er, I don't know how Commander Cullen's going to feel about being 'claimed', but he's right up the way a bit, if you'd like to ask him."

Anton didn't change expression except to blink, his body stiff as a board, looking for all the world like he hadn't heard the guard. Isabela stared back at him, waiting for his reaction. When none was forthcoming, she asked the guards, "Commander Cullen is alive?"

"Yes," the first guard said slowly, brows knitting further in confusion. "He's right over there."

Val's hand slipped from Anton's shoulder, and Anton blew out a shaky breath, following the guard's pointing finger to another corner of the courtyard, where a familiar blond head was bent over a table and gesturing at something to the people around him.

Isabela reached out to squeeze Anton's arm in a bruising grip. "Cullen is alive," she repeated, staring into his face to make sure he understood.

Anton nodded, emotion constricting his throat. "Not for long, he isn't," he swore, voice wrecked, as he dropped from his horse. With fists clenched and nostrils flaring, he stormed towards his husband.

"Don't be a shit, Valery," Candles warned, watching Anton climb the small hill on the other side of the courtyard.

Cullen didn't look up. Probably just a runner delivering the latest changes to the plans, based on what the builders had found in the wall. By the time he raised his eyes, at the sheet of blueprints being snatched out from under them, it was too late. The scuffling of paper being rolled registered before
the face behind it, and then--

"Anton?"

Anton brought the rolled plans across like a cudgel, slamming Cullen in the side of the head. "Why didn't you write? Why didn't you tell me you were alive!? I thought you were dead!" Every word was punctuated with another smack of paper. "I thought you were dead for a week! I rode up here in the snow to take your ashes home!"

"Anton-- Anton!" Cullen tried to grab his husband by the shoulders, but Anton moved far too quickly. "You're faster than the post! I would have had to teleport myself back home to let you know, if you're already here!"

Anton paused in his paper assault, blueprints still held aloft like a weapon. In the lull, Cullen noticed how pale his husband looked, and guilt tangled itself up in his stomach.

"You wrote to me?" Anton asked, eyes narrowing slightly.

Cullen wished he were a better liar. "Well..."

"Augh!!"

Another flurry of blows rained down upon Cullen's head. "Anton-! I tried to-! Will you stop-?"
Cullen made a grab for the blueprints, but Anton danced away. "I wrote plenty! I just... couldn't finish the letter!"

"Well, allow me to help you with that!" Anton said with fake sweetness. "'Dear Anton, I am not dead. I am currently at Skyhold, thinking about how much I miss you. With love, your husband who clearly does not deserve you'."

Peryn stepped out of the tavern, Fenris at his side, and his attention was immediately drawn by the sounds of smacking and shouting. "I am beginning to think maybe his advice is not what I should take for my troubles with Kinnon."

Fenris rubbed his lips to hide a smile. "I think his advice is generally quite good. I also think it should include a healthy amount of writing home. It's less that his advice is bad and more that his implementation is rubbish. He got drunk and slept with my husband, once. Yes, the mage. Don't let him tell you he hasn't."

"He--?" Peryn's jaw dropped.

"It was... quite a show. They each thought the other was someone else. Did I mention they were very drunk?" Fenris raised an eyebrow. "Commander Cullen is no longer permitted to drink cordial."

"I am not certain if being sober makes it more or less forgivable," Peryn sighed, watching Cullen shriek and try to dodge his nimble husband's strikes.

"I don't know that there's anything to forgive," Fenris pointed out. "Five silver says he gets in at least two more crotch shots, before this is over."

Another solid thwack, and Peryn nodded. "That is one."

"It is a good thing he is wearing his armour," Fenris said.

"Anton-! Anton-!" Eventually Cullen decided to stop dodging and instead barrelled forward, ducking
under his next swing to tackle him into the ground. The blueprints continued swinging at his head the whole way down. "Anton, I-!" Cullen finally grabbed and pinned Anton's swinging hand. "I'm sorry. Everything happened so quickly, I didn't even think. I should have let you know I was all right."

"You are such an ass," Anton hissed through his teeth, voice breaking.

"Yes, but I'm your ass," Cullen said with a soft smile. Then he blinked, reconsidering his words. "That... came out wrong, but you know what I mean. I'm yours. I'm alive."

Anton seemed to be calming, and Peryn raised an eyebrow at Fenris. "Only the one hit to Cullen's crotch," he pointed out.

Fenris held up a finger, begging for patience.

"I still want to kill you for making me think you were dead," Anton declared, voice quavering.

"That seems fair, if rather contradictory." Cullen offered him another shy smile. "It's good to see you, by the way. Are you finished hitting me, now?"

The knee to Cullen's crotch said 'no'.

"I'll take it out of you in wine," Fenris said, clapping a hand on Peryn's back.
Chapter 136

Chapter Summary

Brother Kinnon gets a surprise and then another surprise. Skyhold needs a runecrafter to help with the restorations.

"Brother Kinnon!" Leliana called across the great hall, arms draped with cloth as she strode toward him, obviously trying to catch him in the middle of the hall, where the great chandelier had been rehung. Lord Hawke had done an incredible job with the restoration of the lower half of the room, even working alone, as he was, and she had a great respect for the focus it required to wield magic for so long at a stretch. A non-traditional approach, but one she thought took just as much effort as any other craftsman's work. And now it was time for her to reward that focus in what some might consider an unexpected place.

"I'm not sure you can still call me that, Sister." Kinnon, still dressed in Ander Chantry robes, didn't look up from the inlay in the floor. He wasn't certain he agreed with Artemis's decisions about a couple of the repairs.

"Tell me this, Kinnon: Have you served the Maker as best as you know how? Have you done His work in your travels?" Leliana stepped close enough to look up and catch his eyes.

"I've done work in His name. But, I--"

"Have you taken payment for work done in His name?"

Kinnon recoiled. "Never. People who need help like that can't pay for it! You help them because they need it!"

"Have you acted against the Maker's will?" And here was the test, Leliana thought.

"I'm a mage. I fell in love. I told self-serving lies."

"What does the Chant say about magic?" Leliana pushed.

"Magic exists to serve man, and never to rule over him. Foul and corrupt are they who have taken His gift and used it against His children," Kinnon recited, from memory.

"And have you turned that gift against the Maker's children?" A crowd was gathering, Leliana noticed, and that was exactly what she'd hoped.

"I..." Kinnon noticed the eyes upon him and looked around to see everyone looking. "No. I have not. I would not." He spoke with conviction, but the look he sent Leliana was questioning.

"And will you continue to use that gift to serve your brothers and sisters?"

She just stared back at him, unblinking, the barest smile hiding her thoughts as she waited for his answer. And Kinnon took his time to consider that, to consider her question and to make sure he could answer with conviction.
"Yes," he said, his voice carrying the way Leliana's did.

"Then I will continue to call you Brother Kinnon," Leliana replied, smoothing out the cloth draped over her arm before holding it up. "Though perhaps these robes would be more suited to the Fereldan weather. You are not in the Anderfels anymore, after all."

Kinnon's jaw trembled, eyes widening, as he tried to keep the tears in them from spilling down his cheeks. "Is ... that a decision you get to make?" he managed, after a moment.

"I will see everyone here fed and clothed, but I think that's not what you're asking," Leliana's eyes sparkled. "As Cassandra was the Right Hand of the Divine, I was her Left Hand. We are all that remains of her, until a new Divine is chosen. And it is with that title that I offer you this opportunity, and these robes. You do need new robes, Brother. Your legs must be freezing."

"I'm the real thing, then." Kinnon tipped his head back and blinked a few times, sniffing, before he looked down and accepted the robes. "Thank you. ... Wait, does this mean I have to be celibate?"

"You were never any good at that, were you?" Leliana teased. "And I have never liked that rule. The Maker loves us all, and commands us to love one another. Who am I to say you will be forbidden that which is granted the least of His children? Go about it with the same kindness you use in all other things."

"Thank you," he said again, holding the robes almost reverently. "I..."

But the rest of his words were drowned out by cheers and applause, mostly from the other mages, the sound amplified by the naked stone they were working with. Kinnon smiled sheepishly and ducked his head, unsure what he would have said anyway.

Leliana reached out and squeezed his arm, eyes still glittering, before she slipped away. Kinnon watched her go, and his own smile slipped when he caught sight of the silhouette of Templar armour standing in the doorway.

Kinnon jumped when a hand clapped onto his shoulder. "All this for you, Brother Kinnon?" a familiar voice asked, pitched to be heard over the cheering as it was dying down.

He turned to find Candles's grinning face right in his, her arm slipping around his shoulders. "Candles?" he blurted. "When did--? How did you get here?"

"By boat, mostly," said Isabela, appearing out of the crowd next to her.

"Where's the cute Templar? Shouldn't he be drooling all over you, right about now?" Candles asked, scanning the crowd for Peryn. "He's... He's all right, isn't he?"

Kinnon squeezed his eyes shut at her look of concern. "He's not dead. We're not... He found out I'm a mage, and..."

"And all I'm hearing is handsome, single Fereldan, now with magic fingers. My favourite kind!" Isabela tossed an arm around Kinnon's waist and winked at someone in the crowd.

"Well, he's an idiot," Candles declared, firmly. "More for us?" she asked Isabela.

"More for us," Isabela agreed.

It would be so easy, Kinnon thought, to just let them have their way with him. To stop being alone. Candles had always been good for that, and he'd done the same for her. That was pretty much the
basis of their entire friendship. A few drinks, a beautiful woman. Two beautiful women. He draped his arms across them, his new robes pinned between his arm and Isabela's back.

"More for you," he agreed. "The Maker desires loving kindness for all of us, and what could be better than giving you exactly what you want?"

In the back of the hall, Josephine held rolls of plans under one arm, one unfurled so she could show it to the Inquisitor and his spiritual advisor. "The mages should be able to accomplish most of the major repairs, and we're bringing in a dwarven team to validate the work, but we're left looking for something that would give us an edge over Corypheus. We need a master of runecrafting. Fortunately for you, we've located one."

"I could offer some names." Fen'Din attempted a wry look. He had been, after all, a Senior Enchanter in the Circle where Calenhad's armour had been crafted. "Who have you found, and what are we paying them?"

"Her name is Dagna," Josephine answered, glancing down at her notes to make sure she had gotten the name right. "She is, by all accounts, the best, or at least good enough to attract two assassination attempts. Landholders are reluctant to let her ride through, but a boat can get her here just as easily."

"Dagna? The dwarf from Orzammar? You know she studied with me, after the Blight?" Amusement came late, but it finally crossed Fen'Din's face. "If she's not the best, I'll be very surprised."

"Well, good to know she comes with references," Adaar said with a crooked smile. "I guess that makes convincing her to come easier."

"Oh, she is already quite interested," Josephine assured him. "I had heard she studied on the surface, but I did not realise it was at Kinloch Hold! How exciting!"

"She's really quite brilliant, and her theories on lyrium vapours are likely to change the way we regard it. I look forward to being able to offer her an exciting and worthwhile project, once again." Fen'Din looked around the half-restored hall. "Where do we intend to place her research rooms? She'll need a forge, at least, and thick walls. She works in very dangerous components, and the occasional mishaps have devastated practise rooms intended for student mages."

"I believe we can accommodate her in the Undercroft." Josephine gestured to one of the doors behind the platform that would eventually hold Adaar's ceremonial throne. "The forge already exists and the room vents out to the air on the side of the mountain. There are signs it's been used for runecrafting, in the past."

Fen'Din nodded, then called over his shoulder, into the crowd. "Captain Isabela, I believe I have a substantial sum to offer you for a favour! I would trust no one more, for this work, than the captain who held off the Templar fleet at Dairsmuid."

"Flattery will get you everywhere, Herald!" Isabela declared as she sauntered over, still half-wrapped around Kinnon and dragging him and Candles along with her. "Even if you are sending me away already." She offered Kinnon a wink. "So what are you paying me such a 'substantial sum' to do?"

"There's an arcanist we need," Adaar answered, "who's currently in..." He looked expectantly at Josephine.

"Tantervale."

"Tantervale," Adaar went on with a nod. "Do you think you could escort her for us? Apparently there have already been attempts on her life."
Isabela hummed as though thinking it over. "I do so enjoy being an escort," she said, earning a cackle from Candles.
Chapter 137

Chapter Summary

Niall comes to terms with some other spirits and the nature of his condition.

Niall leaned with his back to the raised part of the crenellations on the wall, facing outward toward the mountains. Beside him, Cole faced in, toward the courtyard, his elbows on the bottom of the notch. A cat sat beside Cole, but it didn't look quite right – patchy and far too thin, like its face wasn't on straight somehow. Niall leaned over and tugged the cat's ear, and her face slid back into place, revealing a pair of glass eyes.

"You know you're kind of creepy, right?" Niall asked the cat, who meowed at him. "No, I like you just fine. You're adorably creepy, like some of the apprentices were. But, you're still creepy."

The cat made an inquisitive sound.

"Well, yes, at least you don't drop the temperature ten degrees when you walk into a room, unlike some people. I doubt Valery could handle it, if you did."

The cat purred.

"I know you do, and I'm still not sure why."

"He lost his friend," Cole offered. "And now he needs a new one. Just one. A good one. A good investment."

Niall harrumphed. "Good thing it's just one. Two would be a tall order with Val."

The cat made a chirping sound, and Niall sighed, reaching down to pet the cat. She was too much bone for the experience to be pleasant for him, but she leaned into his touch, rumbling happily.

"Yes, it's a good thing he has you," Niall told her, shaking his head. He turned more fully, opening his mouth to address Cole, but there was no one there. He looked around at the deserted battlements, at the door back downstairs he hadn't heard open or close. "Huh," he said, still absently petting the cat. "Did you see him leave?"

The cat just mashed her face into his hand and continued to purr.

Niall sighed and straightened the cat's skin again. "We should get you something nicer to wear. This really doesn't fit you well. Someone's going to notice, and they're already not sure what to do with me."

The cat chirped inquisitively and turned its glass eyes up, as if looking at Niall.

"If you can sit still for it, I think we can find a taxidermist. There are enough hunters and traders in and out. You'll be much less creepy with a little stuffing." And Niall realised he was feeling better than he had for days. Friendlier, at least. He was willing to attribute some of that to the lessening of he ache in his head which seemed to have loosened muscles in his neck that Asha would be quick to point out he only imagined having.
Cole's voice arose behind him. "She wanted a hand to hold. A promise she wouldn't be forgotten. I brought Anders. There won't be a reason to forget."

Niall stood slack-jawed and gaping, one hand clutched to his chest, as he tried to dull the pounding of his imagined heart in his imagined ears. Fuck imagination, he'd just had the shit scared out of him, and fortunately, that appeared to also be imaginary.

"When did you--? How did you--?" Niall shook his head mid-sputter, passing a hand over his eyes. Stupid questions. Cole wasn't human, and he didn't need to do silly things like walk to get where he needed to be. Niall understood the painful truth of that, but he was still human enough to walk anyway, if only for the familiar feeling of the ground under his feet.

If only so he didn't sneak up behind people like that. There was a certain etiquette to being a spirit, after all.

"You feel better now," Cole said, staring as though he could see through him. And maybe Niall would have to talk to Cole about that, about how unsettling that look was. "The air doesn't feel as heavy."

"I... Yes, I guess you're right." Niall didn't realise he'd stopped petting the cat until a bony little paw started patting at his arm.

"You want to help people," Cole pointed out, and Niall was about to dispute it, when he went on. "You want them to stop suffering. You're suffering with them. When they hurt, you hurt."

And that was a face Niall hadn't had put on that. 'Demon', people kept telling him. When faced with too much pain, he became a monster. But, Cole had different ideas, clearly. "So, if I help them, I'll feel better? I've just been trying to stay as far from people as possible. Everyone's regrets... their hopelessness... I had enough of that in the tower, but now I can't just look away to stop knowing about it."

"When you help, then they help. You can be hope."

The cat began to climb Niall's arm, and Niall petted it absently with his other hand. Hope. What an odd thing to be told.

"I can give them hope, you mean."

"You can be hope," Cole repeated.

And there was something marvellous in that, in the thought of being more than he was, of having a purpose. Hope was what he'd tried to be back in Kinloch Hold, in those last horror-filled hours of his life, the Litany of Adralla clutched in his hand as he'd marched to confront Uldred.

"I suppose there are worse things I could be," Niall said as the cat settled across his shoulders, spiny tail curled around his neck. Hope. He liked the sound of that. "Could you...? I don't know. Could you show me what you do, exactly?"

"You already know when they hurt, how they hurt," Cole replied. "You shut your ears to it because it hurts you too."

He remembered Jowan's decision that brought them out into the Hinterlands -- delivering flowers to a grave. That was the kind of thing he could do easily. And so many people wanted things like that -- he knew it, he could hear them. Little things -- gifts and letters delivered to prove they weren't dead, a lost toy replaced, a meal they were sure they'd never taste again. He could arrange for some things
to happen, maybe borrow some coin to pay one of the merchants to run some letters back down to
civilisation, convince Mack to make some traditional Antivan food... There were mages from
everywhere. And if he was honest with himself, he probably knew best how to help them.

"Do small things," Cole suggested. "There are things that mean nothing to you, but someone wants
them. Someone would be changed by them. You can do so little and help so much, and then it will
hurt less."

"Maybe," Niall admitted, rubbing the cat's nose and wondering if his thoughts on taxidermy counted.
"You hear them, too. I can't pick them out in all the noise. I know, but I don't know who. Help me
help someone, and we'll see how it works."

Cole smiled, and Niall reflected that Cole was already doing just that, except the 'someone' was him.

"Follow me," Cole said, and this time he had the courtesy to walk, even if his footsteps were eerily
silent.

Niall was in the habit of shying away from any nexus of pain, but this time he struggled not to and
just tried to listen. The loss of Haven was still a fresh wound, and it was like pain in a phantom limb,
feeling the ache of those mourning the ones they'd lost. Walking through the courtyard, it wasn't long
before Niall's head started to ache.

"His hand reaches, but he cannot find him," Cole said, and Niall shook off his thoughts to focus on
his voice. "His friend. Clutched tight in his hand one moment, then gone the next. Where has he
gone?"

The words didn't make much sense on their own, but Niall followed them, matching their cadence to
a particular anxiety he could feel in the air.

Niall could feel the crushing panic in his chest, as he found the right thread. A child. A child missing
a friend? Another child? He hoped that whoever it was hadn't died coming out of Haven. But, that
wasn't right... Too small to be another child. A doll?

When he looked up, he was standing in front of a crying child and the boy's very tired looking
mother. "What's he lost?"

"He had a toy fennec. It was his favourite thing, but when we came from Haven... It's been lost
somewhere, probably on the road. There's no way to find it in all this snow."

And there was the mother's despair as well, and Niall could feel it bearing on him, pressing him down.

"I'll ask around and see if anyone picked it up. What colour was it?"

"White. Probably not white any more, but it was white." The mother managed a smile, but it wasn't
hopeful.

"Let me see what I can do." The pain pounded in Niall's head, loss unending, and the others around
them were more and heavier. To get away from it, he made for the nearest place that people would
actively avoid -- the bronto barn. The smell of the things meant no one would be there unless they
were caring for them.

For a moment, he breathed easier, and then the smell caught up with him.

The cat meowed.

"Maybe you don't have to put up with it, but I'm trying to be a normal human being."
The cat rumbled in irritation, and Niall realised it was right. Plenty of people couldn't smell anything at all. Maybe there was something to that.

Niall took a moment to breathe, but the cat meowed again more insistently, even going so far as to paw at the hem of his robes. If this were any other cat, Niall would assume she was begging for food.

"What?" he sighed. The cat's ears pricked when she knew she'd caught his attention, and she turned, taking a few steps before glancing back over her shoulder to make sure Niall was still paying attention. "You want to show me something?"

The cat mewed in answer, tail up and swishing as she squeezed into one of the bronto pens. The smell grew worse the closer Niall got, the bronto's eye following him lazy as he approached.

"What are you trying to show me?" Niall asked, covering his nose and mouth with his sleeve.
"Bronto poop? I'm not cleaning it up, if that's what you're after."

But, peering into the pen, it wasn't a pile of poop that caught his eye but rather the flash of something white.

"Andraste's ass," he sighed, trying to figure out how to get whatever that was out, without getting trampled by the bronto. It was in the most inconvenient possible place that wasn't under the bronto, caught up against the enormous support for the centre of the side. He could reach between the rails, but he wasn't sure he could reach at that angle or far enough.

Crouching down, he pulled up his sleeve and jammed his arm between two narrowly spaced rails, just barely brushing a hint of what he thought might be fluff, if it wasn't straw softened by bronto piss and trampling. The bronto made a disapproving sound in his direction.

Niall pulled his arm back and used his sleeve to both cover it and to cover his face. A few breaths through the cloth were less bad. Okay, he needed a better plan. He probably needed a broom or a pick or something. He seemed to recall there being prods for getting the brontos out of the pens, meant to be used over the top rail. They'd be long, but they'd probably also be sharp. Brontos had incredibly thick hides, and it was nearly impossible to convince one to move. He didn't think spearing the toy would help. It'd get it where he could reach it, but the thing would probably be ruined.

A shovel, maybe? Would the shovels be small enough to fit between the rails? Would he be able to get a decent angle with a shovel, without dropping it? Would he actually be able to pick the thing up instead of accidentally shoving it under the bronto's ass? But, that would be the problem with anything...

"That won't work," Cole said, his voice serene but enough to startle Niall.

Niall cursed and straightened, trying to smooth out his robes without dropping the sleeve from his face. He looked up to find Cole perching on the rails as though he'd been there the whole time.
"Where did you go?"

The size of Cole's wide-brimmed hat exaggerated the tilt of his head. "Go?"

"You disappeared while I was talking to that mother."

"No, you simply did not notice me."

Niall opened and closed his mouth a few times, unsure how to respond to that. He thought it easier
instead to deal with the problem at hand. "What did you mean by 'that won't work'?'"

"You cling to being human," Cole said with that eerie stare that made Niall want to squirm, "so much that you forget what you are."

Niall forced out a laugh to hide his wince. "I don't see how an existential crisis is going to help me get this toy fennec."

"Your body cannot reach," Cole went on, and Niall wished the boy would blink. "But... you do not have a body, not any more."

"I'm standing right here," Niall protested, pulling at his robes. "Pretty sure that's exactly what I have."

"Let it go."

"I did that once. Didn't end well," Niall drawled. "And I don't see how that's going to help."

"Release the expectation, you don't need it, now. If you want it later, you can still have it. It's not going anywhere. The body is in your mind. You carry it with you."

It was the least helpful thing Cole had said yet, Niall thought, as he picked the words apart. The body was in his mind? He stepped out of the Fade and... just was himself again. He wasn't possessing anyone -- not that he knew of. Not that anyone had mentioned, and he was sure Anders would've said something, if not Fen'Din. He expected to be himself, so he was. And if he could let himself become a demon, then maybe he could let himself... walk through the fence? He was sure that didn't make sense, but he was also pretty sure it was what Cole was going for.

"I don't know how."

"Close the eyes you don't need and see it. Be near it. You're not there because you think you can't be, but that's not true any more. You're only as much a human as you want to be. You're only as much a demon as you let yourself be. There are more things you could be. Over there is one of them. Back here is another. You're part of the Fade, now, and you can go anywhere it reaches, which is everywhere."

And that was rather terrifying, really, considering all Niall ever wanted to be was alive and human, but he nodded as though that made sense. He supposed it made as much sense as anything did nowadays.

"'Close the eyes you don't need,'" Niall murmured to himself, trying to puzzle that out. He closed his eyes and -- that was what Cole meant, wasn't it? That the eyes he was closing didn't really exist. Or, rather, that they existed only because he wanted them to.

He tried to remember what it felt like to move like smoke, focusing on the physical sensations and not on the despair that had chased him into that form. He reached without looking, without letting his sight dictate where his body would fit, and when he opened his eyes, it was to find that he had reached too far, through the railing and into a particularly displeased bronto. He pulled his hand back with a squeak before he made himself corporeal again.

The bronto moved like it meant to stand, to do something about this intruder, and Niall lunged for the toy fennec, seizing it by some bit of fluff and tossing it over the rail. The bronto hauled itself upright, and Niall wished he was on the other side of the fence. No, that didn't work. How had he gotten here? Smoke. Becoming inconstant and un-solid. But, the terror was a solid weight in his chest.
Oh, he was going to die again. The bronto recoiled from him and snorted threateningly, and Niall closed his eyes. He'd be nothing again. He'd be no more.

And then that strange sensation seized him again, half a demon, almost. Too many teeth and not enough of them connected to anything. He leaned away, eyes snapping open as the bronto slammed into the rail... in front of him.

"That was a terrible idea." Niall brushed himself off, hands shaking, and picked up the fennec. The thing was badly in need of a wash, but otherwise undamaged.

"Only when you do it that way," Cole's unblinking stare hadn't left him, Niall realised. "There are better ways, ways that aren't grief. Ways that are joy and freedom, instead of the release from dread."

"Great," Niall muttered. "You couldn't have maybe taught me how to do that before?"

Cole finally blinked. "I did not think you would put your hand in the bronto's backside."

Niall huffed but conceded that with a nod. "I didn't either."

"She did not like that."

"I didn't either," Niall said again. He held up the fennec, wondering how it had managed to get wedged in there in the first place. "I hope the kid appreciates this."

Niall was sure if the bronto hadn't killed him, the headache was going to, but he made his way back to the mother and son, with the fennec tucked in his sleeve. The look on his face must have been a clear view into how he felt, right then, because he watched the mother's face fall, expecting bad news. He shook his head and angled himself so the boy couldn't see, when he pulled the toy out of his sleeve and showed it to the mother, straw still stuck to it.

"Is this what you were looking for?" Niall asked. "It's a little dirty, but it looked like it might be--"

"You found it!"

Niall staggered as the woman threw her arms around him. "Oh, good. You probably want to wash it."

"Where did you find it?" The woman stepped back, holding Niall at arm's length, still smiling.

"In the bronto barn. Did you come in the wagons? It must've gotten caught on a harness." Niall could still feel the pain around him, the regret, the loss, the despair, but it was on the other side of this woman's amazement and joy.

"I never thought we'd see it again! You have to let me repay you somehow!" The woman insisted, handing the filthy fennec to her son. "We'll wash him, later, okay? Don't drop him, now."

"You can repay me by helping someone else," Niall said, remembering what Cole had suggested. The more people who could help, the more people who could be helped, the less difficult it would be for him to be around people. "It was just a few minutes. I was looking in the right place. I'm sure there are other people you travelled with who need the help more than I do."

But, it would help him, and he knew it, standing in the glow of her relief.
Chapter 138

Chapter Summary

A lesson in runework and the nature of the world.

Artie wiped the sweat from his brow and took a moment to survey their progress. Skyhold had been a mess when he'd arrived -- was still a mess, really -- but at least now he knew that there was no real chance of collapse, not even, somehow, with the gaping hole that had been blasted through the Undercroft. Gravity was less a concern when magic was involved, it seemed, and the deeper they looked, the more magic he found woven into the very stonework.

"It is impressive," Artie said, frowning down at a smudge of dirt on his sleeve, trying and failing to ignore it.

Next to him, Gatsi grunted something noncommittal, the maze of tattoos on his face twisting with his expression.

"Down here, this is older, but above about the fourth row, it's absolutely classic Alamarri work, all the way across." The elven archivist climbed a little higher on the scaffolding against the ancient rampart.

"Banon, if you fall, I don't think even Anders is going to be able to scrape you back together," Theron called up after him, looking down into the valley below them.

"I'm not going to fall. Maker, that's what the scaffolding's for." Banon swept his hair back with one hand, tucking it behind his ear as he pressed his nose nearly to the stone. "There's an engraving here, but it's broken and full of moss. I think it's a rune? Pether, come look at this. Is this a barrier rune? Someone hand me a pick so I can clean this out."

Gatsi started to hand him one, only to give Artemis a wry look, aware that he couldn't reach. With a smile, Artie took the pick from him and handed it up to Banon as Pether made his way serenely over.

Banon mumbled to himself as he pried out the moss and dirt that had collected there, and Pether watched over his shoulder.

"You are correct," said Pether. "That is a barrier rune. Or rather, it was. It is in need of some repair."

Banon blew a strand of hair out of his face, twisting to look back at Pether without relinquishing his precarious perch. "But it can be repaired?"

"Of course."

"A barrier rune would certainly be nice in case of an attack," Artie said, exchanging a look with Theron. "Which, considering how often we manage to piss off people, is likely to happen at some point."

"I don't know what you mean," Theron replied. "I am the very image of diplomacy."

Artie let his amused snort speak for him.
"An image of diplomacy would involve more than one person," the other Tranquil pointed out, "and you are no more painted than any Dalish."

Gatsi blinked a few times and then started to laugh. There were a few words missing in that interpretation, but he got where it was headed.

"What do you need?" Banon called down to Pether, raising his voice to call attention back to what they were supposed to be doing out here.

"A forge and lyrium-working tools. It would help to pull the stone out and turn it flat, but if you can take a wax cast of the repaired symbol, I can probably mould it and then set it. It would be more difficult that way, for me, but maybe not for you."

Theron realised the Tranquil with them reminded him of Fen'Din -- the expressionless faces and strangely literal interpretations were common to all of them. But, from what he understood, Fen'Din was the opposite of Tranquil. He wasn't cut off from the Fade, he was more connected to it than most mages. Except Niall, he supposed, and he still wasn't sure what to think of the mage turned spirit turned mage. Seemed like a pretty solid idea, but so did most things, right up until they went wrong. And that just put him in mind of Tamlen, again.

Banon stared contemplatively at the wall. "If we pull this out, how much of the wall is coming down?"

"None of it," Gatsi ventured. "I don't think it goes back more than half the depth of the blocks around it. It's an inset, not a structural component."

"Oh good!" said Artemis cheerfully. He knew he would have been volunteered to hold the wall up or shift it around enough that it wouldn't collapse, and just the thought of holding all that weight was exhausting. "Need any help?"

Bannon considered it, considered the pick in his hand, considered the crumbling rune in the wall. "Magic would be faster, yes, and it would certainly be neater."

Artie shot a glance at Kinnon, who had wandered off down the other end of the hall, but the man looked tired, the kind of bone-deep tired that came with loss. Artie suspected he wasn't up for that kind of precision work.

Which left him. He had to hope all that work on the elven ruins and all that sculpting had paid off.

"Well, I do generally prefer neater," Artie said with a crooked smile and less nerves than he expected as he climbed the scaffolding, climbing as close to the rune as he dared, the wood creaking under his feet. Up closer, he could see the grooves where the lyrium had been, could see how ragged the rune was around them. He tried not to think of other, more familiar lyrium patterns in their own state of disrepair.

"Where will I be working?" Pether finally asked, as the block eased out of the wall above him.

"Undercroft?" Theron suggested, with a glance at Gatsi.

"That's probably the safest for something like this. You start pissing around with lyrium in those quantities, and it's better to just expect it's gonna go boom." Gatsi glanced down the wall toward Kinnon. "Hey, Brother What's-Your-Name! Can you run back in and talk to Lady Josephine? We're going to need access to the Undercroft and ... call it four pounds of raw lyrium, or an ingot, if we've got one. It'd be easier if we've got something processed for runework."
Kinnon looked up from the ground under his feet for what was probably the first time in hours. "The Templars aren't going to like this," he warned, slouching back toward the rest of the group, hands buried in his fur-lined sleeves.

"The Templars can kiss my ass. It's not even the same grade of lyrium, and if they don't get that, maybe somebody needs to give a public lecture." Gatsi shook his head. "I know times have been tough, but I also know Lady Josephine has a contract for lyrium mined down south -- outside of Orzammar's claims. With those numbers, even if we need a third of it to repair the walls, it's not going to be serious. And on top of that, why the hell are they drinking lyrium anyway? I know that's some Chantry cult nonsense, but wow. Whole new kind of stupid, if you ask me."

Banon gave a wry huff, making room for Artie on the scaffolding. "I'd be careful where you say that," he said, looking around and down as though expecting to find a group of Templars scowling at them.

"He's not wrong, though," Artie muttered, only half paying attention. He pressed a hand to the stone and felt it moving. Slowly, gently, he coaxed out the rune and the bit of stone surrounding it.

"That's how you end up with that whole red lyrium disaster," Gatsi was saying, still griping, his voice carrying up to Artie and Banon. "Desperate people do stupid things."

"What's that make us?" Kinnon asked, ducking under the scaffolding to get past them. "Because I'm pretty sure desperate and stupid top the list, right now."

"Under the circumstances, this is anything but stupid," the second Tranquil commented. "We are restoring the defensive runework of an ancient fortress that has withstood both time and magical assaults from the inside. If anything can hold off Corypheus, outside of Tevinter, we have likely moved into it."

"Clement--"

"Clemence," the Tranquil corrected.

"Clem," Kinnon decided, "we're still desperate. And desperate people do stupid things."

"Are we desperate?" Pether asked, looking away from the work on the wall. "We have a great deal of backing among the nobility of Ferelden and the Marches -- money, supplies, soldiers. These were the things that took a great deal more effort before Denerim. Preparations to face our enemy go smoothly, and I am inclined to believe Warden Jan's assertion we do not face another archdemon. I have seen an archdemon. This creature doesn't seem smart enough. This situation is much less dire than you imagine, Brother, and we have people who can do the work to ensure it never becomes dire. We were unprepared, at Haven. We will not be, again."

"Yeah, we didn't foresee an ancient Magister coming back from a fiery death to lead an army of angry glowy-red people," Artemis said, muttering more to himself than to anything. "That was on us, really. It's exactly the sort of weird bullshit that happens around the people I know. Particularly Varric. And Cullen, now that I think about it."

"So that's true, huh?" Gatsi called up as Artie carefully made the climb back down, handing the rune off to Clemence once he was within reach. "The rumours about him being one of those old Magisters? The ones who fucked everything up?"

"Don't know about everything," Artie said with a shrug, heaving out a sigh of relief when his feet touched the floor again. "But he seems to have a talent for fucking things up in general, so I believe
"You know, I'm not sure believing people are flammable is ever something you can be faulted for," Kinnon decided, blinking at Artemis. "Nearly everyone is flammable, with some minor exceptions for a couple of Senior Enchanters with ice specialities, and even them you could probably set on fire, if you tried hard enough."

"I also had this nagging belief that dead people stayed dead." Theron shrugged casually, trying not to think of all the friends he'd lost, wondering what might become of them, now that the sky was torn apart. "We're all learning new things, these days."

"So, that's true too?" Gatsi looked even more surprised. "They really just walked right out of one of those sky holes, just like they'd been alive?"

"Levyn is very much alive," Pether offered, studying the rune Clemence held. "So are most of his friends. The enchanter, though, isn't human."

Gatsi ran a hand over his hair, grumbling something in Dwarvish that had the cadence of an expletive. "The world's crazy. You're crazy. But, better to be crazy on the inside of sturdy, rune-enforced walls than out there where the sky's vomiting up spirits."

"Wise words," Artemis agreed, idly wiping the dirt from his hands and trying not think of the gritty texture it left against his palm. He looked around, squinting at the section of wall they hadn't yet explored. "Shall we see what other runes we can find to keep out the less savoury kind of crazy?"
Chapter 139

Chapter Summary

A discussion about Cole.

"He's still upset, even ten years later, and very inclined to take it out on other people. Right now, that's going to be Kinnon, if only because they fought over Ser Peryn so much, at the Abbey," Fen'Din explained to Adaar, as they came down the stairs from the main hall. "Valery's far more pompous than is warranted for a mage of his talents, but perhaps not nearly enough so for a man of his herit--"

"This thing is not a puppy you can make into a pet." Vivienne's voice rang across the courtyard, clear and cool, as she crossed her arms and tipped her chin up, at Solas. "It does not belong here."

"Wouldn't you say the same of an apostate?" Solas asked mildly, his face speaking far more than his voice.

Cassandra caught Fen'Din's arm as he and Adaar approached. "Enchanter Fen'Din, just the man to ask. I wondered if Cole was perhaps a mage, given his unusual abilities."

"He can cause people to forget him, or even fail to notice him entirely." Solas could not conceal his enthusiasm. "These are not the abilities of a mage. It seems that Cole is a spirit."

Fen'Din looked at the three before him, face devoid of expression, as he replied slowly, as if speaking to apprentices. "Yes. Of course he's a spirit. Just like Niall is a spirit, or Stability and Control are spirits."

"It is a demon," Vivienne replied. "They are all demons, Niall in particular."

Adaar shrugged a shoulder as if it hardly mattered to him. "Well, he sure is a useful demon, then."

Vivienne swept around to give him a thoroughly scandalised look. She looked stunning in that fitted dress and horned hat, but Adaar pushed the thought aside for once.

"You didn't see what I saw at Therinfal Redoubt," Adaar said with a firm shake of his head. "Without Cole, Envy would have eaten me alive. Now, I don't pretend to understand the first thing about spirits, demons, and this Fade nonsense -- that's his area." He paused to point a thumb in Fen'Din's direction. "But I do know that we could use all the help we can get, and so far, all he, Niall, and the rest have done is help."

"So far," Vivienne pressed. "And only as far as you know. Did Solas not just mention that the creature can alter your memory?"

"Perhaps he can, and perhaps that will come to be a concern." Fen'Din shrugged, very intentionally and slowly. "Right now, he is a spirit who wishes to aid us, as so many others do. We have taken on Templars and mages, qunari, elves, and dwarves. We have taken on other spirits. They are pure in their ideals, until we lead them. And purity is not always the best we can do."

Solas smiled, surprised, as always, at the things this Circle mage believed.
"Speak plainly! What are we dealing with?" Cassandra demanded, looking back and forth between the two elves.

"Demons normally enter this world by possessing something. In their true forms, they look bizarre, monstrous. Yet, Cole and Niall have possessed nothing and no one, and they appear human in all respects," Solas explained. "They are unusual, but they believe they can help and wish to do so. I strongly advise allowing them to do so."

"With what I know of demons, they either possess something from this world, or they are summoned and bound," Cassandria ventured cautiously. "They almost never appear as something you could mistake for a person."

"Normally, you'd be correct," Solas replied with a shrug. "But Cole and Niall wilfully manifested in human forms without possessing anyone. For Niall, at least, there was the memory of once being human to give him shape."

"Niall wasn't the only spirit-demon-thing to come out of the rifts," Adaar pointed out. "There have been quite a few of them, in fact, as I'm sure you've noticed. They usually come with more teeth than is strictly necessary."

"And they weren't possessing anyone either," Cassandra completed the thought with a slow nod.

"Those demons were drawn through against their will," Solas replied, "driven mad by the world."

Looking down at his glowing hand and feeling the mark throb, Adaar let out a wry huff. "I can relate. And Cole?"

"He predates the Breach," Solas went on. "From what we can tell, he had lived here for months, perhaps years. He looks like a young man. For all intents and purposes, he is a young man." He shook his head in amazement. "It is remarkable."

"And on an academic level, it is certainly fascinating," Vivienne replied. "That does not make him safe."

"We should hear what Cole has to say for himself," Cassandra decided, looking around. "Where is he now? If none of us remember him, he could be anywhere."

"I wouldn't say none of us," Fen'Din volunteered, nodding toward where Cole walked through a camp in the courtyard. "To the best of my knowledge, I've always seen him arrive. He's been just at the foot of the stairs, listening, but he's gone off to help again."

"You can see him?" Cassandra looked as surprised as she sounded.

"Of course I can. I work with spirits. It helps to be able to perceive them. It's all a matter of minding what's around oneself. Your beliefs are in your way," Fen'Din managed something like a smile and looked up at Adaar. "Come, we should see what he has to say for himself. It is your Inquisition, after all."

Adaar laughed. "So this is the part where I actually get to do some inquisiting, in other words? Finally!"

As he crossed the camp, Adaar felt eyes upon him, and he wondered wryly what it must be like to be Cole, to be able to pass unnoticed. Cole passed from one person to the next, drifting like a ghost, and though he paused when they approached, he didn't turn to look at them.
"Haven," Cole said, eyes glassy and unblinking. "So many soldiers fought to protect the pilgrims so they could escape." His voice lowered, more distant, and he went on as though unable to slow the flood of words. "Choking fear, can't think from the medicine but the cuts wrack me with every heartbeat. Hot white pain, everything burns. I can't, I can't, I'm going to... I'm dying, I'm..." His hands twitched, agitated, and Adaar followed that glassy look to a battered soldier laid out by the fire, the man's chest heaving as he labored for breath until finally he stopped breathing altogether. "...dead."

A shiver crept up Adaar's spine, and he shot a look at Fen'Din. "Is he...? You..." Adaar shifted to address Cole directly. "You can, what, feel their pain? Hear their thoughts? What was that?"

"It's louder this close, with so many of them," Cole explained, as if it were a perfectly normal thing.

"Niall says the same thing." Fen'Din gestured back toward the walls, away from most of the people in the courtyard. "Would you like to step away from it, for a bit?"

"Yes. But, here is where I can help." Cole moved on to another dying soldier. "Every breath slower. Like lying in a warm bath. Sliding away. Smell of my daughter's hair when I kiss her goodnight." He paused to watch the soldier's face, as it relaxed one last time. "Gone."

Another caught his attention, and Fen'Din followed, as he moved on, memories already pouring out of his mouth as he approached. "Cracked brown pain, dry, scraping. Thirsty."

Cole knelt holding out his empty hand, but Fen'Din was already holding a cup of water, drawn from one of the barrels, and Cole took it with a nod, offering it to the soldier in the Orlesian helmet, lying on the ground. "Here."

"Thank you."

"It's all right," Cole said to Fen'Din and Adaar as he guided the soldier to lay her head back down. "She won't remember me."

Adaar nodded softly, still unnerved by the whole display but taking it in stride. "So you are using your powers as a spirit to help people."

"Yes," Cole said, rising to his feet. His enormous hat shadowed his face, made it difficult to make out his expression. "I used to think I was a ghost. I didn't know. I made mistakes... but I made friends too. Then a Templar proved I wasn't real." There was a distant sort of sadness in his voice. "I lost my friends. I lost everything. I learned to be more like what I am. It made me different, but stronger. I can feel more. I can help."

"You certainly helped me in the fight with Envy," Adaar said. "That was..." He said with a breathless laugh. "It was kind of nice having someone cheering me on despite not knowing what the fuck I was doing." He glanced back at where the others were watching from the stairs, and he knew Vivienne was about to be disappointed in what he had to say. "How would you feel about continuing to help people? With the Inquisition?"

"Yes, helping. I help the hurt, the helpless, there's someone..." Cole took a step and stopped, trying to focus. "Hurts, it hurts, it hurts, someone make it stop hurting, Maker please..." He took a deep breath, a knife appearing in his hand. "The healers have done all they can. It will take him hours to die. Every moment will be agony. He wants mercy. Help."

"Where is Jan?" Fen'Din asked, looking around. "I do not stand against your help, Cole, but if there are hours, then we can hold a few minutes for Jan's word. It is a rare wound he cannot heal,
especially now."

"Jan is good and just, as well as he is able to be. A human justice, now. Less divine, but more compassionate." Cole looked down at the elf beside him and nodded. "Jan will know. Jan will help."

"And if Jan cannot help, I trust you will." Fen'Din reached out and tugged a lock of Cole's hair, gently, just as Anders used to do with him. He didn't need to explain, and he knew it. Spirits knew these things.

"I want to stay," Cole decided, looking up at Adaar.

"Good," Adaar said, trying not to wonder what else Cole was picking up from the people around him, what else Cole was picking up from him. "Then you should stay. We might need to have a talk about that whole 'making people forget' thing, though. People have a right to know these things."

Cole frowned like he didn't understand, but Adaar didn't give him a chance to ask, turning to find a runner to fetch Jan.
Chapter 140

Chapter Summary

Anton and Bull attempt a new fighting technique. Mayhem ensues.

"A little more to the left." Krem waved from behind a training dummy. "If you throw from there, you'll hit the wall."

"I can aim, you know. Getting used to only having one eye, by now," Bull insisted, adjusting his grip on the Viscount of Kirkwall.

The plan was simple -- he'd throw Anton at the target. Anton would go for a killing blow and then leap back to where Bull could catch him and launch him at the next target. But they had to hit one first. The first one was the real test. Once they figured out what the angles and the flight paths looked like, the rest would come together.

"The first one's the hard one," Krem reminded him, backing out of the way to return to his perch on a chair he'd brought out of the tavern, just to put himself closer to Bull's eye-level.

"They're all the hard one, with me." Anton raised his eyebrows and grinned wickedly.

"Aren't you married?" Krem laughed.

"To the disappointment of many," Anton replied breezily. He'd had just enough alcohol for the wave of his hand to be relaxed and lazy, which so just so happened to be the same amount of alcohol that made this look like a good idea.

"Your husband included, no doubt," Krem quipped, earning a snorting laugh from Bull and a scandalised look from Anton.

"Shut up, the two of you," Bull said. "I'm trying to focus!"

Anton turned his attention back to the training dummy, face scrunched in concentration.

"One, two, HYAH!" Bull threw Anton with a shout, sending him careening towards the first dummy.

Anton moved with the momentum, his dagger finding what would have been the dummy's eye, his feet the dummy's chest, and he used the dummy as a springboard, letting the rebound launch him back in Bull's direction. He landed on Bull's shoulder, catching one of his horns for balance.

Bull staggered to the side, but recovered quickly. "Next one!" he shouted, waiting for Anton to crouch, and then launching him again with one hand.

This shot didn't work as well -- the angle was awkward, and Anton careened off the second dummy, kicking his way toward the third, which he sliced across the painted eyes, before twisting into a leap that landed him on the shoulders of the fourth, where he drove his knives down to either side of the neck for balance, as he dropped into a crouch.

"That was not at all what I meant to do, but I'll take it in a pinch!" He laughed and hopped down,
pulling the daggers out.

"First one was great!" Krem sat on the back of the chair he'd been standing on. "Not so sure about the second one, but that's still one guy kicked in the face, one blinded, and one dead or dying, so it's still not bad."

"And that's only the second toss," Anton reminded him. "We'll get better at this!"

"Another round of drinks first!" Bull declared, throwing his arms out wide. "To steady my hands, you know?" He turned to Krem with a grin on his face.

"If you're trying to wink at me, Chief, that only works if you have two eyes. Just looks like you're blinking real hard."

"Well, I only need one hand for this," Bull replied, throwing Krem a rude gesture.

Krem cackled.

"And the other hand for drinking," Anton added, stepping back to properly admire his handiwork as Krem went to get the next round of drinks.

"Next round's on you if you miss, Chief!" Krem called back as he disappeared into the tavern.

"I couldn't miss if I was trying!" Bull protested. "We're on to something here, you know. This is a good start, but it could be even better, if that was your recovery from a weak toss. How are you for vertical? Think we could get you through a window?"

"I'll have you know I'm a master of walls and windows." Anton tugged at the bottom of his jacket, straightening it. He seemed far too well-dressed for this, but what was the point of getting dressed, if one didn't dress well? "I used to climb the sea side of the Gallows to visit my husband's office. Much quicker than coming up the front."

"Hm. Then maybe I don't need to be throwing you up walls." Bull rubbed his chin.

"But, throwing would be even faster," Anton pointed out, looking up at the open turret window above them. A turret. On a tavern. What would come next? But, he supposed it hadn't always been a tavern. He was fairly sure he could make it up to the window, and the stonework looked like he could get a good hold, even if he didn't get all the way up.

Bull followed his gaze up the turret and let out a considering 'hrmm'. When Krem returned with drinks, he found them both looking up and did the same. He saw the open the window and barked a laugh.

"Looking for more of a challenge, Chief?" he asked Bull, nudging him in the stomach with a full tankard until the qunari took it. "I'm not certain you could throw a rock through that window, let alone a person."

"Hey!" Bull protested.

Krem just gave him an unimpressed look, handing the last drink to Anton as he took a sip of his. "You remember that time with the bandits, when one of them was running away and you decided to throw your axe at him instead of letting Dalish finish him off? You nearly took off my toe!"

"That was one time!" Bull huffed.
"And you haven't learned your lesson, apparently," Krem said, looking terribly entertained. "But I'm not trying to stop you. In fact, I'd very much like to see this!"

"All right." Anton nodded and looked at Bull, pointing. "You face away from it and crouch down. I'll face toward the wall. I step up, you stand up and lift, and this should work."

"Backwards and over your head." Krem nodded slowly, looking for all the world like he was trying not to laugh. "That'll be easy! Of course it will!"

"Trust me!" Anton grinned. "I'm good at this!"

Bull readied himself, squatting and cupping his hands. "Let's do this."

Anton hopped into Bull's hands, leg bending as he rose through the air, and he sprung from Bull's palms when he reached the top of the arc, launching him up and toward the wall. Just a little low, but he could probably grab -- there! The windowsill bit into his hands, and he bent, meeting the wall with his feet, scrambling up just in time to meet a chamberpot to the face.

"Noblemen," a voice scoffed, in a coarse Denerim accent. "Pots o' piss anyway. What do you and your fancy cod think you're doing in my window?"

Anton just barely had the presence of mind to keep his grip on the windowsill, losing his footing after being smacked in the face. He was grateful the chamberpot was empty, at least.

"Just a friendly game of viscount-tossing!" Anton managed a smile, voice tight with the effort of holding on. "Sera, right?"

"Looks more like cod-tossing to me," Sera harrumphed, chamberpot still clutched in hand as though she were debating whether or not to hit him again. "Oy!" she called out, leaning over him to shake the pot in Bull's direction. "Stop tossing fancy clotpoles at my window! Clotpoles? Codpoles? I'm not interested in any poles!"

Krem's snorting laughter floated up to Anton as he swung his feet back into place against the wall.

"Could be worse. Could be Jan," Anton offered, trying to figure out how to get down. "Then it'd be the flagpole."

"You know, I keep hearing that. He's pretty big, for a human, but there's no way." Bull shook his head. "That or it's magic."

"It's possessed," Krem volunteered, lurching toward Bull in a terrible impression of a demon. "Beware the demon dangles!"

"You know, that's something the tamassrans don't cover. What do you do with demon dangles? I feel like 'stab the mage' is probably still the answer."

"Stab the mage. We all know how that's gonna work for you, Chief." Krem made an obscene gesture.

"You're just jealous it's not going to work for you." Bull looked up at Anton and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Eww. Too tall. Not round enough. Too much demon dangle." Krem shook his head and laughed, watching Anton try to find a foothold to get back down into reach.
"I'll have you know there's nothing demonic about my dangle!" Anton protested, peering under his armpit to toss Krem a reproachful look.

"Yeah?" Bull called back, voice shaking with laughter. "Then what was that your brothers were saying about your demon-summoning piss?"

"Ewww," Sera said, face scrunching. "Maybe I shouldn't be hitting you with this." She peered down at her chamberpot, eyes narrowed distrustfully. She turned away from the window to find another bludgeon.

Anton muttered a curse, levering himself up to rest his elbows on the windowsill. "I'll have you know that was only one-- two-- okay, only a few times! Doesn't mean it's my dangle that's demonic!"

"Actually, I think that's exactly what that means," Krem said, his horrified look at odds with his laugh. "What in the Maker's Name did you drink that your piss came out magic?"

"Cordial," Anton drawled, hauling himself up to sit in the window, one foot braced in the frame to keep himself from being shoved back out. Slowly, he managed to catch his breath. "I am absolutely sure it was the cordial."

"Are you sure you weren't just drunk?" Krem asked, still staring up in bemused horror.

"Well, his brothers say it's true, so, I'm guessing something happened," Bull ventured. "Of course they also say he was pissing on Tevinter ruins, so maybe that's it." He eyed Krem, sideways, which didn't work so well with the eyepatch on that side.

Krem met his gaze. "I promise if you pee on me, I will very definitely turn into a demon, and that's not because I'm Tevinter."

Sera turned back to the window, wielding an improbably large copy of the Chant of Light, in the sort of binding usually reserved for cathedrals. "Right! Whoop! No piss on this one! Should be maybe. Boring as piss, anyway."

"Where did you--?" Anton said, bracing himself against the windowframe. "Do I even want to know why you have that?"

"For whacking pissheads who put their dangles on my windowsill!" Sera replied, thumping the heavy book against her palm in a clear threat.

"My dangle is perfectly innocent in this affair!" Anton protested, leaning a bit out of the window to avoid a half-hearted thwack from Sera. The book made a heavy whoomp sound as it passed. "We were practising a fighting technique!"

"Yeah? So'm I!"

Another swing had Anton leaning back further, and Sera took advantage of his compromised position to swing the book down at his 'dangle'. With a shriek, Anton tucked his knees together, but his dodging cost him his balance on the windowsill.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Krem ran for the cart full of straw, stuffing for the dummies, as Anton began to topple.

Bull just stepped directly into the way and held his hands up, tipping his head back so Anton wouldn't hit his horns. "I gotcha!"
Anton dropped, stretching himself out, as if expecting to hit the ground. He'd done worse. But, Bull's hands caught him, slowed him, as he came the rest of the way down. He looked up at the window, just in time for Sera to hurl the chamberpot down at him, the metal curve of it bouncing off his eyesocket and the side of his nose.

"A gift for the cod-shoving pisshead! Something to keep it in!" Sera followed by launching several pairs of frilly knickers at the men on the ground. "If you're looking for your sort, maybe you can find the lady these belong to, like in that story with the shoes! I'd love to see what they'd cut off to fit in these!"

A few pairs caught on Bull's horns, and Krem snatched one out of the air. "Antivan silk," Krem observed. "Are these Lady Montilyet's?"

Cullen paused in the tavern door, struck by those words as well as the sight before him, unsure where to even begin with the absurdity. He looked from the panties in Krem's hand to the panties on Bull's horns, to the panties that had landed on his husband's groaning head.

"What has he been drinking?" he asked Krem. "Please tell me it wasn't cordial."

"Oh hello, Commander! Want some panties? We have extras!" Krem sling-shot the pair in his hands, and Cullen just barely twisted aside to avoid getting the pair in his face.

"I really hope those weren't Lady Montilyet's," Cullen muttered, smoothing down his hair to hide how flustered he looked.

"I am much sure she takes better care of her underthings than to be hanging them on the qunari," Peryn ventured, trying to figure out what they'd walked into. "Or on Viscount Kirkwall."

"Viscount Kirkwall who is still surprised and entirely taken aback to have a living husband," Anton drawled, clearly not over Cullen not having sent him a letter, after Haven. "Who would imagine that a noble son of that fair city would marry a man who seems incapable of announcing his own survival?"

"To be fair, you knew that. You met my sister," Cullen argued. It was a terrible defence, really, but it was an accurate one. He hadn't written to his family either, after the Blight.

"I thought maybe you'd learned from your mistakes!" Anton ripped another pair of knickers off Bull's horns and winged them at Cullen, his aim somewhat skewed by his blackening eye.

Cullen watched as the panties flopped to the ground. "I feel like I'm at an Orlesian party."

"Because of the panties or because your husband is throwing things at you?" Krem asked, leaning casually against the wall. "Either way, I clearly need to go to whatever parties you're going to."

Cullen took a moment to consider. "...both, honestly."

"Oy, buckethead!"

Cullen looked up at Sera, realising belatedly that he shouldn't encourage that title.

"Tell your fancy cod-stuffing to stay outta my window!"

"My fancy... what?" Cullen murmured.

Bull cleared his throat and tipped his head at Anton, whom he was carefully setting on the ground.
"Oh, *that* cod-stuffing."

"His cod's not getting stuffed until he learns to write home, like a reasonable person. Even my idiot brothers write home." Anton brushed himself off and straightened his jacket, before prodding at his face.

"And how am I supposed to write to you, now that you're here, Anton?" Cullen demanded, and Peryn patted his back, gently.

"It'll be even easier. I'm right here." Anton poked the side of his nose and staggered, dizzily. "Someone get Jan?"

Cullen sprang forward, to help, but ran straight into Peryn's hand. "What--?"

"Do not worry, Viscount. We will find a healer for your face. That looks very pain-filled." Peryn paused, looking confused as he pulled Cullen away. "Pain-filling? Pain-fulling?"

"Painful," Cullen corrected, looking over his shoulder at Anton, as Peryn led him away.
Chapter 141

Chapter Summary

Archivist Banon could really use a break, though whether that's from his work, from Dorian, or from Artemis's notorious harem, he's not quite certain.

Amidst the bustle of a busy fortress, Skyhold's library was a peaceful kind of quiet. Artie itched to do something about the bird poop on the railings (thank you, Leliana), but the neat lines of books were a soothing distraction.

And speaking of distractions, Artemis spotted a familiar elf sifting through a pile of books and frowning. Banon the Archivist, if Artie remembered correctly, part of the crew who had helped him with the runes at the base of the fortress.

"Excuse me!" Dorian's voice cut the quiet as he tried to wave Banon done, a heavy book already in hand. "Do you by any chance--?"

"Not now," Banon cut him off, focused on his pile of books. "I found an inappropriately shelved tome this morning, and I have to figure out how it got there!"

Artie all but swooned. Though Fenris wasn't there, he could all but hear his husband laughing at him.

"The people here have no respect for books or for proper organisation. Is it any wonder the quartermaster is always short on something necessary? No one can keep records! Half these people, I'm surprised they can even read, and it might be better if they couldn't! Who puts a volume of erotic Rivaini poetry in the space that is obviously meant for the fourth book in a history of Divine Hortensia's reign?" Banon raved on, gesturing with books, as he crossed the nook, back and forth, putting things where they very obviously -- at least according to him -- went.

Dorian blew his nose loudly, from the other side of the balcony, and Banon didn't even look up, but when Artemis did, Dorian winked and tipped his head at Banon, with a wicked smile, covering it with a large silk handkerchief. Tucking the silk away, he placed his elbow on a large book, balanced on the rail, just leaning on it, as he watched the conversation across the way.

"I know exactly what you mean," Artie said, turning back towards Banon and watching him replacing the books. "You obviously need to organise books by category. One of my brothers once suggested that we should organise our books by colour."

Banon paused in his flitting long enough to turn a look of horror upon Artemis.

"Yes," Artie said, nodding emphatically. "That is exactly the face I made, too!"

"How would you find anything?" Banon asked.

"You wouldn't, but then he didn't do much reading anyway, so I suppose it's a moot point." Artie shrugged, then gestured at the armful of books Banon was balancing. "Would you like some help? That book on druffalo should clearly go on that shelf, there." He pointed out a bookcase just outside the alcove. "And -- really? An entire book on druffalo?"
"Of course an entire book on druffalo." Banon handed it to Artemis. "Where would we be without the knowledge of every beast of the Maker's creation? A whole book lets one know the beast and prepare for seeing it up close! Like books on Antivan wine, or Rivaini festivals, or my personal favourite, Alamarri statuary! To read is to be prepared! And Andraste's blessings on Brother Genitivi for all his work on the places and histories of Thedas."

Banon shelved another three books, as if they were punctuation. "There should be a book on gurns, somewhere, as well. I think that goes in the same shelf, or near it."

And multiple books on dragons, of course, Artie found as he slipped the druffalo book into its proper place, taking care to neaten the books around it as well, bringing the books' spines to the edge of the shelf. "Anton must not have found these," Artie muttered to himself. Otherwise they wouldn't be in their proper place.

"Pardon?" Banon asked distractedly as he slipped a heavy tome back into place.

"Nothing," Artie said with a chuckle and self-deprecating laugh. "I just have a brother who loves dragons." He gestured at the dragon books and was about to say something else when another book caught his eye. Next to a book on brontos was a familiar name, and Artie pulled out the copy of Tale of the Champion, pursing his lips to keep from laughing. "Goodness, they'll just write a book about anything now, won't they?"

"That book." Banon hissed the words like a curse. "Do you know how many copies of that book we're supposed to have? Twenty-three. There are two, including the one you're holding. And we're supposed to have fifty-two copies of Hard in Hightown. We're missing all but four!" He paused, pointing to a lone bookcase that stood half-bare. "And they all go over there. It's the Varric Tethras collection. Why anyone would collect his works is beyond me, but there you have it. Not everyone has good taste in literature."

Artemis bit his tongue, trying to keep a straight face. "The Varric Tethras collection. I didn't realise you had so many copies!"

"In theory!" Banon huffed, throwing his hands up in exasperation.

"And you have the whole Hard in Hightown series?"

Banon looked at him askance.

"I'm asking for a friend," Artie said innocently.

"Again, in theory." Banon paused to examine the next book that needed reshelving. "In theory we also have his less famous Swords and Shields, but that has recently gone missing, too. Either we have quite a few fans, or some kind soul has taken to burning them." As an afterthought, he added, "That was a joke. Please do not actually burn any of these books."

"I can promise you I won't burn anything on purpose," Artemis said in as reassuring a tone as he could muster.

"If we can just prevent any accidental fires, we'll be set," Banon drawled, pulling out a few more tomes on the local wildlife.

Peryn appeared at the top of the stairs, loaded down with books stacked between his stretched fingertips and his chin. "Ah! I am told to bring these to the librarian. Have you seen him? Another Bran..."
"Banon, not Bran," Banon corrected, gesturing for Peryn to set the books next to the other pile.

"And Lord Hawke!" Peryn set the books on the floor and looked up at Artemis. "If I knew you were a lord, when you visited, I might have been more appropriate company for a noble family. But, your brother didn't tell me, either."

"Trust me, you were the appropriate amount of inappropriate," Artemis assured him with a grin. He bent to inspect the new pile of books, neating them so that the edges were flush. "We grew up in Ferelden and didn’t really do the whole noble thing until we ended up in Kirkwall. At that point, ‘Jan’ was living in the sewers, and my future husband was squatting in an abandoned mansion. There were corpses in the entrance hall."

"There... Corpses?" Peryn repeated.

"He gave them names," Artie plucked up the first book in the pile and scanned the shelves for the right spot. "And one day, you'll have to ask Cullen and Anton how they met. So... we already have 'inappropriate' pretty well covered."

Banon's brow furrowed in concern. "Corpses." He turned to Peryn. "I'm not sure where that accent's from, but you should know that's not a Fereldan cultural decor thing. Dogs, but not corpses."

"His husband is Tevinter." Peryn nodded, slowly. "I think it is maybe a very Tevinter thing to do. That is what we hear, in the Anderfels. Blood magic and death from Tevinter."

"We do not decorate with corpses!" Dorian shouted across the atrium. "What a Nevarran thing to do! We handle corpses like sensible people! We visit them, celebrate them, and then burn them!"

"I have heard they also breed with dragons, in Tevinter." Peryn nodded solemnly, his eyes gleaming with amusement.

Dorian's sharp laugh filled the hall. "Oh yes," he said, voice dripping with sarcasm. "The fire breath tends to cut the foreplay short, however."

"Fire breath?" Peryn repeated. "That is from the whiskey? A dragon would not like that!" He beamed when Artemis laughed.

"I'm not sure if I should be offended," Dorian called back, settling his hands on his hips.

"You know," said a woman's voice from a nearby book alcove, "some of us are trying to read!"

"Yes, honestly, Banon!" Dorian shouted across at the archivist. "Do keep it down!"

"I am ignoring you," Banon said without raising his voice, keeping his attention on the pile of books in front of him.

"Who are we ignoring?" Theron came down from the raven roost, looking like he'd made some friends -- scratches and black fluff covered him, with the occasional small feather. "Not Lord Shakes and Quakes, I hope. Or maybe I hope you are ignoring him. More for me."

Dorian's face softened a bit, confusion and envy warring for it as he watched the Dalish warrior cross to the married Marcher noble and apply his hands to a few places that would usually end in an elf losing those hands, outside a brothel. They were so open about it, and he wondered if that was a Southern thing, a Dalish thing, or just them.

"Master Pavus thinks he's funny," Banon muttered, shelving several more books.
"Oh, the Vint?" Theron laughed loudly and grinned antagonistically across the atrium, preparing to be exactly the sort of shit he'd always been. "He's a Vint. They're really pretty ignorable. Except the part where they'll steal anything that's not nailed down and then send demons after you, if you try to get it back, isn't that right, Master Pavus? My Keeper warned me about keeping company with Vints." He pressed a hand to his chest in horror, and winked.

From below, a muffled snort could be heard.

Dorian feigned a look of offence, jaw dropping open. "And what is it, exactly, that you are afraid I am going to steal?" Dorian said before drawing himself up short, realising that sounded dangerously close to flirting.

"Well, I don't have to worry about you stealing Lord Hawke," Theron replied, wrapping an arm around Artemis's waist and offering him a saucy smirk. "I did say anything not nailed down, and I think I keep him nailed down pretty well."

"Could we maybe not announce that in the middle of the library?" Artie requested, ears and cheeks reddening as he slipped away from Theron to rearrange a bookshelf.

"Yes," drawled the woman who had complained before. "Could you maybe not?"

Dorian's eyes widened in surprise for the briefest moment. They'd kept it to a dull roar, in Redcliffe, he realised. "Nailed down, you say? And you think yourself so good at nailing?"

"Oh, yes." Theron leaned on the railing. "The Dalish, educated savages that we are, are excellent at nailing. Why, have you seen our crafts? Nothing like them in all Thedas, and that holds for every craft we practise. But, I suppose you've only known our poor city kin, long separated from those grand traditions, stretching all the way back to Arlathan."

"Maker's breath fan the flames," Banon sighed. "Must you?"

"Must I speak to the excellence of Dalish handiwork and nailing? Oh, clearly I must. Have you never experienced the history of your root?" Theron's mouth moved for the 's', but the sound never followed. "I'm sure we could find someone to educate you on the storied ways of your ancestors."

Artemis didn't quite bury a laugh behind his hand. "Yes, Theron, we all know you are well-acquainted with your 'root'." He almost went on to make a joke about Elven 'culture' only to remember that Cormac wasn't there to get the joke.

"I think I know enough about the 'ways of my ancestors', thank you," Banon drawled. "Now, if you don't mind, you're blocking the light. The title of this one is worn and hard to read." He squinted at one book with a deliberate focus, holding it in front of his face.

"Light? I assure you our lessons can be quite illuminating," Theron replied with a grin that said he was proud of the pun, nudging Artie with an elbow to indicate he was the other part of the 'we'.

"You could illuminate my way," Peryn suggested, raising his eyebrows. "But, I am not an elf."

Theron studied him, as if considering it. "Mmm, no. Tempting, but Leliana and I had to pour Kinnon into bed, last night, and he's still crying about you. And he was drunk enough to inform us both that you don't like it the way I like my shemlen."

"Magical?" Peryn asked, caught somewhere between ashamed and offended. Even with the choices Sister Leliana had made, he still couldn't find it in himself to forgive Kinnon for leading him to violate his vows.
"Bent over a table and tied down, begging for more." Theron grinned widely.

Across the way, Dorian tried not to look interested.

"Tied down?" Peryn clarified with the lift of an eyebrow.

The broader Theron's grin, the deeper shade of red Artie turned, made worse when Theron simply turned to him, leaving the answer to Artie.

"I... It's... been known to happen," Artie muttered, turning to adjust the books on the closest shelf.

"And it might happen again soon," Theron added, his grin turning predatory.

Artie's sigh of exasperation didn't quite disguise the assessing look he swept up Theron's body. "Not in front of Varric's books, please," he said, covering their spines as if they had ears.

Banon cleared his throat. "I suspect they've witnessed much worse."

"Are you sure we can't convince you to join us?" Theron smiled slyly at Banon. "The more, the merrier, and the elfier, the better."

"I have a great deal of work to do." Banon glanced up and caught Leliana looking down, amused. "I do hope the spymaster doesn't... anything really. I do wish she'd stop looking at me. It's terrifying. Have you heard of her work? No? That is exactly my point." He shelved four more books, sharp thumps accompanying their contact with the back of the shelf.

"We could get you out of her view for a bit..." Theron leaned on the edge of the bookcase, still smiling. "You look like you could use a break. Maybe a stiff drink. Maybe some stiff something else."

"What will people say?" Banon gestured at the rapidly-shrinking pile of books and the shelves that still sat with gaps in them. "Oh, can't trust the elf to do a job properly!"

"And none of them would do it at all," Peryn pointed out. "They are not the people who would. People who care about the books will also care about their book-herder. You deserve a rest, Elf Bran."

Banon was so caught up in the term 'book-herder' that he almost missed that last part. "It's Banon."

"Yes. Elf Branon."

Banon opened his mouth again only to sigh and close it again. "Close enough. That's me, Elf Branon the Book-Herder." He shook his head in resignation.

Artie reached as though to squeeze Banon's shoulder only to think better of it. "Templar Bran does have a point, you know. You do deserve a rest, and you have plenty of book-herding helpers to help you finish this."

"Templar... Bran?" Banon repeated.

"I feel like you're focusing on the wrong thing, here," Artie said.

"What is with all the Bran?" Banon glanced around him, expecting an answer, no matter how stupid.

"It is Ferelden. Everyone is Bran, in Ferelden." Peryn nodded, solemnly. "Just like everyone is Jan, in the Anderfels."
Several things went through Banon’s head at that latter revelation, not least that their Jan had basically called himself the Ander equivalent of ‘Bran of Highever’.

"Take a little time off!" Theron plucked a book out of Banon's hand. "We'll have a bit of fun, and then we'll help you put this all back together! I'm among the finest scholars the Dalish can offer! I can follow a map of shelves, to see where things go! I can even write a grand tale about it that'll make us all look heroic, and sing it in the tavern, later."

"Sing... it?" Banon blinked.

"It's the way of our people," Theron assured him.

"Unless the way of your people is to wax poetic about asses, I'm not sure that's right," Artie teased. He shoved a short stack of books into Theron's chest. "But I suppose it is the way of these people. Now make yourself useful so we can find something to sing about."

"Please no singing," the woman who had complained about the noise before pleaded. She gave up after Theron's first note.
Chapter 142

Chapter Summary

Lord Codslinger and Lady Chamberpot decide to take on the troubles in Verchiel.

The tavern was filled with people, and music filled the air. People were recovering from the attack on Haven, and their new settlement was coming to life, really starting to feel settled, despite the icy mountain weather. Upstairs, Sera stood in the window of the room she'd claimed for herself, firing arrows at the training dummies lined up on the other side of the small practice field. Down below, that hairy Warden with the stupid beard was trying to teach Levyn -- and she'd heard of Levyn, everyone had heard of Levyn -- how to fight with a sword.

And there was that Vint from the Chargers, walking with -- oh, hey, that was Viscount Asshole of Cartwheel. She needed to talk to him. "Hey, Lord Codslinger!"

Both of them looked up and after a great show of pointing at themselves and each other, the right one stepped forward. "Well, well, if it isn't Lady Chamberpot!"

"Lady. Pshh," Sera scoffed, recoiling from the very idea. "I heard you used to be somebody, before they made you run that demon city. Like, maybe you used to be a little people with big ideas."

Anton nodded. "I grew up on the Bannorn, working in the fields."

"Then how come you're a shitty noble, now?"

"I'm not shitty!" Anton protested, and Krem cleared his throat. "I'm still not shitty. I peed on that demon. It's a whole other thing."

"You pissed on a demon." Sera put her elbows on the windowsill and leaned out.

"It was a toilet demon! I didn't know it was there!" Anton protested, with a shrug. "And then I killed it, because that's how we do things in Kirkwall."

"First you pee on it, then you stab it," Krem teased, struggling not to laugh.

"Piss on a demon and they give you a city. Yeah. Right, that's a good way to get a title. They should do that around here. Nope! Can't be a lord! Haven't pissed on any demons!" Sera nodded as if this were the most sensible idea she'd encountered in the last week or so, and it may well have been. "Right, well, you should come up here the right way, Lord Demon Pisser, 'cause I got a plan and you sound like you'd be on it. Gonna step on some shitty nobles and then wipe them off our shoe, but we probably get some goodness for this Inquisit-whatever. Betcha Inquisitor Horny's gonna like it."

"Inquisitor... what now?"

"You sure you don't want him to pee on the nobles before you step on them?" Krem called back.

"Well, then he'd be stepping in his own pee, wouldn't he?" Sera huffed. "He can piss on 'em after."
Anton threw his hands up in exasperation as he made for the door, disappearing from Sera's line of sight with his voice trailing behind him. "Maker! You pee on one--! Well, more than one. Two--! No. You pee on less than five demons, and that's all anyone ever wants you to do!"

Krem followed him inside, laughing.

Anton appeared in Sera's doorway shortly after. "Very well, Serah Panty-Slinger, who am I stepping and pissing on, in that order?"

"It's a Red Jenny thing. I got a tip that some noble stiff's are arguing over Verchiel. Land squabble," Sera explained, kicking a chamberpot under a couch, where it clanked against a collection of them. "They're getting little people beat up, so I need you to go to that big husband of yours and get some inquisitor-people to walk through town."

"Why don't you go to that big husband of mine?" Anton asked, leaning against the doorframe.

"Because he'll listen to you!" Sera threw a hand toward Anton, emphatically.

"That's an entirely unfounded assumption, right now." Anton cleared his throat and raised his eyebrows. "But, I bet you're right about Inquisitor Horny. You want somebody who'll listen to me and my obvious experience with Orlesian and politics, I think that's the place to go. And Ser Wouldn't-Write-Home-for-All-the-Gold-in-Denerim would listen to him, even under protest. Inquisitor Horny's his boss." A pause. "Inquisitor Horny. I'm going to start calling him that to his face. I like that."

Sera huffed. "Too much talking to people. Not enough sending the little marchy army men."

Anton waved a dismissive hand. "Politics. Come on, you explain it to me, on the way, and then we'll explain it to him. We scare the piss out of some nobles, and then we get popular support for the Inquisition, right? Everybody likes us because we made the fighting stop."

Anton took a moment to appreciate the improvement in the grand hall, the light filtering in through the patched and cleaned windows, the parts of floor cleared of debris. Sera, however, just marched right past him, intent on the qunari discussing something with Josephine and a pair of Orlesian nobles.

"Oy, Horny!" she shouted, loud enough to scare off the birds nesting in the rafters, and everyone in the hall turned to look.

"Yeah?" Adaar called back without even pausing to consider the name.

Josephine sputtered a laugh and an apology to the nobles, waving them aside. She knew better than to get in Sera's way.

"Ser Piss-a-lot and I have an idea," Sera said, slowing to a stop in front of Adaar, a thumb pointed over her shoulder at Anton trailing behind her.

"Congratulations," Adaar said. "It's about time someone had one. And he's Ser Piss-a-lot now?"

"And you're Horny?" Anton drawled.

"Always." Adaar winked.

"My kind of guy." Anton grinned and raised his eyebrows, before getting back to the point at hand.
"So, the Inquisition needs popular support, right? You've done a great job in Ferelden, so far, but Orlais is going to be trickier. Between the sharding of the Andrastian faith and the civil war, it's going to take something special to get people's attention, and I think we've got it."

Sera nodded and slapped Anton on the back. "Just a little thing, really. A little march-around for some of your people. It's nothing for you, right?"

Anton broke it down into finer-grained political implications. "There's some political drama going down in Verchiel, and the nobles are conscripting the peasants to fight for some disputed portions of the dukedom. In theory, all we have to do is walk through and shame them into submission. No picking sides, we're against everyone. No actual fighting -- we're there to stop the fighting. You should know Verchiel's Grand Duke Gaspard's domain, and he's an utter nugfucker, to put it in the most polite terms I'm willing to use. Got his eye on the Orlesian throne, and then on the Ferelden throne, but he's got his hands full with Celene, so there's nothing to be lost by tweaking his nose a little, here."

"And I do so love tweaking Orlesian noses," Adaar agreed. He tossed a glance at the pair he and Josephine had been speaking with, but Josephine had them distracted.

"I prefer kicking 'em in the squishy bits," Sera said with a shrug, "but I'll take nose-tweaking."

"I thought you preferred taking their britches," Adaar drawled. He watched Sera's smile curl into something wicked before she disintegrated into maniacal giggling. "But I like it. Our people won't have to do anything except look impressive, which will be a nice change for them, I'm sure. I'll talk to Cullen. Or should I say, Lady Piss-a-lot?" He arched an eyebrow at Anton. "And why, exactly, didn't you just bring this up with him?"

Anton kept his expression neutral as he flicked a bit of lint off his sleeve. "We figured he'd have to run it by you anyway."

Adaar hummed like he didn't quite believe that, but he let it go.
Chapter 143

Chapter Summary

Cullen takes his troubles to Anders. Niall would like Anton to stop having troubles so loudly.

The light shone in through the small windows and even more through the large hole in the roof over the loft where Cullen had been sleeping. He kept meaning to ask Kinnon to do something about that, but Kinnon had been so sick, since Haven.

Haven.

"An-- Jan, let me ask you something." Cullen looked over the corner of his desk at the man perched on the woodpile stacked beside it. "I thought I saw someone, back in Haven. Someone we knew."

"We knew a lot of people in Haven," Anders teased, taking a long sip of Cullen's whiskey. Highever. Not bad. "You're going to have to be more specific."

"In that battle, I'm sure I saw Samson. But, on the other side of the lake." Cullen turned his own glass in his hands. "I had a spyglass. I'm not mad; I'd know his face anywhere. We were friends, once."

"You were friends again, later, weren't you?" Anders asked, watching Cullen's face for the answer.

"No. And it's my fault." Cullen rubbed his face, tiredly. "I did my best, but after everything, can you blame him?"

"No, I can't." The words came out a bit more cutting than Anders intended.

"In time, maybe we would have gotten back to where you and I are, but ... it was all too soon, and then he got sick." Cullen's eyes sharpened, still focused on the whiskey in his hands. "He was so sick, when he left Kirkwall, and now he's leading an army? I'm missing something. And he's come to war against me. I'm missing a lot. We may not have been friends, but we stood for the same ideals. He stood with us against Meredith's madness. He helped us rebuild. What's happened?"

Anders looked down at his glass like he expected it to provide the answers. "I think we're missing quite a few things, considering who he was marching with. I watched Corypheus die. I watched him die, on fire, and watched Anton pee on his corpse! How he managed to get up, walk away, and gather an army I don't know. We are missing a few pieces of the puzzle here."

Cullen didn't quite manage to hide a wince at the mention of his husband. "We certainly are," he muttered into his whiskey before taking a surprisingly large sip.

Anders raised an eyebrow at that. "Still in the doghouse? The Lord Doghouse, I should say?"

"Who would have thought there would be this much trouble over a single letter?" Cullen sighed, leaning back and rubbing the back of his neck. "He must have left Kirkwall while we were still in the snow. There wasn't time!"
"Were you even working on one, when we got here?" Anders knew well enough to ask.

"I've been working on a letter since Haven! I just... What do I say? How do I not sound like a fool?"

"Cullen, I've known you for almost as long as you've been a Templar, so just know that when I tell you that you are a fool, I say it after the greatest consideration and years of observation. He married you anyway. You're fine. He's expecting you to sound like exactly the fool you are." Anders laughed, and then laughed harder when Cullen glared.

"And I'm the one you wanted as Knight-Commander."

"Of course I did. You're a fool, not an idiot. You know the theory and the history. You know what's right. You still don't know what to get your husband for your anniversary." Anders hadn't quite managed to stop laughing, yet.

Cullen groaned, the picture of abject misery. "You're enjoying this too much."

Anders sipped primly at his whiskey, but his eyes were still laughing. "No, no, I'd say I'm enjoying this just the right amount!"

Cullen gave him a sour look.

"Better you than me," Anders said with a shrug. Then he laughed again. "Don't worry. If he hasn't peed on you yet, there's still hope."

"I'm not sure how to feel about that standard of measure."

"Either way, if you want to get him to talk to you, I suggest you start by finishing that letter you'd started writing to him."

Cullen's chair creaked as he sat back, mentally and physically uncomfortable. "I'm not certain that letter would achieve much as it is."

"It's the thought that counts. He really just wants you to keep in touch, same as your sister. And did I ever tell you how surprised I was to find out you had a sister? I mean, you ask any mage and we're half-sure all Templars are just seedlings of the Divine."

Cullen finally laughed, taken completely by surprise. "You what? Tell me you're joking. You... you are joking, right?"

"Can't be any worse than what the Templars think of us," Anders pointed out, with a sly smile. "But really, you should finish that letter and give it to him."

"It's... I don't really think... It's not very..." Cullen sighed and pulled a few pages out of a desk drawer, shoving them at Anders.

Anders took a moment to read the last few drafts of the letter. "You know, I might leave off the line about the sausages. Possibly also the, er, plundering, but I don't know. Maybe he's into that. If it's going to be that kind of letter, you should get some help with it. I'd say ask Peryn, but he'd be better at it in Ander. Kinnon's... Oh. Kinnon. Right. Doesn't like you. Still hasn't forgiven you for whatever it was you did after I left. Theron's an obvious choice, but you might want Artie to have a look and make sure they're not completely over the top."

Cullen cleared his throat, cheeks turning a splotchy red. "I am not sure I want Artie's feedback on a lurid letter to his brother."
Anders kept his expression neutral as he sipped his whiskey, pointedly setting aside thoughts of Artemis and another brother. "Fair enough, though with what you have here, I suspect he'd be more amused than disgusted."

Cullen hummed, frowning as he reread what he'd written. "You're right; I do need help, don't I?"

Anders reached over to give his shoulder a pat. "We all need help sometimes. But yes, you especially."

Anton returned to his room -- not quite just his room, they'd descended unexpectedly upon a fortress in the midst of renovations, but a room he could share with a few unobjectionable guardsmen, for now. But, he spotted a bottle with a letter tied around the neck standing just at the door. Somebody's girlfriend, he figured, picking it up to take it inside, which was when he spotted his own name on it. Admirers? Already?

He set down the bottle and unrolled the letter.

Better armed with alcohol, he approached the letter again. Less of a letter and more of a dirty poem, like those ones from the docks in Denerim. A brief appreciation of the Hawke ass, signed with his husband's name. Well, that was ... something. Definitely unexpected, particularly the line about rum and flash, which didn't quite rhyme, but got the point across very well.

"If this is the letter you were writing and planning to send to me," Anton muttered, words half-swallowed by the bottle, "then I can understand why you didn't send it." He paused to take a long drink, wondering how he'd ended up here.

"Whoa, whoa, happy thoughts!" called a voice from the door Anton didn't remember leaving open. "I get it, but drinking while you're bitter is just going to make you spiral."

Anton squinted over the bottle at the man in the doorway, a man with mage robes and dark, shaggy hair that contrasted with his pale skin. Anton looked around the room to make sure the man was addressing him.

"Excuse me?" he said, bottle still raised halfway to his lips.

The man sighed, realising he was going to have to start from the beginning and use small words. "Enchanter Niall, Kinloch Hold," he introduced himself, pointing to his grey-eyed face with one finger. "I'm a few doors down, and I can hear you sulking from the end of the building."

"I'm not talking to myself that loudly," Anton protested, glancing around the room, as if someone else might appear. "And I don't recall hearing anyone else doing any shouting nearby, so you must be mistaken."

Niall shook his head. "No, I mean, I can hear regret and despair. And there's a lot of it going around, these days, even if it's a lot less than when we got here. I came back from the Fade with J-- Levyn and Captain Brynn, and that's a talent I picked up on the trip, however much I wish I could make it stop."

Anton stared at the man, wondering exactly how crazy he was. He'd have to talk to Anders about-- Anders. Anders who could do something very similar, but with people who thought they'd been wronged. "You're possessed, aren't you?" He smiled and nodded. "I have a friend who's possessed."
"No, no. Regrettably all these thoughts are my own. I'm not possessed, I'm... well... I was dead."

"Was," Anton repeated slowly, wondering just what was in that drink.

"That sounds crazy, doesn't it?" Niall asked, drifting into the room instead of hovering in the doorway.

"No," Anton drawled, drawing out the one syllable into three. "Makes perfect sense so far. You were dead, and now you're not. Care to fill me in on how we went from Point A to Point B?"

At the very least, Niall had distracted Anton from his thoughts, and that helped to ease the ache in Niall's temples. "I was dead and wandered the Fade, turned into a spirit, and eventually ran into Levyn and the others."

"People can turn into spirits?" Anton asked, somewhere between unsettled and fascinated.

"People kind of are spirits," Niall said, after a few moments of consideration. "It's why you can dream. You know about Tranquility, I'm guessing, since you married a Templar?"

Anton nodded. "The thing that makes mages stop being mages."

"It makes them stop dreaming, too. People are people and spirits at the same time, and they're kind of tied together in the middle. And if you're a mage, it's a really strong rope and you can look right along it. And if you're a regular person, it's more like a trouser lace. But, Tranquility breaks the string. It separates the person from the spirit. And most of the time, when people die, the spirit dies too. Or it forgets what it is -- which if you're a spirit, is the same thing. But, some people don't lose the spirit. They just stop having a body it goes in. And then there's regular spirits that can look like people, too -- like Cole. Have you met Cole? He's a good kid, but he's a little creepy, even for me. But, I'm the dead people kind of spirit, and I'm trying to figure out how to become the living people kind of spirit, so I can stop worrying about turning into a demon every time someone has a little too much to drink and starts crying about doing dumb stuff when they were a kid." Niall paused, looking a little tense. "That's a joke. It's really not that easy."

Anton forced out an uneasy laugh, regardless. The last thing he needed was a demon here right now, though he supposed this was where his brothers would have made a comment about how he could pee on it. Anton was halfway to making a joke that said as much before remembering that threatening to pee on someone was not a normal progression for this sort of conversation.

"But that affects you? Other people's emotions?" Anton tried to sound casual about it.

"Certain emotions, yes," Niall said, see-sawing his hand in the air. "Depends on the spirit. Despair is... well, it's hard for me to ignore."

"Interesting," Anton mumbled before taking another long sip. "That you can sense emotions, that is. Interesting and not at all creepy, nope."

"It's even creepier if you're me. I can't wait to just be a regular mage, again. Close up the hole in the sky, retire to a nice farm in central Rivain or something, never have to think about demons or other people's regrets again. Niall sighed and rubbed his face roughly. "Anyway, go appreciate your husband. As far as I can tell, he's actually alive. Not even some sort of half-alive, come back from the dead thing -- he's just plain old alive, like people are supposed to be. It's a good thing. You should appreciate it."

"I'll appreciate it when he remembers to tell me he's alive, instead of letting me run halfway across
Thedas to pick up his corpse, before I find out he's not one!" Anton huffed and held up the letter, reading it again, before he offered it to Niall. "And this is just obscene. Although he might win his way back into my good graces, if he keeps it up."

Niall squinted at the text, not sure he wanted to know. "I don't think that's physically possible."

"You never know until you try, right?"

"There. Good. Keep thinking that. I can't hear that." Niall nodded and backed out the door, grabbing the handle to pull it after him. "Happy thoughts!"
Chapter 144

Chapter Summary

Magister Alexius meets more judgement than expected, some from an unexpected source.

Josephine appeared in the door of the room Adaar had been given, spacious and full of light, high in a turret off the main hall. "Felix Alexius has arrived. I'm told he looks much better than he did in Redcliffe. But, this does mean the time has come to pass judgement on his father. Are you prepared? Is there anyone you'd like to consult, before you take the... well, it's supposed to be a throne, but the parts for the throne got hung up in West Hill. I'm sure you'll do fine without it."

Adaar scratched the skin behind his right horn as he closed the book in his lap he'd been napping through. "Oh. Right. We haven't done that yet, have we?" He stood and smothered a yawn before looking himself over and making sure he was at least presentable. "Wait, did you say throne? Inquisitors get thrones?"

Josephine chuckled as she stepped to the side to let Adaar through the door. "Well, they do now! Or they will, rather, once this one gets here."

Adaar couldn't quite suppress a smirk, picturing what his family's reactions would have been to that. "What about a crown?" he teased.

Josephine reached up to smooth a wrinkled edge of his sleeve. "That I cannot promise," she said, lips curled in a smile. "Besides, your horns would get in the way."

"Depends on the crown," Adaar argued.

"Ah, then perhaps it would have trouble sitting on your head, which seems to have just grown a size bigger," Josephine teased.

"Speaking of growing a size bigger," Adaar added with a lascivious wink just to hear her chuckle turn into an unladylike snort.

"Well, well, if it isn't Warden Buttz!" Oghren bellowed, pointing across the hall at where Anders stood with a group of mages.

"Shit yourself in battle, recently, Oghren?" Anders called back, edging out of the crowd. "Who are you with?"

"This is that Vint you sent us," Oghren slapped the man firmly on the back. "Didn't think he was gonna make it, but here he is!"

"Felix?" A surprised smile spread across Anders's face, and he held out a hand to the surprisingly healthy looking young man in Mage-Warden armour. "You look good! I didn't recognise you!"

"It's only because you didn't know him before he looked bad." Dorian appeared around Felix's other side, draping an arm around his shoulders. "And you did look bad, Felix. I thought you might die,
"Better now, I hope?" Felix raised an eyebrow at Dorian as he took Anders's hand.

"Much better. Watch yourself, here. You'll have Orlesian ladies all over you, especially in that Warden getup." Dorian stepped back for another look. "Did they really dress you like that? Who designed that? It's terrible."

"Yes, how terrible of them to cover both shoulders," Felix teased with a look up Dorian's robes, which fell asymmetrically in the current Tevinter fashion.

"Exactly! Hiding one of your better assets!"

Felix chuckled with a shake of his head, but his humour sobered as he looked past Anders into the Great Hall. "Have they brought out my father yet?"

Anders nodded to himself in understanding as he realised that was why Felix was here. Of course. "Not yet."

He looked back to see Adaar on the dais where the throne was supposed to be, trying to squeeze into a spindly chair that he expected to break at any moment. Josephine was beside him, reading off something from her notes, and a small crowd had already gathered, with more trickling in.

Fen'Din and Solas appeared from the Undercroft, still in the midst of an animated discussion about the previous researcher who had blasted himself into a paste, down there, trying to recreate ancient elven magics, without understanding them.

"Is this the best they could offer you?" Fen'Din asked, circling around the chair Adaar had wedged himself into. "I suppose the horns will make them take you seriously enough, even if the chair fails to instil the proper reverence. I wonder, do you think the horns would do me any favours? Perhaps I'll see if Anders would make a halla of me."

Adaar paused in the middle of his uncomfortable squirming to burst out laughing. He tilted his head then and hummed, looking Fen'Din over as he considered it. "You know what? Yes. Everyone is more badass with horns. Why do you think Vivienne wears the hats she does? Real horns would probably scandalise the Orlesians, but, really, are you even living if you're not scandalising the Orlesians?"

Adaar tried to stand up to adjust something, only to sit back down immediately when the chair rose with him. He gave Fen'Din a pained look.

Josephine arrived, ahead of two guards leading a broken-looking man in chains. He still wore the same coat and robes he'd been captured in, in Redcliffe, and Fen'Din wondered, in passing, if the clothes had been washed, at all. That was something he'd have to discuss with whoever kept their dungeons. That could not be allowed to continue.

"You recall Gereon Alexius of Tevinter. Ferelden has granted that we may judge him for his crimes, in acknowledgement of our aid," Josephine announced, stepping to the side as the guards brought Alexius to the foot of the dais.

"In acknowledgement that we've been holding him since Redcliffe," Fen'Din murmured, from Adaar's good side.

"The formal charges are apostasy, attempted enslavement, and attempted assassination -- on your own and the Herald's life, no less." Josephine raised an eyebrow, as she spoke, as if questioning that
anyone could be such a fool. "Tevinter has disowned and stripped him of rank. You may judge the former Magister as you see fit."

"I strongly advise dropping the charge of 'apostasy'," Fen'Din offered, quietly. "Whatever else you decide to do, remember that, technically, every mage serving the Inquisition is also an apostate."

"Agreed," Adaar murmured back, already thinking as much. All the Tal Vashoth mages he'd known were technically apostates too, and he still wasn't sure he understood what the problem even was, there. He spent a moment just looking over Alexius. The dais gave him a clear view of the top of his bowed head and sagging shoulders. "Our Herald here has told us much about what would have happened to Thedas if you had succeeded."

"I couldn't save my son," Alexius replied, barely lifting his head to look at Adaar. His voice was scratchier than he'd remembered. "Do you think my fate matters to me?"

Adaar's brow knit. "Your...? You mean Felix?" He exchanged a look with Fen'Din. "You don't know, do you?"

Movement in the crowd drew his eye, and he looked up to see Grey Warden armour approaching the dais. He almost didn't recognise Felix himself, but he smiled to see him standing upright, colour back in his cheeks.

"Felix Alexius, if you could step forward, please," Adaar called out in his most authoritative tone. He took some relish in the way Alexius' head snapped up at that.

Anders came forward with him, his own Grey Warden coloured coat adding some solemnity to their small procession. "I present Mage-Warden Felix Alexius, serving under Warden Commander Solona Amell of Ferelden."

Felix bowed to the pair on the dais, before addressing his father. "Father, they've saved me. It's not a cure, but if I'm careful, it's ten years I didn't have a few months ago."

"Felix?" Alexius gazed up in confusion. "No, this can't be. What trickery is this? What sort of people are you, in the South, that you would--"

"Father, it's me. It's really me," Felix shoved his hair back with one hand and squeezed his eyes shut. "Okay, what was it you said to me, when I decided to go to Orlais to study? You said you'd surrender your seat, if you had to, but you'd make them take it from you. You said that even if I wasn't good enough for Minrathous or Carastes, I was still good enough for you."

Alexius's eyes welled with tears as he looked up at his son. He shook his head still, but when Felix laid a hand on his shoulder, he crumbled, clutching at Felix's robes. Felix knelt and wrapped his arms around him.

"It's me," he said again, softly, and this time he knew Alexius understood that.

Alexius composed himself after a moment, voice still shaky as he asked, "How can this be?" He looked down at the Grey Warden crest on Felix's breastplate. "A Warden? They have treatment for...?"

"I wouldn't call it 'treatment'," Felix said, rising back to his feet but staying near, "but it has bought me some time. Members of the Wardens and the Inquisition were kind enough to help me." He glanced back at Adaar who offered him a smile.

"I told you we could do it." Anders shrugged, face caught somewhere between smug and
exasperated, a look Alexius knew well from years in the Magisterium.

"Then I face my death in peace. That is my only defence: everything I have done was to save my son. And now he is ... better than I could have expected, after all the treatments we were offered."

"Father, I'm sure--" Felix began, but Alexius cut him off.

"No, I know what I have done. I have betrayed everything we stood for, in pursuit of a promise I've been informed wouldn't even have been kept. And now, at the hands of what I thought were my enemies, I have had my only wish granted. Whatever the punishment for my act of war against Ferelden, I face it in peace."

Anders finally registered the underlayer of the stench pouring off Alexius. "How long has he been on Magebane?"

Fen'Din's eyes rounded in careful surprise. "Most likely since we left Redcliffe. I had wondered, but he seemed too conscious, too coherent."

"No, no. I have no power because I have lost my will," Alexius insisted, shaking his head. "It is the will that makes a mage of a ready conduit. I need no poison to lose that."

Anders closed his eyes as they turned blue, cutting off the glow.

"How do you judge this man?" Josephine asked, from the side, eyeing an uneasy crowd.

Adaar watched Alexius, could see the peace wash over his face. This was a man beaten and tired, a man who had done terrible things with good intentions, but not a man who deserved to die. "Your magic was theoretically impossible, Alexius," he said, leaning forward so that his chair creaked ominously. "We could use people like you." He darted a glance at Fen'Din before continuing, "Your sentence is to serve, under guard, as a researcher on all things magical for the Inquisition."

Alexius slumped, looking more tired than grateful, but Felix looked grateful enough for them both, tears welling in his eyes as he squeezed his father's shoulders. "Thank you for your fairness, Inquisitor," Felix said.

Adaar nodded and smiled and hoped he hadn't just done something incredibly stupid.

"Come, Master Gereon." Fen'Din gestured toward the side of the room, to a door that led away from the crowd, and glanced up at Anders. "The healer and I will see about getting you a bath and something more appropriate to wear." He spotted a face in the crowd and beckoned. "Dorian! Your assistance please?"

He leaned down to be sure Adaar would hear him, when he lowered his voice. "Thank you. I'll see to ensuring our security and his."
Chapter 145

Chapter Summary

Alexius's time magic wreaked havoc across the Hinterlands that is still just being discovered. Dagna arrives, with her assistants.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jowan shook his head, as the three of them headed toward the tavern, closer to the sound of the practice field beyond it, and the sound of Templars and soldiers sparring. "I'm still convinced anyone could be a mage, if they had access to the power. That's why the studies being done on the rifts are so important. That is the power -- it's bleeding out of the Fade, and anyone with the will to use it and the patience to learn how to do it could make a mage of themselves. And I'm not sure that's a bad thing! Demons are bad, sure. Shitty people running your country are bad. But, you've got both of those things whether or not you have mages. Widespread magic just means more people can take care of themselves in difficult situations!"

Ellendra rolled her eyes, leaning in front of Blackwall to point a finger at Jowan. "Widespread magic would mean more shitty people ruling the country with-- Just look at Tevinter!"

"Wait, wait." Blackwall looked at the mages on either side of him. "Is he right? Can people just... turn into mages?"

"Demons can teach magic to people with no innate power, so that suggests you can get the power, even without a rift," Jowan argued. "It's just that now you can get it without making a deal."

A shrill whistle and a loud cheer cut through the afternoon air, and Ellendra looked over at the sound, to see a blond elf leaning out an upper window of the tavern, yelling entirely unrepeatable things to one of the armour-clad duellists below, a young woman with a lion's head on the front of her breastplate. The other party in the fight had their back to her, yet, but she thought it might be a man -- probably one of the Templars.

The sight made Ellendra ache. This Templar was built like her beloved Mattrin had been, and if she blotted out the pain of the past few months, she could pretend, for a moment, that it truly was him.

Next to her, Blackwall laughed, the sound nearly lost in his beard. "Sera appreciating Ser Lysette's 'technique', I see."

"Well, she is good with a sword," Jowan said so matter-of-factly that Blackwall wasn't sure whether or not he meant that as an innuendo.

Aside from a red tinge to her cheeks, Lysette ignored Sera's commentary, and Ellendra was content to pay just as little attention to their sparring until the man turned just enough for her to get a glimpse of his face. The shriek that tore out of her brought everything to a halt.

"Enchanter?" Jowan paled but stepped around Blackwall to put himself between Ellendra and whatever she'd seen. After the Blight, it was nearly reflex. "What--?"
"Mattrin!" Ellendra howled, hands clenched in front of her chest.

Blackwall tried to get a grip on the situation as the second Templar, the man, froze, the sword sliding out of his hand and sticking in the mud beneath his feet.

"Ellendra?" The Templar looked like he'd seen a ghost.

"No, no, no, you're not real." Ellendra squeezed her eyes shut and grabbed at Jowan's sleeve. "Tell me he's not real. Tell me he's not Mattrin!"

"Maybe you'd better tell me what you did to the lady," Blackwall demanded, shoulders squaring as he stepped forward.

"Nothing!" protested the Templar who might have been Mattrin. "Is that Ellendra? I thought she'd died! We were supposed to meet, and she never came!"

"Because you were dead!" Ellendra sobbed, eyes still jammed shut. "I have the letter you wrote me! You ran out of lyrium and took poison! You're dead!"

Blackwall looked back at Jowan, who supported the sobbing Enchanter with both arms, and Jowan lifted his shoulders ever so slightly as if to say he didn't know what to do with it either.

"There were a lot of bodies out there. Maybe it was someone else. After a couple days, it's a little hard to tell, sometimes," Blackwall suggested. "Different Templar, a letter for someone else."

"Or it's that time magic they were saying Magister Alexius used," Jowan offered. "There's a different time where one or both of you died, but it's not this one."

"The letter was written to me," Ellendra protested, her voice cracking. "And time magic? How...?" Her words trailed off as she continued to shake her head, denying the man in front of her.

"Ellendara," Mattrin said, voice little more than a whisper as he approached carefully, slowly, as though nearing a wild animal he was afraid would bolt. "I'm alive. You're alive." He looked like he wanted to say something more but instead simply held out a hand.

Ellendra shied away at first, a sob in her throat, but then she took his hand, if only to make sure he was really there. She then nearly squeezed the life out of it anyway.

"This is what we do," Blackwall decided, watching the lovers. "Listening to you mages talk, you say demons come when people feel like shit. That Niall says demons are made of people feeling like shit. This is what we do, this is what the Inquisition is for. We give people something to believe in. We give them things to be happy about. We push back the demons by just... being too good for them."

Jowan nodded slowly, watching Ellendra pat at Mattrin's face and arms, still sobbing, but with relief to judge by the look on her face. "I like the way you think."

Mattrin carefully gathered Ellendra into his arms, cheeks damp with his own tears. "There's nothing impossible left in the world. You're alive, and you're here."

Leaning much too far out the window, Sera whistled and applauded wildly, before her attention fell on Lysette, still watching in confusion, sword hanging loosely in her hand. "You want to come up and help me celebrate their good fortune? I bet you're real good at celebrating..."

"They're the cutest things!" Candles enthused, rubbing the belly of the nug Leliana had handed her.
"What is the spell?" Leliana asked, watching Candle's fingers glow dimly, though the nug seemed completely undisturbed by it, wriggling contentedly and making little grunty chuffing noises.

"Oh, that's just to keep my fingers warm. You don't want to pet something with no fur if you've got cold fingers, do you, Schmooples Junior? No, I think you don't!" Candles cooed, petting the top of the nug's nose with one finger.

Leliana decided she liked this girl, but she'd already decided Brother Kinnon's friends were probably good people, and so far, they had been. Very trustworthy and loyal, once one got to know them... Aside from Lord Serault, of course, but she expected little else of Orlesian nobility, regardless of how long they'd been separated from home. Still, even he appreciated her company, when he had it. Terribly polite. She'd just never trust him with her nugs.

"They seem to like you very much," she observed, watching Schmooples II insistently nibble at Candles's fingernail. "They are, I've found, excellent judges of character."

"Of course they are! Just look at the wisdom in those eyes!" She scratched Schmooples' wrinkled forehead in a way the nug seemed to find pleasing, leaning into the touch with more approving grunts.

Leliana smiled, giving no outward indication that she heard the tread of footsteps up the stairs, until the courier appeared at the top, cheeks red as he puffed for air. "Sister Nightingale," he said, pausing at the sight of the nug.

"What is it?" Leliana asked, one hand rubbing Schmooples's ear.

"The Arcanist has arrived," he answered, one eye still on the happily grunting animal. "She is currently speaking with the Herald."

"Ah." Leliana nodded. "Thank you." She smiled at Candles. "Come, let us meet her!"

"Isn't it Dagna?" Candles cooed at the nug again. "We should probably leave Schmooples here. Dagna's very dwarfy about nugs."

Leliana chuckled and held open a hutch. "Well, we'll just have to see about convincing her otherwise, yes?"

"Did the bid for a mage tower not work out, then?" Fen'Din asked, finding himself in the odd position of being between Dagna and her two human companions in height.

"Aeducan decided not to start more shit in the middle of a war, so I went back to the surface to find somewhere else to study." Dagna shook her head. "But, I got a really great apprentice! You would not believe what this human can do! You'd think she was part dwarf! Renata, I want you to meet Enchanter Cr-- er, Enchanter Fen'Din of Kinloch Hold! Great guy. Lot of wild ideas about lyrium and the Fade. It's great to be working with you again."

"When I heard your name come up, I made sure I sent only the finest crew to retrieve you." Fen'Din offered a hand to Renata, who had an iron grip. "I look forward to seeing your work, Mistress Renata. If Dagna says you're good, I can only imagine."

Renata had a surprisingly light laugh, given the breadth of her chest and shoulders. "You won't be disappointed. Here, this is my husband Jan." She stepped aside and gestured to a distinctly Ander-looking man.
Actually, Fen'Din thought, he looked a lot like Anders. Older, though, and with a much nicer beard. "Another Jan of the Anderfels? Where are you from?"

Jan shook his head. "Tantervale, now. Couldn't bear the thought of farming in the desert like the rest of my family. Now I've passed the orchards on to my oldest son, and I get to come see Ferelden with my beautiful and talented wife. Can a man really ask for better?" He put an arm around Renata's shoulders and squeezed.

"A man shouldn't, if he knows what's best for him," Renata teased, earning a laugh and a nod from Jan.

"You must be Dagna," called a voice from one of the Great Hall's many doorways. A hooded woman with red hair and sharp eyes, followed by a dark-skinned elf Dagna recognised.

"Oh -- Candles!" Dagna called out, ducking behind Renata to get a better look, waving at her enthusiastically before remembering herself. "Right. Yes. I'm Dagna. What gave it away?"

"The air of competence, clearly," Candles replied. "Easier to breathe than Val's usual stink. And--" Her words cut off abruptly when she caught sight of Jan, realising a beat too late that that wasn't Anders. "Uh. Hello."

Jan looked at himself and offered a confused smile. "I am told I am not the only Jan of the Anderfels here. I hear a lot in the Marches that we all look alike, yes?"

Candles looked relieved. "That's exactly it. Not you all look alike, but you look a lot like my friend Jan. I lived in the Anderfels. I know you don't all look alike."

Jan's face brightened with enthusiasm. "You're an Ander elf? Do you ride a dracolisk? I've heard the desert elves keep them like the rest of the elves keep halla!"

Candles laughed so hard Leliana had to hold her up. "A dracolisk? Do they really? Oh, that would be wild! Hey, Crazypants, how would I look on a dracolisk?"

"I think we should get some." Fen'Din nodded. "For the Inquisition. We'll learn to ride them, together."

"I can ... never tell when you're joking." Dagna blinked up at him.

"I know. Isn't it wonderful?" Fen'Din's smile came a bit late. "Why don't you find Kinnon and Keili, and we'll all have lunch in the tavern? I still need to show Dagna her forge and laboratory, get her settled in. But, I'm sure after such a journey, our friends must be hungry!"

"Starving," Dagna admitted with an enthusiastic nod. "I could really go for some roast nug right about now!"

Candles exchanged a horrified look with Leliana.

Chapter End Notes

Mattrin's bizarre resurrection is semi-canonical. Either Ellendra's boyfriend returned from the dead, or Mattrin's a name as common as 'Bran', because Knight-Templar Mattrin is one of the Templars at Haven. You can catch him arguing with another
Templar, Lysette, who claims the Inquisition saved his life.

Sources:
* Lysette
* My Lover's Phylactery
Chapter Summary

Anders meets the other Jan. It goes about as well as one might expect.

They trundled down the stairs, heavy with ale and food that Candles insisted had no nug in it, and Dagna reflected that these stairs were built for people with longer legs. The cold air was sharp when they opened the door to the undercroft, and so were the sounds of voices bouncing off bare stone.

"'The Veil is old here'," said another excessively tall man. All Dagna could see of him was his long blond hair and the back of his robes. "That's all he said. Wonderfully ominous last words but not exactly helpful."

"Well, the 'don't do what I just did' was already heavily implied," replied an elf, Dalish to go by the intricate facial tattoos.

"I believe the forge itself dates to the dwarven occupation," declared another elf, his bald head reflecting the light that came in through the waterfall, as he perched atop the shoulders of a heavy man with a Rivaini hairstyle and Chantry robes. "Which would suggest it was not here during these experiments, and may have destroyed some of the evidence Ganot was working from. We are, despite our considerable scholarship, somewhat further in the dark than he was, not least because of what he may have ruined with his calling of the lightning."

"Can you still read the strikes in the stone? Maybe we should get Val to look at it." The Rivaini man had a strong Fereldan accent.

"Gentlemen, I present our Arcanist, to whom this room belongs," Fen'Din announced, from the top of the stairs. "Dagna, I present some of the finest scholars Skyhold hosts -- Master Solas, on the shoulders of Lord Cormac Hawke of Kirkwall, Hahren Theron of the Sabrae Clan, and Mage-Warden Jan Kasselmann."

"Pleased to meet all of you! Mages? I hope so. I love working with smart mages." Dagna grinned broadly as she hurried down the stairs, taking in the enormous room and the way the forge seemed to grow out of the wall. "We're gonna have some fun, here! Did I hear you say the forge is dwarven-made? When does it date to? Do I need to make repairs?"

The one Jan stared at the other, and the other stared back, until the one on the stairs spoke. "Jan... Kasselmann, is it?"

"One of the river towns, but right near Kassel," Anders nodded. "But, Jan's such a common name, there must be a hundred Kasselmanns with it. Why, do I look like someone you know?"

"It is also my name," replied the other Jan. "Which town? You must be close to my age. Have we met?"

Anders laughed nervously, panic dancing in his eyes. "Nowhere you'd have heard of, really. Even right across the river."

"We lived along the road from the Petty Crown," Fen'Din said, "but I know the abbey wouldn't have
been there when you were. Not if you've come from Tantervale."

"The Petty Crown?" said the Jan on the stairs even as he descended them, eyes fixed on Anders though he tilted his head in Fen'Din's direction.

Renata followed her husband down into the forge. "Do you know the place?" she asked, eyeing Anders with amazement. "Kasselmann. Perhaps he's a relative? You two look like you could be. From a distance, I would be hard pressed to tell you two apart!"

"That's because all Ander have --" Anders started to say, verbally evading what he knew was inevitable when Jan narrowed his eyes at him and blurted:

"Ket?"

Anders's words stuttered off into a muttered, "Maker's balls."

"Then you do know each other!" Fen'Din managed something approaching a smile. "And from many years ago..."

Cormac turned around so fast he nearly dropped Solas, eyes wide as he took the time to really observe the other Jan. "You're-- You're Ulla's son, aren't you? You're that Jan!"

"That Jan?" Solas echoed, brows knitting. He glanced at Theron, who answered with a helpless shrug.

Jan threw Cormac a startled look at the mention of Ulla, but his stare returned to 'Ket' as though magnetised. "What are you--? How--?" He sputtered for a moment before pinching the bridge of his nose and pausing. "I have so many questions, they're all running together in my head."

"Is this your brother?" Renata asked, squeezing her husband's arm, a look of wonder on her face.

"Ohh," said Solas softly to himself.

"Jannik..." Anders sighed. "Mum wants to see you."

"So, what, you pretended you were me? So she'd think I'd come back?" Jan snapped, angry and astonished.

"No, she knows. Dad doesn't."

"Why is he even still alive, Maker, why?" Jan circled Anders warily. "And why aren't you using your own name, whatever it is?"

"But, you just called him--" Dagna started, and Jan shook his head.

"It's a child's name, but when I left, he was a child."

"I never got a name. They don't give second names in the South. I borrowed yours, so it wouldn't be... weird, when I went to see Mum. I'm a mage, Jannik, and everyone knows it. I can't just present myself at the Chantry on Summerday." Anders looked like he was trying very hard to be shorter. "So, I went home as the other son, the good son."

Jan snorted.

"Okay, that's fair. Dad still hates you, but Dad hates us both, and I haven't really improved his opinion of either of us."
"I don't think anything would improve his opinion of anyone," Jan said with a bitterness only Anders could truly understand. Anders offered him a weak smile. "But I'm not sure about my own opinion of you. You were using my name? For how long?"

Anders tried to gather enough wits together to do the maths. "A... few years. Maybe three? I wanted to see Mum."

"Is Mum here?"

"No, she's still--"

"Then what's your excuse now?" Jan threw out his hands, more desperate and confused than angry.

"Well, it was either that or Seymour Buttz!" Anders blurted. "And I doubt anyone besides the Warden Commander would have appreciated that!"

"I would have appreciated that," Theron mumbled.

"Biggus Dickus, of House Dickus, of Carastes?" Cormac suggested, dropping to one knee, to put Solas back on the floor. "He's still Jan because he's used to answering to it, and he doesn't have a name."

"They called you something in that tower," Jan insisted, eyeing his brother.

"They called me 'Anders'." Anders raised his eyebrows even as he looked at the floor between them, instead of at Jan.

Renata gasped. "Didn't I hear someone say Kirkwall? You're the Kirkwall Anders?"

"Depends on what you've heard." Anders smiled awkwardly.

"They say you killed the Knight-Commander, and now mages run wild in the streets!"

Anders began to wonder if Renata was going to punch him, and whether it would hurt more than being punched by an ogre.

"Hey, I was there for that," Theron protested, "and if that's what the Knight-Commander of anywhere was supposed to look like, I've got serious questions about human religion."

"What?" Jan blinked, confused.

"Have you heard the stories about the Templars who took red lyrium, when the Chantry stopped supplying them?" Cormac asked, putting an arm around Anders. "Because she still had Chantry lyrium, but she was still the first. That wasn't the Knight-Commander any more. The new Knight-Commander's upstairs, handling the Inquisition's push against the demons. His Captain's a good man -- we rescued him from a maleficar -- and he's holding down the city, now."

"What do you mean, we?" Anders snorted. "You were there. You were tied up and dosed out of your mind on magebane. You slipped your brother some Orlesian tongue because you thought he was me, and then you poured grease on a fireball. Nobody should take your word for any of that day."

"Okay, but I'm still right about Meredith."

Anders nodded at his brother. "He's still right about the Knight-Commander. Both of them. And the Knight-Captain, too. I like Ser Thrask, most of the time, when I don't have to think about the fact that
"Mages running rampant in the streets?" Renata asked, eyeing the two mages in front of her with no small amount of suspicion.

"They're citizens like anyone else in the city." Theron shrugged. "No reason they shouldn't be treated like everyone else. That's how the Dalish do it, and we don't have half the problems you guys do."

"Works in Rivain," Cormac pointed out. "And if you're back, you've met my cousin. He's from Dairsmuid. He'll tell you."

"Works in Tevinter too, I wager," Jan muttered, but he looked uncertain.

"Tevinter only treats mages like citizens," Theron replied. "It's the opposite side of the same problem. If mages and non-mages are treated fairly, we avoid that. That is the point, as far as I'm aware." He turned to Anders for confirmation.

"With the chaos brought about by the Divine's death and the disintegration of the Circles," Solas cut in quietly, "I suspect Kirkwall is better equipped to handle whatever lies ahead. Right now, mages are 'running rampant' everywhere."

Renata eyed him carefully, then swept that same look over the others. "Are you all mages?"

"Not all," Anders said, tipping his head at Theron. "He may consider his poetry magical, but that's only in a metaphorical sense." Despite the joke, Anders's smile was thin.

"None of this addresses the fact that my brother has been pretending to be me for three years," Jan pointed out, getting back to the subject he'd meant to focus on.

"There's a lot of Jans from the villages near Kassel!" Anders argued. "It's the most Ander name ever! It's like being Fereldan Bran!"

"That's the best argument I've heard, yet." Jan looked slightly mollified. "Biggus Dickus? Really?"

"I think we were in Llomeryn." Anders shrugged. "It seemed like the thing to do at the time."

"Still, I don't think our mother would have named us both Jan. You need a name, Ket."

"You absolutely can not call me that in front of anyone, ever." Anders looked panicked, eyes rounding. "Can't do it. Don't do it. I'll never get rid of it -- nobody here is Ander except you, me, and Peryn. It's... they'll think it's a real name."

"It might as well be!" Jan gestured to the ratty-looking cat that had appeared at Anders's feet, rubbing itself against his ankles. There was something wrong about the cat, though. Something strange about the way its skin rested. Its eyes didn't look quite right.

"Well, don't expect us to be calling you Jan," Renata said, arching an eyebrow.

Anders's shoulders slumped. "No, no, of course not. I don't suppose anyone will be, once this gets out." Of all the contingencies Anders had planned for, he hadn't considered this particular disaster.

"I am sure the Inquisition will find you a new name," Solas said. "The general public is good for that, though you might not like the results."

"Sera is good for that," Theron pointed out with a laugh. "You might end up preferring Ket."
"Very helpful, thank you," Anders sighed.

Dagna cleared her throat delicately, reminding the group that she was still there. "Wow this quite a bit more excitement than I was expecting on my first day."

"Don't worry," Fen'Din said, glancing down at Dagna, "it's always like this!"

Solas looked pained.
Chapter 147

Chapter Summary

Isabela brings in the mail. Vivienne discusses magic and the purpose of Templars with Peryn.

Since she was coming up the mountain anyway, Isabela had picked up the mail, when she passed through Highever, and when Cullen saw Daylen struggling with the bag, he stopped to help... and to slip another letter into it. Now, Isabela sat on the arm of the Inquisitor's custom-built, qunari-sized throne, sorting through letters and calling out names, while Daylen held the bag open. Cullen had disappeared into the crowd, again, hoping to see but not be seen. A pity his husband had always been better at that.

"First Enchanter Vivienne de Montsimmard!" Isabela called out, and then, "No shit? That's a fancy title for a place like this." She flashed the letter at Daylen. "Enchanter, huh? Do you know her?"

"Vivienne's here? Everyone knows Vivienne. We've never been on any of the same committees, but I've heard her speak." Daylen pointed to the horns of a hennin, coming through the crowd. "There she is. And you shall know her by her hats-- seriously, the woman must have a haberdasher on contract. I've never seen a mage -- even an Orlesian -- dressed the way she does. You'd think she was a magister."

Isabela whistled, taking a long look as Vivienne stepped out of the crowd. "That is a nice dress. Shoes are a little impractical, but that just screams power."

Daylen shot Isabela an amused look, sweeping his gaze over her shapely legs. "Most would say not wearing pants is impractical."

"Well, they'd be wrong," Isabela said, lips curling in a sly smile. "You should know just how efficient not wearing pants can be." She ended the comment with a wink, and Daylen's face turned a lovely shade of red.

Vivienne smiled as she took the letter from Isabela. "Thank you, my dear."

Isabela pulled out another letter and guffawed when she saw the name. "Some fanmail for Lord Dog!" she called out, waving the letter Cullen had slipped into the bag. A glance at Cullen told her he'd sent it -- the man was trying too hard to look innocently surprised.

"Is Anton here?" Daylen asked her, peering into the crowd but not seeing him.

"Oh, if he's not here, he will be shortly," Isabela said, trying to peek into the letter without opening it. "Watch the chandelier. He likes to be dramatic."

"Watch the--? You're joking."

"You should have seen him show up for his wedding." Isabela shook her head. "Dressed up like a bandit and swooping in from the roof. And whatever Warden Alistair has to say about it, swooping is not so bad, if you can do it looking like that."
Anton swung down from some scaffolding, executing a flip to carry himself over the heads of the crowd, and landed gently at Isabela's feet, on one knee, hand extended. "Pretty good, right? Bull and I have been working on that."

"Are they all like this?" Daylen asked. "Am I the only normal person in this family?"

"There are no normal people in this family," Anton assured him, standing up to take the letter and a kiss from Isabela. "You're a mage, remember?"

"Oh, this is a good one." Isabela cackled and showed it to Anton, who snorted and stepped back.

"This I've got to see."

"What is it?" Daylen asked, leaning forward to try to read the writing on the envelope.

"Got one for Warden Seymour Buttz! Do we have a Seymour Buttz?" Isabela whooped with laughter.

"We will if you bend over again," Daylen pointed out.

There was some tittering in the crowd at the name, though some of the frillier Orlesian nobles fluffed themselves up and acted above it all.

"A Warden Seymour Buttz!" Isabela called out just because she could, though it was a near thing, the way she shook with laughter.

The crowd parted around a blond head and a set of blue Warden mage robes, and Isabela laughed all the harder, nearly falling off her perch when she recognised Anders.

Anders watched her with a wry smile, feeling the butt (as it were) of more than one joke after his reunion with his brother, aware he was once again without a name. "I believe you have a letter for me?"

"It's good to see you, Warden Seymour," Anton said, a twitching muscle in his jaw saying he was just barely keeping a straight face.

"It must be," Anders quipped, but his attention was already on the letter, on the familiar handwriting he hadn't seen in far too long.

"Warden Buttz has surely seen them all," Fen'Din joked, peering around Anders. "Have you anything for me? I've been expecting to hear something from Cumberland, but..."

"I don't think anyone's going to be hearing from Cumberland in the near future. Maybe after the rioting lets up, but the College of Enchanters has been a bit of a popular protest point." Daylen shook his head and offered a sympathetic shrug. "Funny running into you here, speaking of Enchanters."

"The other Enchanter Amell! A pleasure as always." Fen'Din nodded. "I'd been meaning to have a statue done of Karl -- you remember Karl, don't you? A few years older than us, Kinloch Hold and then the Gallows?" He paused. "You work stone, don't you, Daylen? I seem to recall that was your speciality."

"Among the best, but fine work. I don't know that I'm who you want for statuary. Doubly since I didn't know him well." Daylen shook his head again.

"I'll have to put it to Kinnon when he's feeling more himself. I wanted to have him added to the
gallery, even if the College never sees use again. He deserved it."

"Past tense?" Daylen asked, face falling. "Is that why we stopped hearing from him? I always wondered, but no one would say, and then Kirkwall stopped coming out entirely..."

"Daylen, can't have you holding the bag if you're not holding it open," Isabela interrupted, pulling his hands apart from where Daylen had started wringing the top of the mailbag. She drew out another letter. "And another one for Warden Buttz! Popular, these days, Warden Buttz! This one's heavy!"

Isabela had to smack Anders with the parcel to get his attention

"What?" He looked up from the letter from Solona.

"Looks like you've got an admirer in Starkhaven."

Anders took the package and read it. "Oh! It's Bethany's latest manuscript!" He blinked, considered it, and handed the whole thing to Fen'Din. "Have you met The Silver Falcon? She's done some great work in Nevarran funerary customs and necromantic considerations."

"I've read her," Fen'Din confirmed, examining the parcel. "You know her?"

"I edit for her. I'm the only person she knew who wouldn't be weirdly judgemental about the topic, or about her not being with the Circle." Anders grinned and leaned an elbow on Fen'Din's shoulder. "I still think you'd be better at it. And just wait until I tell her she's gotten comments from the one and only Senior Enchanter Surana, Bane of Southern Sensibilities."

"The more I see the world, the less I believe the South has sensibilities. I'm from here, and I'm going to require some convincing."

"That sounds like us," Anton cut in cheerfully. "The Thoroughly Senseless South. So who else is calling you 'Seymour Buttz' other than my sister?"

Anders was already pulling the letter out of range even as Anton tried to swipe it. "Your cousin, actually," he said. "It must be an Amell trait."

"Cousin?" Anton echoed.

"Solona?" Daylen said, reaching for the letter too before a loud throat-clearing from Isabela reminded him he had a job to do. He promptly put both hands back on the bag, but Isabela took her time pulling out the next letter, one ear clearly on the conversation. "How is she?"

"At the moment? Suspiciously cryptic." Anders handed the letter off to Fen'Din instead. "I never like when she gets like that. Apparently she has a friend she'd like us to meet, and though it certainly is a notable occasion that Solona has actually managed to make a friend."

"A friend? What, is she sending her husband to assassinate our enemies?" Anton asked, with a surprised look. "I like him. He's fun."

"Oh, I hope she sends Zevran!" Isabela smiled a little too widely. "I'm sure his skills would be in high demand, around here."

"I was hoping for Nathaniel, which means she's probably sending Shale. Can't go wrong with a golem on your side, right?" Anders chuckled, then froze with a sudden half-horrified look. "Oh, I hope we're not getting Oghren."
"Oh, why not!" Isabela laughed. "Are you afraid he'll drink you under the table again?"

"I don't think we can afford the cost in beer, and I'm not sure any of the rooms here are well-ventilated enough." Anders shuddered, looking through the crowd to where Vivienne's horned hat jutted up beside a splash of colour that might have been Peryn's new robes. Lady Montilyet had commissioned something in the Ander style, but with more Fereldan sensibilities, and the red and black with thick silver fennec fur was nearly unmistakeable, even at this distance.

"Either way, I believe we should make preparations to meet with this friend." Fen'Din looked up from the letter. "She claims they're very knowledgeable about Corypheus, his plans, and 'other such creatures'."

"To be fair, he's not the only thing I've met that looked like that." Anders admitted, remembering the Architect, who'd found his attachment to Urthemiel quite entertaining. "And if Corypheus isn't lying about what he is, there's seven of them."

"The fennec fur was certainly a nice touch," Vivienne was saying, admiring Peryn's new robes.

"It is better for the weather here, yes," Peryn agreed, and Vivienne admitted there was something charming about his smile and earnest, if accented, way of speaking. "I did not plan staying so long, but the Maker's plans are... not always obvious."

"Or convenient," Vivienne said, her smile starting to reach her eyes. "Still, I am glad that we have had the opportunity to keep you in the south a little longer, although the reason is regrettable. I can't say I've had the opportunity to speak casually with many Templars. It's discouraged, you know, to get too close, but under the current circumstances, I'd like to better understand my allies in this battle against Corypheus."

Peryn's brows knit, head tilting curiously. "You do not speak to Cullen?"

"I do," Vivienne said with a tip of her horned head, "but Cullen is a very busy man. You seem well educated and far less fearful of mages than many faces in the Templar camp."

Peryn rocked back on his heels, and his gaze swept around the room, automatically seeking out the faces of the mages he had come to know -- for certain values of 'know', he supposed with some bitterness. "Fearful?"

"Since the Rebellion, many survivors have been young Templars whose first real exposure to magic was watching it used in massacres. And while it certainly can be used that way, and that is precisely what Templars are meant to stand against, they seem uncertain about encountering mages outside of battle. Every mage is an immediate and personal threat, and not to be spoken with." Vivienne shook her head gently, not to disrupt the hat. "And truly, that is no way to ensure they are prepared for the future, whatever it may bring. A Templar must, as I'm sure you know, be willing to practise their skills with Enchanters of every school, to be certain they are aware of, and can defend against, whatever a maleficar may bring. You seem like a sensible young man, Ser Peryn, and I'd appreciate being able to work with you, so that mages and Templars are able to commit to the battle ahead with a greater understanding of what their allies are capable of, when to step in, and when to step aside. No general leads a winning force when his soldiers are too busy stumbling over each other to engage the enemy. It is a simple matter of practicality."

Peryn nodded, smiling slowly in agreement as the words turned to meaning. "You seem very practical, Lady Vivienne?"
Vivienne chuckled. "No, my dear. No mage holds a title, except those of the Circle. First Enchanter or Madame will do."

"First Enchanter Vivienne. It is a goodness to meet you in this. No." Peryn waited a moment, staring intently at the wall, before he looked back to Vivienne. "It is my pleasure to join you in this. We must be strong against Corypheus, and we must be strong against the darkspawn. In the Anderfels, things are different. Many mages compete to go to the Wardens. There is much less of the untrusting of the South, but we are strong against maleficars, because it is like you say. We learn together, and we are quick and done when there is trouble. Done. Final? Finished?"

Vivienne chuckled. "Final, I think. And that is admirable and truly as it should be. Have you dealt with many maleficars yourself, Ser Peryn?" She kept her tone gentle, aware this could be a difficult subject.

Some of Peryn's smile faded. "Many, no. Some. It is sad. You know the person for years, but blood magic stains. They are always different, after."

"Different?" Vivienne prodded. "You mean they were possessed? Abominations?"

"No." Peryn paused and shook his head, muttering a few words in Ander to himself. "Well, some, yes. But, they are all different. Stained. I know you are not a maleficar because you are not stained."

"How interesting! Do all Templars see these stains, or is this some special Ander training? I would be very interested to see it taught in the southern Chantry, if it isn't." Vivienne thought of the letter from Hossberg she held, but had not yet opened, and the question she wasn't asking. Was this a Templar skill, or was this some personal oddity, perhaps some result of his heritage?

"I do not know. It is not taught to us. There are no lessons. Some of us are better at it, I think. Some Templars have no ... they do not see it or they do not know what it is. Maybe we should have lessons!" Peryn laughed lightly. "But, this would mean working with the tainted and knowing it, I think. Not all of them are still bad. Some mages, I know, are tricked into doing things, by other mages or by spirits, and they come back when they see it is bad. Not even always mages. Sometimes regular people are so bad they are evil; they are mean because they are happy with it. They are stained, too."

"I wonder if the lyrium confers that vision, or some particular Ander heritage. That is certainly something to consider, when the Templar order is returned to its former place." Vivienne fanned herself slowly, gazing across the crowd. "Tell me, Ser Peryn, are you an average Ander Templar? If I were to go to the Anderfels with you in mind, would I be surprised by the rest of the Order?"

"I am very average." Peryn nodded firmly. "Except I do not work in the Hossberg Tower. That is not average. A small number of Templars work alone, riding through the desert and along the river, to help the smaller towns that do not have Templars. I am trusted to travel the river. Another Templar has taken my place, while I am here."

"So, you are not so average. Someone must find you very skilled that you are allowed to work alone," Vivienne observed.

"Skilled? No more than others." Peryn ducked his head with another self-deprecating smile. "The towns are small and do not need more than one. Most mages are small when we find them, and not many Templars are needed for that."

Vivienne noticed the softening around his eyes as he spoke, and she could not help but smile. "You enjoy working with the children?"
Peryn considered for a moment before nodding. "They are not stained. Only scared. I like to..." He paused and seemed to struggle with his word choice for a moment. "I like to take away their fear."

"It is a terrifying moment," Vivienne murmured, "but a kind face can make all the difference."

"Yes! Our mages have purpose, they have rules, but they follow because they are good, and they wish to do good and to help, not because they are afraid. They know the price of evil, but it is losing the smiles of their friends that holds them back. I know it is different in the South, which seems sad." Peryn looked up at the majestic woman beside him. "I have heard there are not many kind faces, here. That too much kindness is against the rules."

"Certainly the kindness you've offered Brother Kinnon," Vivienne remarked drily. "But, does it not seem sadder to know you may need to execute your own friends?"

"I hold that I did not know," Peryn insisted, red-faced with shame. "And it is not so sad, because it does not happen much. There are schools where it is more, but even there it is not so much. It is rare. It is like the coughing sickness. There is no way to make it go away forever, but when it comes, you must be merciful and quick. You must protect the others."

"You think it is your duty to protect the mages?" Vivienne asked, tone carefully polite.

"Of course!" Peryn answered without reservation, brows knitting in confusion that she would even need to ask. "That is why we are there, yes?"

Vivienne smiled softly as though at some private joke. "You are a good man, Ser Peryn," she said, reaching out to squeeze his arm. "You understand the Circle as it is meant to be, as it will be when all this is finished." She politely side-stepped the indiscretion with Kinnon, satisfied that Peryn had not known he was a mage and that he had ended the relationship once he'd found out.
Chapter 148

Chapter Summary

Fenris dislikes being studied, but he dislikes being in constant pain even more. Solas, Dagna, Dorian, and Anders have a plan.

It had taken an enormous amount of argument, before Fenris would allow Dorian into the room, and he demanded some amount of clothing, before he'd permit more Altus eyes upon him. Still, enough of him remained bare for Solas to study not just Anders's sketches, but the actual lines of lyrium in his skin. Solas, for some reason, he trusted almost as much as any Hawke mage other than his husband. Solas had a certain confidence and an implicit knowledge of when and where to stop.

"As I've said before, runework is a language of symbols that tell stories, and those stories become true by virtue of being witnessed and believed, by virtue of being known. I have heard the common runes on weapons and armour referred to as Tevinter runes, but Tevinter learned them from the dwarves, as Tevinter learned so much from their alliance with the dwarves. The language we all speak to each other, no matter where we have come from? That is also from an ancient dwarven language. I say this so you will have some sense of how ancient and established some words are, some symbols are. They are far older than even the temples of the Old Gods," Solas explained, from where he leaned over the low back of the cushioned bench Fenris lay upon, on his side. "When you encounter the rune for fire, it does not need you to know it to act its part. Fire is a symbol so old that the Stone and the Sky remember it -- and it has only a single meaning. It is, as it has always been, fire."

"Tevene, as it is written and read in the Imperium of the present, no longer uses ideograms, but letters and spelling, as are common in Southern languages," Dorian pointed out. "It is only the oldest texts and those composed by later priests that use the old ideograms. Even when we speak of 'ancient texts', most are written as we read now. Many of the very oldest texts were lost to the First Blight."

"Elvish also spells words, instead of relying on ideograms." Solas smiled subtly. "And Elvish is an extremely contextual language, with words that take on meanings specific to how they are grouped, or in what manner the parts of them are written. A great deal of that nuance has been lost, since the fall of the empire, and more since the fall of the Dales."

"Then the elves must have used dwarven symbols, same as we do, now," Fenris guessed, looking back over his shoulder at Solas.

"Some of them, yes. Some elves, and some symbols. But, often the words would be written out in certain prescribed ways, turning whole phrases into runes by drawing them just so, so they could only be read one way. It is, of course, the lyrium and the will of the creator that made the intention real, as with any rune, but the more well-known the form of a rune is, the more effective it is, as with any magic. Power is important, but belief and desire shape that power into the intended action. So it is with runes -- the lyrium provides the power, but also provides some memory of the creator's intent, and that intent is reinforced every time it is seen and recognised." Solas gestured down the length of Fenris's body. "And so it is with some confusion that I approach this rune. It is similar to another rune, and I can see the shapes that rune would have taken, but it is not that rune, and it does not say the same thing at all. The rune I know is as old as the oldest of thaigs, and I do not believe it is used
any longer. This looks as if some of the linked ideograms were written in Old Tevene, instead of
Dwarven, and between them other words were attempted, but they are not shapes I am familiar with,
and I struggle to read them."

"Can you draw me some of those elven runes?" Dagna asked, squinting at Fenris and then drawing
arrows along some of the lines on the large sketch of him hanging on the wall. "If I know what kind
of changing the words around we're talking about, I might be able to recognise some other languages
in there."

Solas moved around the end of the bench, picking up a wrapped stick of charcoal and sketching on
the corner of the hanging paper. "One I have recently been reminded of, there is a word which
means both 'the buttocks' and 'to speak as if your mouth is full of farts'. This is how they're both
written as words. And here is an amplifier word -- 'excellent buttocks' or 'profoundly full of fart-
words'. You can see that they are similar phrases, at a glance. In fact, in modern Elvish, both are
written the same way, like this." He wrote another line beneath. "So, when I wrote this--" A rune
appeared, glimmering briefly with a hint of magic. "-- a Dalish Hahren read this--" Another rune
appeared, similar to the first, but subtly different in a way that seemed to twist the meaning on its
side, even if one couldn't read it. "-- which apparently caused many years of difficulties, as the Sky
could not remember the words, in the face of centuries of Dalish writings. Not that I wrote those
words with lyrium in them, so they wouldn't have remembered their own purpose anyway. Alas, a
minor miscalculation, on my part."

"So in other words," Artie said, trying to keep a straight face as he examined the 'rune' Solas had
drawn, one he knew intimately well, "you were trying to say my brother is an ass, but it came out
looking like you were saying my brother has a nice ass."

"To my regret and, I am sure, your amusement, yes."

"I don't know if that makes you a prophet or just very observant," said Anders, "but you were right
on both counts."

"I was certainly correct on one account, I believe," Solas replied, eyes tracing the drawing of Fenris.

"Yes, I am told the Hawke ass is particularly spectacular," Artemis said with mock seriousness. The
jokes didn't quite hide the nervous tapping of his toes inside his shoe as he hoped for news, any
news, that could help them fix this.

"So, the biggest problem is this, here, right?" Dagna pointed to the drawing, to the scar on Fenris's
arm. "The rune's broken, so it's not working right. If you compare it to the other arm, really all that
needs to change is moving the scar and re-linking the lyrium pathway." She looked up at Anders.
"You're a healer. Can you do something with that?"

Anders shook his head. "If I could, I'd have done it before there was a scar. The lyrium's in my way.
It has its own ideas, and I'm ... I'll probably do more damage if I try to force it."

"Okay, that makes things a little more difficult..." Dagna picked up a lens, put it down, and picked
up the one next to it, before she crossed to Fenris. "Hold out your arm a minute? I might be able to
work around this -- it won't be good. It won't be right, but it might get you a little relief, for a couple
months, while we figure out how to fix it right."

Fenris offered the arm. "The wound was made with a lyrium weapon -- a red lyrium weapon. I have
been pleased enough not to have become like those Templars."

Dorian whistled in amazement. "And you say it sliced through the lyrium in your own body, without
infecting you? Very, very lucky man, indeed."

Fenris hummed as he looked down at the scar he knew so well. He wasn't sure if 'lucky' was the word. If he were lucky, he wouldn't have been struck at all.

And yet, as he'd said, it could have been much, much worse.

"What are you thinking?" Dorian asked, edging closer to peer over Dagna's shoulder.

"I'm thinking the flow of lyrium's been disrupted," she said, gesturing along the tattoo and sweeping past the swollen edges of his scar. "If we can bridge the gap there, it might help. It'll be tough to keep the right shape, but it'll be something, until we find a better solution."

"So like a splint for a broken bone?" Artie asked, trying not to hover.

"If the bone were made out of lyrium, sure," Dagna replied with a shrug and a crooked smile over her shoulder.

"You intend to insert more lyrium into my body." Fenris sounded far more calm than he felt.

"More like attach more lyrium to your body. I'll need the healer, here, to help me out as best he can, so we don't hurt you doing it, but... I'm pretty sure it'll work. At least for a little while. You'll feel... less bad." Dagna shrugged again and started sketching on the arm of the bench, beside Fenris's head.

"I do not have fond memories of the last time someone attempted to insert lyrium under my skin." This time, Fenris sounded nervous.

"It's just going to be two little cuts," Dagna promised, tapping Fenris's arm. "Right here, and right here. Big warrior like you, you won't even notice." She looked up at Anders again. "You got something to make it hurt even less?"

"I have some thoughts." Anders nodded. "We'll have to talk about what's safe to use with the lyrium. I don't want to lean too heavily on elfroot, if you're doing surgery. It'll keep trying to close up while you're working, and with a slice that small, it probably would." He blinked, a slow smile spreading across his face as he glanced down at Fenris. "How do you feel about sleeping through it?"

Fenris glanced up at Artie before looking back at Anders and shrugging. He didn't like the idea of not being aware of what they were doing to his body, but, "That is likely the best way to ensure that I will be still throughout the procedure."

Anders nodded. He could guess what kind of reaction Fenris would have to the wrong kind of pain, and with his Fade abilities as volatile as they were, that could easily end in disaster.

"We will have to be careful to stay as close to the original rune shape as we can," Solas said, hands clasped behind his back as he eyed the area Dagna was examining, "but, I have been told you are the best."

Dagna wasn't about to point out that was 'skin' was not her medium of choice. She doubted there was anyone alive more qualified for this who wasn't in the room.
Chapter 149

Chapter Summary

Flying goats!?

The crisp mountain air was colder than Anton liked, but the company wasn't bad, especially since one of them could warm the mugs of ale they'd all carried up from the tavern.

"But, it's still freaky shit!" Sera insisted, as Candles handed her a steaming mug. "Sure, it's warm, but it's fire shooting out your hands! How's anyone supposed to think that's a reasonable thing?"

"Hey, the Maker made nugs, the Maker made mages," Isabela shrugged, one arm around Candles's waist. "The Maker made all kinds of unreasonable things. Best we can do is find a use for them. And I've got lots of uses for a warm pair of hands, up here."

"You start talking like that and then it ends in roast twat," Sera insisted, drinking the warm ale.

Candles laughed. She could take offence, but why bother? This was how people thought, and at least Sera was still having the conversation, rather than fleeing to 'safer' companions.

"Do you--" Anton leaned over the wall. "I haven't had that much to drink. That's... that's actually happening. I think there's a very large, horned man down there trying to propose to... well... someone."

"What the shit?" Sera lunged for the wall and leaned way over, slopping ale into the snow. "How's that proposing? He's throwing a goat!"

Isabela's eyes rounded and she turned to look. "Ferelden style proposal? Well, we are in Ferelden. Got another secret admirer, Tony?"

"I'm married!" Anton shouted down at the goat-tosser, hands cupped to either side of his mouth. Another goat thudded into the wall, spindly legs flailing as it slid to the ground.

Sera nearly choked on air, laughing so hard she snorted.

"That's two goats, Tony," Isabela said, peering over the wall. "I'd say you're worth at least three, anyway. And where are the sheaves of wheat?"

"True," Anton said, nodding as though taking this seriously. "He's going about it all wrong."

Somewhere below, a goat brayed indignantly. The goat-tosser shouted something at the wall none of them could understand.

"We should probably tell somebody about this, shouldn't we?" Anton said after a pause.

"Oh Maker yes," Isabela said. "Anders would love this!"

"I mean in case he's a threat or something. That is some angry goat-tossing going on."

"He's throwing goats!" Sera protested, gesturing at the man below. "And he's outta goats! What do
you think he's gonna do next? Slap you with a fish?"

"Is he qunari?" Candles asked, still eyeing the horns. "Maybe it's for Adaar."

"Oooh, I can't tell from here." Isabela squinted and leaned to the side. "Might be Avvar. I heard they wear horns on their heads. But, at that size, might be qunari."

"We should probably let someone know," Anton said, again. "And Adaar sounds like a perfect choice."

"What if it's for Creepy?" Sera asked. She wouldn't call Fen'Din crazy, but she'd definitely call him creepy. Too many mages. Too many weirdo mages falling out of the sky and claiming they're not dead any more.

"Then somebody's going to be so disappointed." Candles laughed.

They made their way back across the courtyard, entering the great hall to the sound of Val stridently arguing from the balcony above. He and Vivienne had been at one another nearly since he'd arrived, over points of Orlesian politics and how 'very Fereldan' he apparently seemed.

Candles turned and called up to him. "Valery, dear! I think the natives are convinced you're one of theirs! There's a big Ferelden with fur and horns at the gates, and he's brought you a whole herd of goats!"

Val sputtered, outraged.

Vivienne stepped over to the railing. "Excuse me? Goats? Is this some rural custom of Ferelden, that we should be aware of? I'd hate to imagine the scandal..."

"Darling, we Fereldans invented scandal," Anton said with a wink. He called up to Val, "The goats are nice, but remember that a few sheaves of wheat are necessary for a real proposal! Make sure you're holding out for the best!"

"Proposal?" Vivienne repeated, pressing a hand to her chest.

"That's not--!" Val sputtered, nearly vibrating with embarrassment and anger. "It's not a proposal, and they're clearly making up the goats!"

Candles's answering cackle was wicked. "Making it up? Take a look for yourself! Your future husband is at the gate!"

"Madness," Vivienne huffed with a dramatic shake of her head.

"Madness, is it?" Sera called back to her. "You're the one with the horns and the fur-trimmed cloak, right? Maybe he thinks you're one of 'em! Hope you like goats!"

Cormac looked over from where he'd been discussing the correct way to beat things with sticks with Josephine and Adaar. "Goats again, Anton? Whose goat is it this time?"

Isabela shrugged and pointed at Adaar. "We thought it might be his. The delivery's a little short, but there's a nice rack backing it up." She held her hands out to the sides of her head.

"The angle's bad. Can't tell if that's Avvar or qunari, but I figured we should come mention it to someone in charge." Anton shrugged innocently. "I'd do something, but it's not my city, so I don't get to pass judgement on lovelorn drunks throwing goats."
"So someone horny is throwing goats at the wall, and you immediately thought of me?" Adaar asked, trying to wrap his head around this mental image. "You all know me so well. This could be the beginning of a beautiful relationship. Show me to the tosser." He gestured grandly for Isabela to lead him on.

It turned out that he didn't need to be led, not when said goat-tosser was shouting loud enough to make even Adaar's deaf ear ring.

"Not qunari," he said once he was close enough to be sure he didn't recognise the words. The weight of disappointment sinking low in his belly came as a surprise. He hadn't been expecting to see the rest of his old company, but a distant part of him admitted that throwing goats at a wall to get his attention was exactly the sort of thing Shokrakar would do.

"Still horny," Isabela assured him.

"We should probably figure out who he wants," Candles pointed out. "Or... maybe that's a what, not a who."

Anton nodded, leaning over the wall. "Hey, down there! Who are the goats for, and where's the wheat?"

The man below jerked back in surprise, dropping a goat which bleated offendedly. He peered up at the faces above and laughed. "I don't seek a marriage, though whichever one of you killed my idiot son would be a welcome addition to my clan!"

"You're looking for your son's killer by... throwing goats?" Candles hoisted herself between the crenellations, and then helped Sera up next to her.

"Well, somebody cuts up your family, you gotta throw something, right?" Sera shrugged.

"I seek the one called Adaar, who killed my son. As is custom in my clan, I have smacked the walls of his holding with goats blood." The man below shook his head as if it were of no consequence. "No foul! He meant to murder Tevinters, but got feisty with your Inquisition. A redheaded mother guarantees a brat!"

"Your son?" Adaar peered down at him, eyeing the man critically. "I assume you mean the Appendage of Korth?"

The man barked a laugh. "Hand," he corrected. "Though perhaps 'Ass' would have been more like it. Do as you've earned, Inquisitor. My clan yields. My remaining boys have brains still in their heads!"

Adaar leaned on the wall, peering over to get a better glimpse of the goats piled at the base. He shook his head. "It looks like our conflict was accidental, Chief...?"

"Movran."

"Chief Movran. But, it can't happen again. I know the Ass of Korth is dead, and you have to be running out of goats, but I cannot take that chance."

"And what is your sentence, Inquisitor?" Movran asked as though inquiring about the weather.

A smirk twitched at Adaar's lips. "I banish you and your clan -- with as many weapons as you can carry -- to Tevinter."
Movran barked out a laugh. "My idiot boy got us something after all! I think I might change my mind about not seeking a marriage," he added with a broad grin at Adaar.

Adaar chuffed. "With no sheaves of wheat? Please."
Chapter 150

Chapter Summary

Jowan and Josephine have a chat about family and friends.

Not for the first time, Jowan found himself curious at the enchantments that maintained the garden. Even with the snow in the courtyard and pressed against the walls, the garden was a pleasant springtime temperature, just a bit humid, the warm air carrying the scents of the herbs and flowers Anders and Vivienne had planted. He sat on a stone bench, nibbling at a sprig of elfroot, listening to Lady Montilyet telling wonderful stories about Antivan festivals.

"But, you're not Antivan?" Jowan asked, surprised. "I thought I'd heard that was where your family came from!"

"Oh, we do now." Josephine flicked a hand, absently. "We are as much an Antivan merchant family as any other. But, a long time ago, my family came to Antiva from Orlais. I don't know the whole story, but we were nobility, and there was some sort of scandal."

"Like Varric?" Jowan remembered hearing Varric tell that story, one night, after getting drunk enough to complain about his brother. "Dagna says there's still places named for the Tethras family in Orzammar."

"Perhaps," Josephine said around a soft chuckle, "though I'm afraid Varric has not told me enough of his family for me to compare. But, the Inquisition does seems to attract a certain type, no?"

"The marginally insane?" Jowan answered with a crooked smile, heedless of the bit of elfroot caught in his teeth.

"Only marginally?" Josephine teased. "I was thinking maybe 'daring', but I suppose those two things tend to go together."

"Was your family important, back in Orlais?" Jowan asked.

"That depends on what you mean by 'important', I suppose. From what I understand, we used to have vast holdings in Val Royeaux itself. I wish I could've seen them," she said wistfully, "especially the ones bearing the family crest. The original crest's design was abandoned when we were exiled from the city. I have always wanted to find a copy."

There was a pang forming somewhere in Jowan's chest at the wistfulness in her voice, at the sadness in her smile, and he wondered what it must be like to have those kinds of roots.

"What about you?" Josephine asked, innocently. "I know you are a friend of Enchanter Fen'Din, so you must have come from the Circle, but I'm sure you had a family before that, yes? Like Jan and his brother Jan?"

"I don't really remember," Jowan admitted, after a moment's silence. "I'm not even sure how old I am. I just remember going out with my dad -- I don't know what he looked like or what his name was -- and he took me somewhere, and I couldn't go home any more. I don't remember much at all, before the Circle. And then there was Enchanter Amelet. She was nice."
"Oh, you poor thing! How terrible!" Josephine reached out and put a hand over Jowan's where it gripped the edge of the bench. "No one deserves that!"

Jowan eyed her sideways and cleared his throat. "Maybe you should ask Jan and Niall about me, before you say that. I'm sure they'll both say I deserved worse. I was a bit, um... I didn't really... I only had two friends, and one of them isn't speaking to me any more. Well, neither of them, I guess, but I know Solona's just busy, not pissed at me. I made some bad choices, but I've really tried to fix things."

"No one deserves that," Josephine repeated, emphasising 'no one' and holding Jowan's gaze with a steely stare, one that said she wasn't to be argued with. "No one deserves to be cast aside like--" She shook her head, unable to supply an adequate word, or at least too polite to say it. "Certainly not by their family."

Jowan just shrugged, unsure what to make of someone being so angry on his behalf. "It's not so uncommon a story, really. Not among mages, anyway. Kids manifest magic, and the parents are scared and leave them with someone who knows how to handle magic. Or someone else sees the kid manifest, and they're taken away."

They'd all been anchorless at the Circle, in one way or another, and while others at least had more and better memories of a previous life, it was the only life Jowan had known. Seeing the sad, almost stricken look on Josephine's face made it clear that this was, in fact, not as common or expected among the general population. He wasn't sure how to feel about that.

"It's all right," he said, feeling the need to reassure her. "We all sort of become family at the Circle. I just... happened to be the little brother everyone liked to pick on." He offered a self-deprecating smile and shrug, not so much looking for sympathy as stating what he thought was fact.

"I suppose we've all had one of those," Josephine conceded, finally, "but you seem a much better conversationalist than my own."

"It's because I'm not related to you." A corner of Jowan's smile lifted further. "And speaking of annoying little brothers, have you seen much of Jan and Jan? I never imagined our Jan as a little brother, but the other Jan definitely treats him like one."

"At least Warden Jan has finally shaved that beard! He's quite handsome, without it. I'd never have guessed!" Josephine laughed and reached behind herself for a sprig of mint.

"Everyone thinks Jan's handsome." Jowan rolled his eyes. "The entire Circle wanted a shot at that, and most of them got one."

"And you?" Josephine asked, nibbling at the mint leaves. "You must have had many young ladies cooing and sighing when you passed in the hall. Look at that regal nose! It's very Alamarri, not at all like the Theirin look. I've always thought the Theirins must be Ciriane, like Andraste."

Jowan sputtered out something that might have been a laugh, feeling the heat rush to his cheeks. "Can't say too many women complimented me on my nose," he said with a crooked smile, all too aware of her hand where it still pressed against his. "And I, uh, well... There was really only one who mattered, at least at the time. You know Lily? We were... together, for a little while, when we were young and stupid. Or, well. When we were young and I was stupid. Not stupid for loving her," he added in a rush, realising he was rambling but unable to stop himself. "Just... stupid in general."

"What happened?" Josephine asked, sounding genuinely curious.
More heat rushed to Jowan's face. "Let's just say that I'm the reason she ended up in Aeonar."

"She's also a mage?" Josephine looked surprised. "Oh, she must be like Brother Kinnon!"

"What? No! No, Kinnon's... a thing unto himself." Jowan rubbed the back of his neck. "No, she was just an Initiate. But, there are rules about that... And we were going to run away together, but I made it and she didn't. And then I was a maleficar, so because of our relationship... It was stupid. The only thing she ever did wrong was fall in love with me. Guess she's over it now. Probably better."

"Love is never easy, but that seems a bit more difficult than usual. But, I've heard it said you went back for her, that you located and broke into Aeonar? You are a madman, Levyn, but a bold and romantic one. Have you told the tale to Varric, yet? We should hear it in the taverns, by year end."

"Oh Maker, I hope not," Jowan groaned. "The last thing I need is the world to know about the whole thing with the geese!"

"Geese?" Josephine asked, politely puzzled.

Jowan flapped a hand in the air as though to wave it aside, but he knew he'd piqued her curiosity now. "Geese. The... the magic was a bit weird around Aeonar, a bit like the way the rifts warp the world around them. I was just trying to cast a simple summon as a *distraction*, but just happened to hit at just the right place and right time that I... sort of sent the entire building into the Fade, myself included."

"That is... an odd sort of luck it seems you have," Josephine said around a huff of laughter. "Geese? That's how you ended up in the Fade? Truly?"

"Unfortunately," Jowan sighed with a nod.

Josephine giggled, trying to hide the sound behind her hand. "Oh, now you *must* tell Varric! He'll spin it in a way that will be both amusing and heroic. Have you met the Hawkes? He has done a wonderful job with their stories when, to hear them tell it, they are no less bizarre."

"The Hawkes? Oh, you mean the skinny lord with the elf husband and the Antivan lover who's actually his brother? Wouldn't want to be at the table for those family suppers." Jowan shook his head, looking a bit disgusted.

"I've heard that was so they could stay close without anyone asking questions. And you're missing one -- Viscount Anton of Kirkwall." Josephine's smile spread as horror splashed across Jowan's face.

"*They're* related? To him? I've met noblemen before. I worked for Arl Eamon! I've never met any like him. Do you know he had the Iron Bull throwing him at walls, last week? On purpose? Is this what Marcher nobles are like?"

"It's much more of an Antivan attitude, I think. I'd have more alliances in the Marches, if more Marchers were like that. But, his sister's the Princess-Consort of Starkhaven, so we'll see where that goes. I do like her. Lady Amell is a quick wit and an iron will."

"... Amell?" Jowan blinked. "I thought we were talking about the Hawkes."

"They're all Amells. They're just the branch of the family that inherited the title and the estate. Viscount Kirkwall is Lord Amell, and his sister is Lady Amell."

"Amell... as in the Hero of the Fifth Blight, Solona?"
"I've heard Captain Isabela brought her brother to us, but he's mostly stayed locked away in the mage camp, teaching and writing."

"I knew Solona. She was my best friend, before the Blight." Jowan shook his head. "You see what the Circle is like? I never even knew she had a brother."

"I'm sure Enchanter Daylen would be happy to meet his sister's friends. You should introduce yourself!" Josephine offered a leaf of mint to Jowan.

Jowan offered a weak laugh, nibbling on the mint leaf to stall as he tried to think of a response.

"And I'm sure he'd like to hear any of the more embarrassing stories you may know of the Hero of Ferelden," she added with a grin. "Goodness, I might too! She's always been so larger than life, until I met you and Jan and all the rest."

"Are you sure telling embarrassing stories about her isn't against the Warden code, or something?" Jowan laughed. "I'd rather not bring their wrath down upon me."

"So what? If they do come after you, just summon another flock of geese!"

Jowan groaned. "I'm going to regret telling you about that, aren't I?"
Chapter 151

Chapter Summary

Valery has it out with Niall over something that's been bothering him. Anders calls Blackwall on his shit. Fen'Din and co. ride up to Oswin on the way to adventure beyond.

"What the fuck do you want, Orlais?" Niall didn't turn from the window he was looking out, high at the top of a badly-damaged tower. It was quieter up here, further from the countless whispers of dread and anguish in the populated parts of the fortress. And that was why he could hear Val so clearly, when he came up the stairs. A decade of regret and suffering that only sharpened as Val got closer to him. "Do you want me to knock your teeth out again, so Anders can straighten them?"

"I want to know why you're still alive. I want to know why I shouldn't just throw you out this window." Val's eyes were dark, and they gleamed with a boldness he hadn't shown since the Blight. "How dare you come back alone."

"I didn't come back alone. I brought twenty other mages with me, and a handful of Templars." Niall knew what Val meant, and he wouldn't give him the satisfaction. Not with this headache.

Val clenched his hands into fists like he meant to do something with them, the skin of his knuckles stretched white over the bone. But he didn't get any closer, didn't grab or throw a punch. Val was looking at him like he was something Other, a reminder that Niall wasn't human any more. It took a moment for Niall to realise that the bleakness wrapping around his shoulders was bleeding into him from Val and not of his own making.

"Did you need something?" Niall snapped. "Or did you just come up here to give me a headache?"

"How could you leave him there?" Val hissed through his teeth.

Niall blinked. Who had Val known from Aeonar? Who had they lost to the demons? Unless...

"Leave...Mouse? Turns out he was a demon. Turns out it was his domain, after Sloth fell. And Valor wasn't too interested in joining us, so..."

"Leofric! How could you just leave Leofric!?!" Val's hands leapt out, plunging into the cold air around Niall to shove him back against the edge of the window.

"He wasn't there. I'm the only one." Niall shook his head, confused. "The Chant says the dead are collected to the Maker's bosom. It's not where I wound up, but I was the only one left. I was there for ten years, Valery. If he'd been there, I'd have seen him. I knew demons by name, from how often they came scratching around the tower, there, but I never saw another one of us. Not Uldred, not Leofric, not Sweeney..."

"You're lying," Val said, voice cracking.

"Why would I lie?" Niall asked, voice heavy with exasperation. "Sorry, Val, but you're looking for answers I just don't have."

"Why didn't you look for them?" Val shouted, face hot and eyes wet, an inch away from the ugly
sort of crying. He reached for Niall again, hands fisting in his robes. "He has to be there!"

"Where would I look?" Niall shouted back, peeling off Val's hands and shoving him back. "Where would I go? Maybe you should go wander the Fade for ten years and tell me what you find!" There was smoke gathering under his fingertips, his outline wavering, and Niall tried to will himself to press the dark thoughts back. Val wasn't making that easy.

"Sorry to interrupt," said a third voice, and Niall looked up to see Artie awkwardly padding into the room. "I just need to... get this." He reached past Niall for the copy of Hard in Hightown on the shelf beside him. "Thanks."

Both of them stopped to watch as Artemis retreated with the book. As the footsteps faded down the stairs, Niall glanced at Val. "You know, I've heard he's sleeping with Anders."

"Wrong brother. The fat one lives with him." Val huffed, straightening the fall of his shirtfront, so the embroidery looked less chaotic.

"No, I think it's both of them. It's Anders. When has anything stopped him?" Niall looked amused and a little impressed.

Val made a disgusted sound that Niall would have expected from Seeker Cassandra.

"Oh, please, Valery. Like you didn't."

"And maybe I will, again!" Val stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him and leaving Niall alone with a splitting headache.

Anders ducked into the barn, intensely aware of the straw and wood around him, and how much more flammable Fereldan barns were than Ander barns, not that it had stopped him, once upon a time. This time, he wasn't here to set anything on fire. Not that he'd been last time, either, but... The smell still hung in the back of his head as a reminder of what was possible. How many years, and this still bothered him...

But, there was Blackwall, sanding some half-finished piece of some larger wooden project, and Anders approached almost silently, waiting, hoping Blackwall would look up, would turn around. But, no. He'd been right. The sense was entirely lacking. He politely thumped a barrel with his heel, as he passed.

"Ah, Jan! Or... are you still Jan? I heard about some trouble with your brother. Family can be difficult, but they're what the Maker gave us, right?" Blackwall looked polite, if wary, knowing there was something he didn't like about the look in those eyes.

"We have to talk. Is anyone else here?" Anders looked grim, not at all like the recklessly jovial healer everyone liked.

"Just me, for now." Blackwall set down his tools and pulled a sheet over the table to protect his work. "Have you heard from the Warden-Commander?"

"Yes, but that's not why I'm here. You and I both know you're not a Grey Warden, but I am, so I'm here to set some ground rules." Anders set a foot out, shoulders square, subtly expecting to be rushed.

"What makes you think that? Like I said, I came down from the Marches and I work in Orlais,
mostly." Blackwall stepped back with one foot, turning a bit to the side, fingers stretching and then relaxing.

"You really have no idea, do you?" Anders laughed, amazed. "Every Warden knows every other fully ... initiated Warden on sight, just like we know darkspawn. Besides, you don't eat enough and you sleep too much. I kept thinking you were freshly Joined, that I just couldn't see you properly, yet, but you're not getting more Wardeny over time. You're just not a Warden, at all."

"I'm a Warden in the ways that matter," Blackwall protested, raising his voice even as his shoulders hunched in. Defensive. At least he knew he was caught.

Anders's laugh came out a bit harsh. "It takes more than wishful thinking to become a Warden, Blackwall. Which I'm assuming isn't your name, by the way, but it's all I have to call you."

"You're hardly someone to lecture me on borrowing a name!"

"I won't argue that," Anders admitted with a shrug. "And to be honest, I don't care about the name. I care about the Grey Warden title and your intentions. Whoever or whatever it is you're running from is your own damn business. And once you're finished being indignant, you'll realise I'm actually trying to help you."

"To 'help' me. To help me what, disappear?" Blackwall scoffed. "You've discovered something that makes you think I'm not who I say I am, so it's time for me to move on again?"

Anders rolled his eyes. "Do I really have room to talk? I don't think so. Again, not my problem. My problem is you getting people killed because you're not a Warden. And it hasn't happened yet, but don't think for an instant that I've forgotten the Storm Coast. You're a good fighter, and I'm guessing you used to be a soldier. Some kind of soldier, anyway. That it? You're a deserter? No, don't tell me. I don't care. I care that you can take orders, and if you're going to keep doing this Warden thing, you're going to be taking mine."

"Blackmail?" Blackwall drew himself up to protest, but before the words could leave his mouth, Anders interrupted.

"No, you puckered nug's asshole, I'm going to try to keep your cover as long as you're doing good work, here. And as far as I can tell you are doing good work. Cole likes you, even if Niall doesn't. That's not really personal. Niall doesn't like anyone."

"And all I have to do is do whatever you say?" Blackwall drawled.

"Essentially," Anders replied as though that hadn't been sarcastic. "Like I said before, Wardens can sense each other and darkspawn. You can't, and anyone relying on you to do so is going to end up dead. I, on the other hand, can, so if you stick close to me, I might be able to help you fake it better."

Blackwall paused to consider this, scratching the corner of his beard. "All right. Fair enough."

"And please, whatever you do, don't go introducing yourself as a Warden to other Wardens. Then you'll end up having a much less friendly version of this conversation with someone much less attractive."

"You think a lot of yourself, don't you?"

"Yes, in fact. I do." Anders smiled in a way that strongly discouraged questions.
There was, Candles decided, only so much sulk any travelling party needed, and right now, Kinnon was doing all of it, which was bad news, because Peryn was doing just as much, meaning they'd entirely exceeded the limits. Combined with the sparkly glow elf's incessant brooding, even Theron and Anders singing the worst of dirty Fereldan pub songs couldn't lighten the air enough.

"Hey, Brother Sexy, did you get a dispensation for the rest of us?" she teased, leaning over to nudge Kinnon's arm. "Does this mean we're a real abbey, now?"

"We've always been a real abbey," Kinnon argued, not taking his eyes off the horse in front of him, mostly because the horse in front of him was some kind of demon-possessed swamp beast that made his horse very nervous. "We're serving the people, just like the Chant says."

Candles frowned at that humourless reply and squashed the impulse to roll her eyes. "Well, yeah, but people tend to have selective hearing when it comes to the Chant. Especially the Chantry higher-ups. Are we officially recognised by the people in big hats, or still just a real abbey 'in our hearts'?"

Kinnon shrugged half-heartedly. "Well, Leliana seemed to approve, and she's as big a hat as we've got around."

"Not like there's a Divine around to stop you," Artemis said, butting into the conversation to tune out Theron's outrageous song. "And people have other things to worry about besides a group of mages who've been helping them."

"Still nice to get the official nod, though," Candles said. "You know? Instead of hiding?"

Artie sighed. "I know."

Candles leaned a bit to see Fenris around the rest of the group. "Hey, Glowy, you doing okay over there?"

"My name is Leto," Fenris complained, pulling the heavy fur roundcloak closer. Why did people live in southern Thedas, he wondered, not for the first time. "And this entire country is unreasonably cold."

"He's fine," Anders called over his head. "Dagna warned us he'd have cold flashes while the treatment settled in. Don't worry, it'll stop being winter soon."

"Yes, and when we reach the height of summer, maybe it will only be as cold as winter in Minrathous," Fenris scoffed. Really, for as much as he complained, he was grateful to Dagna's quick thinking. He felt better than he had in months, at least, and the flickering had finally stopped. She'd warned that he might not want to use the lyrium too much, this early, and that it was probably only a temporary fix, but he could stop worrying about losing parts of himself in the Fade. His colour had improved somewhat, and the cracks in his skin seemed to finally be healing. Even if it was only a few months respite, it was more hope than he'd had since Meredith first hit him with that sword.

"When this is all over, we'll take you back to Kassel with us, to warm up," Cormac joked.

"I would much rather do some warming up with my husband than with you, thank you," Fenris drawled.

"Are you sure you don't want to cuddle the bear for warmth?" Anders asked with a grin, and after all these years of seeing Anders with a beard, seeing him without it again was still taking Fenris some getting used to.

"I prefer to avoid getting close to bears of any sort," Fenris replied with the quirk of an eyebrow.
"Probably a good idea," Candles said. "Hey, did you hear that Cassandra once punched a bear? And by bear I mean the animal that will actually kill you, not Mack."

"Only one bear?" Artemis replied. "Are you sure?"

"Cassandra once punched me, too. Same trip to the Hinterlands." Cormac laughed and twisted around to look at Candles. "Demons, I think, and somebody got a little loose with the Entropy."

"I've already apologised for that," Fen'Din reminded him.

"Wait, wait, Crazypants? I thought you were going to tell me it was Jo-- er, Levyn!" Candles whooped. "Somebody write a ballad! Hey, up there, Dalish! You're a poet, right? Crazypants makes a mistake! It's legendary! It deserves to go down in history!"

"I have made other mistakes," Fen'Din raised his voice just enough to be heard clearly. "Where are we stopping, tonight?"

"Oswin," Peryn replied. "Do you know it? These names are strange to me. Maybe I am not saying it right."

Kinnon looked like he'd almost remembered something, but it slipped away. He was sure Peryn had said it right, but he wasn't sure speaking to Peryn was really in his best interests.

"Isn't there a castle there?" Cormac asked, rubbing the stubble along one side of his jaw. "Artie, you remember the place, don't you? Not quite the Bannorn, one of the banns had a fort there, or something? I think dad handled some bandits blocking the route from there to ... Highever, probably? Orzammar, maybe?"

"Maker," Artie murmured at the hazy memory that conjured. "That's right. I remember Bethy asking if that could be our next home. She was so serious about it too, and quite put out when dad laughed."

"And now she lives in an even bigger castle," Fenris said, lips quirking up at the corner as he bundled his cloak closer about him. "I suppose that means she's the one who's laughing now."

"Something tells me I need to meet this Bethy," Candles said. "Everything I hear about her makes her sound wonderfully terrifying."

"That's because she is wonderfully terrifying," Artie assured her. "But yes, I remember the place. I wonder how much it's changed since then..."
Chapter Summary

Someone's been to Oswin, before. Strange revelations are made.

Like the village around any keep, Oswin was a wide spot in the road. A tavern, a public stable, and a small marketplace surrounded the fork, where another road led up to the keep. Beyond that, a handful of farms stretched into the distance. Chickens puffed and bustled in the road, squawking at the sudden horses.

Kinnon tore his eyes away from the decaying horse in front of him and felt a chill race down his arms. "I know where we are," he said, and his voice felt like it belonged to someone else. This had to be a dream.

"Not looking so good, there Brother Sexy." Candles drew up beside him, holding out a hand to catch him if he slipped out of the saddle.

Theron turned back to come up on his other side. "You all right? Might not be the place you're thinking. All these little shemlen towns look the same..."

Kinnon lifted a heavy hand to point at the tavern sign. "I know where we are. I grew up, here."

Candles's eyes went round. "Grew up...? Hey, remember to breathe, Kinnon. That's kind of important."

Kinnon didn't realise he wasn't, but he forced himself to draw in a shaky breath. Everywhere he looked, the sense of *familiar* was a crawling sensation over his skin, skin he wanted to climb out of. Twin impulses to stay and to bolt made him freeze instead.

"You're sure?" Candles asked. "This isn't like that time Dennet asked you to hand him something and you said 'Yes, dad'?"

Kinnon blinked, settling back more into reality at that reminder. "What? That's--! That was *one time!* And what does that have to do with this?"

Candles shrugged. "In a Fereldan town, surrounded by horses. Horse sounds and horse smells. Maybe this is you tapping into your Horse Lord roots." Despite her flippant way of speaking, she looked concerned.

Kinnon resisted the impulse to look at Peryn to gauge his reaction to all of this. "I'm not going to call the next person I see 'dad', if that's your worry," he grumbled, cheeks hot.

"We should stable the horses and see about getting some food," Anders pointed out, dismounting and taking the reins of Cormac's horse. "Why don't you let me and Cormac handle the horses? Theron, go get us a ta-- No. Wait, Artie, why don't you get us a table? I think Kinnon might look a little better sitting on something that isn't moving."

Fen'Din stayed mounted, edging the black beast he rode out of the main thoroughfare and away from the other horses. It took them some time to become accustomed to his... 'unicorn', he supposed. He
watched as Theron and Candles helped Kinnon down, and Anders and Cormac went to the stable to negotiate. The unicorn would sleep outside, as usual. She seemed to prefer it, anyway. Something about the sky.

"I'm fine," Kinnon swore, in a voice that suggested otherwise, as the elves at his sides led him into the tavern. "It's just a little... I haven't been here in a very long time. And nothing's changed..."

"Behold, the power of rural Ferelden." Theron swept a hand in front of them, a broad gesture. "You leave, you come back, nothing's changed but the generation."

The bartender was eyeing Kinnon strangely, past where Artemis stood, a look like he'd forgotten something or misplaced a word.

Kinnon offered him a weak smile, a pale imitation of casual friendliness, and went for the table Artie indicated with a gesture.

"Not to be confused with Kirkwall," Fenris was saying in reply to Theron, "where you leave, you come back, and someone else has tried to burn it at least twice."

"To be fair, that hasn't happened in years!" Theron pointed out, pulling over a few more chairs. It was a small tavern, and they would be knocking knees under the table, but they'd suffered worse fates.

"Only because we haven't come back yet," Fenris said with a smirk.

"Excuse me," said a man trying to squeeze by Kinnon, and Kinnon stepped to the side, waiting for the man to pass before pulling out his chair. But then he looked at the man's face, and another flash of memory was a tug behind his sternum.

"Dad?" he blurted before he'd even processed it.

"Honestly, Kinnon, what did you just say?" Candles said, throwing up her hands before she turned and looked at the man who had frozen still in the middle of the tavern, a man who looked like an older, scruffier Kinnon. "Oh, Maker's Beard."

It took Peryn a few seconds to understand what was happening. For all that he could converse in Common, the words still took a little longer to register than Ander, but that word was almost the same in both. Why would Kinnon -- oh, because he'd grown up, here. But, who--? And then he saw the man staring across the tavern, and he wondered if it was true.

"No, my son disappeared decades ago," the old man shook his head, sadly. "They said mercenaries kidnapped him, after he almost got trampled by one of their horses. You do look a bit like me, in my younger days, but my son's dead. Cousin, maybe? I have folk all the way down the side of the lake. They take you to the Chantry young?"

"Something like that. But, I came from here," Kinnon insisted, and Theron patted his shoulder.

"It's like I said, Brother, every small town in Ferelden looks the same."

"No, they don't! The tavern sign--"

"I will settle this," Peryn decided, closer to the old man than the group at the table. "You are Master Miketherg-- Macither-- The Horse Lord?"

"MacEichthighearna. The Horsemaster." The old man nodded. "I'm the Horsemaster, like my father
and his father. It's why we have the name. My family's been the Horsemasters of Oswin since before there was a Ferelden. Came down from the Clayne lands on a treaty with Bann Oswin, himself, oh... five or six hundred years ago. Where'd you hear that name?"

"It's my name," Kinnon said, in a small voice. "I'm Kinnon MacEichthighearna, and they weren't mercenaries, they were Templars."

Colour drained from the old man's face, but he shook his head. "No," he said, sounding like he was trying to convince himself more than Kinnon. "My son is..."

"A mage," Kinnon finished for him, a small smile to go with his small voice. He tried to continue talking, but his throat felt oddly tight, and he couldn't push the words through.

"Sit," Peryn suggested to them both. A gentle hand on the old man's elbow steered him towards a nearby empty chair. "Drinks are needed for this." He offered the old man a kind smile, and for a moment his eyes met Kinnon's. But then he turned to head towards the bar.

"So, you... didn't know?" Candles looked back and forth between the elder and younger Kinnon at the table. "I mean, I heard things, but... most of us were taken right in front of our parents. Jan and I..." she trailed off.

"You are a mage?" the horsemaster asked, turning curious but wary eyes on her.

"Bunch of us are." Candles nodded and smiled. "We're with the Inquisition. We've come to fight the demons and close the nasty holes in the sky. We're getting pretty good at it, too. Kinnon's a big damn hero, too, and don't you let him tell you he's not. He saved the Inquisitor from a dragon."

"It was a little more complicated than that." Kinnon cleared his throat and looked away, as Peryn returned to the table with several mugs hanging from both hands.

"I was there," Peryn said, setting the beer on the table and sliding a pint in front of Kinnon's supposed father. "It was not so complicated. And it was not the dragon. Lord Hawke and Master Levyn saved us from the dragon. Kinnon saved us when the mountain fell on the dragon." He swallowed, still conflicted as he remembered feeling Kinnon collapse. "And he almost died, but a good healer and the Maker's will left him to us."

Peryn's words set a soft ache in Kinnon's chest, but when he looked up, Peryn wasn't looking at him and was at least pretending not to notice Kinnon's stare. Kinnon fiddled with the drink in front of him, nails drawing shapes in the tankard's condensation.

"I have heard of this Inquisition," the horsemaster said, raising white eyebrows. "About how they fight demons and send them back to the Fade." He looked around the table at the lot of them, eyes lingering on their weapons and the potions at their belts. But his gaze kept returning to Kinnon.

Candles gestured grandly. "See? Hero. He's done the... MacEichth-blah-blah name proud."

Theron grabbed one of the beers Peryn had brought over. "Take it from me and Ser Peryn, over there. We just stab things, and we wouldn't be here without the mages. Good, regular folks, most of them -- except that one weirdo... and that other weirdo. Still good, just a lot less regular."

"You're dressed as a Chantry Brother," the horsemaster pointed out, still trying to figure out if he was being tricked in some way. "Is this a joke? I didn't think mages were allowed in the orders."

"They were not," Peryn confirmed, with a sigh. "But, you should know, Master Horse Bran, it is the Left Hand of the Divine, herself, who gave him those robes and his station."
Theron choked on his drink. "You can't just call everyone Bran, Peryn!"

"He is Fereldan," Peryn said simply. "His name is likely Bran. He would be likely Jan, if he were Ander. But he is not."

"There is some logic to that," Artie admitted with a nod.

The horsemaster awkwardly cleared his throat. "Actually, my name is Bran."

Peryn gestured at him. "You see? Yes?"

Theron opened and closed his mouth a few times, before sighing and taking a longer drink of his beer, the tankard distorting a word that sounded suspiciously like 'shem'.

"You're forgetting Elf Bran," Artie whispered to him.

"The Left Hand of the Divine, you say?" Bran said to Peryn, bringing the conversation back around.

Kinnon just smiled awkwardly and tried to make himself appear smaller, his cheeks a blotchy shade of red. He wasn't sure what to make of all the sudden praise.

"Sister Leliana is perhaps the best hope the Chantry has, until a new Divine is elected. She and Seeker Cassandra worked with the Divine more closely than anyone, for many years, and it is by the will and the writings of Divine Justinia, that they have presented, that we have the Inquisition," Peryn explained, unsure how much of Chantry politics would be known to the average Fereldan. Even in the Anderfels, the politics fell off well above the farmers. "And in her wisdom, Sister Leliana has declared that Brother Kinnon may serve the Maker as any other man."

"You say that like you're not too sure of it," Bran pointed out, picking up on the way Peryn said 'wisdom'.

"He's a Templar." The redness on Kinnon's cheeks intensified. "He's got issues."

"My issue is that you are a liar!" Peryn sputtered.

"I was going to tell you! I said I was going to tell you the very next day!"

"They were dating," Fenris clarified, for Bran, who watched this go on over his head. "It didn't work out, for the reasons you'd expect."

"Oh my," said Bran, still overwhelmed by it all.

"See, this is why I didn't tell you sooner," Kinnon grumbled. "I knew you'd be upset about it!"

"I can be!" Peryn argued, his grasp of the language becoming more halting the more upset he was. He paused to gather the right words. "I have the right to be!" He paused again to look at the others for confirmation. "That is right, yes? 'I have the right'? That is how you say it?"

The others all nodded and offered various affirmative noises, trying not to get in the middle of the two of them.

"I know you do," Kinnon sighed. He traced more shapes in the tankard's condensation. "I just... wanted to enjoy what we had a little longer." He gave his dad a sheepish shrug. "Sorry. This isn't how I saw this happening. In fact, I didn't see it happening at all. Meeting you, that is."

"For more than thirty years, I thought my son was dead. For all I know, he is dead, but you look so
much like I did, when I was young. The magic is your mother's family. She was Avvar, you know? There's lots of magic up in the mountains. Just horses and dogs, down here. So, it fits you. I'm not so surprised you're a mage. I'm just surprised you're alive." Bran looked terribly shaken, again, as if every time he started to come to terms with the idea, the strangeness of it flared up again. "And a Chantry Brother. We've never had one of those in the family. First time for everything."

"What about mum?" Kinnon's smile looked like it might split his face. "Can I see her? We're only here for the night, and then we're going to take care of something up in Crestwood... I'd like to--"

"She died," Bran said, quietly. "But, you can say your piece to her ashes. Maybe with all the holes in the sky, she'll hear you."

The words were like a weight on his lungs, but it was a familiar weight. She was gone, truly, and not just some nameless figure he'd never see again. Then his father's last words registered, and Kinnon let out a shaky laugh, thinking of Niall.

"Maybe," he agreed, though he hoped she wouldn't come back as some vengeful spirit. He finally picked up his drink and clinked his tankard against his father's.
The sky was just turning pink towards dusk when a druffalo ambled into Oswin, carrying a horned figure who earned quite a few stares as he plodded his unusual mount towards the stables. Adaar answered those stares with a disarming smile, a look that said 'see? I'm harmless!', and he could tell how many of them had never seen a qunari by how quickly they shied away anyway.

Fen'Din's 'unicorn' let him know when he had found the stables. "Good to see a friendly face," Adaar said to the creature. His pasted-on smile slid from his face as he slid from the druffalo, the grime from a day of travel sitting heavy on his skin.

A young woman appeared in the doorway, stopping short at the sight of him. She was dressed for work, skirts tucked into her belt, sleeves rolled to her elbow, but her eyes were big and blue as she stared at him. Still, Adaar noticed she wasn't shrinking back or running away.

"I'm standing next to that," Adaar said, tipping his head at the undead unicorn, "and you're staring at me? You know how to make a man blush."

Then she was the one blushing, hiding a giggle behind her hand. Cautiously, she took a step forward, gaze roving over him curiously. "I don't suppose you know what to feed this thing?" she asked with a crooked smile, gesturing at the unicorn.

Adaar saw promise in that smile. "Why don't I give you a hand?" he offered in a voice that suggested he could give her more than that.

Fenris lay closest to the wall, in the tavern loft that served as a bedroom for everyone they'd been travelling with. The place was ill-equipped to handle overnight guests, but he shouldn't be surprised, in a village so small. But, even with little more than a heap of straw under him and his own cloak spread over him, he could say he felt better than he had in years. Dagna had warned him not to use his powers too much, until they could get something more stable, but even just the patch she'd put in over the scar had made the worst of the symptoms stop. Anders had been quick to heal the lesser complaints, along the way, checking against the list of things Dagna thought might go wrong. But, none of them were on the list. Just far less serious versions of what he'd had, since Meredith first sliced through that line.

A warm blanket, a body that very nearly obeyed him, and all he could think to add was the wonderful husband who slept beside him. He slipped his hands under Artemis's cloak and pulled that warm body closer, hands lingering on every part he touched. This was the quiet brother. They could probably keep the noise down, here against the wall, as far from the others as they could get. It wasn't all that far, really, but maybe it would be far enough.

Artemis stirred, a grin tugging at his lips. He stretched, arching his body back against Fenris, pressing his ass into his groin suggestively.
"I see someone's awake," he said in the barest whisper.

Fenris quieted him with a finger on his lips, his hands rucking up Artie's shirt, coming around to caress his stomach, his chest, pulling Artie close against him as he feathered kisses over the back of his neck and behind his ear. He could feel Artie's stomach muscles flutter with quiet laughter.

"Really? Here?" Artie said over his shoulder, the words more shapes on his lips than sounds, but the way he ground back into Fenris said he was hardly uninterested.

"No, not really here," came a mutter from the next cloak over, and Kinnon offered a one-eyed, baleful glare from where he was trying to keep himself curled up enough to stay entirely under it. "At least take that downstairs."

"It seems we are already too loud," Fenris observed, laying another kiss against Artemis's shoulder. "Do you wish to stay warm, or would you prefer I make you sweat?"

"Do I have to hear this?" Kinnon complained, pulling his cloak over his head, only to bare his toes. "I don't want to hear this! Maker, I hope they have proper inns in Crestwood."

"I think there's more than one way to keep warm," Artie replied, ignoring Kinnon and turning just enough to kiss Fenris. He patted Fenris's hip, a gesture indicating it was time for him to get up.

Fenris did not bother to dress properly, figuring his nightshirt and cloak would serve for a brief foray to somewhere more private. As they made their way downstairs -- more properly down the ladder -- he realised the tavern itself hadn't closed, which he should have expected. It wouldn't do to leave passing merchants or post riders without somewhere to stop for food, in the middle of the night.

Fortunately, they were hidden from the main room, having come down into the kitchen, where a pot of stew still hung over a low fire and a door led out the back to the compost heap and the yard, which, if he remembered, led out to the stable. With a quick glance around, he decided their chances would be better with the horses, and he squeezed Artemis's hand and cocked his head toward the door.

Artie followed, biting his lip against a grin when he realised where they were going. "Brings back fond memories of Lothering," he said in a low voice at the door to the barn.

Fenris gave him a wry look but took the opportunity to pull him into a proper kiss, the door of the stables propped open with his shoulder. Artie allowed himself to be pulled into his husband's body, lips moving against his as they started to stumble into the barn.

Then there was the sound of movement and a moan much too feminine to belong to either of them, and they stilled. Artemis squeezed past his husband to get a better look inside, spotting movement off in the opposite corner, a familiar qunari pinning someone to the wall, her legs wrapped around his waist.

"I see the Inquisitor made it," Fenris drawled.

"He's hard at work," Artie quipped. He crept a bit closer to get a better look.

"What are you doing?" Fenris whispered.

"I'm curious!" Artie whispered back.

Fenris rubbed a hand over his face and followed even more silently. Yes, 'hard' and 'working' were certainly descriptors that fit, even at this angle, and he wondered what relation to Kinnon that woman
might be, if she was in the stables long after the horsemaster had gone home. On the other hand, they were also in the stables, so perhaps that was just his mind getting ahead of him. Still, the flash of sweet-potato-coloured hair made him think he might not be wrong.

He tugged at the back of his husband's cloak, hissing, "Neither of them are elves! We should leave here, or at least find another empty stall!"

"He's qunari!" Artie hissed back. "I just want to see if he's... proportional!"

"I think we can make an educated guess!"

Adaar's ear twitched in their direction, but a particularly enthusiastic sound from his partner covered much of their conversation. Artemis ducked into the nearest stall regardless, peering around the wall. Fenris followed him, leaving his better judgement behind.

Artie's eyebrows shot up, lips forming an 'o' before turning a smirk his husband's way. "We should have brought Anders."

Fenris tried not to look affronted. "Why?"

"He and Adaar could joust."

"This conversation is ridiculous and not at all the reason we came out here," Fenris muttered, wrapping his cloak more tightly around himself. Even as they closed in on spring, Ferelden was terribly cold. Certainly too cold to be standing around in his nightclothes in something that was barely a building, with exactly none of the exercise he'd hoped to be getting.

"Joust." He huffed. "Don't tell me you're getting a taste for qunari, now, after everything we went through in Kirkwall."

Perhaps that made him a hypocrite. In fact, he knew that made him a hypocrite. He'd always been quite welcome in the qunari compound in Kirkwall, though not for these purposes.

"He's hardly the Arishok," Artie huffed. "Are you really not curious?"

"I am really not curious."

Artie sighed dramatically before turning back to his husband, noting the way he was huddling inside of his cloak. He grabbed a fistful of the cloth and pulled Fenris to him. "Ah yes, I believe I was supposed to be keeping you warm..." He nipped at Fenris's lip.

"I was rather looking forward to our own jousting, yes," Fenris drawled, willingly pressing against the length of Artemis's body.

The comment startled a snicker out of Artie, who only just managed to stifle it against Fenris's shoulder.

"I seem to remember some things about you and poorly-insulated Fereldan barns," Fenris murmured, slipping his hands under Artemis's cloak, running them along the warm body beneath. He grabbed fistfuls of nightshirt, rucking it up, as he backed Artemis into the side of the stall.

With two cloaks around them, the warmth improved, aside from the part where Fenris thought his toes might still fall off from the chill. His fingers traced lazy swirls along Artemis's thigh, the other hand clutching a hip. He could just barely recall the first time he'd touched Artemis like this -- the drunken fascination with the body in his hands, pressed against him. All these years later, and he still
had those same desires -- more desires, even. It had been far too long since he'd been able to enjoy
his husband's wonderful body, without fear of somehow hurting himself in the process. Not that he
minded that much, but not dealing with it would be a long-awaited pleasure.

"That has been a bit of a theme," Artie murmured against Fenris's lips. The wood was rough against
his back, a cold contrast to the heat of Fenris's body against his front. Fenris's fingers were cold, but
he hardly minded, knowing they would warm quickly.

Fenris kissed him, one hand slipping around to squeeze Artemis's delectable ass, and Artie sighed
pleasantly into the kiss, arching back into his touch. Artie's hands found Fenris's nighthirt under
their shared cloaks and similarly rucked it up, his fingers finding and tracing lyrium lines he knew by
heart.

Through it all, they could hear the snap of Adaar's hips and his grunts of pleasure, as well as the
woman's breathy moans.

"Do you think you'll be quieter than she is?" Fenris teased, pressing himself even closer against
Artemis, skin on skin, skin on lyrium, and the chill bled out of him at the magic in that skin. How
strange, he thought, for the thousandth time, that he now took comfort in what had so long been his
bane. How the years had changed him -- changed them both, he supposed, but for the better. Even in
the frozen South, he could be happy, and with far more pleasant fluids on his hands than blood.

He rocked his hips against Artemis's, beginning that promised 'joust', revelling in the pressure and the
warmth, in the desire between them, in the wonder at how much had been restored to him by just a
little sliver of lyrium in his arm. Ah, and that was why he was so focused on how this all began -- he
was learning to live, again. It would be so much easier, this time. This time he had memories to
follow, the expectations of pleasures he'd known, and would know again, like the brush of Artemis's
breath against his lips, now that the skin was ... somewhat less of a tattered mess. The shocks of
pleasure at those fingers along the lines in his back that now no longer ached so badly.

He ground himself roughly against Artemis, hands kneading the firm ass settled in them, pulling his
husband's body even tighter against him. His lips slid to the side, littering kisses down Artemis's jaw.
"Even with you, I have missed you."

Artemis's breath shivered out of him as he tilted his head, allowing Fenris's lips to dip down to his
throat, to feel his quickening pulse. As his hands traced the lines along Fenris's back and ribs, Artie
understood. Fenris was as close to healthy as he had been in years, and hope was a warm pressure in
Artie's chest, hope that he wouldn't have to worry about accidentally hurting him or Fenris
accidentally hurting himself.

"Of course you have," Artie murmured. "I would miss me too."

Fenris huffed, and Artie's breath hitched at the next roll of Fenris's hips. For a moment, the world
narrowed to just the two of them, the barn's other occupants forgotten.

A tug on Fenris's hair pulled him back up into a kiss, one more desperate than the last. "Take me,"
Artemis begged.

Fenris pulled on Artemis's thighs, until they wrapped around his waist, trying to find an angle at
which he could reach to push into the tempting warmth of his husband's body. Again he thanked the
magic, as his hand filled with oil that splashed down his leg and onto the floor. Perhaps it was best
Artemis wasn't trying to keep up with Anders, yet. Fenris couldn't imagine the places that oil might
end up. Still, he leaned in, bracing Artemis against the wall of the stall as he eased himself in.
A warm sound caught behind Artemis's teeth where he bit his lip, and the squeeze of his legs encouraged Fenris's slow slide. He turned his head to kiss behind Fenris's ear. "I imagine this is a night I should avoid the earthquakes?" he joked as he adjusted to the weight of Fenris inside of him.

"We might wish to avoid frightening the locals. The Inquisition arrives and the very ground shakes? Not encouraging," Fenris murmured against Artemis's neck, grinding into him. "Though perhaps we might make the ground tremble just a little."

The thrusts started slow, but hard. Unceasing and solid, just a warm up to the frenzy Fenris expected they could work each other into, given a little time. As he felt Artemis open to him, the thrusts becoming easier, he picked up the pace, faintly aware of the clacking of the wood they leaned against. One thrust followed the next, harder, deeper, faster, reckless and glorious, a bright splash of pleasure, and the wall clacked and thumped.

And then it cracked, sending them toppling through the space left as the board ripped away from the others, soundly cracking what appeared to be Kinnon's mount just above the tail. The horse reared and whinnied, hooves pounding at the already weakened walls, and Fenris caught the edge of the gap with one hand and Artemis with the other, dragging them both back through the hole and away from the enraged horse.
Chapter Summary

The horses aren't pleased in the least. Kinnon's extended family is amused as all get out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Artie's soft moans of pleasure gave way to a confused screech, his legs and arms around Fenris in more a death grip than an embrace with nothing against his back to support him.

The horse tore free from its stall, whinnying its displeasure, the ground trembling lightly with the pounding of hooves rather than more pleasant things. Artemis unwound himself from Fenris, tugging down his nightshirt as they scrambled to get away from the noise and mess.

"What the Blight?" Adaar hissed, scrambling to pull his pants up from where they'd pooled around his ankles. He held them closed but had no time to fasten them, he and his new friend scrambling out of the horse's way.

Fenris pulled his cloak tighter around himself and nudged Artemis behind him, as if it would help. No matter how many times he reminded himself that Artemis was taller than he was, it never stopped him from trying to hide his husband behind him. There was no way out but past the angry horse, and he knew Adaar would be watching the beast. In short, they were stuck. Of course with how loud Artemis had been...

"Is anyone else here?" he called out, knowing damn well there should be an answer. "I came down to see if I'd dropped the salve from my saddlebag, but this horse has us trapped!"

Offering Artemis a lopsided smile, he shrugged. It sounded legitimate, at least.

"Dropped your salve?" Artie repeated in a mocking, if amused, whisper. "Is that what we're calling it?"

Fenris shushed him.

Adaar tilted his head in entirely the wrong direction, shielding the woman behind his bulk as he did up the laces of his breeches. He eyed the way out, but the horse was still spooked, its nostrils flaring and the whites of its eyes showing as it stomped its hooves.

"Fenris?" he asked tentatively, recognising his distinctive Tevinter accent.

"Inquisitor?" Fenris called back in a similar tone, as though he didn't already know he was there. "I thought I saw your druffalo..."

"Just arrived," Adaar said, eyes searching the stables as best he could from his defensive corner.

"How do we escape the horse?" Fenris asked, warily, as the sound of the other horses stirring began to spread. "I do not think we wish to harm it, but it is quite upset and means none of us any good."
The woman slipped out from behind Adaar, belted tunic covering halfway down her bared thighs, and pulled her boots on, but not her pants. She looked like she had a plan and Fenris hoped it was a good one. As the horse trampled one way through the stable, she ran the other, and for a moment, he thought she was just going to leave them there, but she darted back, ducking into empty stalls to avoid the horse, finally ending up in the one Fenris and Artemis were in.

"Take these." She shoved a bag of apples at Fenris. "Get into the next stall and feed one to the next horse down. They'll calm down if we get them interested in something else. Just make sure you don't get stepped on. You get this side, I'll get that side, and eventually that girl's gonna start to wonder why everybody else gets apples."

"How come I don't get apples?" Artie joked.

Fenris gave him a wry look. "Here, my noble steed," he drawled, handing Artie the bag. "You are taller and have a longer reach anyway."

"There's a joke in there about riding," Artie pointed out. He watched the horse stamp along for a moment before slipping into the stall next to them via the slat Fenris had hip-checked off the wall.

"Yes, and Theron is not here to make it," Fenris replied, slipping through after him.

At the right angle, Artie caught a glimpse of the horse the next stall over, its ears moving uncertainly, pressing back to its head then forward again. Artie bit back a smile, thinking of Fenris' ears, and stretched out a hand, an apple held enticingly. Artie cooed at the horse and murmured encouragements until it shyly crept his way, sniffing at the apple before finally taking a bite. He felt the horse's puff of breath against his arm.

The woman darted back across to the other side of the stable, offering apples from a second sack to the horses, there, as she called out endearments to them in a soothing tone. With every bite of apple, the smell of them became more obvious, and more horses leaned over the doors of their stalls, more curious than afraid, and quickly rewarded with more apples.

After a few minutes, the rampaging mare stopped charging back and forth and kicking at the walls, edging ever closer to the people with the apples.

"Well, did you want one?" the woman asked, holding an apple out in her direction. "You'll have to come and get it."

The horse shied away, and the woman fed the apple to a different horse, petting its nose and cooing.

As he watched the calming horse, a snout bumping Artie's arm told him he was being remiss in his duties. "Sorry. You are correct, of course," he said, pulling out another apple, which was quickly gobbled up.

The horse that had been running around circled back around, ears perked forward in interest. The woman continued feeding apples to the other horses until the mare was close enough to touch, at which point she held out another apple in her direction. Cautiously, the mare nibbled at the offered treat.

"I would applaud, but I think that would just send her running again," Adaar said. He kept his distance, aware that his size and horns made a couple of the animals nervous.

That same snout bumped Artie's arm again, hard enough that he would have stumbled if he were a Force mage. "I'm out of apples!" Artie told the horse, holding up the empty bag for investigation. "Sorry!"
Fenris looked equally unimpressed with the lack of apples, but decided mashing his face against his husband probably wouldn't solve that problem. "Seems like a popular place, for the middle of the night," he remarked, as the woman led the mare to an undamaged stall.

"Oh, I work here," the woman said in the same gentle voice she'd been using with the horses, still trying to keep the mare calm. "Not many people come through, at this hour. Most of them plan to be somewhere else, but when Bann Loren's not in Denerim, someone has to be here to settle his guests and the post horses. I'm Amandine."

"You're related to, er, Horsemaster Bran?" Fenris asked.

"Oh, not closely. But, someone has to be the new horsemaster, one day, and after that tragedy with his son..." Amandine shook her head, still petting the horse and gently checking for injuries. "Do I look that much like him?"

"Not like him, like his son."

Amandine's hand paused before resuming its petting. "I'm afraid you must be mistaken. Kinnon was killed when he was very young."

Adaar's ears pricked. "Kinnon?" he echoed. He took a few cautious steps closer but stayed at a distance. Now that everything had calmed down, he was finally able to take note of Artie next to Fenris, wrapped tight in his cloak. "Dropped your salve, huh?" he drawled, an eyebrow arched in Fenris's direction.

"Putting away your druffalo, huh?" Artie replied in the same tone, drawing a snicker from Amandine.

Fenris cleared his throat. "I am not mistaken," he said. "Kinnon is alive and travels with the Inquisition. He has hair very much like yours."

"We're Clayne!" Amandine laughed. "That describes all of us!"

"If you will be awake in the morning, join us for breakfast," Fenris suggested, a slim smile creeping across his face. "You can meet him, yourself, and judge. I'm sure Inquisitor Adaar won't mind the company."

"As long as he doesn't bring his druffalo to the table," Amandine joked, pulling her hair out of the horse's mouth.

"Literally or figuratively?" Fenris asked, and then held up a hand. "Nevermind. Both. Either. None of the preceding. Please don't bring your druffalo out at the breakfast table."

Adaar huffed, putting his hands on his hips. "Of course not! It's much too big to fit through the door!"

Artie snorted a laugh and tried to hide it behind a cough.

"Yes, much more suited to jousting," Amandine said with a knowing look at Fenris and Artie. Artie felt his face heat as he wondered how much she had heard.

Adaar's brows knit. "Jousting?"

"Don't worry about it," Artie said.
Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the late chapter! Difficulty breathing has led to difficulty determining what day it is!
The dead have returned to Crestwood. Fen'Din finds this mildly concerning, but not as serious as all that. The Grey Wardens have also come. Peryn finds them concerning, but can't put a finger on why.

The ride wasn't that long, but Kinnon's horse was less than thrilled with it, shying away from Fenris and Artemis for reasons he found it best not to explore. It was fine. That put a little more space between him and Peryn. Which wasn't at all what he wanted, but it was probably for the best. Still, even that dull ache in his chest couldn't damp the guilty nausea at the idea that he had living family he'd never imagined. The idea that his father had thought he was dead for all these years.

"I think I'm just going to stay in Oswin for a while, on the way back. I mean... that's the thing to do, right? I have family. I should visit them, get to know them. The cousin? I could have expected a cousin. But, I just thought... I always assumed dad knew what happened." He shook his head. "I never got letters, but no one got letters. They told us it was because our parents didn't want us any more. Well, except Flora and Val, but they were nobles. Some kind of noble. Hey, Jan, do you remember who Flora's parents were? Because I can't--"

"Well, that's going to be a minor inconvenience," Fen'Din suddenly declared from the front of the caravan, magic pulling at the air around him as he opened his mouth to sing. The smell of wet decay crawled in on the wind, and the horses snorted, but didn't pull away. Most of them had known the Fallow Mire.

"Minor," Adaar repeated with a chuckle as he noted the figures shambling out of the mist. At a distance, they almost seemed human -- and he supposed they were, once -- until one dragged itself close enough for Adaar to see the scraps of skin hanging around an open skull. At that range, it stopped shambling forward and raised a bow it shouldn't have the muscles to manipulate.

Adaar tensed but trusted the mages to throw up a barrier or a shield.

"I hate these things," Artie muttered from behind him. He made a fist, and the undead creature crumpled inward as though a giant hand had crushed around it before falling to the ground in a heap. He shrugged when Adaar turned in his saddle to look at him. "What? They're mostly bone!"

Adaar refrained from pointing out that so were most people.

"Can you get through this without setting them on fire?" Anders teased, reaching over to nudge Cormac with one hand while he splashed a glyph across the ground with the other, freezing the creatures shambling toward them. "No greasing any bones in the middle of the fight?"

"That was once, for the love of Andraste. Once. And I was on enough magebane to take out all the Venatori in Tevinter." Cormac raised a barrier in front of them, with a glance at Kinnon, who sat praying over a cupped hand, the other hand holding the horse in place. He still wasn't quite right. Maybe bringing him out hadn't been the wisest idea.

And then the earth rose up and swallowed the undead caught in Anders's glyph. A dome of rock
closed around them and pulled back into the earth, and Cormac could hear the pained sounds from Kinnon, who tried to keep them quiet, but he’d clearly done more damage than they’d thought, that last night in Haven. Small spells had come back to him, and day-to-day magic had become simple, again, but the amount of power needed for something like this was still a little more than Kinnon was quite prepared to wield again. Still, he very obviously had no intention of letting that stop him. After all, skeletons had no blood in them.

Artie heard Kinnon's pained grunt and looked over to get a sense of what he was trying to do before lending his magic to help, folding the bones back into the earth. He still didn't quite have Kinnon's precision, but he had the forcefulness to crush them into the ground.

Kinnon panted, slumping as he released the spell. Sweat was cold on his forehead and against his back where his robes clung to his skin. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Anders manoeuvring his horse over next to his.

Adaar just watched the light show, the mages making quick work of the undead. "No, it's okay, guys, I've got this," he drawled.

Behind him, Fenris chuckled.

Peryn watched Kinnon struggle, pushing himself to contribute to clearing the road, even as he, himself, and the other non-magical members of their group just let it happen. And in that moment, he was ashamed of himself. Was it not his duty to guard the mages he travelled with? To protect them from evil spirits and bandits? But, they didn't seem to need the help. They didn't even seem to need Kinnon's help, honestly. But, he'd still made the effort. And that, he thought, is what Sister Leliana had seen.

"You get used to it," Fenris said to Adaar. "Don't get in front of them and stab anything that gets too close."

"Especially don't get in front of Artie," Cormac teased, reaching past the barrier to catch the next figures coming out of the fog. A familiar voice made him drop the spell.

"Whoa! Hey! We're still alive out here!" Harding called through the mist.

"Harding?" Adaar asked cautiously, turning his good ear her way. He caught the glint of her armour as she trotted towards them.

"I see you've met the neighbours!" she called out. A few hairs had slipped out of her elaborate updo, the damp making them cling to her neck and the side of her face. "It's good to see you safe, Inquisitor, Herald."

Adaar slid from his druffalo, deciding he towered over her enough on land. "Same to you, though it's always good to see you, Harding."

Harding chuffed. "Well, you might rethink that after I give you the news. There's trouble up ahead."

Adaar sighed. "There always is."

"Why do I have a feeling she means more than a few more undead?" Anders muttered as he looked Kinnon over.

"Because nothing's ever just a few undead."

"No, it's a few undead and a greased bone fire," Fenris drawled. "Or your entirely delightful sister
and twice as many undead."

"Who's got a delightful sister and why haven't I met her?" Candles swaggered down the hill to the side of the road, leading her horse with one hand and bearing what appeared to be an enormous wheel of cheese suspended from the other by straps. "You guys are never going to believe what I found. Look at this thing! I'm pretty sure that's drakescale in the mould, too!"

"A cheese." Harding looked entirely nonplussed. "A scaled cheese. I really feel like this is the kind of thing that would have actually surprised me, before I joined the Inquisition, but now ... it's Inquisitor Pointy and Herald Crazypants, and of course there's a scaled cheese. Why wouldn't there be?"

Adaar gestured at Harding and nodded. "That... is about where I am, too. Is it tasty?"

Candles's face scrunched. "Have you tried biting into drakescale? Not fun. Was great help against the asshole skeletons who attacked me, though!" She held up the wheel of cheese, giving them a clearer view of the arrow sticking out of its side.

Fenris blinked. "You... used it as a shield. A wheel of cheese."

"A wheel of dragonscale cheese," Candles replied, holding up a finger to make sure the difference was clear.

Artie shrugged and looked at his husband. "Well, you are what you eat."

"Better not tell Bull, then," said Harding. "He'll try to swallow it whole."

Adaar hummed in agreement. "Anyway, I imagine the trouble you mentioned wasn't the block of cheese?"

Harding let out an uneasy laugh. "Better follow me," she said, tipping her head in the direction of the path behind her.

Fen'Din dismounted to lead his questionable unicorn, so he wouldn't drip the latest round of embalming salves on Harding.

"Crestwood was the site of a flood, during the Blight," Harding explained, pointing to the lake off the side of the path, a glowing greenish storm disturbing the surface of the water. "While that's not the only rift in the area, when it appeared, corpses started walking out of the lake. If you're going to get to Jan's Warden friend, you'll have a serious fight on your hands. Fortunately, Commander Amell sent a couple of guides for you. They flagged us down, when they saw the Inquisition banners."

"So, the spirits are appearing from under the water? Oh, that's going to be curious. I wonder how we'll get to it. Boats, perhaps. I wonder if we can borrow a boat..." Fen'Din stared out across the lake, wondering what the demons of the drowned might be. Terrors, probably. Despair. It was a good thing they hadn't brought Niall.

Adaar wiped a hand over his face. He was far past the point of wondering how his life had come to this. "I don't know how I feel about riding a boat over a lake filled with angry undead. We'd be vulnerable, and they don't have to worry about drowning." To Harding, he added, "How come we never meet any place nice?"

A startled laugh punched out of her. "Oh, I don't know. Crestwood is almost charming, if you don't mind undead and constant rain. But, maybe someone in Crestwood can tell you how to get to the rift in the lake. Maker knows they want to help."
"Are the Warden guides still here?" Fen'Din asked, seeing nothing but Inquisition armour, as he entered the camp that surrounded part of the road.

"No, they've gone on ahead to see if they can help with some other problems in town. There are bandits taking advantage of the chaos, and getting food into the village has gotten difficult. Most of the farmers have moved into town, just to stay safe." Harding shook her head and gestured them on ahead of her. "We'll try to hold the road. Good luck and be safe."

Another turn and the Inquisition discovered the road couldn't be held from that far back, unless Harding had meant to keep the undead from leaving Crestwood, which Fen'Din couldn't fault. Better to keep them contained, than to let creatures that neither ate nor slept and destroyed everything in their path besiege more of Ferelden than a single village.

"Do I need to stay out of your way, Artie?" Theron asked, debating whether to bother drawing his sword.

"No, you don't!" Anders called out, a paralysis rune spreading under the battle already in progress. "Nothing wide area; I think the Wardens we're looking for are already in this fight. I'd rather not have to explain to Solona that we killed her guides."

Artie reined in the spell he had been casting. In the mist, it was difficult to make out more than basic shapes too far ahead, and though the figures approaching had the halting, lumbering gait of undead, Artie didn't like not being certain. "Good call," he said, waiting until he had a better view of the hanging, decayed jaw of the creature in front of him before crushing it into the ground.

Next to him, Theron let fly an arrow, then two, and in front, Adaar finally had cause to draw his great, two-handed sword.

"Been needing the practice," Adaar said with a teeth-baring grin as he brought the sword overhead to bring it down in a diagonal chop -- only for a streak of lightning to fry the creature in front of him before jumping to take out one, two, three more. Adaar's shoulders slumped as he levelled an exasperated look back at Candles.

"Sorry," she said, hardly sounding it.

Anders glanced over his shoulder to see where the arrows had come from.

Theron caught the way that glance lingered on his bow. "Hey, I hunt! It's not that much different, except for the part where they're not moving!"

In front of all of them, Fen'Din sang to the spirits, calming them and drawing them away from the fight. Around him, the song picked up as if the wind were singing, and a faint glow coiled closer. Rotting bodies dropped where they stood, their inhabitants drawn to the song.

Despite his better judgement, Peryn rode up along Kinnon's side. "You look not well. Do you need help?"

"I..." Kinnon wished he could think of a clever response, but he was so used to Peryn ignoring him that the words stuck to his throat. "Fine. I'm fine. Thank you."

Peryn held his stare for a moment before offering him an awkward nod and riding ahead. It was only as he was riding away that Kinnon stopped to think about whether he actually was 'fine'. Seeing Peryn's back to him, his first instinct was that no, no he wasn't.

Ahead, the battle died down as quickly as it had started, leaving three somewhat stunned Grey
Wardens in the middle of a fading rune.

"The Grey Wardens thank you for your aid, Inquisitor," one of them said, noticing Adaar's hand.

"You Solona's men?" Anders called out, not bothering to dismount. "Don't think I know the lot of you!"

"We've come from Orlais, I'm afraid. There are rumours of an ancient darkspawn in the area." The Warden looked up at Anders, and a knowing look passed between them. "Perhaps you have also followed it here?"

"We just fought it at Haven." Anders shook his head. "But, that was weeks ago. Is this where he's retreated to?"

"We had heard rumours it passed through, but the villagers know nothing. They have troubles enough."

Adaar flexed his glowing hand, its dull ache nothing more than white noise now, but he remembered all too well how easily Corypheus had thrown them around back at Haven. That they'd survived was nothing short of a miracle.

He looked back at Anders. "If that thing is here, we are going to need far more reinforcements than we've got."

"Corypheus had an army with him," Fenris reminded him. "Their own troubles or not, I suspect the villagers would have a harder time ignoring that."

Adaar nodded, hoping the rumours were just rumours. "Have you seen any other Wardens?"

"Not except him," said one Grey Warden, gesturing up at Anders.

"Any chance you can stick around and give us a hand with the undead?" Anders asked, hopefully.

The lead Warden shook his head. "We've got to keep following the rumours until we find him. Commander Clarel was very sure about that. But, if you've weakened him, maybe we'll be lucky. Even a wounded bereskarn goes to ground somewhere."

"Good luck!" Anders waved and nodded.

"Maker's blessings on you, as well." The lead Warden raised his hand to Adaar, before leading his men out of the road. "Be well, Inquisitor."

Peryn watched them, curiously, remembering the Grey Wardens he'd been frightened by, as a child. Jan had never disturbed him like that, nor had most of the Wardens he'd met later. There was something these men had done that clung to them.

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