Take It Out On Me

by giantsequoia

Summary

Hawke is broken by fury and grief after the horrific murder of his mother. Anders, desperate to provide whatever solace he can, submits himself as a target for Hawke's violent rage. Things rapidly spiral out of control. Meanwhile, ancient magics begin to awaken deep beneath Kirkwall. An elder horror from the Fade stirs from its slumber, seeking new mortal prey.

Notes

This fic was written many years ago and is currently being revised/reposted. In the process, I'm trying to fix any and all errors, but I'm bound to miss some. If you notice any errors in spelling/grammar/syntax or missed/repeated words, please let me know via comment or get in touch with me on tumblr or twitter (see my profile). Thank you!
Solace

Chapter Summary

Events are set in motion.

Chapter Notes

Revised 07/04/2018

Michael Hawke had had enough of mages.

“And... at last... her face. Oh, this beautiful face....”

Quentin’s words haunted his thoughts. He could still hear the deranged bastard’s slimy voice whispering in his mind.

Sitting on his bed in his estate, breath heavy and harsh, Hawke squeezed his eyes shut and kneaded the sides of his head. He was trying his harde to banish from his mind the nightmarish image of his mother’s face sewn onto a corpse. And that wretched madman, standing beside her with his oily smile and his nasty, filthy hands, touching Leandra like she belonged to him. Proud of himself.
It wouldn’t go away. Hawke felt as though he would see it every day, whenever he closed his eyes, for the rest of his life.

This was why blood magic was forbidden, he thought. This was why the Chantry demanded an accounting of all mages.

“Mother,” he whispered. “I’m sorry.”

What Leandra’s last hours must have been like, Hawke shuddered to contemplate. He tried to console himself that she was at peace now, at the Maker’s side with his father and his siblings. He hadn’t been able to save her, but at least he’d avenged her.

He’d killed the vermin, of course. Cruelly, and over a period, starting with Quentin’s lips and hands. But the man hadn’t suffered enough. No amount of pain that Hawke could have inflicted would have ever been enough.

Violence usually excited him, but it hadn’t this time. This time, the splatter of blood, the gurgles, the screams, the sensation in his hands of his blade rending flesh – there was none of the usual thrill along his spine, no stirring in his loins. This time he’d only felt sick.

Aveline hadn’t blamed him, hadn’t even asked him to see proper justice done, but neither had she stuck around to watch him carry out his sentence. Varric had slipped away with her, wisely deciding to wait until Hawke had cooled off before offering his condolences. Even Fenris had eventually left in disgust.

Only Anders had stayed with Hawke throughout the ordeal, no doubt thinking to provide wordless comfort by his presence.

Hawke hadn’t been able to look at him. He’d wished the mage had left with the others.

In his bedchamber, Hawke gritted his teeth and stood up to pace in front of the fire. Fire made him think of rage demons. He closed the grate with a slam to let the flames die down.

He crossed the room and opened the window to try to let the quiet of the Kirkwall night into the room. Or, perhaps, to let the heat of his fury out. The cool autumn air felt soothing on his bare chest and back, but it couldn’t calm the corrosive hatred that still pulsed through him like a lingering poison.

Hawke’s greatsword, the one he’d had since his sixteenth birthday, was leaning inelegantly against the writing desk. Its razor-sharp length was slick with congealed blood and degenerate shade essence. His armour, similarly discarded, sat in a pile of heavy plate and underpadding, some on the chair, a few pieces on the floor.

Both armour and blade needed to be cleaned, badly. To get the stink of rage demon char off, let alone the reek of Hawke’s own sweat and blood. And the blade would have to be oiled soon, or it would be damaged.

But he couldn’t. His mother was dead. He hadn’t been fast enough, and now she was gone. The last of his true family, the people who had meant the most to him in the world. She was gone and he hadn’t saved her.

Hawke couldn’t bring himself to take care of his equipment in his current state, but he needed to do something. The howling, ferocious grief inside him would consume him utterly otherwise.

What could he do?
Sleep was out of the question. Although he was exhausted, Hawke knew he would never sleep with his heart and his head pounding like this. He would just have nightmares.

He needed a bath more than he needed sleep. He was filthy and sweaty, and not all of his wounds had fully closed. But after tearing Quentin apart, he’d been splattered with viscera. How could he ever be clean again?

What he really needed, what he wanted more than anything else....

Hawke’s fists clenched when he heard footsteps on the stairs outside his bedroom. What now? Had he not made it clear that he wanted to be alone?

What he really needed was release. There was so much rage and pain and guilt churning inside him that it was all he could do not to scream. His fury was bottomless, but expending more of it might finally exhaust him into unconsciousness.

Hawke already knew who was at his door. Bodahn would have let only one person enter at a time like this.

He didn’t want to see him right now. He was afraid of what he’d do.

“I know nothing I can say will change it,” said a soft voice. “I’m sorry.”

Anders.

Hawke turned to look at him but said nothing. His muscular arms were folded in front of him, and he left them there. As much as he had come to care for Anders, even love him, right now all Hawke saw as he looked at him was mage. Not a blood mage, to be sure, but something just as foul – an abomination.

“You were lucky to have her as long as you did,” Anders continued, seemingly oblivious to Hawke’s smoldering glare. “And when the pain fades, that is what will be important.”

Hawke rolled his eyes with a disgusted sneer and turned around to walk to his bed. He sat down heavily and rubbed his temples some more, partly to try to assuage the throbbing ache buried there and partly to avoid looking at the mage who’d shared his bed for over a year.

“Go away, Anders,” Hawke said, not entirely succeeding at keeping a neutral tone of voice.

“Look... I know we don’t always see eye to eye,” Anders said as he approached the bed. “About more things than just templars and mages. But I care about you a lot. I-”

“Templars and mages,” Hawke spat. His face twisted with pent-up emotion. “Always with the templars and mages. The bastard who killed my mother was a mage, remember? You were there, Anders! You see now, why the Chantry keeps mages in the Circle? You see now why the templars....”

He couldn’t finish, choking on his grief. His hands trembled in his lap.

Anders sat down carefully on the bed beside him.

“Quentin was a madman,” he said softly. “That’s why he did this. Not because he was a mage.”

“Fuck you!” Hawke snarled, lurching to his feet and waving a hand in dismissal. He went over to stare through the grate at the dying fire, his back to Anders. His jaw, neck, and shoulders were
tightly clenched with the effort of suppressing his rage.

“I know you’re angry,” Anders said, still in that infuriatingly calm, supportive voice. The bed rustled as he stood. “I know you’re... looking for someone to be angry at. Someone who’s still around for you to... punish.”

That much was certainly true, Hawke admitted silently to himself.

“If it helps, take it out on me,” Anders continued. “I’m here for you, Michael. Whatever you need.”

Hawke turned around to stare at him. His vision shook. He could hear his heartbeat pounding in his head. His breath was ragged. His fingers flexed, eagerly.

Anders watched him silently, waiting for his answer.

“Don’t say that unless you mean it,” Hawke said in a deadly whisper, his self-control balanced on a blade’s edge.

“I do mean it,” Anders said, but his voice was less certain than it had been a moment ago.

Was that fear in his eyes?

The spike of arousal was hot and sudden. Blood rushed to Hawke’s groin. He licked his lips.

“I’m yours, Michael Hawke,” Anders whispered.

Hawke lunged with one hand outstretched and delivered a powerful backhand to the mage’s face.

The force of the blow knocked Anders backwards onto the bed, momentarily stunning him. For Hawke, the release of pent up energy was lustfully sweet. He immediately wanted to do it again, and his mind was too broken to really think about why.


Anders said nothing as Hawke grabbed his wrists, squeezing them so hard that Anders couldn’t help a gasp of pain. Hawke straddled him, yanking his arms up to pin his hands over his head. He gripped both of Anders’s wrists with one large hand, and with his other he slapped him across the face. The sting on his palm was a balm on the rage in his soul, and something ugly inside him writhed at the pleasure of it.

“Templars,” Hawke hissed in Anders’s ear, his breath hot on the mage’s neck, “lock up your kind because they’re dangerous.” His free hand curled tightly through Anders’s hair. “You are dangerous. Mages become abominations and they kill people.” He shoved Anders on the word kill, squeezing the mage’s wrists harder together.

Yes, Hawke thought hazily. This felt better. Much better. Now his blood was pumping, like it did during a fight. His cock was already hard.

Anders was looking up at him with wide, submissive eyes. He stank of fear. Hawke leaned down to inhale against his neck, and the scent of his sweat drove him into a frenzy.

His hands clawed their way down Anders’s arms, pushing back the sleeves of his robe. Hawke grazed his teeth along the mage’s jaw and reveled in the salty taste of his skin. He wished Anders was bleeding somewhere, so that he could taste the blood.
Hawke straightened and his hands crawled their way down Anders’s body. He loosened the straps and buckles that held the mage’s robe and coat together. He yanked the folds apart, exposing bare flesh, and his hand pressed into Anders’s chest.

Anders’s eyes were stung by tears from the pain he felt, mostly echoing in his face from Hawke’s blows. Still, he said nothing. He watched Hawke looming over him, reading the agony etched on his face, visible even through his rage. He met Hawke’s wide-eyed gaze. The warrior’s pupils were dilated with the thrill of domination.

He’d seen Hawke get excited and aggressive during sex before, and enjoyed it. He’d also seen Hawke get excited and furious in combat like he was now, but it had never been directed at him before.

On one hand, the thought filled him with terror. But on the other, Anders was coming to realize that his love for this elemental force of a man was strong enough to withstand whatever Hawke might do to him.

He would do anything to soothe the pain he could read in Hawke’s face, lurking behind the fury. Even submit to... this.

Hawke had managed to slip Anders’s coat down around his shoulders, leaving them bare and pale in the soft light of the fire. He leaned down and bit Anders’s collarbone hard enough to leave a deep wound. Anders jerked in pain, but Hawke let out a pleased growl as he tasted blood.

He straightened again, eyes half closed as he spread redness over his lips with his tongue. When Anders made tentative motions to examine the injury with one hand, Hawke snarled and punched him brutally in the jaw.

Anders let out a whimper of pain, and Hawke forced his head to one side so he could lick up the length of the mage’s neck. His teeth grazed Ander’s ear.

“Don’t fucking move unless I tell you to,” Hawke hissed, and Anders nodded silently, as best he could with Hawke pressing his head into the coverlet.

“Turn over,” Hawke commanded, raising his hips on his knees to give Anders room to obey. He did so.

Hawke tugged down on Anders’s robe, fingers working to loosen the buckles where necessary, drawing it further down over Anders’s slender back. He twisted around and pulled the mage’s feet up to yank off his boots, tossing them onto the floor.

Finally, Hawke stood up to remove the robe and coat entirely, leaving Anders naked but for his smallclothes, face down on the bed.

Anders felt the savage, agonized man behind him climb onto the bed and straddle him again. A finger traced its way up his spine, provoking a shiver. When it reached his hairline, Hawke’s hand curved around his neck and squeezed, fingernails digging painfully into Anders’s skin.


Hawke curled his muscled calves around and under Anders’s knees, keeping his legs locked in place. He leaned forward to grab Anders’s wrists and pin them at his sides. Anders was effectively immobilized but for his head, but he kept himself carefully still all the same, remembering Hawke’s warning. Even so, he couldn’t suppress another shudder at the faint rasp of Hawke’s beard sliding up his back and over his shoulder.
A warm tongue probed into his ear, and teeth nipped at his earlobe for a moment.

“No Justice,” Hawke whispered. His teeth slipped along Anders’s neck and down to his shoulder; unexpectedly, he bit down hard. Anders wriggled and moaned at the intimate pain of Hawke’s tongue licking at the injury.

“There is no Justice,” Hawke went on. “There was none for me, none for my family, but there was vengeance. There is only vengeance.” He shifted himself, and Anders could feel the hard length of Hawke’s cock pressed against his butt.

“You’re an abomination, and your kind deserves everything they get.”

Hawke’s hands disappeared from his wrists for a moment, and Anders’s smallclothes were suddenly ripped open, giving Hawke the access he needed.

Anders heard the rustle of fabric as Hawke unfastened the laces of his trousers. He spread Anders’s buttocks with his hands and spat on the tight pucker in between. Anders felt a twinge of his own desire awakening in response to the sensation of Hawke’s tongue in that intimate place.

Hawke spat once more and spread his saliva around the ring of muscle with his tongue. He probed inwards, unthinkingly calling upon skillful, well-practiced motions that made Anders gasp and twitch at the pleasure they produced. He felt a long finger push roughly into him, and he clenched his teeth at the friction.

Hawke drew his finger out and spat a few more times, lapping with his tongue before pushing his finger back in. Anders was enjoying himself enough to almost start forgetting his fear.

Then the finger was gone, his hands were immobilized again, and Anders felt the hard, massive head of Hawke’s cock pressing against his hole. Hawke pushed into him mercilessly with an eager growl.

Anders gasped into the bedclothes. Hawke hadn’t put enough spit back there. Not nearly enough.

Hawke, in his lust-clouded rage, either hadn’t noticed or didn’t care. Once the head was in, he shoved himself forward roughly, burying his cock as deep as he could with an animal groan of satisfaction. Anders’s brief yell of pain was cut off by a powerful hand over his mouth, damp with spit and blood.

“Awww,” Hawke mocked. “Too big for you? Too much all at once? I recall you seemed to enjoy it last time, you little whore. You’ll get used to it.”

He started to withdraw, but for Anders it was just as painful.

“Besides, aren’t you used to big, nasty spirits entering-” Hawke shoved himself back in, hard “-your body?”

Anders gasped and whimpered with the pain of being invaded and stretched so roughly, but Hawke only snickered. Anders writhed beneath him, tormented as much by the discomfort and Hawke’s hateful words as he was by the creeping suspicion that at least some of his lover’s mockery was true. After all, he was an abomination.

And why hadn’t Justice emerged to fight back? Leandra’s death wasn’t his fault. He felt no surge of magic crackling to the surface, no irrational compulsion to attack or even to defend himself.

He’d told Hawke he was there for him – whatever it took – and he’d meant it.
Perhaps Justice, too, was ashamed of what they had become.

An apparent brief moment of rationality caused Hawke to allow Anders a minute to adjust to the thick, rigid cock buried so deeply inside him. He soon grew impatient, however, and he began to pump himself in and out with escalating rigour.

Anders’s hands were pinned at his sides, and he felt Hawke’s tongue and teeth exploring his neck and upper back. The injury on his shoulder was aggravated by an eager tongue. The sound of Hawke’s lustful, rhythmic grunts and the harsh smack of his meaty thighs against Anders’s butt grew until they filled the room.

Gradually Anders grew accustomed to Hawke’s rapid, brutal pace, but the pain never really stopped. Hawke had always been aggressive and dominant in bed, but he had never been this savage.

Throughout, Anders continued to remind himself that by submitting, he was allowing Hawke to purge himself of his rage and anguish. Despite what his pain had turned him into, he was still Michael Hawke, the man Anders knew and loved. That was why he endured this; ultimately, out of love. And in a twisted sort of way, he was able to enjoy it.

For his part, Hawke was lost in his own carnal pleasure. The thrill of blood on his tongue and the hot, tight body around his cock, his frenzied thrusting fueled by the heat of his rage, all but washed away the agony he felt. He yanked on Anders’s hands and bit him on his neck and shoulders a few more times, reveling in the coppery warmth of blood on his tongue. He pounded the entire length of his cock into Anders and manhandled him as roughly as he wanted, and it aroused him as nothing had ever done before.

In the past, he’d taken care to avoid injuring his lover or being too rough during sex. Now that he knew the thrill he’d been missing, the very idea of restraint seemed insane.

Presently, as Hawke neared his climax, his pace increased and he leaned down to grind against Anders’s back, kissing and sucking on his neck. The force of his thrusts rocked Anders’s whole body.

“Yeah,” Hawke grunted, followed by a long, inarticulate groan of pleasure as his mouth traveled upwards. His beard bristling against Anders’s neck and jaw, irritating several of the bleeding bite marks he’d left.

“You’re going to take my seed,” Hawke murmured against his ear. His hands on Anders’s wrists were painfully tight. “Deep inside you, like a good little whore. Take my load, you piece of shit, you fucking abomination. Take it. You’re mine.” He groaned again and shuddered against Anders’s back. “You’re mine!”

With a powerful thrust he erupted inside Anders, growling and snarling his savage pleasure.

It went on for a while. His thrusting slowed, but he remained steady and forceful as he continued to ejaculate shot after shot of warm spunk deep into his trembling lover.

Eventually his frantic pace slowed to a gradual halt, and Hawke collapsed on top of Anders, still buried balls-deep inside him. Both of them were panting as if they’d just climbed Sundermount at a dead run.

“Mine,” Hawke repeated softly in Anders’s ear, and nipped his earlobe. He rested against the mage’s back for a moment, still catching his breath.

Anders squirmed a little, having a difficult time getting enough air himself with the heavy, muscular
warrior lying on top of him. Hawke’s chin was nestled in the hollow of his shoulder, but he had grown still.

Anders tried again to move, but he was still tightly pinned.

Finally Hawke seemed to notice that Anders was gasping and rolled off of him to lie on his back on the bed nearby. His cock slipped out of Anders’s abused hole with a slick noise and fell, still semi-hard, against his belly.

Anders was relieved that the ordeal was over, but even now that it was, he still found that in a strange way, he’d enjoyed the intimacy. Not from the pain and humiliation he’d endured, but because it had been with Hawke, the man he loved – in spite of and because of what he was.

He wondered if Hawke would want to take total control of him like that again.

Did he want that?

It was difficult to tell, but Anders felt as though something had changed between them. He hadn’t been this afraid of Hawke since they’d met.

Minutes passed in silence, and the light of the fire grew dimmer as it subsided into embers. For some time, the only audible noises were soft breathing and the whisper of the breeze entering the room through the open window.

After a time, Anders thought that Hawke must have fallen asleep. The man stank of sweat and blood, like he always did, but there was now the added tinge of musk and sex. The scent was strangely calming.

Anders was thinking that he really should have bathed, but he was starting to drift off himself. His thoughts grew increasingly fuzzy.

Abruptly, Hawke pushed himself up into a sitting position.

His sudden activity startled Anders back into full wakefulness as well. He chanced a glance at Hawke, but the warrior was facing away from him, his legs over the side of the bed. Anders watched him discreetly.

Hawke stared into the sullen glow of the coals on the other side of the grate. His hands were still on the coverlet beside him. His shoulders were hunched, rising and falling slightly with his breath. Otherwise, he was motionless for a long time.

Eventually Hawke stood up and walked around the bed, over to the window. He leaned against the sill and stared out over the moonlit cityscape of Hightown.

Anders didn’t move, but from his prone position on the bed he was easily able to watch what Hawke was doing. He stood there for a while, his nude glory limned by moonlight, apparently lost in thought.

Then he covered his eyes with his hands and his shoulders started to heave.

For a surreal moment it looked like he was laughing, and Anders was afraid that Hawke’s ordeal had utterly broken him.

Then he heard quiet sobbing, and his heart melted with tender concern.
“Maker’s breath,” Hawke whispered, so quietly Anders could barely hear him. “Maker’s breath, what... why? Why did... what have I...?”

Anders couldn’t bear to see the man he loved still in such obvious pain, even after he’d treated him so brutally.

He pushed himself to his hands and knees and then swung his body around to bring himself to his feet on the soft carpet. He crept up behind Hawke, unsure if his comfort would be accepted or not.

When Hawke felt Anders’s cool hand on his shoulder, he stiffened. His quiet crying froze abruptly as he forced stillness on his mouth and throat. He said nothing, refusing to look at the mage, taking sharp, ragged breaths.

Gently, Anders turned Hawke around by his shoulders and folded him in his arms.

For a further agonized moment, Hawke remained rigid, unyielding. Then he accepted Anders’s embrace, utterly lost, weeping into his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he sobbed. “I’m sorry.”

Anders shook his head, whispering soothing words into Hawke’s ear. The river had been undammed; this was what it took. Now at last he could vent some of the pain, the guilt, and the rage that had been killing him. Now the natural catharsis of grief could take over, and the long process of healing could begin. There was nothing for him to apologize for.

Anders said as much, among other things, and Hawke was pliant in his hands. The beast he had become was gone, replaced by a broken, anguished man.

Feeling the feverish heat of Hawke’s skin, Anders allowed a soft trickle of cool magic to wash over them, soothing the wounds from the battle earlier that had not been healed or even tended to.

“You fucking bastard,” Hawke said thickly.

For a moment, Anders was shocked into silence. What? Surely he didn’t mean...?

“You bastard. Why did you...? Why do you have to be so...?” Hawke seemed to be struggling to find the right word, and finally Anders understood.

“Here for you, no matter what it costs me?” he suggested.

Hawke nodded against his shoulder.

Anders drew apart from Hawke long enough to place a gentle kiss on his lips. Their foreheads touched, and Anders stared into Hawke’s emerald eyes.

“Because you’re Hawke,” he said. “I’m yours.”
Hawke hefted his trusty greatsword, freshly oiled, and appraised its edge in the firelight. He found himself wanting to hone it again. It was razor-sharp and absurdly deadly, but it had gathered a few new nicks over the past few days.

It hadn’t been that long, really, since he’d sharpened it last – just a few days before....

His expression darkened into a scowl. Just a few days before the wretched blood mage had killed his mother.

Hawke glanced over his shoulder. Upstairs, past the balustrade on the mezzanine, the door to his bedroom was slightly ajar. He could see no sign of movement inside, and if Anders was making any noise, it was inaudible from where Hawke stood.

He could still scarcely believe his own behaviour the previous night. It would have been far easier not to think about it. Yet the experience was still vivid and fresh, difficult not to relive in his mind over and over.

Even now, part of him enjoyed the memory and yearned to do it again.

It felt like he had been a different person then. Lost in rage and grief, changed by his pain into an unthinking, savage animal who could do nothing but vent into the nearest outlet. And that had been Anders.

He could not forget the seductive power he had felt with the mage completely at his mercy.

The idea crossed his mind to go upstairs and do it all again, except harder than before and for longer. It really had been over too quickly.

Hawke palmed his forehead and tried to focus himself. He needed to divert these dangerous energies elsewhere. Anders hadn’t killed his mother. Anders could be damned stupid about templars and mages, and he occasionally became whiny, but that didn’t mean he was wrong. And Hawke still cared about him – more than anyone else alive, now that Leandra was gone.

He couldn’t treat him like he had last night. Bad enough that he’d done it once already! It was a terrible way to treat any person, let alone one who had given him so much trust and affection. It was a betrayal, and spouting verbal abuse throughout and calling him an abomination just made it worse. *Hawke* was the real monster.
He could never do it again, no matter how much he ached to... no matter how good it had felt.

But then there was the fact of Anders’s reaction.

Hawke would not have been surprised if Anders had left the moment he was able and never looked back. He had expected shock and hurt, horror, disgust, active resistance. *Never* would he have thought to be met with forgiveness and understanding. It was so far beyond what he considered possible, so completely alien to the way his mind worked, that Hawke was still not sure whether he had dreamed that conversation by the window.

A bell rang somewhere in the mansion, indicating a visitor at the front door.

The sound pulled Hawke firmly back into the present. He grunted in annoyance, putting his sword down carefully on the writing desk. It was probably another simpering noble come to offer condolences on the death of a woman they had barely known and never cared about, someone who was more interested in the chance to worm their way into Hawke’s good graces than in genuine commiseration. He’d had four such visitors today already. Bodahn would deal with it.

He heard the door open. The conversation seemed to go on for longer than it should have taken for Bodahn to disabuse a hopeful noble of their delusions. Reluctantly, Hawke went into the antechamber to see what was going on.

Bodahn offered a tip to a young elven boy, who accepted it and ran off. He closed the door and turned to Hawke, holding a sealed envelope.

“Ah! Messere Hawke. Urgent message for you from Guard-Captain Aveline.” He offered the envelope and Hawke took it.

“Thank you, Bodahn,” he said. “Go check on Anders, please, and wake him up if he’s asleep.”

Bodahn left to do his bidding, and Hawke broke the wax seal of the Kirkwall City Guard. His eyes scanned the message rapidly, a dark smile creeping over his face as his brain worked through the information.

Aveline was a good woman. Although she frequently disapproved of his choices, often harshly, she still seemed to consider him a friend. Rather than trying to offer solace for Leandra’s death, she instead evidently knew exactly what would cheer him up, and she’d acted on that knowledge.

What a wonderful coincidence that the situation her missive described should crop up less then twenty-four hours after his need to indulge in mindless carnal violence had intensified so dramatically!

Voices echoed to him from deeper in the mansion, and Hawke returned to the common room where he’d left his sword. Anders was standing on the mezzanine above him, looking down.

Hawke paused. For the first time in a long while, his acerbic tongue failed him. What did one say to one’s lover after doing... what he’d done?

“Hawke,” Anders said. “Is everything...?”

Was everything okay. That was what Anders asked him, the morning after Hawke had beaten and abused him. Guilt rose inside him like the bitter taste of bile creeping into his mouth. He squinted and avoided the mage’s eyes.

“Yes,” Hawke muttered. “Fine. I... uh, I need your help. If you’re able and – and willing.”
Hawke had killed darkspawn, including ogres and emissaries. He’d fought and killed qunari, dragons, giant spiders, demons, abominations, undead, and countless humans, elves, and dwarves with varying qualities of equipment – all without blinking, except when blood splattered in his eyes. And that just made him grin, because it made the fight more of a challenge, and because blood in his eyes was usually accompanied by blood in his mouth – which tasted good.

How peculiar in that light that he found himself unable to make eye contact with the man he’d so enjoyed hurting the previous night, and who just minutes afterward seemed to have completely forgiven him for it.

“Of course,” Anders said. “I’m here for you. Whatever you need.”

This cannot be real, Hawke thought. He cannot mean that.

And yet he did.

_I don’t deserve you, Anders._

∞

“Varric!”

The dwarf in question leapt, startled from his blissful reverie by the shout, and spilled a copious quantity of ale on his lap.

He cursed, tried to wipe the offending beverage off his duster, gave it up as a lost cause, and looked up. It was Hawke, of course, and predictably, Anders was with him.

“I need you. Meet me outside in five minutes.” Hawke stormed away.

“...All right,” Varric said pointlessly, still recovering his poise. He left his mostly-empty tankard on the table and crossed to the window of the Hanged Man to look outside.

It was near midday. That was unusual – if Hawke wanted his help, he tended to come early in the morning or late at night.

It occurred to Varric that he hadn’t yet offered his sympathies for Leandra’s death. Then again, he’d somewhat assumed Hawke would want to take a few days off from adventuring to grieve, rather than going out to kill things more or less immediately.

Inwardly, Varric rolled his eyes as he realized his error. Killing things was how Michael Hawke expressed himself. The only real surprise was that he hadn’t shown up sooner.

Varric looked at Anders. The mage was fiddling with his staff, passing it from hand to hand distractedly and not paying attention to the dwarf.

“Problems, Blondie?” Varric asked meaningfully. Anders looked at him.

“He wants to go out to the coast,” the mage said. “Find some raiders and kill them in the usual fashion.”

So, carve them up with his massive sword, and get off on the blood he spilt. Varric tried not to shudder.

“Aveline got word that some of her guards are pinned down or... got caught in an ambush, or something.”
Anders’s voice trailed off. He seemed distracted.

Varric looked at Anders closely, his interest piqued. He himself had received that same information from one of his contacts not half an hour ago. He’d also heard that a blood mage was involved.

Bluntly, it didn’t greatly interest him either. No business of his would be immediately affected by the debacle however it ended, and whatever ripples that eventually made their way to him could be dealt with then without having to fight angry criminals and blood mages. Varric often found the most prudent way to deal with these kinds of situations was to let the crazy people who wanted to kill each other do so at their leisure, and then pick up what he could for himself as the dust settled, in relative safety.

So much for that plan. If Hawke wanted Varric’s help, he’d get it. He owed Hawke that much, and more.

“You know there’s a blood mage out there too, Blondie,” he said cautiously. “Fell Orden, I think they called him. Real vicious bastard.”

“Right. Aveline mentioned him,” Anders replied. “Merrill’s already agreed to come to help deal with Orden. Hawke’s gone to find Isabela... he’ll want her to disarm traps, and you to snipe. And of course Aveline will be there to lead her guards.”

Varric’s eyebrows shot up. Useful information, all, but utterly devoid of any ranting or railing about blood mages and how they gave all “innocent” mages a bad name, etcetera.

Varric had never known Anders to pass up such obvious bait. Something else was going on here.

Surreptitiously, Varric examined his friend as he passed his staff back and forth, still staring absently at nothing in particular. Was that the shadow of a bruise on his face? And another on his neck, and more on his wrists?

Anders was the kind of healer-type mage that Varric would never not be friends with if he could help it. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen him with any kind of injury at all, outside of active combat.

And had Hawke seemed surlier than usual, when he barged into the tavern just now making demands? He’d never been the friendliest guy, and his mother had just been horrifically killed, of course, but....

Varric stopped himself. That was enough reason to be surly, really. But he could help neither his curiosity nor his imagination. There were clues all over this situation that smacked of a story in the making. If such a tale existed, he’d be damned if he didn’t find out what it was.

And if it didn’t, well... he could always make it up. Michael Hawke and his lover Anders, the rebel mage, were simply too good characters to waste.
As always, Hawke led the way, greatsword strapped to his armoured back, as the group traveled down the barren sandy path towards the Wounded Coast. The midday sun gleamed on his heavy plate, cleaned just that morning.

Aveline walked beside him, scanning the area ahead, her armour gleaming almost brighter than his – intentionally, Varric figured. On Hawke’s other side, his Mabari warhound Reaver strode proudly.

Merrill wandered along behind Aveline, alternately paying more attention to the scrubby plant life nearby or interesting cloud formations than where she was placing her feet. Varric kept an eye on her as she went, making sure to warn her of any encroaching obstacles that she seemed likely to trip over.

Anders trailed behind Hawke, still apparently lost in thought, but never taking his eyes off the back of Hawke’s head. Varric and Isabela took up the rear.

“Varric,” Isabela whispered. “Check out Anders. What’s going on there, do you think?”

Varric glanced at her, then at the mage. From behind, the bruises on Anders’s neck and wrists were rather more prominent.

“You’ve noticed it too, huh?” he muttered back, and she nodded.

A strange new dynamic had emerged between Anders and Hawke since they’d left the noisy bustle of Kirkwall. The more Varric watched them, the less inclined he felt to make up a story about it.

From time to time, Hawke glanced back at Anders briefly, as if to make sure he was still following. Varric couldn’t distinguish the scowl Hawke gave Anders from the scowl he gave everyone else (and in fact wore most of the time even when not looking at anybody). But without fail, every time Hawke looked back, Anders looked down, breaking eye contact.

Aware of Isabela’s curious half-smile, Varric looked away and didn’t answer. To him it now seemed rather obvious, and disturbing. He was surprised Isabela hadn’t picked it up yet.

“Those are bruises on his wrists, aren’t they?” she said, not loudly enough for anyone else to hear. “I know restraint marks when I see them. Hawke and Anders have a dom-sub thing going on now, don’t they?”
She seemed to be deeply amused.

Varric’s eyebrows shot up and he revised his opinion of Isabela’s powers of perception.

“How hot is that?” she added. “When did this happen, and why did nobody tell me?”

“A ‘dom-sub thing’?” Varric whispered back. “Is that what they call it?”

“You know.” Isabela murmured, voice heavy with insinuation. “One’s dominant, the other’s submissive. Isn’t it obvious?”

“Mmm,” Varric said noncommittally.

“I mean, clearly Hawke’s always been the one in charge there,” Isabela went on. “Five minutes after meeting the two of them I had a feeling they were going to end up together, and Hawke is such a top. But this... this is new. This thing they have going on. Kind of exciting, don’t you think?”

Her tone became excessively sensual. “Two handsome men – one rather bigger and more strapping than the other, of course – getting up to all sorts of naughty business....”

“Exciting?” Varric looked at her, remembering just in time to keep his voice down. “Where’s the excitement in physical abuse, Rivaini?”

“Abuse!” Isabela smothered her laughter with a gloved hand. “It’s not abuse if he likes it! Come on, Varric. Do you really think a mage like Anders, with a spirit of Justice in his head to boot, would just let a big intimidating guy like Hawke, known to favour templars over mages, smack him around if he didn’t enjoy it just as much?”

Varric’s eyes widened. He hadn’t considered Justice. He thought he’d been experiencing friendly concern, for Anders’s well-being and Hawke’s mental health.

But that? That was somewhere he did not really care to go. Storyteller though he was, there were certain lines, like into his friends’ personal lives, that even he would cross only with the most extreme reluctance – if at all.

Good thing he hadn’t said anything yet! ...Still.

“Okay,” he said carefully, still under his breath. “But don’t you find it a little bit odd that last night, Hawke’s mother was killed as part of a nauseatingly evil scheme by a blood mage to resurrect his dead wife, whose face just happened to resemble Leandra’s – and today, Hawke’s as gung-ho for killing as ever, but now Anders is bruised and submissive?”

Isabela raised her eyebrows and nodded, pursing her lips. “Huh. You know, you’re right, Varric. I didn’t think of that. Now it makes a lot more sense, actually.”

“What?” Varric didn’t trouble to keep his voice down this time, and Merrill looked over at him curiously. Hawke and Aveline didn’t appear to notice, however, and Anders just kept staring at Hawke.

Varric threw up his arms. “I don’t get that at all,” he said, once more in an undertone. “You know more about this kind of crap than I do, Rivaini. But if you think Anders is... is in danger, or something, you let me know immediately, yeah?”

“Don’t you worry, Varric,” Isabela said, clearly still amused. “I’ll explain it to you later if you want.”
“No need for that,” he said tiredly.

“Varric?” Merrill asked, drifting back towards them like a fluff of dandelion on a gentle breeze. “Is something wrong?”

“We’re good, Daisy. Just keep walking.”

Varric inwardly shuddered at the thought of having to explain this newfound depth to Hawke’s relationship with Anders to the naïve elf. Not that he was really in a position to be explaining anything of the sort.

Although... Merrill was a blood mage, so getting from violence and blood to pleasure and power was probably a lot less of a conceptual leap for her than it was for him.

This line of thinking only led to imagining Merrill in the kind of situation Hawke was in now, another notion that Varric was all too happy to avoid.

He looked around for a distraction; his eyes settled on Hawke’s dog.

“Do you think Hawke was being a bit too obvious,” he muttered to Isabela, voicing something he’d long been thinking, “when he named his warhound ‘Reaver’?”

“It suits him, don’t you think?” Isabela replied. “He’s just like his master, really. I wouldn’t want that thing charging at me.”

“It just seems... uncreative,” said Varric. “Hawke does enough reaving all on his own.”

“Well, what would you suggest instead?”

Varric thought about it, glad to have further distractions from his own overactive imagination. “Something utilitarian, maybe? Something that describes the dog’s function, like... Bloodrender.”

“Oh, perfect,” Isabela said sarcastically. “Bloodrender is an absolutely charming name for a dog. Why didn’t I think of that? ‘Here, boy! C’mere, Bloodrender! There’s a good doggy! Who’s a vicious, bloodthirsty puppy! You are! Yes, you are!’ How is that any different from ‘Reaver’?”

Varric couldn’t help chuckling. When she put it like that....

“How about Bonechewer?” Isabela continued. “He does actually do that, I’ve seen him.”

“Or Limbripper,” Varric suggested.

“Headcrusher.”

“Throatabiter.”

“Bandit-eater.”

Varric snorted. “Mook-mauler?”

“Heart-and-lifeblooddrinker.”

“Are we talking about Hawke’s dog or Hawke?” Varric had noticed earlier that Hawke hadn’t brought his helmet, which he only did when he was in a particularly vicious mood, and wanted the blood of his enemies on his face and in his mouth.
“Leghumper,” said Isabela, snickering.


“Duke.”

Varric looked at her, surprised by the sudden simplicity. “Where did that come from?”

“We had a dog on the ship once named Duke,” Isabela said. “He killed rats like nothing else. Amazing.”

Varric was about to reply when Hawke held up his hand and called for a halt.

“We’re entering enemy territory,” he said brusquely. “They have archers and mages. Stay low and keep it down unless absolutely necessary!”

Varric and Isabela glanced at each other. Varric hefted Bianca from her strap on his back, and Isabela fingered her knives. Evidently, the time for lightheartedness was over.

∞

Lieutenant Harley eyed the approaching party from her position crouched behind a boulder. A few other guards were with her, all wounded to some degree and looking relieved at their newly arrived company.

Lieutenant Harley was less enthusiastic.

“So few?” she said as the party joined the guards, taking cover behind the boulder. Merrill tripped over a root and only barely managed not to fall into Aveline’s lap.

“Captain, I appreciate that you’ve come,” said Harley, “but... the Marauders are here in force, and they’re well-entrenched. We’re going to need more than a few more blades, a crossbow, and a Mabari charger.” Her eyes went to Merrill, and the obvious, unspoken addendum hung in the air.

Hawke laughed nastily but said nothing. Harley looked uncomfortable.

“These are no ordinary fighters I’ve brought, Lieutenant,” Aveline said calmly. “The elf is a mage. She might well be...” Aveline cast her gaze around the people she had brought with her “...tied for the second most dangerous person here. Not counting me.”

Harley’s eyes widened and she looked at Merrill with new respect. Varric wondered if she would have accepted that assessment of the waif-like Dalish from anyone but Guard-Captain Aveline Vallen.

He tried not to snicker as Harley’s gaze moved around to himself and the others, obviously wondering who had tied Merrill for second most dangerous. Personally, Varric rather liked to think it was himself that Aveline had had in mind as Merrill’s match, but it could just as easily have been Isabela or Anders.

It was rather obvious, of course, who had them all beat.

“As you say, Captain,” Harley said. “The Marauders are-”

She was cut off by a shout from the cliffs above them. “No fair, guard dog! You’ve brought friends!”

Hawke looked up, his eyes coming alive.
“Shut your mouth!” Harley yelled back.

In answer, an arrow whistled down from the heights, right at them.

Varric barely had time to say “Look-” before one of the guards recoiled, writhing in pain, a gory mist of blood spraying from his neck where the arrow had punctured. Raucous laughter echoed down from the cliffs.

Hawke was already breathing a little faster, staring at the blood fountaining from the dying man, his pupils dilating and his grip on his sword tightening. Varric hadn’t even seen him draw it from the scabbard on his back.

After an interminable period of agonized gurgles, the soldier’s thrashing finally subsided and he became still. Harley had held his hand as he died, but there hadn’t really been anything they could do. Even Anders had only shaken his head regretfully.

Rage clouded Harley’s face as Aveline reached out to gently close the dead man’s eyes.

“Bastards,” she hissed. “They’ll pay. I’ll make them pay. But this is going to be difficult, even with mages on our side. They heavily outnum-

“Don’t worry about that,” Hawke cut her off. “Who are these people? Tell me everything you know. No – everything I need to know.”

Harley looked at him in surprise, then at Aveline. The captain nodded.

“Evets’ Marauders,” said Harley. “Bloody raiders... they’ve been terrorizing the coast, robbing and raping for Maker knows how long. Fell Orden’s here – he’s a blood mage. Viktor Longdeath’s handiwork you just saw. I’m not sure how many others they’ve got, but they have more than we did when we got here, and they’ve been picking us off with arrows and fireballs.”

“She’s not kidding,” Isabela said. “I’ve heard of the Marauders. Even other raiders are scared of them.”

Hawke nodded, and let go of his sword briefly to give Reaver a rub. His eyes were alive with malice, but his expression was otherwise blank, processing information.

“Right,” he said. “Here’s how this is going to work. Reaver and I are going to charge their lines.”

“What?” one of the guards cut in. “You’re crazy, serah! The mage will send you to meet the Maker before you get three steps!”

Hawke looked at him, and the defiance left the man’s face instantly. Perhaps the obvious submission in his eyes made Hawke take pity, a little bit.

“Enchantment,” Hawke said, clapping his gauntleted fist over his breastplate with a hollow clang. “The amount of lyrium in this metal could pay your salary for ten years. Don’t concern yourself with my safety and don’t interrupt me again.”

The guard nodded, abashed, clearly regretting having spoken in the first place.

“Varric, I want you to hang back and snipe anyone you can,” Hawke resumed. “Prioritize any archers you see that look halfway competent, or who look like they might be targeting my dog.”

“Will do, Hawke,” Varric said.
“Isabela – stay out of sight and disable any traps you can find.”

Isabela pouted.

“Alright,” Hawke relented. “By all means, slit as many throats as is convenient, but if I end up with my leg caught in a metal claw while the blood mage is still alive, I’m going to be angry. At you.”

The glare he gave her silenced any flippant comeback Isabela might have had forthcoming, and she nodded her assent.

“Merrill,” Hawke said, but was cut off as a fireball blasted against the boulder they were sheltering behind. The ground itself trembled, and they were all seared with intense heat and pelted by falling debris.

“Merrill – deal with the blood mage,” Hawke said as the dust settled as if nothing had happened. “Mostly I want you to focus on preventing him from using his spells on me or Reaver, and secondarily on anyone else of ours. If you see an opportunity to make the kill, take it. Otherwise, hang back and keep yourself alive. Throw out some curses if you feel like it.”

“I’ll do my best, Hawke,” Merrill said.

“ Anders,” Hawke said.

“Yes.” The mage had been silent throughout, his steady gaze on Hawke never wavering. Now he became alert and attentive.

“Protect Varric and Merrill, and Isabela if you can keep track of her,” Hawke said.

“Yes. I will.”

“Don’t use any healing magic on me unless I ask you to, or if I’m obviously about to die,” Hawke went on.

Harley looked shocked, as did the other guards. Aveline looked like she was beginning to regret asking Hawke for help. Her frown had grown increasingly severe during Hawke’s speech, and when he was finished, she spoke.

“And what about me, Hawke? My guards-”

“Will get killed,” Hawke finished for her. “They can hang back here, and leave once the raiders are distracted enough not to pick them off as they retreat. You....”

He looked at Aveline appraisingly, and a brief smile quirked his lips. “Your help I wouldn’t turn away, if you’re set on participating.”

“Of course I am, and so are my guards,” Aveline said angrily.

Beside and behind her, Varric saw a few of the remaining guards raise eyebrows and exchange glances, as if tempted to mention that they would happily leave everything to Hawke and his group. None of them were brave enough to say so to their captain, however.

“I agree,” said Harley, and to her credit, she appeared to mean it. “We’ve managed to get them pinned here, at great cost – if we leave and your suicidal charge fails, they could get away. It might be years before we get another chance like this.”

“I appreciate your efforts,” Hawke said, his voice and face empty of irony. “But trust me when I tell
“You that not a single one of them will live to see the sun set. I’ll take it from here.”

Harley still looked indecisive, Aveline annoyed.

“I would get out while you can, if I were you,” Varric advised the guards. “Hawke does this a lot. Those raiders have no idea what’s about to hit them. You’ll live if you leave now. You might not if you don’t.”

Harley pursed her lips and looked at Aveline. The Guard-Captain sighed and nodded.

“Wait until you’re sure the raiders can’t fire on you,” she ordered. “Protect the most seriously wounded as you retreat. If anyone is fit to act as a runner, send word to the Keep, but otherwise wait for me up the path.”

“Captain,” Harley said. “Maybe you should come with us.”

“You should, really,” Hawke agreed.

Aveline glared at him. “No. I am coming with you.”

Hawke shrugged. “Alright then. Isabela, check the main path there for traps, then maybe try slipping around the side path. Merrill, Varric, Anders – get ready. Aveline – shall we charge their lines together?”

“Of course.”

“Wait for Isabela’s signal, then.”

“Good luck, Captain – Hawke,” Harley said. A few of the guards echoed her sentiment, but Hawke barely heard them, already focused on the coming battle.

Varric deployed and loaded Bianca, and ensured his supply of bolts was close at hand. He’d brought a few flasks of miasmic potion and a sticky tar bomb which also might come in handy.

By the time he looked up from checking his equipment, Isabela had already vanished. Hawke had his arm around Reaver and was whispering in his ear. The dog was utterly still, his eyes focused on Hawke.

A brief, shrill whistle resounded from the cliffs – Isabela’s signal.

“Go, Reaver!” Hawke yelled. The Mabari charged, Hawke immediately behind him, greatsword poised to impale the first target that came into range. Aveline followed a moment later, sword and shield ready.

Varric, Merrill, and Anders followed at a more relaxed pace, but all were tense and alert. Up ahead, Aveline’s gleaming armour disappeared around a tall, rocky bluff; screams and clashes could already be heard in the heights.

Varric sniped two archers who made the mistake of showing themselves, and Merrill shot a bolt of spirit magic at a third, blasting a hole through his head.

“Merrill,” Anders said. “Maybe climb up there where he was? You’d have a good view from up there, and cover.”

Merrill glanced up, all trace of sweetness and innocence having evaporated in the heat of battle. “Yes, I think you’re right, Anders. Will you be able to hear me up there, if I need help?”
“I’ll protect you,” Anders said. His own staff was alight with blue energy, crawling around his arms and legs in a silent display of sorcery.

Merrill tapped her staff on the ground; a bundle of roots erupted from the sand and surrounded her, then retreated just as quickly, taking her with them. She reappeared high on the cliff, the only sign of her passage a slight depression in the path where she’d vanished.

Varric and Anders rounded the bluff, passing several defunct claw traps and a snipped tripwire along the way. They reached the relatively open plateau where the raiders were camped.

Hawke was in the middle of the area, swinging his sword in great arcs that carved into multiple men at a time. Several were lying around him in spreading pools of blood, screaming and missing limbs. Reaver fought beside his master, snapping and snarling at anyone who tried to attack Hawke from behind.

Aveline was engaged with several raiders at once, her back against a bluff and her shield fending off their blows. She stabbed out every now and then, but most of her attention was devoted to keeping herself alive.

Varric crouched behind the edge of the bluff and peered around. The blood mage was nowhere in sight; neither was Isabela. There were at least forty men and women wearing patchwork armour and carrying mismatched weapons in the clearing. Several of them were attacking Aveline, but most were focused on Hawke and Reaver.

Hawke lunged at two men who were charging him. His greatsword took off one man’s head in a single swipe, and the other’s charge was stopped dead as Hawke’s gauntleted fist collided with his face and caved it in. Hawke swung his sword around behind him, spinning with it, severing a man’s legs at the knees and letting out a roar of laughter in his deranged glee. Reaver pounced on the screaming, mutilated man, tearing into his face with his teeth.

As Hawke’s momentum carried him to one side of the battlefield, Varric took the opportunity to launch several bolts from Bianca, kneecapping from behind three of the men attacking Aveline. She didn’t waste the opportunity, lunging out from the cover of her shield to end their lives with swift, brutal efficiency. Her face showed none of Hawke’s manic bloodlust, only stone cold concentration.

Hawke was now surrounded by a ring of raiders; they seemed to want to charge him all at once, but each was too afraid to get close to him without backup, and none were in a hurry to be first.

“COME ON!“ Hawke bellowed, spit and blood flying from his mouth. His armour and sword were drenched; his hair was soaked, and his face and hands were splattered liberally with red. His eyes were wide and crazed, his bloodlust held in check only by a thin veneer of rationality. Varric didn’t blame the raiders one bit for their fear.

Hawke turned in a circle, chest heaving, eyes darting from target to target. Reaver kept behind him, defending his back. Several raiders shifted as well, apparently trying to evade Hawke’s attention.

As a few of them passed by a bush near the edge of the cliffs, Isabela popped into view and neatly slit their throats before disappearing again.

A shout went up, and archers in the cliffs peppered the surrounding area with arrows, but the missiles were deflected harmlessly by a shield of energy conjured by Anders.

Several of the more intelligent raiders immediately looked around for the enemy mage, but Anders had slipped back behind the bluff with Varric, keeping out of sight.
Hawke’s patience came to an abrupt end. He yelled a battle cry and charged, sword raised threateningly. The raiders in his direct path scattered, while those behind and to either side immediately closed in, brandishing their own swords, axes, and maces.

Varric selected one of his rare and valuable explosive bolts and fired it into the mass of charging men and women. A fiery bloom detonated in their midst, to a chorus of crashes and screams and bodies flying in every direction. Reaver let out a series of approving and challenging barks, and Varric smiled.

Hawke was back in the thick of combat, slicing and carving at his assailants. Several of the raiders engaging Aveline broke away from her to help their comrades.

Varric found himself once again amazed that Hawke could dance among so many blades and arrows and escape fatal injury. By the look of it, he was bleeding from several cuts on his face, hands, and forearms, but he was covered in so much blood that it was difficult to tell how much of it was his. His armour was dented and pierced in enough places that he likely bore several less visible injuries.

Trusting Hawke to do what he did best, Varric turned his attention to searching for archers among the cliffs. He picked off a few, helped once by Merrill; a disoriented archer collapsed out of Varric’s range, but the elven mage dispatched the man with a magical rocklike missile.

“Varric, down!” Anders yelled, and Varric dropped without thinking. A crossbow bolt whistled over his head from behind, and his pounding heart clenched in fear at how close it had been.

He spun around to face their ambushers just as a magical explosion rocked the battlefield, sending him stumbling forward as the force of it washed over him from behind. Fell Orden had timed his appearance well, it seemed.

Four men and a woman were charging up the path towards Varric and Anders. Three more hung back with arrows nocked and ready. Varric struggled to his feet in time to knock an attacker on the head with Bianca, forcing him backwards.

Anders swung his staff in an arc before them, showering the raiders with razor sharp spears of ice. Several were seriously wounded and all were slowed by the intense cold that suddenly erupted. While they were hampered, Anders protected himself and Varric with a buffer of cloudy magic.

The distraction also gave Varric time to find his feet and load several more bolts into Bianca. Anders knocked the chargers further back down the path with a wave of force, so Varric targeted the archers. One fell to his bolts, but a second managed to fire. Varric ducked instinctively, but he needn’t have worried; Anders’s magical shield crystallized around him in time to protect him.

The third archer collapsed rather suddenly, a dagger sprouting from his eye. Varric was briefly confused before he recognized Isabela’s handiwork. At least, he assumed it was her; he hadn’t seen her since she appeared on the other side of the clearing, and he had no idea where she might have thrown the knife from. He made a mental note to thank her later.

Anders was now shooting lightning from his staff at the raiders who had regained their feet, fatally electrocuting them. Varric finished off the rest with several well-placed bolts.

Their immediate danger having passed, the magical shields protecting the archer and mage dropped. Both turned at once back to the larger battle still raging behind them.

Fell Orden hovered above the battlefield, protected by a magical barrier himself as he attacked Hawke with bloody, spidery bands of energy. Yet none of Orden’s attacks were reaching him – all
were neutralized before they touched Hawke by opposing arcs of blood magic. Merrill was performing her task.

Aveline had left her defensible position and was engaging several fighters off to one side. Hawke was carving apart the remaining raiders still swarming him, using wide, vicious swings that resulted in screams and gouts of blood. Not many remained alive – there were perhaps eight or ten, but Hawke himself was also clearly tiring.

Reaver was wounded, moving with a slight limp. His mouth and paws were obscenely bloodied and his fur was matted with red, but he continued to faithfully protect his master’s back.

Varric shot an explosive bolt at Fell Orden’s shield, but immediately afterwards wished he hadn’t. The bolt exploded, heat and flame washing uselessly around the spherical barrier. A few raiders were singed, but Orden was unharmed – all Varric had accomplished was to draw his attention.

Orden snarled and pointed his staff directly at Varric. Bloody lightning lanced outwards right at him; Orden poured all his energy into the magical assault, dropping his shield. Varric dove for the relative safety of the bluff, but it was impossible to know if he would make it. He had evaded death countless times before – he couldn’t help wondering if this would be the time he wasn’t quick enough.

Merrill and Anders stepped in, however. A few tendrils of the elf’s blood magic materialized from the air and neutralized much of Orden’s power, and the rest was absorbed by a powerful shield that Anders raised before them both. The impact visibly shook the mage; he fell to his knees and his eyes and skin flared blue, the spirit of Justice he harboured lurking anxiously just below the surface.

“Thanks,” Varric gasped, climbing to his feet and helping Anders stand straight.

The mage’s reply was lost in the deafening bang of another magical explosion. Evidently, Merrill had taken advantage of Orden’s sudden lack of protection. Bodies, pieces of bodies, rocks, and dust flew in every direction. Anders’s shield absorbed much of the blast, but both mage and dwarf were still knocked from their feet once again. Through the ringing in his ears, Varric heard Hawke’s distinctive crazed laugh and Reaver barking.

His head ringing from the bang, Varric went to one knee and raised Bianca – if there were going to be magical pyrotechnics, he wanted a more stable stance. The air was still filled with dust, and Fell Orden, Hawke and Reaver, and Aveline were invisible.

Isabela materialized out of the dust and slipped nimbly behind Anders’s shield.

“Nobody behind us?” she asked breathlessly. She was disheveled and sported a few bruises and scrapes, but seemed otherwise unharmed.

“Not anymore,” Varric said dryly. “Probably not many in front, either, after that.”

“Aveline’s down,” Isabela said, still panting. “Wounded, but she’ll live. Hawke’s okay, I think – you heard him laugh, nothing can kill him when he gets into one of his moods.” She smirked. “Where’s Merrill?”

“Up there, still,” Anders said, pointing. Varric glanced up – Merrill appeared briefly and waved to him. She looked exhausted and paler than usual, but alive.

Groans of pain reached them out of the debris-choked air. More mad laughter followed, followed by slicing noises and cries of pain that cut off abruptly or dissolved into gurgles.

“Yep – he’s fine,” said Isabela unnecessarily. More slashing, tearing, snarling, and clattering noises
resounded.

“We need to be able to see what’s going on,” Varric said to Anders.

The mage touched the orb of his staff with one hand; the carved blue crystal began to glow. Anders turned his palm outwards, past his shield and facing the battlefield. A magical wind arose and began to clear away the dust.

Aveline’s silhouette became visible, lying on her back with her shield in a defensive position. Reaver was crouched next to her, panting and bleeding. Aveline waved weakly to the small group huddled behind the magical barrier; Varric waved back, glad she was okay.

The conjured wind gradually cleared the battlefield of airborne debris, revealing a scene of carnage. Tellingly, Hawke’s kills were easily distinguishable from Aveline’s and Isabela’s. None of the raiders remained alive; several had been dismembered or eviscerated, many more savaged by Mabari claws and teeth. A few were headless, and more than one was cut entirely in half. Others had been neatly run through, or had their throats cleanly slit.

Blood covered every surface: seeping into the sand, splattered on the rocks, soaking the clothes and armour and skin of the dead. Once, Varric would have been shocked and revolted by the grisly scene before him, but meeting Hawke had done a lot to harden his stomach.

Alone among Evets’ Marauders, the blood mage Fell Orden still fought. His opponent was Michael Hawke.

The mage was exhausted, his mana spent, hands and arms slashed with casting wounds. Orden’s limbs trembled as he struggled to remain standing, fending off Hawke’s raging blows with his staff. Hawke, too, was wearied, but Orden’s demise was inevitable.

Briefly, Varric considered stepping in, but experience told him Hawke would only be annoyed that the dwarf had stolen his kill.

A minor tremor shook the ground behind Varric, and he turned to see Merrill stepping from an elf-sized twist of gnarled roots. The magical wood sank back into the ground, and Merrill smiled brightly at Varric, back to her usual innocent self and utterly unaffected by the gruesome abattoir the clearing had become. Her arms, too, were slashed with casting wounds.

Hawke let out a yell as he swung his greatsword in a mighty arc. Orden parried with his staff, but the strength of the blow shook his entire body and he cried out with the strain and pain. He staggered backwards, his face twisted with hate.

Hawke pressed his advantage, forcing Orden further back with slices and thrusts. Finally, grunting with impatience and exhaustion, Hawke spun his greatsword in a vast circle that would have beheaded anyone standing nearby. It impacted Orden’s staff with a mighty crack, and the magical weapon fell to the ground in two pieces as its power dispersed with a soundless wave of force.

Orden was panting, staring up at the sneering warrior in fury. Hawke was nearly spent himself, but he raised his sword for the final blow. Before he could, however, Orden lashed out with his blood magic, dredging up one last, desperate attack.

Merrill gasped and Isabela exclaimed “Whoa!” as Hawke was flung backwards, slippery tendrils of blood magic groping his chest armour, his neck, and face.

Anders rushed forward, his shield collapsing as he charged through it. Varric grabbed for him – there was still a desperate blood mage on the field, after all, and who was to say he couldn’t scrounge up
just a bit more of his deadly art? But Anders evaded Varric’s grasp and ran to Hawke’s side.

As it turned out, Varric needn’t have worried about Fell Orden. Before Hawke had slid to a halt on his back on the far side of the clearing, Reaver had lunged at the mage, covering a distance of several meters in the blink of an eye. In an instant he was at Orden’s throat and tearing it out. Drops of blood flew this way and that as the hound shook the mage’s tattered body back and forth like a ragdoll.

Varric felt relief and exhaustion wash over him simultaneously. Orden would live for another few excruciating moments, but the battle was effectively over.

He hardly noticed the stress that filled him during fights, coiling nervous energy inside him like tension in Bianca’s cords. The release of that tension, the knowledge that everyone was more-or-less safe, was a blessed balm on his frayed nerves. Happily, he folded Bianca into her dormant state and holstered her on his back to be cleaned later.

Hawke had shoved away Anders’s help, ordering him curtly to see to Aveline. He stood under his own power, his neck and lower face gashed horrifically by Orden’s magic. Seemingly unaware of his injuries and unaffected by pain, Hawke made his way to Reaver and went to his knees beside him. Orden, gurgling, finally twitched into stillness.

“Nicely done, Reaver,” Hawke said heartily. “Beautiful! Oooh, that was beautiful, that last bite!”

Reaver barked happily and wagged his tail, then licked Hawke’s face, smearing him with blood and dog saliva. Merrill and Isabela made noises of disgust, but Hawke laughed like a child. Varric coped by smiling at the absurdity of the sight as he and the others made their way over to Hawke.

Hawke scratched his dog’s head, rubbing blood deeper into the Mabari’s coat. He glanced over at Anders and Aveline; the mage had worked his healing magic, and was helping Aveline to her feet. Though still bloody and battered, her wounds were gone.

She thanked Anders sincerely, and he nodded, but Varric noticed that his eyes never strayed far from Hawke.

Hawke wasn’t oblivious, either. Seeing that Aveline was fine, he called, “Anders!”

Anders jogged over to him at once, raising his staff.

“Heal my dog,” Hawke said, indicating Reaver.

Anders stopped short and stared at him, mouth agape. Aveline, Varric, Isabela, and Merrill were just as surprised.

“What are you waiting for?” Hawke demanded when nobody moved.

“Hawke,” Varric said. “You can’t see your neck. That last bit of magic – aren’t you in pain?”

“Hawke... Michael,” Anders said hesitantly. “You really need-”

“Anders, heal my dog,” Hawke growled, and Anders obeyed at once. Varric shook his head, wondering why he was surprised.

“The rest of you...” Hawke said, looking from Aveline to Varric, Merrill, and Isabela. “Excellent fight. I’m proud of you all. Especially you, Merrill.”

Merrill beamed.
“Now go home.” He gestured with his head for emphasis.

For the second time in as many moments, Hawke’s words were greeted with astonished expressions.

“...What?” Isabela said.

“Go home. Not you, Anders. You stay here. Heal anyone if they need it – you don’t, Isabela, so don’t waste his mana. Get some rest. I might want you again tomorrow if the Qunari problem gets any worse, or if the Viscount whines for my help again, which he probably will.”

Isabela and Varric exchanged glances.

“Going to do some sightseeing?” Isabela quipped.

“Absolutely,” Anders said before Hawke could even open his mouth. “Hawke’s been begging me to show him the sights. The Wounded Coast, you know. People flock from all over Thedas to see the wondrous variety in its landscape.”

Isabela covered her laugh with a hand; Aveline continued to frown. The shadow of a smile crossed Hawke’s mouth, so briefly that Varric wondered if he’d imagined it.

“Hawke, are you sure?” Merrill asked, evidently concerned. “You look like you really need-”

“Go!” Hawke barked.

Shock flitted briefly across Merrill’s face, but after a moment she simply shrugged. Like Varric, she’d known Hawke long enough not to be truly surprised any more, nor to take it personally, when he praised her magical skills one minute and yelled at her to leave the next.

“Alright then, there’s no need to shout. I had fun today, Hawke – thank you for including me. You know where to find me.”

And with that, she skipped off down the path, still trailing a drop of blood here and there from her casting wounds. She paused only once, to pick a flower.

Reaver, meanwhile, was shivering with apparent delight as blue energy coursed along him, closing his wounds and resetting wrenched limbs. The blood dried into his coat remained, however. He would need a bath.

“Thank you,” Hawke said as soon as Anders lifted his staff. The mage nodded, wiping his brow.

“Now go on, boy,” Hawke said, still kneeling next to his dog. “Go and run for a bit. Cool off. Find some small animals to kill and eat, and then head back to the mansion.”

Reaver barked exuberantly, danced around Hawke in a circle, and took off with a blast of bloody sand under his paws.

Hawke climbed to his feet. He’d recovered his breath, and the wounds on his face had slowed in their bleeding, but his body was still tense. His eyes were still wide and dilated, darting from here to there in rapid bursts.

He seemed to notice Aveline, who was staring at him disapprovingly with her arms folded. She raised one eyebrow questioningly, indicating the now barely-visible dog with her head.

“It satisfies his hunting instinct,” Hawke explained.
“This wasn’t enough?” Aveline said, appalled.

“It also saves money on buying food for him. He eats quite a lot, you know. Don’t worry, he can take care of himself.”

Perhaps realizing that that was all she was going to get, Aveline rolled her eyes and turned away.

“Thank you for your help, Hawke. I’ll have someone sent out here later to clean this up. Come by the Keep tomorrow and I’ll make sure you’re rewarded.”

She departed without another word.

Hawke barely acknowledged her. He was now staring at Anders with the same predatory look in his eyes that he typically reserved for whatever he was about to hack apart with his sword.

“Hawke,” Varric said. “Are you sure we should be leaving you two alone and wounded out in the wilderness where anyone can...? I mean, obviously you’re not helpless, but you are exhausted.”

“Let it go, Varric,” said Isabela, eyes gleaming. “It’s not our business.”

She eyed Hawke, then Anders. “Although if you feel like making it my business... please, please do.”

She winked at Hawke, smiled at the mage, and sauntered away. Hawke watched her leave, bemused.

Varric was getting strong vibes that he definitely should not be the last one to hang around with Hawke and Anders for much longer, but his concern for the mage – and for Hawke too, to a lesser extent (he was a vicious bastard, after all) – made him try one more time.

“Anders,” he said quietly. “Is there something going on here that I should know about?”

Hawke turned to him, and Varric very nearly backed away under the heat of his glare. Somehow, he held his ground, waiting.

Anders spoke first.

“Go on, Varric. I’d like to be alone with Michael, if you don’t mind.”

Varric looked at him.

“I appreciate your concern,” Anders continued softly. “But you know I’d ask you for your help if I needed it. Or... wanted it.”

Varric threw up his hands. He’d tried. “You know I’m going to have to make up all the details you don’t tell me,” he said.

Anders laughed. “Varric, in this case even you could not possibly make up anything as wild as the truth.”

Varric stared at him, baffled. He looked at Hawke.

“Thanks for your help, Varric,” Hawke said. “Now please go away.”

Hawke hardly ever said “please”. Varric nodded once, and then he turned and left at a run to catch up with Isabela.
“Fucking finally,” Hawke growled, turning away from Varric’s retreating back. He grabbed Anders by the head and kissed him hard, forcing his tongue into the mage’s mouth as deeply as he could.

He wanted him now. Hawke couldn’t have stopped himself if he wanted to, and he didn’t care. All the violence, the blood, and the killing had had driven him over the edge. His cock was painfully hard inside his armour – he was just barely rational enough to start taking it off.

At first, he’d fought with his mother in mind. Every strike against the raiders had been for Leandra, venting the helpless rage he still felt over her death.

But it hadn’t been long before he’d reverted back to his usual bloody combat fervour, where every strike was for himself. He’d fought for the eager, almost sexual thrill he felt whenever he killed, for the pleasure he took from the taste and smell of blood – and especially from the feeling of it hot on his skin, whether it was his own or (preferably) someone else’s. All of that had seemed somehow amplified today, from the strength of his blows to the savage delight he felt while inflicting them.

(Somewhere in his mind, Hawke was self-aware enough to notice that his bloodlust and urge to hurt people had intensified dramatically just since Leandra’s death the previous night. Had it really only been less than a day?)

All of that intense desire, all of his eagerness for violence intermingled with his pursuit of carnal pleasure, was now focused on Anders.

In those distant depths of his mind, Hawke recalled the feeling that this was wrong, somehow. He remembered thinking that he was an awful person, that he’d been then and was being now terribly selfish and cruel. There was a part of him that he knew he would regret this later.

But the part of him that was in charge at the moment didn’t care about any of that. He couldn’t seem to think clearly about anything at all, besides his lust for violence and fucking. All of his reasoning from that morning – that what he planned to do was a vile way to treat any being, that Anders didn’t deserve to be punished for the crimes of another mage – seemed as wax melting in the inferno of his desire. None of it compared to what Hawke wanted for himself.

Want was about the only faculty of his that was still functioning, and it was his want that was in command of his body.

To be sure (Hawke rationalized), Anders could have – would have – objected last night, or this morning, or really at any point before now, if he had truly wanted Hawke to stop. He hadn’t left with the others, nor had he asked Varric for help even when he’d all but explicitly offered it. He hadn’t even called upon Justice to defend himself with magic.

He wants it as much as I do, thought Hawke. He does. He’s mine. He wants me to own him in every sense of the word. He wants me to use his body for my own pleasure.
Anders, for his part, couldn’t possibly have fended Hawke off without using magic. Physically, he was no match for him. The blood-soaked man’s fierce advances reminded him strongly of the previous night, and reawakened all the feelings he’d experienced then.

Hawke’s armour was now pressing into Anders uncomfortably from various angles, but Anders didn’t mind. The muscular energy behind the squeezing came from the man he loved, and so it was pleasure to him. Hawke radiated a powerful metallic odour of blood and sweat that was igniting his own desires, and (thankfully) mostly eclipsed the reek of the dismembered corpses that littered the sandy cliff where they’d fought.

Yet as strong as Anders’s desire was to be taken and punished, it was rapidly being overpowered by his concern for Hawke. The wounds on his neck weren’t life-threatening, but they were serious.

Hawke’s armoured hands had already unfastened Anders’s robe, and they were now crawling over his upper body. Driven by the rough exploration, the cold, sharp fingers of his gauntlets had broken Anders’s skin in numerous places. If Hawke even noticed, it only excited him further.

Hawke finally released Anders from the aggressive kiss to lick and nip at his ears. Anders took the opportunity to speak.

“Michael,” he said, struggling a little to get his arms free.

“Shhh,” Hawke breathed in his ear, following the whisper with a probing tongue. Anders shivered with delight, but maintained his focus.

“Michael, let me heal you.”

Hawke ignored him, one hand now working to unfasten the straps of his own armour.

“Please,” Anders insisted.

Hawke let out an angry, frustrated growl and backed off. Not knowing how long he would stay docile, Anders grabbed his staff and quickly summoned healing magic from his mental library of spells.

Hawke tilted his head back and closed his eyes, frowning and moving his head back and forth as the cool blue light touched his skin and knit his wounds together. He looked uncomfortable.

Even through that sullen expression, Anders was as awed by the sheer physical presence Hawke radiated as he had been when they first met. The man was a paradox: it seemed that the closer he was to death, or the closer he brought others to death, the more alive he himself became.

Anders couldn’t help an inward sigh of relief as the magic died away, leaving his lover’s neck and lower face uninjured.

Hawke opened his eyes and stared at him. His pupils were enormous. His eyes seemed feral, barely human.

Without warning he closed the distance between them and punched Anders hard in the gut, his armoured fist delivering an intensely painful blow as his other hand reached up and grabbed Anders by the hair. Hawke yanked his head back as he stepped in close, preventing Anders from doubling over in pain as he wrapped in him his metal embrace once more.
“Don’t do that again,” he said in a dangerous whisper, and grazed his teeth along Anders’s neck.

Panting and dizzy from the blow, Anders allowed Hawke to support his weight while he recovered. Hawke sniffed and licked hungrily at his neck and shoulders, seemingly unconcerned.

“Don’t do... what again?” Anders managed to ask, fighting down his nausea.

“Interrupt me.”

Anders wouldn’t, not again. He knew that Hawke really did care about him, somewhere, in his own savage way. That he had let Anders heal him at all spoke volumes.

But something had changed, even since last night.

The events of the last twenty-four hours had convinced Anders that his mother’s murder had in fact broken something in Hawke. He had always been violent, but this crazed lust was unlike anything Anders had ever seen in his life. He was no longer sure that Hawke would be capable of stopping himself if he went too far, and that was deeply unnerving.

If Anders stayed with him and continued to submit to this treatment – and what choice would Hawke give him, really? – then he would be putting his own life in danger every moment they were alone. And indirectly, he’d be endangering Hawke as well, for surely Justice wouldn’t sit idly by forever.

Would it be so bad? whispered a voice in Anders’s mind even as Hawke shoved him over and he fell onto his back hard enough to knock the wind out of him. The voice was his own, or it was Justice’s – or both.

In an instant, Hawke had the halves of his cuirass and its underpadding removed and was looming over Anders, tracing shallow cuts on his face with his gauntlets. His muscles gleamed with sweat in the late afternoon sun. The limited view Anders had of Hawke’s impressive physique, previously obscured by heavy plate, was marred by a number of jagged scars. To Anders, they only added to his majesty.

A thought rose unbidden in Anders’s mind from the depths of his consciousness, in a place Justice cowered away from in shame and fear at what they had become. He would be honoured to be killed by this man.

Unhealthy ideas that had occurred to him during Hawke’s assault the previous night were now surfacing again in his thoughts.

The two of them, Anders and Justice, were an abomination. They had killed countless templars since escaping from the Circle of Magi the final time.

It was true that many of them had deserved it, having routinely tortured and imprisoned mages out of a fanatical and utterly misguided sense of divine right. Among them were sadists, rapists, and murderers.

Others, however, had only been following orders. Commanded to track down a dangerous and powerful apostate, they’d had no choice but to obey their superiors.

Still others, leashed by their lyrium addictions, had been barely better off than the mages they’d hunted: slaves of the Chantry and utterly at its mercy.

Regardless of their attitudes, many of them must have had families, spouses and children and parents who depended on the income they provided.
Anders and Justice had killed them anyway.

There were other acts he wasn’t proud of. He had killed more than just templars. He and Justice inflicted considerable collateral damage in combat. Over the years, more than a few innocents had been caught in the crossfire between himself and templars or other mages. Sometimes, he had even inadvertently led other mages to their deaths.

In the face of Hawke’s accusations last night, and his own insatiable lust for punishment right now, Anders’s previously unshakeable resolve in his plight now seemed very weak indeed. Especially since mages like Quentin and Fell Orden – those who had escaped Chantry oversight – still strode about, killing and terrorizing as they pleased.

The part of him that was Justice muttered non-stop in his mind: arguing against the flawed logic of these thoughts, pointing out the internalized prejudice. Demanding to be heard. Insisting that he was being manipulated and abused.

But the sound had faded into a buzz of indistinct noise.

“Michael,” Anders murmured, feeling the need to tell Hawke what he was thinking. To explicitly give him permission, whereas before he had only implied or silently yielded.

Hawke lifted his face from Anders’s body long enough to slide the mage dexterously out of his robe and smallclothes, leaving him lying naked and bruised in the blood-soaked sand. He straightened, now working on the cuisses that protected his thighs, staring at Anders without blinking. Giving him permission to speak.

“You know I....” Anders wasn’t sure how to phrase it. “You know I don’t mind if you....”

Hawke’s eyes narrowed. He bent down and silenced Anders with a fiery kiss, then paused. Their foreheads rested against each other, their eyes inches apart.

Hawke continued to stare at him, and Anders felt a still-armoured finger stroking his chin. Hawke’s scent filled his nostrils – mostly blood with an undercurrent of sweat, but for the first time he noticed something else, something spicy and rancid that he couldn’t immediately identify.


“Shut up,” Hawke snarled, and suddenly his eyes and his scent were gone and Anders’s face was ringing from a metal-fisted backhand. His head spun and he groaned in pain, but he didn’t fight back. He couldn’t and wouldn’t, and as long as it was Hawke doing this to him, he wouldn’t ever again.

“Whiney bastard,” Hawke muttered. “I know you deserve it. You deserve a lot more than that.”

He’s right, Anders thought.

Hawke ran his tongue and armoured fingers over Anders’s body, exploring and tasting him. Anders shivered when cool metal caressed his left nipple, then slowly outlined his pectoral muscle. Hawke’s other hand had moved lower, tracing his navel and combing through his public hair. The gauntleted fist enclosed his cock, and Anders made a faint noise at the mingled discomfort and excitement.

“Oh,” he said again when Hawke squeezed his hardening cock. He was sitting up now, straddling Anders’s waist but with one hand behind him. Hawke watched him with a curious look in his eyes. Anders couldn’t have broken eye contact with that predatory gaze if he wanted to.
He felt a spike of metal – one of Hawke’s fingers – move in a circle around his balls, and then a sudden bloom of pain. Hawke had pierced his skin, directly under his sac. Anders gasped, but his cock was only getting harder.

Hawke’s hand moved back up to feel out Anders’s erection, and his curious look became a dark, knowing smile.

“I knew it,” he said softly. “I knew it.”

He reached up to his mouth and slowly licked the spot of blood from his gauntlet where he had broken the skin. Anders watched him, entranced, utterly at his mercy.

Hawke pushed himself to his feet and divested himself of the last of his armour. His greaves and gauntlets were tossed to the ground beside his sword and the various other pieces. He let out a groan of relief as the metal constraints on his cock were finally removed; his undershorts did little to conceal his substantial length, and he reached down to fondle himself through the thin fabric.

Hawke stretched, working out the tension in his muscles, and removed his undershirt to enjoy the warmth of the sun and the coolness of the ocean breeze on his skin. Anders drank in the sight of him standing in the fading sunlight – muscular, scarred, and still covered in drying blood – and thought he’d never seen anything more beautiful. He was barely conscious of his hand drifting down to stroke himself.

Hawke looked down at Anders as he stepped out of his shorts, at last freeing his cock to spring eagerly upwards, a strand of pearly fluid dangling from the tip. He straddled Anders again and forced his arms above his head, then leaned on his wrists, pinning them in position.

“Now,” he said, his eyes once more growing dangerous, “suck it.”

He held Anders’s wrists down with one hand, spreading his fingers and thumb over both, freeing his other hand to guide his cock to the mage’s lips and thrust himself in.

Anders had no choice but to accommodate the thick cock being pushed into his mouth. He breathed slowly through his nose, but he was fighting his gag reflex by the time Hawke had inserted his entire length, burying Anders’s face in his pubic hair.

Hawke started to grind his hips back and forth, thrusting his cock in and out. Anders, tears in his eyes from the pressure on his throat, could only struggle to breathe whenever his airways weren’t blocked.

Hawke grunted and gripped the back of Anders’s head, pushing himself into his mouth with a slow but utterly implacable rhythm. He released Anders’s wrists, grabbed one of his hands, and began to bend the mage’s fingers back painfully.

“Come on,” Hawke growled. “You can do better than that.”

Anders’s cries and moans of pain were muffled, but Hawke seemed to enjoy the sensation.

“Aha,” he said softly. “So that’s what I need to do to teach you how to suck cock properly.”

Hawke grabbed the mage’s hands and forced them upwards, stretching Anders’s arms out above his head as far as he could and leaning over him. He began to fuck Anders’s mouth in a faster, powerful rhythm, and he bent down to gently suck one of Ander’s fingers. He kept it up for only moment before he bit down hard enough to draw blood.
Anders couldn’t help his yell of pain. The combination of the sensation it produced on his cock and the taste of blood in his mouth drove Hawke wild.

“Fuuuck, yeah,” he breathed. “That’s it. That’s it... scream for me.”

He bit down again on a different finger, his tongue eagerly licking at the blood that flowed, and Anders’s cries and sobs of pain around the thick dick in his mouth were ecstasy.

Hawke leaned back, still holding Anders’s wrist and gnawing and sucking on his mangled fingers, and withdrew his cock from the mage’s mouth. The glistening shaft was slick with saliva and precome.

Hawke used his free hand to grab hold of his cock and slap Anders across the mouth with it several times. Anders gazed up at him, tears in his eyes, panting from the pain his hand.

“Lick it,” Hawke murmured around the bloody fingers on his tongue. Anders obeyed, and Hawke closed his eyes in delight, rolling his hips back and forth to ride his cock along Anders’s tongue.

An idea struck him, and he reached over to grab his gauntlets, still lying where he’d discarded them. He climbed to his feet and reversed the direction he was facing as he put on the metallic gloves. He knelt again, this time above Anders’s head. Without needing to be asked, Anders took Hawke’s member in his mouth again and worked it with his lips and tongue. His hands, free of restraint, crept around Hawke’s body to tentatively caress his firm butt and lower back.

“Ohh... good boy,” Hawke groaned appreciatively. “Good boy.”

He leaned over Anders, supporting himself between his legs with one gauntletted fist. With his other hand, he traced one finger along the sensitive joint where Anders’s leg joined his pelvis. Anders groaned around Hawke’s cock as the armoured claw on his gauntlet left a deep cut.

Still thrusting himself deeply into Anders’s throat, Hawke bent down to run his tongue along the fresh wound. The bloody taste in his mouth, its smell mingling with Anders’s sweat, was an exquisite euphoria.

Grinning darkly in anticipation, Hawke gathered more blood on his tongue and ran it slowly up Anders’s stiff member. The mage tensed beneath him, his grip on Hawke’s butt tightening.

Hawke took the head of Anders’s cock between his teeth and, holding it so in place, ran a metal claw down the erect shaft, scoring another shallow cut. His tongue followed the narrow slice.

“Unnh!” Anders bucked beneath him, and his moan of mingled pleasure and pain was almost enough to push Hawke over the edge. His body tensed, and he lifted his head from Anders’s cock long enough to run his tongue up the bleeding wound once more. He dug the claws of his gauntlets into Anders’s thighs, piercing him in several more places.

The smell and taste of blood coupled with the moist, warm throat surrounding his cock was becoming too much for Hawke. He started to thrust faster, feeling his climax approach.

Anders choked, not having expected Hawke’s suddenly increased pace. He started to struggle, unable to breathe. Hawke didn’t care.

He thrust himself into Ander’s throat as deep as he could just as he felt his balls clench and waves of hot pleasure wash over him. Metal claws gouged Anders’s thighs and knees harshly; Hawke turned his head back and forth, rubbing the blood all over his face. He let out a mad sort of giggle as he ejaculated heavily, enjoying the pulsations along the length of his cock and the convulsions in
Anders’s throat.

“Swallow it,” Hawke moaned. “Fucking swallow it all. Yeah....”

He kept thrusting, shooting several more thick wads of semen. The pleasure washing through him made his arms tremble as he supported his weight. His eyes were closed, bloody mouth hanging open as he rode the waves of rapture, hips still thrusting beyond his conscious control.

Eventually the ecstasy began to subside and his frantic fucking slowed.

“Suck it clean,” Hawke breathed, barely able to keep himself from falling onto Anders. He dipped himself deep into the mage’s mouth a few more times, relishing the heightened sensitivity in his spent cock as Anders followed his command.

“Nnnngh... such a good little whore you are, Anders. So tight and hot, and so obedient.”

At last he pulled himself all the way out and rolled to one side, sprawling in the sand in exhaustion. He was breathing heavily, eyes still closed, face still covered in Anders’s blood.

For his part, Anders was trembling, having been unable to breathe for a time while Hawke was emptying himself into him. His scratched,bloody erection was beginning to subside now that Hawke was no longer actively using him.

Presently he felt goosebumps rise along his arms and rubbed them, slightly chilled in the lengthening shadows of the nearby bluff.

Hawke drifted for a time in post-orgasmic bliss, not really thinking about anything but savouring and reliving his intense climax. Anders made no sound, and soon regained his breath.

Sometime later, his uninjured hand found Hawke’s, and their fingers intertwined, flesh and metal.

At that moment Hawke’s eyes opened, and all at once his capacity for rational thought came rushing back.

He realized where he was, what he’d just done, and to whom. A deep and unsettling hyper-awareness of his surroundings crept up on him.

He could feel every clump of bloody sand beneath his naked body. The stench of thoroughly ripped apart human bodies invaded his nostrils. Seabirds screamed high above him, piercing his ears with their mocking calls.

The sun had disappeared behind the bluff, and the salty breeze from the ocean that had been so soothing and freeing not long ago now felt cold and accusatory.

Mental torment welled up around him in such an inescapable maelstrom that for nearly a minute Hawke could barely breathe.

He’d done it again.

Dozing himself, but perhaps sensing what Hawke was thinking, Anders squeezed his hand in a silent gesture of reassurance and solidarity. It only made Hawke feel worse. There was no real contact between them – he only felt the slight shift of pressure on his gauntlet.

He covered his eyes with his other hand, fighting back sobs.

Hawke squinted beneath his gauntlet, trying furiously to suppress tears. He would not cry in front of Anders. He would not, could not ask for nor accept comfort from the man he had so hideously mistreated.

The mage’s sympathy was touching in a heartbreaking way, but somewhere inside him it also repelled Hawke that Anders could even look at him with anything other than hatred after what he’d done.

“Michael... talk to me. Please.”

Hawke breathed deeply, trying to calm himself down, trying to regain control.

It wasn’t working. He felt a sob welling up in his chest, but he fought it down with every ounce of willpower he could muster.

“Michael!”

“What?” Hawke burst out. His head was near Anders’s knees; he couldn’t see his face. It felt like his lover’s voice was coming to him on the breeze from the ocean, with the cries of the birds from the sky, with the uncomfortable grind of sand from the earth.

“Don’t be upset,” Anders whispered. “I told you I-”

“You what?” Hawke snarled. “You deserved it? You’re wrong, Anders. This is fucked up and wrong and we both know it. No matter what you’ve done, no matter what you are, you don’t deserve to be raped and beaten and mutilated, let alone by someone who’s supposed to cherish you and love you and protect you.”

He choked on a stifled sob. “You’re not the one that needs to be... needs to be put down like a rabid animal.”

He coughed, barely holding it together. Anders was silent for a few moments.

“Neither are you,” he said, so quietly that Hawke barely heard him.

Hawke squeezed his eyes shut, forcing tears of bitter shame from his eyelids that trailed down his face to join the blood in the sand.

“This isn’t right,” he muttered. “This is so, so far from right.”

“Then what is?” Anders asked.

“I don’t know, but it isn’t this!” Hawke exclaimed. He took a deep breath and held it, searching for the words he needed. It didn’t take him long to find them.

“You need to leave, Anders,” he said in a stronger, surer voice. “You need to get away from me as soon as you can. As far as you can get, as fast as you can go. Like, right fucking now.”

“What?” Anders sounded genuinely shocked. “No!”

“Anders,” Hawke gasped, and he finally sobbed, no longer able to contain his emotions. “There’s something wrong with me, can’t you see that? When I get like that, it’s like I lose my fucking mind! I have no control over myself at all! I might kill you and I wouldn’t even care!”

Anders didn’t reply. The same outcome had likely already occurred to him. It was frighteningly likely.
“Until... until afterwards, when I realized what I’d done,” Hawke cried. “And then I’d probably kill myself, because you’re the last person in the whole world that I love, Anders. You’re all I have left. If you died because of me, I’d have nothing. I’d be done.”

He took several shuddering breaths, struggling to regain control of his voice.

“Please, don’t let that happen,” he begged. “Save both of us and run, now. Run away while I know who I am. Go somewhere I won’t ever be able to find you. I could find a way to live without you, if... if I just knew that you were safe. From me.”

Anders shook his head against the sand. His voice was implacable. “I can’t do that, Michael.”

“You must!” Hawke yelled, his sudden vehemence startling them both. “You cannot stay with me. I command you to leave!”

“I disobey you,” Anders said calmly.

Hawke roared his frustration and rolled away. Their linked hands separated.

Hawke struggled to his feet and wandered a short distance away, around the bluff to where the sun still shone.

He sat down heavily with his legs dangling over the cliff and stared out at the brilliant setting sun for a while. He felt utterly drained, empty of everything vital.

After a little while, there were no thoughts left in his head except for wordless regard of the beautiful natural vista in front of him.

It was a blessed relief. Things were so much simpler this way, when there was only the barest minimum of mind.

Time passed. The sun drifted further downwards, staining the cloudy horizon pink, purple, and red. The higher parts of the sky were already darkening to the blue-black of night. A few scattered stars were becoming visible.

Hawke leaned against the bluff and shielded his eyes from the glory with his gauntlet.

Presently he became aware that Anders was sitting next to him.

“I’m sorry I cut you,” Hawke muttered, avoiding his eyes, face reddening with shame at the inadequacy of the comment.

“Look,” Anders said, holding up his hand, freshly uninjured and merely stained with dry blood. “Healed. I have a bit of a knack for healing, you know.”

“Anders, I’m not kidding,” Hawke said wearily. “You have to go. If you won’t, I will. This cannot continue. I will not kill you and get off on it.”

His eyes drifted closed and he shook his head, as if the motion would make it so.

“Michael,” Anders said. “Your... bloodlust. It hasn’t always been this intense, has it?”

Hawke’s eyes opened. His heart skipped a beat as his mind seemed to pass briefly over a landscape of chilling possibility.

“No,” he said.
“What changed? And when?”

Hawke thought about it. Fighting and violence had always excited him. He’d always felt a little thrill when he killed, when his sword parted flesh, or when he was splattered with the blood of his victims.

Until last night, however, his enjoyment of violence had never been overtly sexual. He had never felt any desire to fuck people as he killed them, nor to kill people as he fucked them. He’d sometimes been aroused in combat, but he’d always attributed that to excitement and adrenaline, not to some kind of... fetish.

In bed, he’d always enjoyed being dominant and rough with the men he’d been intimate with in the past – but never to this degree. Never to the point of physically hurting them and deriving pleasure from shedding their blood.

What had happened to him?

“I’ve always liked killing, and violence,” Hawke said, remembering that Anders was still waiting for answer. “And... also rough sex. But never at the same time. Last night, when you came to the mansion – that was the first time I ever....”

“Mixed the two,” Anders said softly.

“Yes.”

Anders looked thoughtful. His jaw worked back and forth silently, gazing at the sunset. Hawke eyed him askance.

“What are you thinking?”

Anders looked back at him and didn’t immediately answer. Hawke thought he saw a flicker of Fade blue in his eyes, but it might have been an optical phenomenon, a reflection of the ocean or sky.

“Blood magic,” Anders said.

Hawke’s mouth opened, then closed. He turned the idea over in his mind.

“You think-” Was there such a magic that could do... this? What even was this? Hawke wondered how to phrase it.

“You think somebody... did something to me?”

Anders was frowning, eyes distant and pensive.

“I’m certainly wondering if it’s possible,” he said. “Fell Orden. His magic seemed to trigger this, this mood in you – but it couldn’t have been him that started it. You only fought him today, and last night had already happened.”

“Quentin,” Hawke spat, the familiar rush of hatred bursting in his chest.

“Maybe,” said Anders. “He certainly seems the most likely culprit, if it was a spell of some sort, since your – shall we say, your altered behaviour first manifested soon after we encountered him. Who else have we fought who’s used blood magic on you?”

Hawke cast his mind back. It felt like he’d fought dozens of blood mages since his arrival in Kirkwall; the city was infested with them. There had even been one in Lothering once, long ago.
Surely, though, if some magic had been used on him that long ago to make him this way, it would have manifested before now.

“Gascard DuPuis,” he said after considering. “Tarohne... Idunna... Decimus. Several others, but none that I left alive long enough for them to talk to me.”

“Okay,” Anders said. “Here’s what I want you to do. Think back, think hard, about the battles you had with Quentin, Gascard, Tarohne, and Decimus. Idunna is less important – I was there and I saw what she did to you, and I don’t think she had the time to do anything more complicated than take control of your body. But just in case, think about her too. Write down everything you can remember about those battles – the magic they used, how it affected you, what it felt like, how you or I or whoever else was with you countered it. Then give that information to me.”

Hawke looked at him, hardly daring to hope that these new, depraved depths of bloodlust he’d discovered in himself were the result of some external factor, and not a latent insanity of his own that his mother’s death had dislodged and made manifest.

“Meanwhile, I’m going to do some research,” Anders said. “See if something like this is even possible, and if so, why someone might want to do it to you. And I’m going to write to some friends of mine – competent, trustworthy people who have experience fighting blood magic. Much more than I do.”

“I can think of a reason someone might want to do it to me,” Hawke said darkly.

“What?”

Hawke looked away. “To punish you,” he said.

Anders was silent.

“Or, you know, to make me into a ruined, empty shell, because whoever I’ve fallen in love with will die having sex with me,” Hawke went on, with sarcastic blitheness. “I do have rather a lot of enemies. I’m sure any number of them would be delighted to destroy me without actually killing me.”

Anders had cracked a melancholy smile at the word love, but Hawke didn’t notice, still looking elsewhere.

He reached out and wrapped his hand around Hawke’s gauntlet. Carefully, he pulled it off and set it aside.

He gestured for his other arm, and Hawke obliged. The other gauntlet was removed.

Both of them now sat naked in the sand, connected by their hands.

“We’ll fix this, Michael,” Anders said with quiet, calm reassurance. There was something else in his voice, too – a hint of resonance, of distant power.

Hawke looked at him, and this time there was no doubt – he saw flickers of blue in Anders’s eyes, curling just under his skin, waiting to be called on.

“If this – change – is something that has been done to you,” Anders said, “then that is an injustice I will not tolerate.”

His voice reverberated on some strange internal plane. Hawke felt the mage’s words in his chest.
“Nor will I allow my man, the man I love, to lose himself in his own bloodlust,” Anders said, his voice snapping back to normal, utterly human.

Hawke shook his head and looked down at their joined hands, wanting to believe him but not quite able to at the moment.

“I am yours, Michael Hawke,” Anders said. “But you are also mine.”
Restless

Chapter Summary

A liminal space (redux).

Hawke finished a paragraph and set down his quill with a long, exhausted sigh.

He’d covered several pages with what he remembered about the battles he’d fought with the blood mages Tarohne and Gascard DuPuis. He wasn’t done yet, and he hadn’t even started on Decimus, let alone Quentin.

His single candle was sputtering, burned down to a stub and casting uneven shadows over the scribbled notes that littered his writing desk. He stared down at the pages, supporting his forehead with hands that were stained with ink and, in a few places (where he’d clenched his fists in frustration hard enough to injure himself with his fingernails), his own blood.

One problem was that the more he wrote, the more he remembered – some of it with such vivid, haunting clarity that he felt sure it must be important somehow. Why else would the sensations of blood mages’ spells, as excruciating and debilitating as they were, be so ingrained into the memories of his muscles and veins – if not because they were altering his body in some alien, long-lasting way? Some way that his very flesh still cried out against, longing to be reversed?

Or did his flawless recollection arise from the fact that he was already familiar with a form of blood magic – the strength he drew from pain, using his own infinitesimal spark of magical power? Hawke knew that his particular talents, accentuating his natural bloodlust as they did, were far from commonplace. There was a word for people like him, and it was reaver.

In any case, he had no way to know what was important and what wasn’t, so he was writing down everything.

The other problem, of course, was that reliving the battles made him itch to go out and look for blood mages – or anyone, really – just to fight them, to feel the glorious thrill of combat, to get a taste of the killing fervour that he had lately found himself yearning for more than ever. The bloodthirst, and the rage that always came with it, had made it difficult for him to concentrate – to say the least.

Hawke had been forcing himself to focus on his memories for many hours at this point. Although he enjoyed killing people too much to ever think of giving it up, he had no desire to murder the man he loved in a fit of bloodlust. If reliving all of this was what it took to help Anders solve this problem, then relive it all he would, and gladly.

“Messere?”

Hawke looked up, blinking some of the bleariness out of his eyes.

Bodahn stood nearby, holding a lantern and regarding him with a worried expression. The meager light of Hawke’s almost-gone candle barely illuminated his dwarven manservant’s nightclothes; his face and lantern hovered in the gloom like a spirit. Hawke hadn’t even heard him approach.

“Is... everything alright?” Bodahn asked.
“Bodahn,” Hawke said hoarsely. He cleared his throat and rubbed his face, pushing his hands back through his thick, unkempt hair. “Unnh... what time is it?”

“Well after third bell, messere. I really think you ought to get some rest. What are you working on that is so urgent you must stay up this late?”

For a moment Hawke was tempted to tell Bodahn to mind his own business and go back to bed, and let the master of the house do as he pleased. He was by nature a very private man, and even though he’d hired Bodahn and his adopted son Sandal years ago, he’d never really spoken to either of them on a personal level. They weren’t really friends.

Leandra had been much closer to Bodahn and Sandal than he was. For the first time since her death, it occurred to Hawke to wonder how the dwarves were coping with the loss of the lady they had served since the Deep Roads expedition.

To his credit, Bodahn had always respected Hawke’s desire for privacy. He’d barely blinked at Anders’s obvious bruises the night after Leandra’s murder, and he hadn’t so much as hinted that he’d heard any unusual noises from Hawke’s bedroom. If he was grieving for his lady (and he probably was), he was doing so in private, away from Hawke’s eyes and ears.

The question he’d just asked might well have been the closest he’d ever come to prying into Hawke’s business. Yet it was clear from his expression and tone that he was speaking out of concern, not nosiness.

And yet... how could Hawke possibly explain what he was trying to do? He almost never spoke about his own feelings to anyone – except occasionally Anders, and even then only with great difficulty and awkwardness. This... problem of his, if such a simple word could even be applied to whatever in the world was going on, was of an entirely different magnitude.

“It’s....” Hawke stopped rubbing his head and started on to his eyes as he searched for the proper words. “A long and complicated story. Don’t worry, Bodahn. If you’re really curious, I’ll... I’ll tell you about it some other time.”

Maybe he even meant that.

“Of course, messere,” Bodahn said peaceably. “Will you be turning in soon?”

Would he? There was more Hawke needed to write down – a lot more. So many things had come to mind so quickly that Hawke had alternated between describing his fight with Tarohn and his fight with Gascard, regurgitating information as it came to him with no real order behind it. There were some things he hadn’t yet recorded, and he would probably have to rewrite it all afterwards to make it legible and coherent. And there were at least two more blood mages about whom he hadn’t written anything at all yet.

Maybe it was time to take a break. As urgent as this was, he didn’t have to get every word of it down tonight. His scribbling was as likely to produce incoherent nonsense as useful information when he was this tired.

Besides, it was too late (too early?) to be trekking across the city to take what he did have to Anders. He might as well go to bed and finish this tomorrow.

“Yes,” Hawke said eventually. “Soon.”

Bodahn nodded. “Would you like me to bring you anything? Tea, water, wine?”
“Hmm...” Hawke mused. “A glass of wine would be nice. I’ll take it in my room. Something red, and dark. Warmed before the fire first, if you please.”

Bodahn took the odd request in stride. “I will see to it, messere.”

His eyes went to the nearly spent candle. “Shall I leave the light? I can find my way back.”

“No, that’s fine.”

Bodahn bowed and departed. The glow of his lantern receded with him, and the gloom closed in around him once more.

Once again, Hawke rested his forehead in his hands and stared down at his mess of notes.

Though the pressure on him had sometimes become unbearable, first in Lothering and then in Kirkwall, Leandra’s solid, comforting presence in his life had never wavered, never vanished from his side or his mind. Since he’d been a child, she had always been the one to encourage him when he’d doubted, helped him up when he fell, and comforted him when he despair.

Once it would have been her tirelessly searching the darkness with a lantern, his darkness, until she’d found him and put him to bed. He felt aimless and lost without her.

Later, as he’d grown older, Hawke had taken on more and more responsibility for protecting and caring for his family. He’d enjoyed the role, because he’d felt needed and loved and important. Malcolm Hawke had been a capable man, but his apostasy meant there were always certain places he couldn’t go, things he couldn’t get, or tasks he couldn’t complete. At those times, his elder son would step in, for the sake of his family.

His younger siblings, too, had depended on him. Carver, though he could be snide and resentful at times, was his friend as well as his brother. Hawke still fondly reminisced about sparring with him in the fields outside Lothering, teaching him swordplay and practicing his own skills. He had never been prouder than the first time he had fought his brother and held nothing back, and Carver had disarmed him anyway.

And Bethany – she had needed to be kept hidden from templars as much as Malcolm did, but her youth and lack of experience had made her much more vulnerable. Hawke had found almost as much enjoyment in whisking her away from inquisitive templars as he did in beating up village boys who though they were good enough for her. Bethany frequently objected to his acts of “protection,” which rarely ended without some kind of violence on his part. Yet a wry sense of humour had always lurked just beneath her veneer of indignation.

Though inexperienced, Bethany had come fully into her powers at a young age, and Malcolm’s expert tutelage had ensured that she really was entirely capable of defending herself. Still, she had allowed her older brother to scare away her suitors – the ones he knew about, anyway – because she knew he enjoyed doing it.

Bethany was gone now, dead of the taint in the Deep Roads. Carver, his exuberant youth snuffed out far too young, had never made it out of Ferelden. Neither had Malcolm.

And now at last, Leandra had joined them – leaving her eldest son behind in this increasingly grey, bleak world. He was alone.

He knew it was childish to still feel such dependence on his mother at his age, but Leandra would have never allowed him to shut her out of his life. When he thought about it, Hawke could see much of his own fire in her.
He supposed he wasn’t really *utterly* alone. He had his dog, after all. Reaver had been a solid presence at his side since childhood, and would live for many years yet.

Varric was a good friend, and Isabela had his back. Aveline was dependable, even if she sometimes (most of the time, really) thought he was a terrible person... and it wasn’t like she was wrong.

He felt reasonably confident that Merrill and Fenris would back him up if he needed them, even though they both sometimes annoyed him – Merrill with her blithe unconcern about spirits and blood magic and Fenris with his zealous hatred of all mages. The two of them really had more in common than they thought.

And maybe his family wasn’t *completely* gone. He might be the last remaining Hawke, but he had that fire inside of him still – Leandra’s fire. He had his father’s tenacity, Carver’s strength, and Bethany’s... well, the memory of her love and the joy she took in living.

And then there was Anders.

Anders, whom he loved and who loved him, and whom he’d turned upon in his anguish and rage.

Hawke shoved himself to his feet, eyes stinging with exhaustion and his own fragile emotions, as his struggling, dying light source finally went out. He was surprised that it had lasted this long. There was so much more he needed to write down, but he would write no more tonight.

Looking forward to his glass of wine and sleep, Hawke made his way to his bedroom in complete darkness. Bodahn wasn’t the only one who could find his way without any illumination, least for a time.

∞

It was mid-afternoon several days later. Anders sat alone in his clinic, for once without any patients to tend to.

His eyes scanned the missive he’d received, rereading it over and over. His anger, buried these last few days under the sudden intense weight of Hawke’s lust and battle fervour, had reawakened stronger than ever. His shame brought on by Hawke’s accusations had evaporated in the heat of his righteous fury.

Justice was partly to blame for his agitation, but Anders was certain that he himself, even without the spirit’s influence, would never have tolerated this. Not what he was reading, not if it was true. *Nobody*, no sane, rational, thinking being – human or otherwise – would ever stand for this if they had a soul, if they were possessed of even the tiniest shred of empathy.

Surely *this*, of all things, would convince Hawke that his cause was just.

Anders had made his way through the city and was halfway across Hightown, heading for Hawke’s estate, when the thought crossed his racing mind that this was not the best time to ask his lover for help tracking down a lunatic templar.

His strong, confident stride paused.

Hawke had quite a bit on his mind right now. His mother’s death and the possibility of his own corruption at the hands of an as-yet-unknown blood mage, among other things. His bloodthirst. Escalating tensions between the qunari and Chantry. His conflicting desires to simultaneously keep Anders from harm and punish him in a violent, sexual manner that, if the mage was honest with himself, he found strangely, intensely exciting.
Anders shook off his doubts and kept walking. He told himself that it would do Hawke good to think about something else for a while besides all of that. Maybe he was being selfish, but he really did need help, and what better opportunity than this would he get to convince his lover that the templars were out of control?

And this task would likely involve killing at least a few people, so it would sate Hawke’s bloodlust for a little while.

What Anders wouldn’t admit even to himself was the strong possibility that such combat would only inflame Hawke’s desires beyond his conscious control once again, and then he would turn his violent appetites upon Anders just like he had at the coast a few days ago.

Even as he pretended not to have had the idea, the thought of it sent a thrill of anticipation along his spine, and his cock stirred beneath his robes.

∞

Bodahn let him in with his usual cheerful greeting and informed Anders that the master of the house could be found in one of the empty bedrooms upstairs. Anders followed the dwarf’s directions, stopping to pat Reaver along the way – to stay in the dog’s good graces if for no other reason. Wistfully, he thought of Ser Pounce-a-lot.

Anders found Hawke stripped to his smallclothes and practicing his swordplay, swinging and maneuvering his massive greatsword in a lethal whirlwind around him. He’d clearly been at it for a while, as evidenced by the sheen of sweat that glimmered on his muscular form.

Anders thought it would be better not to interrupt – for his own safety, for Hawke’s concentration, and for the sheer pleasure of watching the capable warrior’s deadly grace.

In combat, Hawke’s movements rarely seemed so calculated as these. He tended more towards artless savagery than this kind of finesse when fighting living (or at least animate) opponents. Yet even in his battle frenzy, Hawke was far from reckless, for in those situations he relied on the instincts he honed so carefully in quiet, focused environments like this one.

Too soon for Anders’s appreciative eye, Hawke’s momentum carried him around and he spotted the mage standing at the door. He slowed, allowing the flat of the heavy blade to come to a rest on his shoulder.

“Anders,” Hawke said. Breathing hard, he wiped his forehead and started towards the doorway.

“Michael. That was... a pleasure to watch,” Anders commented.

“Actually doing it feels even better.”

Hawke stopped in front of him, bent down to pick up his sword’s sheath, and carefully slid the blade home. Then he leaned it against the wall. Once both his hands were free, Hawke grabbed Anders by his head and kissed him fiercely.

Anders responded unconsciously, his own hands moving around Hawke’s sweat-slick back to caress his tense shoulders. Hawke’s kiss was fiery and his probing tongue was aggressive, but controlled. Despite himself, Anders felt a twinge of disappointment when Hawke pulled away to look into his eyes.

“I...” Anders had to take a moment to catch his breath. He cleared his throat. “Mmm. I need to talk to you.”
“Have you learned something?” Hawke asked as he shouldered his way past Anders and headed for his bedroom.

Anders was momentarily confused, but then he realized what Hawke was talking about. He quickly suppressed a flash of shame at his lack of anything useful to share.

“Unfortunately not. I’ve sent my letters, but they’re going to Ferelden and Nevarra – no way to estimate when I’ll get a response. I’ve started some research of my own... made a few discreet enquiries, tapped some old resources... but nothing yet. I’ll keep working, though, and I promise I’ll let you know immediately if I discover anything.”

Anders followed Hawke to his bedroom and leaned against the doorframe as the sweaty warrior picked up a linen towel and started to dry himself with it. Anders watched, enthralled.

“Well, what then?” Hawke asked after a moment, and Anders forced himself to remember why he was here. The righteous rage he’d been holding onto when he’d arrived had all but evaporated.

“I’ve received word from some of my contacts in the mage underground. There’s a templar named Ser Alrik who’s been abusing the Rite of Tranquility. Using it to silence any mage who disagrees with the templars, publicly or otherwise.”

His anger returned easily, and his voice grew heated. “I’ve been watching the Gallows, and there are more new Tranquil every day. Good mages, people who I know for a fact passed their Harrowing.”

He scowled as he remembered his own narrow escape from the wicked templar.

“Ser Alrik doesn’t care about protecting mages or anyone else,” he went on. “He’s worse than Meredith – however misguided she may be, she at least believes she’s helping people. Alrik’s a sadist. I’ve had a run-in with him myself. The bastard enjoys causing pain. He makes mages Tranquil so they’ll be compliant, and then he....”

His voice trailed off as Hawke turned to look at him, dropping his towel. For a brief moment, Anders forgot what he was saying. His mouth opened, and then closed.

“So?” Hawke prompted before Anders could pick up the thread of his thought. “He sounds like a lunatic. Yes, he should probably be killed. But one criminal doesn’t condemn the entire order.” He went to his wardrobe.

“No,” Anders agreed. “That’s not what I’m saying. Although... never mind. My contact says that Alrik has a plan to make Tranquil every mage, in every Circle. All the mages – from the children to the Grand Enchanter. He calls in the ‘Tranquil Solution.’”

As he was talking, Hawke pushed down and stepped out of his sweat-damp shorts and recovered a fresh pair from his pile of folded clothes. Anders’s eyes were immediately drawn to Hawke’s butt, but he kept his voice steady. The man’s sheer irresistibility could be aggravating at times like this.

Hawke turned around, grimacing his disgust. “That’s insane,” he argued as he put on the clean smalls. “The Grand Cleric would never allow that, let alone the Divine. Not even Meredith would authorize such a plan.”

“That may well be,” Anders said. “But I have it on good authority that Ser Alrik intends to carry it out, with or without the Divine’s permission. He’s already begun. Like I said, he’s making mages Tranquil who don’t deserve it. None of them ever deserve it, but this man is flagrantly breaking Chantry law. Hawke, he’s raping people.”
Hawke slipped on some trousers, and Anders watched him fasten the laces. He found himself hoping that Hawke wouldn’t put a shirt on. His lust had been on a slow burn for several minutes now, stewing beneath his rage at the templar’s monstrous crimes. Damn it, but why did Hawke have to be so... so unbearably sexy?

“So this Ser Alrik’s planning on Tranquilizing the entire Circle of Kirkwall,” Hawke said, folding his arms. He made no move to reach for a shirt, and Anders inwardly rejoiced. He tried not to be too obvious about where his eyes were wandering.


Hawke didn’t quite roll his eyes, but he looked like he wanted to. “Right. And you have all this on ‘good authority,’”

Anders frowned at the implied skepticism in Hawke’s voice, but he nodded. “My information is valid. I wouldn’t have come to you with this if I wasn’t absolutely sure.”

“As long as you are sure. I’m still not convinced this is as big of a threat as you say. Sure, Alrik might find a few people insane and evil enough to help him try to do it. But never the Grand Cleric, never the Knight-Commander – despite what you may think of her – and never the Divine, or anyone, really, who has the resources to see it actually done. Andraste’s flaming tits, man, other templars would kill him themselves before he got that far.”

“You’re not listening to me,” Anders said, becoming annoyed with Hawke despite his attraction to him. “He’s gone too far already. He’s making innocent mages Tranquil and raping and killing them.”

But Hawke wasn’t done.

“But you, of course – you don’t trust the templars not to put their armour on front-to-back, let alone deal with their own reprobates,” he continued. “You and Justice must fix everything yourselves. And so you’re going to go after Alrik to make sure he can’t enact his plan... and you want my help doing it. Is that about right?”

Anders could feel his face burning, with embarrassment as well as anger. Hawke read him so easily. He wondered if his lover was aware of the effect he had on him – making him near-irrational with lust just from watching him swing his sword around in his smallclothes, a moment of nudity, and now just standing there with his arms folded across his bare chest.

Very probably, the answer was yes. Hawke knew exactly what he was doing.

Briefly, an utterly insane idea crossed Anders’s mind: attack Hawke, provoke him, and get him worked up and bloodlusty and unable to stop himself from taking Anders, roughly, right then and there. He dismissed the notion almost as soon as it occurred to him, but the fantasy was an alluring one.

It seemed like the more dangerous Hawke became, the more attracted to him Anders was. What was wrong with him? Why did he desire to be punished so strongly?

It was specifically Hawke, really, Anders thought. Pain had always turned him on a little bit – but never this much. He’d never become so aroused just from the thought of Hawke beating him as he fucked him as he had been lately.

Of course, the fact that it had actually happened a few times at this point made it rather easy to imagine it happening again.
Hawke was rude, arrogant, and snarky when he could be convinced to be social at all. He tended to favour templars over mages and made no secret of it. The fact that he was gorgeous and apparently knew it didn’t really help, either, although at least he didn’t flaunt it.

Despite all of that, Anders had been falling steadily in love with him almost from the moment they met. If an unlikelier match existed, he had a hard time imagining it. He was Hawke’s man... and Hawke was his.

And what Hawke wanted – what he’d expressed in his despair on the sandy cliffs – was to be cured of the strange affliction that had intensified his bloodlust into murderous carnal desire. However much Anders desired and enjoyed Hawke’s brutal treatment, Hawke wanted to tone it down. Anders had to respect that, and do everything in his power to make it happen.

After all, there was nothing to stop Hawke from slapping and cutting him during sex entirely of his own volition, after he was cured. He’d do it if Anders asked him to, probably. And in the meantime....

One of Hawke’s eyebrows was beginning to creep upward as he continued to stare at him, and Anders realized that he hadn’t answered the man’s question.

“Yes,” he said, having to repeat the word when his voice caught in his throat. “Yes, I would like your help... if you’re up for a minor adventure.”

“Always.”

“I know a secret passage into the Gallows,” Anders said. “All I really need to find is evidence of what Ser Alrik’s planning, something that I can show to the Grand Cleric. We might not even have to confront him. If we do, you know what I’ll want your help doing. But... the tunnels I know of are frequently used by lyrium smugglers. We may very well run into some of them along the way. So in all probability, whether or not we find Alrik, there will be fighting.”

Hawke’s eyes lit up, and Anders stifled his smile.

“Alright then,” Hawke said. “Yes, I’ll help you.”

“Are you sure?” Anders said, not really expecting Hawke to refuse at this point. “I know you have a lot on your mind right now.”

“I need a break from thinking about my... my problem,” Hawke said. “A good fight always clears my head. But I...”

He glanced down at the floor, suddenly looking unsure. Anders straightened a little, watching Hawke closely.

“I want you to help me stay me,” Hawke said quietly, still not making eye contact. “If I can fight without losing control, then... then that’s progress. I don’t want to turn into a raving, blood-crazed sexual predator every time some moron attacks me in the street – and Maker knows that happens often enough. Can I count on your help? Can I count on you to control yourself? Because I can’t do it without you, Anders. I need you. If you’re not holding my leash, nobody is.”

Anders knew exactly what Hawke was asking, and he felt curiously little shame as the lie passed his lips. “Yes, Michael. Of course, I’ll do everything I can. I’m here for you.”

That last bit wasn’t a lie, at least. He just didn’t add that he was there for himself just as much.
Hawke suddenly snorted and started laughing.

“What?” Anders asked, baffled.

“The Tranquil Solution. All of Thedas, right?” Hawke chuckled. “Even the Tevinter Imperium? That would go over well.” He laughed again, heartily.

Anders watched him, not really seeing the humour, but glad just to see Michael Hawke smiling in a non-threatening, non-mocking, non-blood-crazed way. The smile and the mirth lit up his whole face, made him into an almost entirely different person.

For a moment, just for a moment, Anders was cognizant of the fact that what he was indirectly planning was, in a few critical ways, just as bad as whatever had been done to Hawke in the first place.

The moment passed.
Judgement

Chapter Summary

Mistakes are made.

“Varric!”

For the second time that week, Hawke’s sudden appearance in the Hanged Man and shouted demand for the dwarf made him jump and spill his drink on himself.

Varric cursed fluently as he drew a handkerchief and patted down his chest hair. Why couldn’t Hawke be a normal human who spoke in a normal tone of voice and for Andraste’s sake, took a week off after his mother was murdered by a blood mage?

There he stood, just as scowly and intimidating as ever, decked out in his heavy plate and greatsword, ready to go adventuring. Didn’t he ever get tired of wandering around in dank caves and sewers killing people and random monsters and looting their stuff?

No, Varric answered himself. Of course he didn’t. He wouldn’t be Hawke otherwise.

And again, Anders was with him. Not distracted and distant this time, though – in fact, he looked alert and positively eager. There were restorative potions clipped to his belt, ready to use. His staff crystal was freshly shined. And he bore no visible bruises or chew marks.

Interesting.

“Hawke,” Varric said calmly, holding onto his dignity with aplomb even as his chest hair was still somewhat damp with ale. “You need me again?”

“Yes. You have other plans?”

Varric glanced left and right, trying to think of a plausible affirmative answer. Technically he was supposed to be in a Guild meeting right now, but he hadn’t gone to one of those in four years and Hawke knew that.

He had intended to check up on Merrill rather soon, followed up by a few of his other contacts. But Hawke would just tell him to do that later.

He supposed there was no harm in asking what they were doing. It didn’t always involve templars, blood magic, or Hawke getting ragey in combat and slicing people into chunks of pulpy matter.

“What’s the situation?” he asked casually, taking a sip of the reduced volume of drink still in his tankard.

“Going after a frothing lunatic fringe templar who wants to use the Rite of Tranquility on every single mage,” Hawke said in a tone that a normal person might use to discuss weeding their garden. “Looking for evidence, carving him up if we meet him. The usual.”

Anders looked a little annoyed by Hawke’s summary of their intent, but he added nothing else.
Varric suppressed a sigh. So much for *that* not being on the table.

He eyed Hawke, then glanced suggestively at Anders. “And you two are quite sure you wouldn’t like to... go it alone?” he asked, keeping his voice carefully neutral.

Hawke snorted, while Anders looked a little discomfited.

“No,” said the mage. “We’re likely to meet lyrium smugglers in the tunnels. Dwarves among others. You and Bianca would be a great help.”

Naturally. Well, there *was* good coin in it for him, getting rid of lyrium smugglers.

Varric looked hard at Anders. He decided to throw tact and subtlety to the winds.

“And afterwards,” he drawled, “once Hawke’s been cutting up smugglers and probably templars and whatnot and has worked himself into a bloodthirsty, horny fugue, are you two going to want to have creepy blood sex right there? And I’ll have to leave right as it’s getting really awkward, *again*? Because I’ll be straight with you, Blondie, I would prefer not to.”

Anders looked increasingly shocked as Varric went on, and on his emphatic “*again*?” the mage actually winced, having the grace to look slightly ashamed of himself. Varric noted that he didn’t seem to want to say no, apparently opting for embarrassed silence.

Hawke, though, seemed to be in barely-controlled danger of cracking a genuine smile – and that put Varric at ease more than anything else might have.

Really, Anders did look rather... fine. Evidently Hawke had neither killed him nor mutilated him beyond recognition after he’d left them on the cliffs, and ditto for the intervening days.

At least (Varric’s vivid, overactive imagination whispered to him) not beyond the scope of healing magic, and not anywhere visible.

With effort, he silenced his internal voice.

“Fine!” the dwarf said, throwing up his arms as both Hawke and Anders continued to pointedly not answer his question. He stood up and made sure Bianca was strapped securely to his back.

“Lead the way, Fearless Leader and his Possessed Boytoy. Let’s go before I change my mind.”

“I am *not* a-” Anders began vehemently.

“Shut up,” Hawke said, and Anders fell silent.

Varric laughed merrily until well outside the tavern, only desisting when Anders threatened to hit him with his staff. He still couldn’t prevent a slight giggle every now and then.

∞

In Darktown, Anders indicated with a gesture where they were headed. They stopped at a patch of dirty flooring indistinguishable from much of the rest of Darktown. The reek of chokedamp was perhaps a little stronger here, but there was nothing to indicate that this location was unusual in any way.

Except (Varric noted with a dry lack of surprise) the faded, almost invisible rune scratched into a nearby wall.
Anders knelt down and brushed away some dust and mold. A metal ring became visible; Anders tugged on it, revealing the outline of a trapdoor.

“Don’t tell anyone about this entrance to the Gallows,” he said as he opened it. “It’s saved the lives of—”

“Oh, it’s far too late for that, Blondie,” Varric said, deciding it was best to let him know.

Anders looked at him. “What are you talking about?”

“This particular entrance,” Varric replied. “I’ve told—”

He paused, rubbing his chin as he searched his memory. “At least six people about it since you’ve come to Kirkwall.”

“What?!” Anders was baffled. “You can’t be serious.”

“You don’t think you’re the only one who knows about the labyrinths in the walls?” Varric said. “The Merchant’s Guild has known about this route for decades. The templars, probably longer—they’re a prime demographic for the smugglers, after all.”

He paused, then added thoughtfully: “Odd that it’s apparently never occurred to them to monitor it for rebel mage activity.”

Anders raised his eyebrow and nodded. “That’s true,” he said. “I... suppose I should have realized. I’ve come across lyrium smugglers in here before, but they leave me alone if I stay out of sight and out of their way. The tunnels have been here for a long time... others are bound to have found them over the years.”

“Lyrium smuggling is still a crime,” Hawke said darkly. “Templars get exactly as much as they need from the Chantry, no less. Anything more than that is just for the addicts, and they’re no help to anybody. If we see any smugglers, they die.”

He kicked the door the rest of the way open and started to descend.

“Agreed,” said Varric. “The Merchants Guild hates them just as much. A reduction in lyrium smugglers on my direct watch translates to more brownie points for me. Maybe even enough to make them forget about the last few meetings I’ve missed!”

“What about the several hundred meetings you missed before the last few?” Anders asked archly as he followed Hawke down the ladder into the tunnels. “That way,” he added as Hawke apparently expressed ignorance as to which direction they were heading.

“I send people,” Varric said evasively. “Cousins and friends of the family, you know... representatives. People I trust.”

“People you make up, you mean,” Hawke’s voice echoed from below.

“Shhh!”

Varric dropped off the rickety ladder into the dark, musty tunnel, landing on his feet next to Anders. There was barely enough dusty light coming through cracks in the ceiling to see by. Hawke had already prowled off into the gloom, his sword drawn and ready in his hands.

Anders followed him, a sparkle of energy making his staff crystal glow faintly. Varric took up the
rear, habitually checking behind them every few dozen steps.

He was relieved to see that Hawke seemed to be coping relatively well with his mother’s death. He was in a better mood than he had been for several days – a marked improvement over the day they’d fought the raiders at the coast, to be sure. It was always a good sign when he participated in the snide banter rather than glaring or snarling at the rest of them to be quiet.

Varric wondered what Anders was up to. The mage seemed to be a little edgier down here in the dark, his gaze darting left and right, his fist clenched tightly on his staff. There was no sign of Justice emerging to wreak havoc – yet.

“Blondie,” Varric whispered, so as not to attract any undue attention that might be lurking in the shadows. “Can you give me a bit more background on what we’re actually doing here? Lunatic fringe templar and such – intending to make Tranquil all the mages? What?”

Anders proceeded to explain what he knew about Ser Alrik in a hushed voice as they crept through the tunnels. Varric listened carefully, watching Anders when he could.

He noticed that the mage was careful never to let Hawke get out of sight. Sometimes, when the tunnel curved tightly through rock, Anders was practically breathing down Hawke’s neck to keep him in eyeshot. Other times, the only sign of the warrior’s presence was the faint light from Anders’s staff glinting off his armour, with the rest of him lost in the shadows ahead.

∞

Hawke watched the darkness carefully, his eyes wide to catch whatever glimpse he could of the next faint patch of light. As necessary as they were, the lighter spots were the likeliest places for an ambush. Whenever he could, he also glanced back at Anders and Varric. Mostly at Anders.

Hawke was tense, his muscles coiled and ready to leap into combat at the slightest provocation. His kept his breathing carefully under control. He was alert and hyperaware of his surroundings, sensitive to the slightest noise, change in the scent environment, or puff of displaced air.

He was also intimately aware of Anders, particularly whenever the mage was right behind him. He could hear Anders breathing and the sound of his fingers rasping on the carved wood of his staff. He could feel the mage’s eyes slipping down his back, and he couldn’t help wanting to turn around and return the scrutiny.

Unbidden, a vivid recollection of what Anders looked like naked sprang to his mind. Naked, yes, and squirming beneath him as he took what he wanted. Naked, submissive, thoroughly penetrated, and... bleeding.

Hawke clenched his teeth and forced himself to concentrate on his surroundings, trying to regain control of himself, but his body was reacting against his will. His cock was hardening in his armour.

How much fun would it be to pounce on the mage right now, tear off his robes, and-

Again, Hawke wrenched his attention back to the present. His control had been immaculate up until now. He would maintain his own mind; he would not become a maddened animal again.

They came to a sudden right angle in the tunnel’s path, followed shortly thereafter by another heading in the opposite direction. Then came a third and fourth – mirror images of the first two, so that they were once more aligned with their original heading. Between the two middle turns of the box-like shape was an intersection with a cramped, unlit tunnel that headed downwards into dusty shadows, echoing with hints of far-off voices.
The strange and seemingly arbitrary diversion from the path’s direction aroused Hawke’s curiosity.

He recalled what Varric and Anders had been saying earlier about “labyrinths in the walls.” Kirkwall was riddled with such secret passages, quite a few of which Hawke knew about – the one that led into the cellar of his estate, for instance, which he and Bethany had once used to recover their grandparents’ will.

One of the first things Hawke had done upon moving into the mansion was to personally seal that very passage. He had no desire for anyone to gain access to his living space or take him by surprise, accidentally or otherwise. Now he wondered if there were other concealed, subterranean routes into his mansion, ones that he didn’t know about.

This line of thinking reminded Hawke of something else peculiar he’d come across – very rarely, but more than once since he’d arrived in Kirkwall.

“Varric,” he whispered.

“What?”

“You were talking about labyrinths earlier.”

“Yes,” Varric said. “Kirkwall is literally a series of mazes built on top of and inside one other. Utterly insane way to organize a city, if you ask me, but the ancient Tevinters weren’t dwarves.”

“Have you ever heard of the Band of Three?” Hawke asked.

Varric was silent for a moment. Then his voice drifted forward from the near-total darkness behind Hawke.

“Band of Three... hmmm. It rings a bell.”

“It sounds familiar to me too,” Anders said. “Where have I seen that?”

“Do you remember those notes I showed you?” Hawke said quietly, eyes still searching the shadows before them.

The tunnel widened up ahead into a large chamber with what looked like wooden scaffolds and stairways built around its edges. It was bathed in thin, watery light from an unknown source. Hawke’s alertness cracked up a few notches.

“Notes,” Anders mused, still in a barely-audible whisper. “I think so... yes. The Enigma of Kirkwall. Something about-”

“Passages,” Varric interrupted. “Yes, I remember now too. Streets shaped into glyphs... channels carved beneath the streets for the flow of sacrificial blood.”

“What are you thinking, Hawke?” Anders asked, his voice taking on a decidedly different tone. Curious, fascinated, and a little worried.

“Blood magic,” Hawke whispered back, slowing as he neared the illuminated chamber. “Demons contacting mages... even ordinary men in the lowest levels. The Veil is thin here. In this whole city.”

Out of nowhere, a bright blue flash erupted in the chamber ahead, blinding and staggering all three of them.

“Lyrium bomb!” Varric’s shout was barely discernable through the ringing in Hawke’s ears and
head. He couldn’t see at all. “Ambush–”

Hawke blinked furiously and swung his sword blindly in front of him. He felt a lusty thrill as it connected solidly with flesh and he made out the sound of a macabre gurgle. The air filled with clangs and shouts, and the world became chaotic.

Hawke’s vision cleared in time to see several armed dwarves and two or three humans charging at him, stepping over the body of the one he’d neatly decapitated. From the flashes of light, banging noises, and repetitive twang of Bianca coming from behind him, he surmised that Anders and Varric were dealing with their own assailants. But how was that possible? The only intersection had been at the right-angled box diversion quite a ways back–

Hawke discarded the irrelevant thought and charged forward to meet his attackers.

He roared with glee as he impaled a dwarf through the mouth. The foolish man’s momentum carried him through almost two feet of greatsword before he slid to a bloody halt. Hawke wrenched his blade free, opening the dwarf’s head in a gruesome spray, and readied it to slice into the next.

A thrown dagger flashed past his head, and another was barely deflected in time by one of Anders’s energy shields. Hawke hardly noticed, focused on stabbing and slicing at the dwarves clustered around him. Each did their best to dodge and duck his swings, trying to slip under his guard.

A second blast of explosives or magic – Hawke wasn’t sure which – flared behind him, knocking him forward. He narrowly avoided catching his neck on an ambusher’s dagger; fortunately for him, however, the dwarves were also knocked off their feet. Hawke recovered before they did and ended all their lives with swift, brutal efficiency.

More were appearing from the shadows all around him, however, so he had no time to check on Anders or Varric. He spotted a few archers limned in the watery light on the scaffolding above him and dove for the relative cover underneath one of the wooden platforms. With his back to a wall, it was relatively easy to defend himself from the ten or more dwarves and humans now surrounding him.

He caught a glimpse of Anders and Varric, crouched in the middle of a green sigil that flickered on the ground. Varric was busy dispatching several melee attackers who had crossed the glyph and become ensnared by its paralyzing magic. Meanwhile, Anders spun and whirled his staff to launch icy projectiles at the archers above Hawke. They were holding their own for now.

Hawke roared a challenge, eager for blood. The lyrium smugglers (as they could only be) surrounding him obliged, swarming him and stabbing frantically at whatever part of him they could reach.

This would prove an interesting challenge. The humans had an advantage of reach over their dwarven comrades, but the stout dwarves could more easily slip inside Hawke’s guard. His armour had already stopped a number of clumsy thrusts and stabs, but it was only a matter of time before one of them found a weak spot.

Once the smugglers learned that he was vulnerable only in specific areas – like his face – they would change their tactics. Until then, the advantage was his.

Hawke had no intention of letting it get that far. His heart was pounding, his bloodthirst already overpowering his reason, but he yet retained enough of his mind to be aware of the fact. The sooner this was over, the better.
The moment he saw an opportunity, he charged forward, heaving his sword in a great arc as he did. His blade swept a dwarf’s head completely off, fatally wounded another across the face, and lodged in a human’s armour. Hawke bowled the injured man over, yanking his sword free and crushing his opponent’s face beneath his armoured boot.

By the time the other attackers had recovered from their surprise at his sudden move, Hawke had turned around and was carving into them.

“Hawke, dodge!” he heard Anders’s voice over the din of battle, and he dropped low under another thrust sword, hoping he was dodging in the right direction. Two arrows whistled over him where his head had been moments before.

Hawke snarled and stood back up, using his momentum to launch himself forward and knocking two men over. He stabbed down twice, killing both in an instant.

Hawke felt a powerful kick to the back of his left knee, forcing him back down. He spun as he fell, trying to turn to face his attackers; he barely managed to raise his greatsword in time to parry a blow aimed at his face. Three dwarves and a human remained alive in his vicinity.

Hawke grunted with the effort of swinging his sword while down on one knee, forcing the marauding blades back and giving him the space he needed to roll forward and get to his feet. The four attackers hung back cautiously, the slick pools of blood and bodies around them and the rising stench of death attesting to the danger Hawke represented.

Panting, quickly checking behind him to make sure he wasn’t about to be ambushed again, Hawke scanned the cramped battlefield.

Anders and Varric were okay – nobody could threaten them at close range due to Anders’s persistent paralyzing glyph. Varric appeared to be exchanging fire with the archers on top of the scaffolding under which Hawke was fighting. Anders was bent over and panting, apparently catching his breath, but he was uninjured – still strong enough to maintain a barrier that protected both himself and Varric from arrow fire.

Heart racing, Hawke sidestepped a dagger thrown by one of the dwarves and shot forward, slicing down savagely and cutting the thrower open from neck to navel.

Three were left, and all were backing away fearfully. They were clearly wondering if it was too late to escape with their lives. Hawke grinned wickedly and licked his lips as he advanced.

The human suddenly burst into azure flames that magically engulfed him as if from nowhere. He screamed and ran in a random direction, flailing in his anguish and finally tripping and falling to lie in a shuddering, burning heap that gradually became still.

“Nice one, Blondie,” Hawke heard Varric mutter.

“Who keeps unshielded lyrium in their pockets?” Anders wondered with disdain.

The two remaining dwarves glanced at each other as Varric and Anders approached. The arrow fire from above had stopped, the last one having succumbed to Varric’s impeccable aim. The two melee attackers were the last ones alive of their entire band.

“We, uh... we surrender,” said one in an anxious, gravelly voice. He lowered his sword and dagger hopefully, unsure if his petition would be accepted.

“Oh, so now you want to talk,” Varric said wryly. “Couldn’t have tried that a little earlier, huh?
Might have saved you some trouble, and your friends’ lives. How many you got, Hawke?"

“Several,” Hawke said, not taking his eyes off the dwarves. “I lost count after the first few heads came off and the fountains of blood and flying body parts obscured some of my view.”

Both dwarves were pale, one noticeably trembling.

“Please don’t kill us,” he said weakly. “We didn’t know who you were.”

“I still don’t,” his comrade complained.

“We never would have attacked you if we knew,” the other continued, his voice tinged with desperation. “If we knew you... uh....”

“Would reave your asses to the Void and back?” Anders said helpfully.

“Yeah, that. We never would have bothered you at all. Honest!”

“How long are we going to stand here and talk?” Hawke demanded. “Can I kill them already, or not? Anders?”

Anders looked at him, confused, then started as he realized what Hawke meant. He rounded on the dwarves.

“You’re lyrium smugglers,” he said.

“Obviously,” said one of the dwarves.

The other tried to silence him, but to no avail. “Oh, come on. You really think they’ll believe we’re postboys running messages for the Knight-Commander?”

“Is that your cover story?” Varric cut in incredulously. “That’s beyond pathetic. Since when has the Knight-Commander used dwarven postboys to run messages for her through the walls?”

“Shut up, Varric,” Hawke said, and his friend smiled and shrugged.

“Do you know a templar named Alrik who uses these tunnels?” Anders asked the dwarves.

One of them scratched his head. “That sounds familiar,” he said.

“Yes,” said the other. “That’s the crazy one. The nutcase that the other ones obey.”

Anders rolled his eyes. “We’re talking templars, remember. Be more specific. What kind of crazy?”

“Scary crazy,” said the dwarf who’d remembered Alrik, shuddering. “Bald. Eyes like ice.”

“Sounds like him,” Anders said, his face grim.

“Whenever he asks you to do something,” the dwarf went on, clearly glad to have useful information, “it’s like he’s threatening... perverse, sexual punishment if you disobey. ‘You know what happens to mages who don’t do what they’re told,’” he mocked in a high-pitched drone.

“That’s definitely Ser Alrik,” Anders said.

Hawke looked at him with an eyebrow raised at the same time Varric said “Sexual punishment? How lunatic are we talking here, Blondie?”
“The absolute worst,” Anders said through gritted teeth.

“I feel bad for those Tranquil,” the dwarf whispered fearfully. “I think he... makes them do things. Or just does things to them. The way he looks at them says it all. It’s – it’s not right. The normal mages are all terrified of him – even some of the other templars are, too!”

Anders looked angry. His hands were moving along his staff, and Hawke caught a flicker of Fade blue crackling behind his eyes. Justice was near the surface.


The dwarves looked at each other.

“I have no idea,” said the one who’d described Alrik. “They never tell us anything really important. I’ve just seen him down here a few times. He only deals with the boss....”

His eyes flicked to one of the eviscerated dwarven corpses cooling on the ground.

“I don’t know if they have any... chambers down here or anything. He probably stays up in the Gallows with the rest of the templars, and only comes down here to get his lyrium. One of his men is supposed to meet us this time... up ahead.”

“Speaking of your lyrium,” Varric said, “where is it?”

“In containers on top of these platforms,” said the other dwarf, indicating the scaffolds. “We got word from back that way-” he indicated the direction Hawke, Varric, and Anders had come “-that you guys were coming, and to set up an ambush. Never got a chance to carry the cargo any further.”

“You were heading towards the Gallows,” Anders asked, and the dwarf nodded.

Varric sighed and rubbed his forehead. “Can’t just leave lyrium lying around down here... even refined lyrium. I’ll deal with it. Got some contacts that’ll be all too happy to get some black market lyrium back into the legitimate system.”

“Thanks, Varric,” Anders said. His eyes were on Hawke, who was fingering his blade hilt and staring hard at the dwarves. “The less the templars get, the better.”

The dwarves exchanged glances again.

“You’re taking our haul,” said one. “Does that mean-”

Anders nodded to Hawke, and the warrior lunged forward with a roar, swinging his sword mightily. He decapitated both dwarves in a single blow before they even knew what was going on.

The corpses fountained blood and fell backwards in a comically identical fashion.

“So there’s a templar up ahead,” Varric said immediately, hoping to use a tangible datum to forestall any loss of control on Hawke’s part. “And this Alrik you’re looking for might well be there too. What exactly are you hoping to find, Blondie?”

“Evidence,” said Anders darkly, and there was a hint of resonance in his voice. Justice was agitated. “Anything that confirms his Tranquil Solution is more than just a rumour. If we find Alrik himself we can interrogate him, and if it’s true, he dies.”

“After what you’ve told me, which was confirmed by what we just heard,” Hawke said, “he dies
whether or not it’s true.”

Anders’s eyes flared blue and he nodded.

Varric glanced between the two of them, wondering if he would have to start watching them both now for signs of uncontrolled battle fervour.

But Hawke seemed to be calming down. He was carefully avoiding looking at Anders, instead eyeing the shadows and walls around them and methodically cleaning his sword with a rag he’d produced from some recess in his armour. Anders was still fingering his staff like he itched to unleash fiery devastation with it, but the crackles and blue fire of Justice were subsiding. Good signs, all.

“I’ll have to come back with some men for the lyrium,” Varric said, looking up at the containers on the scaffolding. “I only hope it’s still here when I get back.”

“Hopefully it won’t have sprouted anything by then,” Anders added.

“Sprouted anything?” Varric asked as Hawke began to move onward into the shadowed tunnel at the opposite end of the chamber. He and Anders followed, still talking.

“This is refined lyrium, not raw nodes. What do you mean sprouted?”

“It’s true that raw lyrium is dangerous enough just sitting out in the open,” Anders said. “But refined lyrium can do even stranger things when left on its own for a while. It can affect the local environment. Thin the Veil, cause any number of strange anomalies or distortions. Not a good situation by any means.”

“Why is this the first time I’m hearing about this?” Varric said, deeply annoyed.

“It’s hardly ever a serious problem, as far as I know,” Anders said. “But this is Kirkwall, after all. Like we were discussing earlier, the Veil here is already thin. I wouldn’t take any chances if I were you.”

∞

They advanced for perhaps another three quarters of an hour, meeting nobody and encountering only one other intersection, identical in shape to the last and roughly the same distance from the large chamber. Hawke was silent throughout, speaking only twice to warn Varric and Anders of obstacles in their path.

When he saw light filling another large chamber up ahead, Hawke raised his hand and halted, indicating the other two should do the same.

“Extinguish your staff,” Hawke murmured, and Anders did so. The three of them stood in near-total darkness; only the patch of light up ahead broke the silent void around them.

Hawke pointed. Varric and Anders strained their eyes to see what he had seen.

“Movement,” Varric said under his breath.

“Yes,” Anders agreed, just as quietly. “It looks like-”

“A templar,” Hawke finished for him. “Probably one of the ones the dwarf told us about. Varric – can you scout ahead, see if he’s alone, without letting him know you’re there?”
“Yes,” Varric said. “Probably.”

“Do it, then. Signal us to come forward if you think it’s a good idea. Otherwise, come back.”

Varric edged around Hawke and crept forward. He quickly disappeared into the darkness. Sometime later, his small silhouette appeared against the distant light.

Hawke watched carefully. Varric was far enough away that if he looked away for even a moment, he might miss the signal.

His steady gaze never wavered, even when he felt Anders’s hand slip into his own. He felt no contact through his gauntlets, but he felt the movement and pressure.

“Anders,” he warned softly.

“I just want to be near you,” the mage replied. “Surely that’s not going to set you off.”

Hawke wanted to make a sneering comeback and insist, but he was doing so well. His self-control was steely, unflappable. This was good practice on not giving in to temptation. So he allowed the mage to squeeze his hand as he continued to watch the light ahead.

He couldn’t deny the comfort he felt, either. After years of caring deeply for Anders, he’d grown accustomed to the man being nearby most of the time. It was soothing to think of things in that regard, rather than the depressed, violent thoughts he tended towards when considering the problem of his bloodlust.

Presently the silhouette raised a hand, the signal for Hawke and Anders to advance. They did so as silently as they could, hands falling apart.

Varric’s silhouette shifted as the dwarf retreated to meet them a little closer than where he’d been.

“He’s alone in that chamber,” Varric reported when they were within whispering distance. “I don’t think it’s Alrik. But there’s some kind of commotion going on past him. All I could see was a rock face, but it looks like there are stairs leading up to a higher level. The tunnel must continue on from there. I heard shouts and some other noises, but I couldn’t make out what was going on. I think the other templars must close by, and this one’s a sentry.”

“Good work, Varric.” Hawke eyed the templar in question, more visible now that he was closer. He considered their options.

“Could you and Bianca take him out from here?” Hawke asked.

“Sure,” said Varric, only the slight pause before his answer giving away his surprise at Hawke’s relatively stealthy suggestion. “I might need a bit of light to aim by, though.”

“Anders, help him,” Hawke commanded as Varric deployed his crossbow.

A faint whisper of light bloomed from Anders’s staff, producing gleams on Hawke’s armour and Bianca’s polished mechanism.

The templar stirred, likely noticing the light. He had time to take one step towards them before Bianca sang and a bolt sped away into the gloom.

Barely a moment later, the templar collapsed, writhing. A spray of red at the base of his helmet darkened his breastplate.
“Nice shot,” Hawke complimented.

“Thank you,” Varric said modestly.

“Now let’s go.” Hawke moved forward rapidly, not running but taking no trouble to remain quiet either. Varric and Anders followed.

The templar was still twitching a little when they reached the chamber. The commotion Varric had spoken of was now clearly audible; Hawke caught sight of movement on top of the rock face and marched on past the dying knight to the stairs.

“Please, don’t hurt me, messere!” a woman’s voice begged. “I haven’t done anything wrong!”

“You lie,” said a cold, inflectionless voice. “You know what happens to mages who lie.”

Anders’s eyes narrowed and his hand tightened around his staff.

“That’ll be him,” Varric muttered. “Wonderful.”

He glanced at the mage. Anger was twisting Anders’s face, and his eyes had begun to glow with blue light. Both of them scrambled to catch up to Hawke, who had already reached the top of the stairs and was readying his weapon.

In the chamber above, a bald templar in elaborate heavy plate stood over a cowering girl. Several other templars surrounded her, all helmeted. A few more stood farther back; their hands went to their weapons as soon as they saw Hawke.

“I only wanted to see my mum,” the girl sobbed. “Nobody told her where I went. Please don’t make me Tranquil!”

“It’s too late, girl,” said Alrik, perverse excitement creeping into his voice. “You will learn to behave yourself once you are Tranquil. Anything I command... you shall do.”

Watching the scene unfold, Hawke was already livid.

He was willing to forgive far more on the part of the templars than Anders was, but this was unquestionably too far. Something about the tone of Alrik’s voice as he promised horrors to the terrified mage had shattered all of Hawke’s carefully-built control. Fury was flooding through his veins, entwined with a deep, primal hunger for bloodshed.

As the rising tide of his battle fervour washed away the rational part of his mind, a small, dwindling voice inside him wondered if his rage was so acute because he saw something of himself in the sadistic templar, and it made him afraid.

“You need to shut the fuck up and die,” he snarled loudly, brandishing his sword pointedly on the final word.

Alrik turned around. His men had already drawn their weapons. “What is this?”

“We couldn’t have tried diplomacy, huh?” Varric said, raising Bianca into attack position.

Anders was spinning his staff with a look of murderous hatred on his face. Blue energy crackled about him, and his eyes were radiant. For once, he and Hawke were in complete agreement.

“You will never touch another mage!” Justice thundered.
Alrik’s eyes widened in surprise, then self-righteous anger as he recognized an abomination. As he reached for his weapon, Hawke was already swinging his greatsword with a furious bellow.

Battle erupted around them, but those first few awful moments felt like an eternity to Varric.

He watched in what felt like slow motion as Hawke’s blade took off the top of Alrik’s head.

He could have counted the bits of brain matter and shards of bone in the spray of gore that resulted. The image nauseated him instantly, and though years of working with Hawke had taught Varric to keep his stomach under control until the battle was over, the memory of that horrific blow would haunt his nightmares for the rest of his life.

At the same moment, a screaming blast of spirit magic from Justice collided with Alrik’s breastplate. The templar’s seizing carcass erupted with azure flames.

Whatever other horrid destruction awaited Alrik’s body, Varric never saw. Battle had been joined, and he was now firmly in ‘fight or die’ mode. He fired at the nearest knight besides Alrik, aiming for the eye slit in the helmet.

Hawke wasted no time tearing into the other templars. He became a spinning maverick of death, lashing out with his fists and feet as well as his blade.

The templars were in disarray, unprepared for the sudden death of their leader and the unbridled ferocity of the assault. Hawke’s blade clanged harshly against their armour hard enough to dent it and, in a few cases, rupture it completely. Though their heavy plate protected the templars from most of his strikes, Hawke’s battle rage was such that the sheer force behind his swings staggered them backward and broke more than a few ribs.

Justice was spinning Anders’s staff, managing to avoid hitting Varric with it only barely. Blue fire swirled out from him in a helix, arcing around Hawke to melt a templar’s armour, and the screaming man inside, into slag. Another suffered the same fate, and then a third.

Varric had now had time to load a second bolt, and he took aim at one of the templar archers hanging farther back in the tunnel. There were three, but none had fired yet. Hawke was moving too quickly to present a target, and the churning of armoured fighters prevented a clear shot at Varric or Anders.

Varric saw a brief opening that lasted a bare instant and took it. His bolt slipped between Hawke’s back and a templar’s falling sword to nail the middle templar archer to the rock face behind him by his neck.

As Hawke and Justice continued to maul the templars, most focused on them, but a few became aware of the additional threat posed by Varric. The two archers returned fire, forcing him to evade and waste his next shot.

Blue fire cast by Justice washed over one of the templars heading for Varric, but it cleared away to reveal the knight unharmed. A shimmering, ellipsoid shield had protected him.

The templar raised his hand and white magic flashed from his shield. Justice staggered, hand clutched to his abdomen in pain. The magical aura surrounding him flickered and dimmed.

The templar advanced, holding his hand out to maintain his annulment magic. Two others guarded him on either side.

An idea that might save his life and that of Anders raced through Varric’s mind. He reached for his belt, found a hard sphere, and yanked it. He threw it as hard as he could, lips forming a silent prayer.
The potion bottle shattered against the breastplate of the templar on the left. The clink of breaking glass was barely audible over the din of Hawke’s battle with the templars a scant few meters beyond, but the hiss of spewing vapour was unmistakable, as was the dense black cloud of oily smoke that erupted from the compressed liquid that had been inside the bottle.

The three encroaching templars paused, startled at their sudden loss of vision, and then began to cough as the acrid fumes were drawn into their lungs. The white flare of annulment magic died away.

“Anders!” Varric shouted, taking the opportunity to scramble along the edge of the rock face to a safer distance. “Or Justice, whatever you are! Get away from them while you can!”

The spirit didn’t respond, but Varric glanced back and saw him lurching away, using the time Varric had bought.

Hawke had also been obscured by the smoke, but the battle cry that erupted from the cloud could belong to no one else.

“RRRAAAGGHH!” Hawke bellowed, his form evolving from a dark shape in the vapour to land a powerful blow against one of the confused templar’s shoulders. Sparks flew where his blade scraped against the templar’s heavy plate.

The knight fell to his knees, keening in pain, his sword arm hanging like a limp rag. His other hand dropped his shield, moving up to try to comfort his injured shoulder uselessly through his armour. Hawke’s foot impacted the back of the templar’s head, forcing him down onto his face with a clang.

Next, Hawke spun, somehow maintaining his balance with one foot on the templar’s helmet, and his greatsword impacted with another loud clang into the nearby templar who had annulled Justice’s magic. He managed to aim the blow well enough to wedge his blade into the gap between the templar’s breastplate and helmet, as the spurt of blood and resulting pained, gurgling cry attested.

At a safe distance, Varric quickly loaded several more bolts into Bianca and scanned for targets. The templars that Hawke had been fighting earlier appeared to be either dead or still searching through the dispersing cloud of smoke. One more that had been moving in on Justice had gotten his bearings, but was now forced to fend off Hawke’s enraged hacking. The templar’s shield, severely dented and scratched, was barely holding up against the assault.

“Hawke!” came the resonant boom of Justice’s voice. He had regrouped himself near the stairs, safe from any templar’s attempt at annulment for the moment. “Move!”

Hawke ignored the spirit’s call, pressing his attack against the retreating templar. He was lost in his own bloodlust, likely only barely aware of the possessed mage’s presence at his back. Varric looked for a shot, but there was too much risk of hitting Hawke.

Justice let out a frustrated growl that reminded Varric chillingly of the noises he’d heard made by shades. He raised his staff. Energy swirled along it, coming to a sharp, brilliant point at its tip.

The templar suddenly seized, his arms forced out straight at his sides. His sword and shield dropped from nerveless fingers to clatter against the ground. Bright white light burst from within his armour.

The man’s scream was long and tortured as he was lifted into the air, blinding energy radiating from him. Hawke was forced backwards, cursing, lifting one arm up to protect his face. Varric, just before shielding his own eyes, noticed that Hawke’s face was burned.
The templar exploded in a shower of sparks and metal slag. Thankfully for Varric’s stomach, the matter of his flesh and blood seemed to have been incinerated in the blast, so there was no accompanying spray of viscera.

Hawke was thrown onto his back by the shockwave. Varric, farther away, staggered backwards and only narrowly managed to remain upright. A few other templars stumbling out of the smoke were not so lucky – the light burned holes right through them, and as one they collapsed in death.

The magical explosion also cleared the remainder of the smoke. Varric edged sideways to get a better view.

The templars that Hawke had been fighting were indeed all dead, lying in bloody piles around the chamber. Only the two archers were still alive.

Varric fired once, twice. Both templars fell in silence, bolts suddenly sprouting from their eyes. He turned to see how Hawke was doing.

The warrior was gone. Varric looked around, surprised, and heard a smack at the same time he saw that Hawke had already shot to his feet, charged over to Justice, and backhanded him across the face.

The burns on his face were not as severe as Varric had initially thought, but they looked painful.

“You fucking idiot!” Hawke roared. “Get control of yourself!”

To Varric’s astonishment, the mage – eyes and skin crackling with the spirit’s power – recovered from the blow rapidly and shoved Hawke right back, a burst of magic amplifying the force of his punch. “See to your own control, fool!” he shouted, and marched past the stunned warrior.

Varric watched, mouth agape, as the possessed mage stalked over to the other side of the chamber, brushing aside the remnants of the smoke cloud.

He wondered at first what Justice was doing, and then realized with a start of fright that one templar was still alive. He’d been hiding in the shadows at the edge of the chamber, advancing on the mage girl who still cowered at the far rock wall.

When he saw Justice striding towards him, the templar raised two daggers and darted forward, preparing to strike. Before he’d advanced three steps, Justice swung his staff, its tip aglow with brilliant blue fire.

The end of his staff impacted the templar’s helmet with a thunderous crack and a flash of light. The templar died instantly, his body thrown several meters to land with a sliding thud in the dirt. His helmet had become brutally concave, his head canted at an ugly, impossible angle.

“I will have every templar for these abuses!” Justice boomed. His deep, gravelly voice resounded throughout the chamber, having entirely overpowered Anders’s softer, higher tones. Dust rustled from the ceiling and Varric felt the thrum of the spirit’s words in his chest.

Hawke appeared beside the dwarf and they exchanged glances. Hawke hadn’t yet fully come down from his battle rage – he was breathing heavily and his pupils were dilated and predatory – but he was still.

“Justice,” Hawke said, wiping his mouth on the back of his gauntlet. “Get a grip. They’re dead.”

“Every one of them will feel Justice’s burn!” the spirit shouted, whirling to glare at Hawke with contempt. He swung his staff in a circle, its azure fire tracing a line in the air and very nearly striking the terrified mage behind him.
“Get away from me, demon!” she cried, hiding her face behind her trembling hands.

Hawke’s eyebrows shot up.

“Oooh, boy,” Varric muttered. “That’s not going to go over well.”

“I am no demon!” Justice said furiously, turning back around to loom over the girl. “Are you one of them, that you would label me such?!”

Varric’s heart froze, going from dismay to fear in an instant. Surely Justice wouldn’t-?

Hawke was already moving forward.

“Please, messere,” the girl sobbed, trying her best to shrink herself further away from Justice, but she was pressed against stone; there was nowhere else to go. “I beg you, don’t hurt me.”

“Anders,” Hawke said loudly. “Come back. The templars are dead.”

“I feel their hold over her,” Justice seethed. He raised his staff, the blue fire whirling back to life along its length as if he was preparing to kill the mage. “I will have my vengeance!”

Varric’s mouth was dry and tasted of ash. He did not want to watch Anders’s spirit turn against the very girl whose torment had spurred his bloody crusade in the first place. And yet it was happening, right in front of him. There was nothing he could do to stop it.

He turned away, covering his peripheral vision with his hand.

“Justice!” Hawke bellowed. Varric heard him trying to grab the possessed mage’s arm and yank him backwards, but from the sounds of it, Justice fought him off. “We just saved this girl from being made Tranquil! She is the one we were fighting for!”

The girl was screaming and sobbing, still begging for mercy.

But there would be none. Blue fire lit the wall of the cavern as Justice’s magic converged at the tip of his staff.

For a brief moment, Varric – facing in the opposite direction – saw his own shadow, silhouetted by eldritch light against the opposite rock face. Beside his shape were two others: Justice in Anders’s body, delivering the blow, and Hawke, struggling to restrain him.

There was a crackling whoosh as the staff fell. The sobbing cut off abruptly.

Justice’s fire died. The staff clattered to the ground. The azure rage of the Fade diffused with a faint tremor that rattled the very stone.

Slowly, Varric turned back around, blinking with incredulous horror as he lowered his arm. One look at the remains of the young mage was enough to confirm the worst.

He watched Anders double over, clutching his head and stumbling backwards. The mage’s eyes appeared between his clenched fingers, wide with revulsion, all trace of Justice gone.

“No!” Anders choked. “Maker, no!”

There was nothing much else to say. For several long, deeply uncomfortable moments, his shuddering gasps were the only sound in the chamber.
Varric stood rooted to the spot, fighting the urge to take another look at the girl. He blinked several more times, struggling to process what had just happened.

Finally Hawke spoke.

“Varric,” he said in a voice of deadly calm. “Go, please. See to your contacts about the lyrium. Give us... give us some time alone.”

Varric was far from sure that that was the best thing for him to do right now, but there was no arguing with Hawke when he had that tone in his voice.

Nor could he deny that the notion of getting far away from here offered immense relief. He had done everything he could.

It was too late to help the girl. The templars were dead, and their Tranquil Solution would most likely die with them.

As for Anders....

“Don’t kill him, Hawke,” Varric said quietly, surprising himself with how calm is voice sounded. “Please.”

He had to believe that this was a mistake. That this wasn’t what Anders truly was – that Justice had imbalanced him, not actualized him. He had to.

Hawke didn’t answer. He was staring down at his weeping lover, his face stoically blank.

Mind slowly numbing over with shock, Varric collected a few salvageable bolts for Bianca from the dead templars. With a final glance at Hawke and Anders, he left the chamber.

He had no idea what was going to happen between then, or if he would see either of them alive again, but there was one thing he was sure of: his part in this particular chapter of their tragedy was done.
Delirium

Chapter Summary

The worst chapter.

The underground chamber was dense with the cloying smell of blood and fresh corpses. Illuminated only by faint light streaming in through a cleft in the ceiling, its edges were thick with shadows.

Anders’s thoughts were frozen with horror and revulsion. The image of the young mage’s terrified face as he’d loomed over her was burned indelibly into his mind. The sound of his magic knifing into her body, the gush of her blood, the last choking, gurgling sound that had escaped her as she lay paralyzed with pain and terror – they all rang in his ears, and they would forever more.

He would never have a peaceful night’s rest again in his life. Nor did he deserve one.

He had failed. He was an abomination. He was everything the Chantry and the templars said he was. He was the reason mages were feared and the reason they were locked up.

Crouched in the darkness against the rock face with his face in his hands, lost in his own private Void, Anders had nearly forgotten that he wasn’t alone.

He was brought back to the world, sharply and painfully, by the cold, merciless grip of a clawed gauntlet around his neck.

Hawke stared at him with a familiar predatory hunger as he lifted Anders helplessly by his neck into a standing position. Anders had seen Hawke’s feral, wide-eyed glare many times – and several times recently, directed at him – but never before had his gaze appeared quite so... cold.

Distantly, as if from another life, Anders remembered his reckless idea of luring Hawke into combat to awaken his thirst for blood, to make him eager for more violent sex.

In the harsh light of his present reality, that plan now seemed idiotic in the extreme. Right now, at perhaps the lowest point he’d ever been in his life, provoking Hawke into losing control of himself was the absolute last thing that Anders wanted.

Of course, at this point it was far too late to do anything about it.

“Michael,” Anders said with difficulty, barely able to get the word out.

Hawke didn’t reply.

Anders tried to prise Hawke’s grip off his neck, but the metal gauntlet was utterly implacable. It was like trying to lever open a bronto’s jaws.

The first flickers of true fear made Anders’s skin clammy. He wondered if he’d finally pushed Hawke too far, if this would be the last mistake he would ever make.

Fortunately for him, once he was upright against the wall, Hawke’s grip loosened enough to allow him to breathe. He continued to say nothing.
“Michael... focus,” Anders said carefully. “Listen to the sound of my voice. You don’t want... you don’t want to do this. You want to stay in control. Remember what you said, on the cliff? You felt bad afterwards.”

His words sounded pathetic and hollow, even to him. His desire to be punished felt stronger and more justified than ever, but he realized now that what he’d wanted was not genuinely inescapable agony, but the kind of pain that gave him pleasure.

He had a horrible feeling that Hawke knew exactly what kind of pain that was, and that it was decidedly not what he had in mind to inflict at the moment.

“You knew,” Hawke growled, breathing harshly, his eyes never leaving Anders’s.

Mortal terror crept into Anders’s heart. His fingers trembled around Hawke’s gauntlet.

“You knew I would get like this, after,” Hawke went on, lips curling in disgust. His pupils had dilated to an unsettling degree; the green of his irises was all but invisible in the dim light of the cavern.

“You wanted it. You wanted me to punish you. And you deserve it, you filthy... piece... of... shit.”

Teeth bared, eyes flashing with rage, he squeezed.

“Michael!” Anders gasped, choking on the word as he renewed his struggle to loosen Hawke’s grip. “Remember how you asked me to leave you, because you didn’t want to lose control and hurt me more than you meant to? How you didn’t want to kill me and get off on it, because it would destroy you when you came back to yourself?”

With his free hand, Hawke grabbed one of Anders’s wrists and effortlessly dislodged his grip. He leaned in close and ran his tongue along Anders’s jaw up to his ear, grazing the mage’s earlobe with his teeth.

“Don’t need to kill you to get off,” he whispered. “Just need to make you bleed a lot.”

Anders screamed as his hand erupted with a fiery spike of agony. With uncanny speed Hawke had drawn his small dagger, a weapon of last resort, and stabbed him through the palm with it.

Anders barely had time to register the foreign object embedded in his flesh before Hawke followed it up with a savage punch to his jaw. Anders was left stunned, his head ringing from the blow.

For a time, the whole of his conscious mind knew only the clarity of pain.

During that time, he was pliant in Hawke’s hands. Hawke wrestled him out of his robes and threw him, naked, to the ground. He groaned in pain, cradling his bruised jaw with his uninjured hand.

Hawke glared down at Anders, his mind already racing ahead to what he planned to do.

He slid his foot underneath the mage and used it to roll him onto his stomach. Then he made sure he would stay there by stepping on his back with an armoured boot.

Hawke was getting quite good at undoing all the various straps and catches of his armour in record time. He did so, keeping his gauntlets and boots on as well as his undershirt and shorts, although he fully intended to remove them later.

As he removed his armour, he considered Anders’s words. He did in fact remember everything he’d
said and felt on the cliff, but the intense anxieties that had prompted those feelings now seemed very distant. None of them felt important in light of what had just happened.

He certainly still had access to his usual hot-blooded rage. He could feel it pulsing inside of him, waiting to be unleashed – like a boiler whose release valve he could open at any time. His cock was already semi-hard in anticipation as he considered which of the ideas that came to mind to enact first.

Yet he felt as though he was in total control of himself. His motions were smooth and careful, his breathing slow and deep. It was as if there was a partition in his mind separating the him of that moment on the cliff from the him of this moment in the cave, a gap that the emotions of that day couldn’t cross.

And the Hawke that was in control now was much colder and meaner than the other. He was patient. He calculated.

Was he even the same person now as he had been that day? Hawke wasn’t sure.

He rolled Anders back over onto his back and stared down at him, fondling himself through the fabric of his shorts. He could tell that, quite apart from being frightened, Anders had noticed how calm he was, and was deeply unnerved.

The mage was crying silently, likely as much from the shame of what he’d done as from the pain in his hand and face. He breathed in sharp, heavy gasps, trying not to sob as he lifted his impaled hand to examine it. Carefully, he touched the embedded dagger. A faint aura of blue healing magic began to dance among the fingers of his uninjured hand.

Hawke kicked the healing hand away and knelt down with his knees on either side of Anders. He leaned over him and stared into his eyes.

Anders gazed up at him, plainly terrified but also bewildered at Hawke’s behaviour.

He’d expected a bloodthirsty animal, and he was getting something entirely different. He had no idea what would come next, and the fear and confusion he radiated was intoxicating.

“You brought me here to fight a corrupt templar,” Hawke said softly. “So I killed him, as well as most of his underlings. Varric helped a bit, and so did Justice – fancy that! You, though....”

As he spoke, one of Hawke’s hands drifted out towards the dagger stuck in Anders’s palm.

“You did nothing but lose control,” he spat. “Justice did the killing, but it was you that let him out.”

He twisted the dagger, provoking a pitiful whimper from Anders.

“You contributed nothing but mindless, undisciplined hatred to that battle,” Hawke said, affecting an airy, conversational tone. “And believe me, I know the feeling. During fights, I pretty much feel nothing but incandescent fury. Also much of the rest of the time. There isn’t really a singular reason for it – it’s just the way I am.

“But I don’t let it govern my decisions. Rage is my power, not my reason for living. It’s the force behind my sword. Never once in my life have I turned my blade on an ally – let alone a noncombatant! – out of sheer bloodlust. As crazed as I get, I still remember how to tell my friends from my enemies.”

Anders closed his eyes, turning his head away guiltily as Hawke’s words sank into the turmoil of his mind. Tears fell from his eyes.
Hawke leaned down and gently kissed Anders’s cheek. The familiar bristly sensation of Hawke’s beard brushing against him was oddly soothing, despite the pain in his hand and the fear warring with overwhelming shame in his gut.

“Of course, there were those few times recently,” Hawke whispered in his ear, following the words with a flick of his tongue. “Admittedly, those times constituted partial-to-complete losses of control. But where you’re concerned, Anders, my dick gets involved in the decision-making process, too. You know how sexy you are.”

Anders shivered as Hawke reached down and ran cold metal claws along his flaccid dick.

“You were lucky, really,” Hawke said. “If we’d drawn it out long enough, I might have killed you before I came. But... ohhh, what a climax that would have been.”

The lustful moan in his ear, the warmth of Hawke’s breath, and the wet tongue on his ear and neck were almost enough to stir Anders’s passion beneath the layers of pain and emotion that were making it difficult to think clearly.

He suddenly became intensely aware of Hawke’s rock-hard dick pressing against his stomach. He could feel a damp spot where the warrior was leaking precome through his shorts.

“I saved that mage, Anders,” Hawke hissed, his voice abruptly taking on a decidedly less gentle tone. “And Varric helped – let him have his due. That templar, Alrik, would have made her Tranquil and then raped her. Probably repeatedly, for the rest of her life. He might even have passed her around to his cronies, since none of them seemed so much as put off by the way he was talking to her. So it’s a good thing we saved her, isn’t it?”

He raised his head from where he’d leaned it into the crook of Anders’s neck and glared down at him with contempt. He grabbed Anders by the face, the claws of his gauntlets digging painfully into his skin.

“Isn’t it?” he snarled.

Anders had no answer. A few more tears slipped out of his eyes.

“But what happened then?” Hawke demanded, mockingly pitching his voice higher. “What did Justice do – what did you let him do – to that poor girl whose mind and life we’d just saved?”

Hawke’s other hand flashed back out to the dagger and he twisted it again, much more viciously this time. Anders’s cry of pain echoed throughout the still, empty chamber.

“What did you do, Anders?” Hawke asked again, gauntleted hand forcing Anders’s head to remain still as he stared down into his eyes, his face once again unnervingly blank. “What did you do?”

“I killed her,” Anders sobbed. “Justice has changed. I can’t control him anymore. I’ve warped him into... into Vengeance.”

“That’s right,” Hawke breathed. He twisted the dagger again and delivered an open-handed slap to Anders’s face.

Anders screamed and thrashed beneath him, trying to rise, but Hawke moved his free hand to his chest and held him down. He was too strong, and he had a position of leverage. Anders had not so much as an inch of leeway.

Hawke leaned down again and kissed him, absorbing the vibrations of Anders’s agony with his lips.
and mouth. He raised his head enough to speak once Anders’s cries and struggles had died down again to whimpers.

“You took a spirit of the Fade into your body,” he said. “You, a mage, and one raised by the Circle. A Circle that was at the time practically liberal compared to the Gallows as it is now – isn’t that what you once told me?”

“I heard a little about that thing with Uldred and the abominations and blood mages that happened during the Blight. But before that... I often think Bethany would have done well at Kinloch Hold. She might well have been a lot safer than she was living in hiding with her family, anyway.”

Anders shook his head in mute denial. Hawke might have had all the power between them at the moment, but there were still things he didn’t know, things he didn’t understand.

Inside him, Justice railed – demanding that he explain at least some of those things, make Hawke see how wrong he was.

But Hawke wasn’t done.

“In a way, you’ve had opportunities my sister never did,” he said. “You’ve been taught all your life about the dangers of spirit possession. I only know a little because there were apostates in my family. But you... you really should know better, don’t you think?”

Hawke gave the dagger one last cruel twist. Anders’s palm was a bloody, ravaged mess at this point, and his fingers were grey and nerveless.

Hawke withdrew the dagger.

“Don’t you think?” he repeated as he brought the dagger to his mouth. He ran his tongue along the bloodied blade, his eyes closing in pleasure.

“Yes,” Anders croaked, his voice rough from screaming and crying. “I made a ghastly mistake, and it cost that girl’s life among other things. I don’t know if I can ever begin to make things right, but please, Michael, please... stop hurting me. This isn’t you. Please, just let me heal my hand.”

“Oh, I’m just getting started,” Hawke said.

Anders whimpered in pain and fright, closing his eyes as Hawke let the dagger drift lazily down the mage’s jaw, scoring a shallow cut. He traced it with the armoured claw of his thumb, deepening the wound as his fingers held Anders by the face, inscribing their own bloody marks into the flesh under his chin. He leaned down to kiss him again, invading the mage’s mouth with his tongue.

Hawke traveled with his mouth down Anders’s jaw and neck to the hollow of his collarbone. There he dug his teeth in while his other hand worked the dagger in a long, slow gash down Anders’s neck and shoulder to his upper arm.

Anders continued to moan and weep at the pain he was in, but he managed to keep himself from outright screaming or sobbing. His throat was already raw enough.

Hawke gnawed for a moment on Anders’s collarbone, enjoying the coppery taste of blood in his mouth and spreading it all over his teeth with his tongue. He moved downward, inhaling deeply. The mixed scents of blood, sweat, and fear stirred him to greater excitement. He gripped Anders’s forearms with both hands, dropping his dagger nearby, and bit down hard with his canines on the mage’s nipple. The sudden sensitive shock made Anders scream again.
Hawke’s eyes traveled around their immediate surroundings, and with a dark, satisfied grin, he saw what he was looking for. A dead templar lay crumpled within reaching distance, clothed in what had once been a formerly impeccably-cared for shirt of chain mail. The chain had been no barrier to Hawke’s greatsword, and now lay ruined about the body of its owner.

Hawke reached out and picked up one of the disparate metallic rings that had come loose from the chain shirt. It formed an almost complete circle but for a gap where it had been torn out of its matrix.

“How do you feel about bodily adornment?” Hawke murmured in Anders’s ear.

“What?” The mage was bewildered for a moment, but then he felt sharp metal points closing around his mangled nipple, and his screams renewed.

Hawke twisted the ring a little to make sure it was secure, and then squeezed it between his gauntleted fingers, closing the loop so that it was embedded in Anders’s nipple.

It would have to be removed eventually, of course – the risk of infection was far from negligible, especially in this dank cavern. But for now, it provided an intimate, painful mode of control over Anders, something that gave Hawke a sensual thrill.

He found another suitable ring and closed it over Anders’s other nipple, this time using only the torn edges of the metal hoop to pierce the mage’s flesh. Anders, his throat burning and his lungs exhausted from screaming, could only moan and toss his head back and forth.

“Michael, please,” he cried between gasps for breath. “Don’t. Please stop. I beg you, no more. No more... I’ve been punished enough.”

“Oh, you think so, do you?” Hawke said acidly. “I disagree.”

He backhanded Anders across his face, already bruised and bloody from various cuts.

“Quit your puling, abomination. You deserve it all and a lot more, and you know it. The whining and pleading is not hot.”

For the first time, anger briefly flitted across Anders’s brow as the insult seemed to cut deep enough to rouse Justice, but the look evaporated rapidly under the heat of Hawke’s glare. Anders lapsed into silence, or at least quiet weeping.

Hawke moved himself downwards, tracing his clawed fingers along Anders’s chest to scratch eight parallel lines down his torso. He didn’t cut deeply enough for the wounds to bleed openly, but the whimpering he provoked was enough to make Hawke tense with anticipation.

He grabbed Anders by his thighs and yanked them upwards, inflicting several more puncture wounds as he lifted his lower body and exposed his anus. Hawke moved in with his tongue, gliding it from Anders’s sac down the perineum to circle the ring of muscle.

Anders couldn’t help gasping at the intimate, pleasing sensation. It was an unexpected shift from the torment Hawke had inflicted on him thus far.

Feeling overheated despite the cool air of the cavern, Hawke paused what he was doing long enough to remove his undershirt. Once he was shirtless, he shoved Anders’s legs upwards again.

“Hold your own legs up, would you?” he said, annoyed.

Anders thought it best to comply, and did so, curling his wrists under his knees to avoid irritating his
mangled hand.

Hawke used his now-freed hands to spread Anders’s butt, allowing his tongue deeper access. He spat copiously, spreading his saliva around and thrusting his tongue inward.

Anders squirmed a little, his eyes drifting closed, allowing himself to enjoy the sensation and forget some of his pain. It didn’t last.

Hawke leaned back and stood up long enough to slip out of his shorts, at last freeing his massive erection from its confines. He stroked his cock a little with his gauntlet as he knelt back down, positioning himself so that he could access Anders’s hole.

On one armoured finger, he gathered some of the fluid that had accumulated on the end of the engorged head of his cock. The feeling of the cold metal – still somewhat slippery with blood – on his heated flesh was delightfully strange.

Hawke reached up to slip his finger into Anders’s mouth. Anders licked the precome obediently, but moaned and twisted his head away when Hawke cut into the roof of his mouth.

Hawke grabbed Anders by his teeth and jaws and forced him to be still while he inscribed another wound across the mage’s upper lip. Perhaps sensing that it was better not to resist, Anders endured the mutilation in silence.

Eager to satisfy his deepening lust, Hawke positioned his cock at Anders’s hole and pushed.

He let out a low groan of satisfaction as he forced himself into the tight warmth. He leaned down to silence Anders’s panting and whimpering with a kiss, clawing the mage’s shoulders and upper arms as he did.

He paused for a moment when he had buried his cock as deep as it could go, his balls resting against Anders’s butt. Hawke ground his hips against Anders, enjoying the heat and the friction of his clenched insides. He grabbed Anders’s ankles, drew himself back out, and began to thrust hard and fast.

Anders was sweating despite the cool air of the cavern, having a hard time suppressing his moans and whimpers of pain. Although Hawke had lubricated himself better than the last time they had fucked, he was still far from comfortable with Hawke’s rapid, vigorous thrusting.

Every time Hawke rammed his cock into Anders it sent a tremor through his body, aggravating his various injuries. His hand and nipples still burned with pain. His face, arm, neck, and the inside of his mouth stung horribly where Hawke had cut and bitten him.

The warrior was beyond caring. Though his eyes were half-closed in ecstasy, Anders could see that Hawke’s pupils had dilated even further, beyond what should have been physiologically possible for a human being. His eyes were almost entirely black, with only a thin annulus of white sclera still visible.

He was also giving off a powerful scent of blood, sweat, and something else – something spicy mixed with decay. It was the same scent that Anders had noticed the day Hawke had brutalized him on the cliff.

It was hauntingly familiar, stirring the shadow of a memory deep in his mind, but he couldn’t identify it. What was it? The more Anders thought about it, the surer he was that he had smelled it somewhere before, but where? And when?
It was difficult to think coherently with the pain wracking his body and the well-endowed warrior pumping in and out of his tight rectum. Anders was starting to grow used to the carnal rhythm, but it still hurt too much to feel good.

And Hawke... Hawke appeared to be on the edge of finally losing control, like he had on the cliffs. His pace was increasing, his euphoric expression twisting into one of mingled rage and savage joy.

Hawke turned his head and bit down into the flesh of Anders’s calf. Pinned down by the muscular warrior’s dominant position, Anders could do nothing but struggle weakly and groan in pain.

Hawke didn’t appear to notice. His eyes were closed, blood staining his lips and chin, a satisfied growl welling up from deep in his chest. His rapid thrusting slowed until he pulled his cock all the way out. Anders couldn’t help his sigh of relief.

The respite didn’t last long. Hawke leaned over and opened his mouth, allowing a stream of bloody saliva to dribble from his tongue and fall onto his dick. He spread the grisly makeshift lubricant around with a claw of his gauntlet and pushed himself back in.

Although the thought of his own blood lubricating Hawke’s renewed pounding made Anders feel sick, he couldn’t deny that the fuck was smoother and less painful as a result. Even so, the addition of the ragged gouge in his leg, which Hawke had resumed gnawing on and licking at, more than made up for any reduction in his physical discomfort.

Hawke leaned his upper body forward, allowing himself a deeper angle of penetration into Anders. His shoulders forced the mage’s legs further down until his shins were pressed uncomfortably against his own shoulders.

Hawke’s face was right above him. The warrior licked his face, spreading blood and saliva over him.

Anders looked up into Hawke’s eyes with barely constrained terror. They were completely black, utterly without colour or light.

If there were any remaining doubts lurking in Anders’s mind about the nature of Hawke’s condition, they evaporated at the sight of those inhuman eyes. Something was very, very wrong with Michael Hawke, and it was a near-certainty that blood magic was involved.

“Did you know,” Hawke murmured as he continued to fuck him in a fast, now only marginally painful cadence, “that you’re one of the only people who calls me by my first name?”

He leaned down to kiss Anders, initially with unexpected gentleness, but Anders was soon whimpering again as Hawke bit his lower lip, practically chewing it to encourage the blood to flow. Then he nuzzled into Anders’s neck, licking him with his bloodied tongue.

“Everyone else who did was from Lothering,” he mumbled. He raised his head up again, his empty black eyes staring into Anders’s.

Anders was profoundly worried about what his lover had become, and his concern was deepening by the moment – not the least because of the intimidation of Hawke hovering right over his face. The change in him was alarming enough to pierce through Anders’s pain and fear, spurring his mind to begin considering possible answers.

This latest round of talking, however, only confused him. Why was Hawke talking about his name and Lothering now of all times?

“Most of them are dead now. My parents and Bethany. Carver usually had some wiseass nickname
or other for me, or he just called me ‘brother’. Elder Miriam, and the Revered Mother in the Chantry. Luke, my first boyfriend... he died at Ostagar. Hardly anyone else – most of the people I worked for called me ‘the Hawke boy’ or ‘Malcolm’s eldest.’

“But then there’s you. I think you’re the only person I’ve met in Kirkwall who doesn’t call me ‘serah’, ‘messere’, or ‘Hawke.’ Why is that, I wonder?”

Through his pain, his fear, and his worry, Anders forced himself to answer.

“It’s because-

His voice was hoarse from screaming. He cleared his throat painfully.

“Because I love you, Michael Hawke. I love you for the man you are, not for the power and wealth of your name.”

“Even now,” Hawke said, sounding intrigued. “Even as I do this to you.”

He reached out with his thumb and used the metal claw to scratch another cut down the side of Anders’s face. Drops of blood followed the claw. Hawke ran his tongue along the gash, collecting them.

“Yes,” Anders whispered. “Even now.”

“Beautiful,” Hawke murmured. His eyes glittered like the night sky. “You’re so beautiful when you bleed.”

His head went down into the hollow of Anders’s neck. His thrusting rhythm never slowed as he gnawed on the thin flesh over the mage’s collarbone.

Broken by the pain he was in, Anders closed his eyes. He set aside his worried thoughts and allowed himself to drift, concentrating on endurance. He would have to survive this encounter before he could do anything for Hawke.

Inevitably, he thought of the mage he’d just killed and found some comfort in the fact that he was being punished for what he’d done. Whatever bizarre affliction had so altered the man he loved – possibly irreversibly – at least it allowed Hawke some twisted pleasure to give Anders exactly what he deserved.

For his part, Hawke was in an entirely different world.

His heart was beating so fast that he could hear the vibration in his head, but it wasn’t painful. The world apart from their connected bodies seemed distant and unreal. The dark, grungy cave around them had retreated like an outbound tide, fading away into a state of suspended existence.

When he opened his eyes, the image of Anders he saw seemed feverishly bright and hyperreal. The crimson of his blood stood out in stark relief against his white skin.

Hawke could only fuck, occasionally opening a new wound on Anders’s body and tasting its fresh flow as he floated in his ecstatic haze. He thought of nothing other than the tight, exquisite warmth around his cock and the intoxicating scent and taste of blood. The aggressive rolling of his hips was no longer under his conscious control; it felt like he barely had to shift them back and forth to make the euphoria wash through him like the narcotic caress of a drug.

After an indefinite stretch of time in this dreamlike world of pleasure and power, Hawke began to
come back to reality a little.

The persistent staccato beat of his heart was starting to become mildly painful in his chest and head. A semblance of reality was gradually returning to the world.

The next time he opened his eyes, Hawke noticed that Anders had a disturbingly blank expression on his face. His eyes were staring into Hawke’s, but they were empty. His face was bruised, covered in slashes and congealed blood. Both of his earlobes were shredded, his lower lip badly split, and his neck and shoulders covered in bite marks and half-dried blood.

Rather than stirring a dormant sense of concern, the sight of his lover in such a state reawakened Hawke’s excitement. The strong, constant glow of pleasure radiating from his dick had grown almost too constant, and therefore somehow less satisfying.

Hawke wanted more. He wanted to shoot a heavy load of spunk into Anders’s body. His faint headache and the mild burn in his chest spurred his bloodlust back into overdrive.

He leaned his upper body back up to a near-vertical position. Anders, noticing the change, seemed to come awake; he blinked and his gaze focused on Hawke’s face in a way it hadn’t before. Something he saw there provoked a relieved expression that lurked behind his mutilated countenance, but Hawke didn’t care what it was.

He reached out with both hands to slip a metal claw through the rings around the mage’s nipples. A sly grin crossed his face as he twisted them – not hard enough to tear the rings free, but hard enough to make Anders’s face crease in pain and wring another few pitiful moans and whimpers from his throat.

His anal muscles clenched involuntarily around Hawke’s dick, and the warrior smiled.

“Yeah,” he mumbled, his voice rough from not having said anything for some time. “Squeeze my cock. Tighten those muscles for me.”

Anders complied as best he could, sensing that Hawke was nearing his orgasm and eager to have the ordeal over with. His body was wracked with weakness, however, and he could barely muster any strength at all in his stretched, loosened sphincter.

“Milk my cock,” Hawke said a little louder, twisting one of Anders’s nipples harder and reaching down with his other hand to scratch a bloody star into the mage’s chest. “Squeeze me... draw out that seed. I know you want it.”

Anders cried out as Hawke sped up, increasing his already powerful rhythm into a frenzy of vigorous thrusting. The constant pain that Anders had grown used to intensified once again.

“You do, don’t you?” Hawke demanded. He squeezed Anders’s thighs with his gauntleted hands. “Don’t you?”

“Yes,” Anders said.

“Of course you do... you fucking horny maleficar. I’m going to make you beg for my spunk.”

Hawke repeatedly drew himself almost all the way out and then rammed his cock back in as hard as he could, enjoying Anders’s rhythmic, pained grunts.

“You’re going to beg me to fill you up. You’re so empty inside of anything but pathetic, impotent hatred, you need my seed inside you. Maybe I won’t even give it to you. Can you handle it? Huh?”
He slammed himself in again, as hard and as deep as he could go, to emphasize the word.

“Huh? Can you handle this, mage?”

He was fucking Anders so roughly and so fast that the mage was crying out again, squirming in pain.

Hawke gouged his flesh with his gauntlets wherever he could reach, tasting the mage’s blood when he could. He reached down with one armoured hand and splayed it over Anders’s stomach, then contracted his hand to score another star-shape.

He scraped downwards. Somewhat to his surprise, he saw that Anders’s cock was rock-hard. His face lit up with a delighted, malicious grin.

Hawke shoved Anders’s body upwards enough to allow him to continue his fuck-rhythm. With one hand, he enclosed the mage’s erection in his metallic grip. With his other, he found his dagger lying on the ground nearby.

He stabbed it suddenly into Anders’s uninjured hand, nailing it to the ground. Anders shrieked in agony.

At the same time, Hawke began to stroke his cock. Anders shuddered at the dual sensation of his hand being stabbed and cold, bloodstained metal sliding along his dick.

Hawke lessened his pace to a slow but solid fuck, pumping himself in and out of Anders hard but not as fast. At the same time he jerked Anders’s cock faster, igniting the mage’s own dormant desire.

Anders whimpered and writhed, trying to push himself against Hawke’s cock, trying to get him going faster again. Hawke’s superior strength was more than able to prevent his efforts.

He did, however, continue to speed up the pace of his hand on Anders’s cock. He watched the sweat on his brow, the desperate plea in his eyes as he edged closer to orgasm.

As he was about to ejaculate, Hawke suddenly withdrew his hand and began to slam his cock into the mage as hard and fast as he could.

Anders moaned in crazed frustration; one of his hands was pinned by the dagger and the other was crippled and useless. He couldn’t touch himself, no matter how badly he wanted to.

“Michael...”

“Beg for it. Fucking beg me for it, mage.”

“Please,” Anders panted. “Please... touch me again. I’m so close.”

“I don’t care how close you are! Beg me for my seed. You want it inside you, don’t deny it. Beg me for it or you get nothing.”

“Please,” Anders begged again. “Please come inside me, Michael. I beg you. Give me your seed. I want it so badly.”

Hawke kept up his pace as he leaned down to loom over Anders. He scraped his teeth over several of the slashes decorating Anders’s face, reopening several.

“What about Justice?” he whispered. “He wants it too, doesn’t he? Justice knows what a voracious demon he is just as much as you do. I want to hear your spirit beg for my spunk.”
Anders groaned in frustration and tried his hardest to summon the spirit.

Whereas before he had emerged so easily — utterly beyond Anders’s control — now he cowered in the darkest depths of their shared subconscious.

Anders yelled inside his own mind, demanding that the spirit emerge and do Hawke’s bidding, for both their sakes.

But Justice would not. His shame had made his presence small, a tiny spark in the raging storm of Anders’s tumultuous mind. There was the slightest flicker of blue in Anders’s eyes, under his skin, but nothing else. Justice would not come.

“He can’t,” the mage sobbed. “I can’t. I’m sorry.”

Hawke smiled nastily and reached out to yank the dagger from Anders’s hand. Immediately, Anders clenched it painfully into a fist and tried to move it over to stroke his stiff cock, but Hawke punched his wrist, disabling his hand. Instead, Hawke closed his own metal-encased fingers around Anders’s cock and jerked it, just as he felt his own climax approach.

His pace was frantic, his cock burning with the long-built up pressure and the expected imminent release. His grip on Anders’s cock tightened as he felt his balls clench.

His pupils, having contracted back to more human dimensions, began to dilate again.

He was close, very close... so close....

*There. Yes!*

Hawke let out a bellow of victory as his orgasm finally exploded deep inside Anders. Anders cried out at the same moment, ejaculating harder than he ever had in his life, spraying his chest and face with semen.

Hawke shouted some more, wordlessly, as he rode out the wave of pure ecstasy. He continued to fuck for nearly a minute, shooting load after load into the mage, emptying himself utterly in a series of rapturous spasms.

His pace and the sheer size of his dick squeezed much of his spunk out of Anders’s abused hole. It dripped down the mage’s skin and onto the dirty stone beneath them.

At last fully drained, Hawke gave one final, aggressive thrust and collapsed on top of Anders, exhausted, still buried balls deep inside him.

His over-accelerated heartbeat finally began to slow. His pupils contracted, little by little, back to their normal size. As it had before, more and more reality seeped back into his awareness.

Hawke’s weight had forced the breath out of the Anders’s lungs. For a few frightening moments, he had to struggle to breathe. Then the pressure eased.

He felt Hawke’s tongue drifting lazily over the wounds on his face. When he could, he strained for a glimpse of the warrior’s eyes.

They appeared to be returning to normal.

For a long time, as Hawke’s breathing slowed and Anders began to recover some of his strength, the cavern was quiet.
Eventually, Hawke pushed himself off of Anders and withdrew his cock. It was still semi-hard, streaked with a gruesome mixed foam of blood, saliva, and semen.

Wearily, Hawke forced himself to his feet and took off his gauntlets and greaves, leaving them next to the rest of his armour. He stretched and yawned expansively, cracking his neck and various joints. He shook out the coiled tension in his body and loosened his arms.

He stared down at Anders for a while. Then he turned away to inspect the chamber.

The mauled bodies of the dead templars had long since cooled. Only now did Hawke become aware of their pervasive stench.

He went to the charred, twisted mass of slag and ruined flesh that had once been Ser Alrik. He searched through the templar’s armour and underclothing, unmoved by the macabre nature of his task.

He found some documents, still miraculously legible. He examined them, then moved on, spending some time searching the other bodies.

Presently Hawke returned to where Anders still lay, barely conscious, only half-heartedly trying to work up the strength for a healing spell.

He retrieved his armour and put it on in silence. He picked up his greatsword and slid it into its sheath.

Finally, he looked at his lover.

“Anders,” Hawke said.

The mage looked over at him blankly. He was utterly drained, his face ashen behind the blood, his eyes holding only a dim spark.

“I’m sorry,” Hawke said evenly. “I really, really am. But you asked for it that time. You know you did.”

Anders looked away and didn’t answer, but his silence was enough.

“I know that doesn’t make it right,” Hawke continued. “But if I’m going to overcome this problem, whatever the fuck it is, I can’t do it alone. I need your help.”

Anders blinked slowly. He nodded, still not meeting Hawke’s eyes.

Hawke crouched down next to him. “Anders, look at me.”

He did so.

Hawke’s face was inches from his own. He could feel the warrior’s warm breath on his face. He could smell the blood and sweat on his body. The rotted spiciness was still there – faint, but detectable.

The possibility of identifying the peculiar scent seemed remote, but Anders inhaled deeply anyway, trying to ingrain it in his memory. Somehow, somewhere, his mind – sluggish though it was at the moment – would find the answer to this mystery.

He became aware of a sudden blessed coolness on one of his mutilated hands. It was a comforting firmness, a familiar wooden shaft.
He looked over, seeing that it was his staff. Hawke had placed it near enough to him that he could use its focal powers to heal himself without too much trouble.

Anders looked from the staff back to Hawke’s steady eyes.

“From now on, you’re going to need to be very, very careful,” Hawke whispered, in a voice of such deadly seriousness that Anders was chilled. “You’ll get what you ask for – every single time, until one or both of us is dead or this is fixed. If it ever is. If it even can be.”

He stood up straight and tossed down the documents he’d found on Alrik’s body.

“Here’s your evidence. It seems we were both right. The Tranquil Solution was Alrik’s idea. Meredith and the Divine rejected it, but as we heard, he was pretty much going to try it anyway.”

Anders took a deep breath, aborting a movement to reach for one of the documents when he remembered that he would have to take his less-injured hand off his staff to do so.

“I’m sorry I dismissed your concerns,” said Hawke, “but I hope you also realize that your blind hatred of the templars led you to seek a violent response to this first. That ultimately resulted in the death of an innocent woman. I know I’m the last person who can criticize anyone for being quick to fight, but...”

He trailed off, not really having anything else to complete the thought. He looked over to one side of the cavern.

Anders followed his gaze to the crumpled body of the young mage.

“If I were you, I’d find out who she was,” Hawke said quietly. “Her family ought to be told that she was killed by a demon.”

Anders cringed and curled into a fetal position, trying to muffle his sobs.

Hawke shrugged. “Then again, maybe they’d be better off not knowing how she died. I know I’d want to know, if it were Bethany or someone else I loved. And know I’d want vengeance.”

He turned away, towards the tunnel leading back to Darktown.

“Come by the estate later and I’ll give you what I’ve written down about the blood mages,” Hawke said.

He started to walk away, then paused and looked back.

“That is, if you still believe whatever’s wrong with me can be reversed, and if you care enough about your own life, and mine, to try.”

He started to say something else, then shook his head and departed.

Anders was left alone, lying naked in the chamber, covered in his own blood.

The sunlight entering through the cleft in the ceiling had faded into twilight. The cool, still air seemed to embody the silence that pressed in around him.

A little while later, Anders finally found his strength. He found it in a deeply buried, untouched part of himself – the part that had survived his flight from the Circle, survived Vigil’s Keep and the psychotic Mother, survived Justice and Kirkwall, survived Karl being made Tranquil, and survived Michael Hawke.
There, in his secret core, Anders was still Anders the mage, and not Anders the maleficar; and Justice was still Justice the spirit, and not Vengeance the demon.

Slowly, carefully, Anders gathered his strength, called upon his magic, and began to heal his body.
Chapter Summary

In which the passage of narrative time accelerates, Spiders Happen, shit gets interesting, and a wild new protagonist appears.

Time passed.

Hawke’s self-control continued to improve. Anders was careful to never again provoke him, intentionally or otherwise.

After Hawke left, he had healed himself as best he could. Most of the injuries Hawke had inflicted were easily dealt with, but the mess of his left hand had gone untended a little too long. Even his extensive knowledge of restorative magic couldn’t fully repair the damage, at least not right away.

Anders had done his best regardless, and his hand was now functional, but stiff. Moving his fingers occasionally brought out echoes of pain. He hoped that continuing to treat it over time would ease the lingering problems, but he had no idea if it would ever be the same again. Fortunately, the residual traces were not ready apparent to others and barely, if ever, affected his ability to heal and fight.

Varric said nothing when he saw him the next day, but he was clearly relieved to see Anders alive and apparently unharmed. He seemed reassured that Anders continued to emerge from his close encounters with Hawke intact, and never pressed when Anders declined to answer his circumlocutious, subtly worried questions.

A few times, however, Anders caught the dwarf examining him closely when he thought the mage wasn’t looking. It wasn’t long before Varric’s practiced eye had detected the stiffness in Anders’s hands, the new care with which he handled his staff, and especially his changed behaviour around Hawke.

Anders now tended to avoid looking directly into Hawke’s eyes while speaking to him unless it would be insulting not to. He was more careful in his suggestions on how to deal with corrupt templars. He was definitely more zealous than necessary about healing Hawke’s wounds – sometimes even over the warrior’s explicit objections.

If Varric had drawn any conclusions from what he observed, he hadn’t yet spoken about them to Anders... although it seemed likely to happen eventually.

Interestingly, Isabela also seemed to have picked up on the altered dynamic between Anders and Hawke. Anders suspected that Varric had filled her in on what he knew, as well as what he had speculated on.

As time went on, Isabela grew conspicuously less snarky whenever both Hawke and Anders were present, avoiding topics that dealt blatantly with sex. She stopped baiting Hawke’s annoyance as often, and did so much more cautiously. Whenever he was clearly in a foul mood and responding nastily to anything not immediately relevant to their situation, she tended to fall uncharacteristically silent.
Anders sometimes caught Isabela shooting him concerned glances. A few times when Hawke was absent from their usual gathering in the Hanged Man, she even asked him how the mage rebellion was going.

Anders was startled and bemused by the question, since he knew well Isabela’s disinterested views on the plight of Kirkwall’s mages. Her carefree attitude had rubbed him the wrong way in the past, and started more than one argument.

When he considered it further, however, Anders wondered whether this apparent newfound interest was Isabela’s roundabout way of expressing her concern for him, personally. After all, she could never have outright ask him if he was alright; it went against the grain of her personality.

Although Anders had lost some of his stomach for outright fighting for mage freedom after Justice (after he) had murdered Alrik’s captive – instead focusing on peaceful protests, assisting the mage underground, and caring for the poor the Chantry ignored – he was touched that Isabela actually seemed to care about him after all, despite their clashes in the past.

He informed her that things were going as well as could be reasonably expected given the current climate, but declined to offer any further details. Isabela clearly wasn’t sure whether to believe him or not, but she took his answer at face value with her usual charm.

As for the other members of their mismatched band of adventurers – Merrill was as oblivious as ever, although she did seem to notice Hawke’s deteriorating mood and often tried to cheer him up.

Sometimes, it even worked.

Fenris was his usual surly self, although he was considerably more perceptive than Merrill and privately asked Varric what was going on. Varric knew that Hawke and Fenris agreed about slavery and the mage situation in Kirkwall and little else, so he was unsure how much of Hawke’s confidence he should reveal to the taciturn elf. For that matter, he wasn’t really entirely clear on the situation himself.

Varric explained what little he knew to Fenris, and suggested that he do as the dwarf did: tread lightly around Hawke but watch him closely, and avoid the subject of mages in general. Fenris agreed this was wise.

Aveline, for her part, seemed to have deduced most of the salient details on her own and had chosen to deal with the matter by not being there. The fewer laws she saw Hawke breaking, for whatever reason (and there were many), the fewer reasons she had to rail him about his behaviour.

Despite her preference to leave Hawke alone, Aveline remained willing to help him whenever he needed her. She mentioned more than once that she owed him that much, for helping her get together with Donnic among other things – and also that for all his (several, enumerated) faults, she cared about him as a friend. But she requested to accompany him on his sojourns around the city and beyond less and less, and her visits to the Hanged Man became correspondingly less frequent.

∞

Perhaps inevitably, Michael Hawke was named Champion of Kirkwall by Knight-Commander Meredith Stannard after his defeat of the Arishok in single combat.

Hawke had never had anything but respect for the Qunari, and he’d had no interest in being the one to take on their powerful, imposing leader. He hadn’t really wanted to fight the Qunari at all, let alone duel the Arishok. Unfortunately, circumstances had forced his hand, and Aveline had persuaded him to defend the city he had come to call home. Those closest to him noticed that his
mind largely seemed to be elsewhere throughout the ordeal.

The duel was fought at Fenris’s suggestion over Isabela, who had returned with the stolen Tome of Koslun conveniently right as the Arishok was demanding to know where it was. It was Anders, though, who encouraged him by speaking some private words beforehand. None save the two of them knew what Anders had said to convince Hawke to go through with the duel, although Varric predictably proceeded to speculate wildly about the contents of that conversation.

The fight was long and tiring for both combatants. The Arishok was a formidable fighter, and easily proved a match for Hawke’s skill and strength. More than once the Arishok had appeared to be on the verge of victory, only to retreat as Hawke sprang back from what had seemed like certain death. Throughout it all, Hawke remained utterly in control of himself, his eyes focused and normal, only drawing on his natural battle fervour.

Finally, after nearly an hour of intense combat, Hawke drove his greatsword through the Arishok’s chest, ending the brief Qunari-Kirkwall war and saving the city where he lived. He then collapsed in exhaustion to exuberant cheers rising around him, spreading throughout the city like wildfire with the news of his victory.

The last thing that Hawke wanted was public gratitude or yet more pomp and ceremony from Kirkwall’s elite. Aided by Anders, Varric, Fenris, Isabela, and Aveline, he’d slipped away to his estate in the chaotic aftermath of the duel, barely acknowledging the Knight-Commander’s praise and her bestowal of the title of Champion.

None in Kirkwall would ever doubt Hawke’s combat prowess again, and they all wanted to thank him personally for his efforts. Many called on him to take the newly vacant seat of the Viscount.

But for days after the duel, Hawke remained within his estate, and his manservant turned away every single one of the subsequent flood of visitors. The Champion was resting, said Bodahn, and was not seeing anyone at this time. Only a select few – those who were permitted to know the location of the Hawke estate’s hidden entrance – were allowed in.

For the rest of Kirkwall, the Champion who had saved them all from the Qunari was but a spectral non-presence: a symbol of the might and resilience of their city, and a reminder never to yield to foreign influences. Only much later would the title in popular consciousness become attached to the man himself. Notably absent from nearly every retelling of this tale was the ironic fact that Hawke himself, despite having been born of a native Amell, was a foreigner who retained the mannerisms and accent of a born-and-raised Fereldan.

Thus began (assisted significantly by Varric) the legend of the Champion: an unknown man who rose rapidly to prominence from a sea of faceless commoners, becoming a noble hero and saviour... and who then, just as quickly, vanished back into the crowds.

∞

Throughout the brief Qunari invasion and its tumultuous aftermath, during which Knight-Commander Meredith stepped into the role of Viscount of Kirkwall, Anders had continued his efforts to discover what had changed Hawke’s bloodlust, and how.

Hawke himself had been reserved since the incident in the cave, and he became moodier still after his duel with the Arishok. He grew distant and formal around Anders, speaking little and answering questions briefly. He returned affection when Anders expressed it to him – often hungrily, although always with restraint – but he never sought out the mage for sex, nor did he press him for updates about his condition.

∞
Though he was a little hurt by the cold treatment, Anders couldn’t blame Hawke for doing what he felt was necessary to keep his bloodlust utterly under control.

He also couldn’t help being a little relieved that Hawke was making such an effort. Whenever he was around him in a combat situation, there was always a creeping fear that the warrior would lose his grip and fall into his killing lust. His episodes since the night of Leandra’s death had escalated in severity each time, and the last one had come far too close to lethal for comfort.

Anders had no desire to find out how far Hawke would go in his altered state, nor did he want to know what Hawke might be capable of if the condition were left untreated for too long. Hawke seemed to sense Anders’s anxiety around him, and Varric told him privately that Hawke often went out of his way to vent his anger elsewhere, when Anders wasn’t around.

These days, every moment Anders had to spare from his other work was devoted to feverishly researching blood magic. Outlawed everywhere but Tevinter, the forbidden school of magic was nevertheless flourishing in Kirkwall, for several reasons.

Long before the Qunari incident, Hawke had given him detailed (if rather scrambled) reports on his battles with Gascard DuPuis and Tarohne. Later, he completed reports on Decimus and Quentin. The accounts provided Anders with much useful information, but they were merely a jumping-off point for more in-depth studies.

Anders had never approved of blood magic, and his feelings of revulsion at the practice only deepened the more he learned. He persisted, for he had no choice if he was to find answers for Hawke, but many extra problems came hand-in-hand with his new research.

Given that he already had to avoid templars and was actively assisting rebel mages fleeing rape, torture, Tranquility, and death, having to venture into the city’s extensive black markets to find ancient tomes of obscene magic or imported Tevinter artifacts made Anders’s life even more difficult. He was already known to some degree to the templars at the Gallows; he had no desire to give them even more reasons to come after him, nor did he wish to accrue a sinister reputation with the very people he was trying to help.

The knowledge he came across was frequently disturbing and often outright sickening, but it usually aided his research in some way. Several times, however, Anders could find no viable way to test a critical hypothesis other than live experimentation.

He absolutely refused to use sapient beings as test subjects, no matter that they would provide a wealth of invaluable information, and he was intensely relieved when he mentioned as much to Hawke and the warrior readily agreed. If Hawke had insisted, Anders might well have considered crossing a line that he had long ago sworn never to cross. Only for Hawke would he have compromised his own sense of self in such a way, and it was a great comfort to know that Hawke was both still himself in regards to his values as well as unwilling to take advantage of Anders’s devotion to him.

Instead, Anders used goats, nugs, and other animals as his power sources and test subjects for his first forays into blood magic. This alone was farther than he had ever before taken his pursuit of knowledge, and though it filled him with awful shame and disgust to do so, he never hesitated. Everything he did, he did for Hawke.

As his experimentation meant that he had to maintain an even greater vigilance than usual for templars and their accomplices, Anders worried for some time about finding a suitable location to conduct his research. After weeks of frustrated searching, he finally gave in and presented the problem to Hawke – who readily allowed him access to the deeply-buried cellars of his estate. The
subterranean rooms, complete with a hidden passage to Darktown, were well-suited to the task.

Anders never breathed a word of his activities to Aveline, and neither did Hawke. It was far easier that way, and she would hardly have thanked them for involving her. Fenris, likewise, they kept out of the loop for the sake of convenience. Varric and Isabela might have had some inkling of what was going on, but fairly early into Anders’s research they had both gleaned enough details to wisely refrain from asking for more.

However, Anders soon found himself in the ironic position of asking Merrill for advice and aid. The Dalish elf’s knowledge of blood magic was far greater than his, and although she was startled and suspicious when he began asking her tentative questions, she came around once she understood that it was to help Hawke. Her assistance proved invaluable.

Months on, Anders had made significant progress, but perhaps inevitably, he reached a dead end. Both he and Merrill had exhausted every avenue readily available to them, and the options that remained were invariably much more dangerous and morally questionable to pursue.

Anders hadn’t yet received responses from either of the two friends he had asked for help – one for her extensive knowledge, the other for her worldly power and experience. At this point, he was hoping to receive missives from one or both of them very soon. He trusted them enough to know that something must be coming, for neither would have ignored a problem the magnitude of which he had presented them with. Still, the lack of word was starting to worry him.

Anders had constructed, painstakingly and at great cost, a theory as to what might be wrong with Hawke. He strongly suspected Tarohne’s work of being the original culprit, and there was some evidence that a spell of Quentin’s had catalytically aggravated the effect. There was one critical element missing from his theory to tie it all together, however – each disparate facet of the problem made sense on its own, but without the connecting element, the theory fell apart.

Anders hadn’t yet presented this explanation to Hawke, as he could not begin to formulate a possible treatment until he was absolutely sure what they was dealing with. Merrill knew about his idea, and she had agreed that they had best not say anything about it to Hawke until they were sure.

Yet until he received an answer from either of his friends, Anders had very few options left to uncover the missing element. All but one of those necessitated the unthinkable: crossing the line into human experimentation and sacrifice.

Even the one non-murderous option wasn’t particularly attractive. In his explorations of Kirkwall’s underworld, Anders had gone through all of his contacts, all of Varric’s and Isabela’s, several more he had made along the way, and most of Hawke’s. There was one, however, that he had not yet dared to try.

Although Hawke insisted that this being was mostly harmless and that visitors to his lair were entirely safe so long as they followed the rules, Anders had heard far more about Xenon the Antiquarian and his Black Emporium than Hawke realized.

Anders had no desire whatsoever to journey so deep into Darktown, especially not to visit such a dangerous and unpredictable entity as Xenon. Unfortunately, every source he could find agreed that it was the one place in the world where he could access the Emergent Compendium: an enigmatic tome of cryptic, ever-changing knowledge.

Left with no other choice but the interminable one of waiting, Anders gritted his teeth and made the decision. Perhaps Xenon would be amenable to sharing some of his knowledge. It would be expensive, but the possibility that the Compendium could reveal the link he needed to complete his
theory was too great to ignore – especially in light of the horrible alternatives.

Anders intended to broach the subject with Hawke when they were next alone. He didn’t anticipate any resistance to the idea; Hawke had offered to take him to the Black Emporium more than once already, and only Anders’s unwillingness to expose either of them to the dangers of that place any more than absolutely necessary had prevented him from accepting.

On all other fronts things seemed to be going relatively well, considering the circumstances.

Hawke hadn’t lost control of his bloodlust since the Alrik incident. As time went on, he and Anders became less apprehensive about showing physical affection to one another – more like they had been before Leandra’s death.

Anders treasured the rare times that Hawke opened up to him about what he was experiencing. Despite the bizarre and unknown nature of his affliction and the turmoil it had introduced into their relationship, it felt good to know that he still trusted Anders enough to talk to him about it, even after everything that had already happened.

Hawke revealed that his urges to kill for no apparent reason were becoming more frequent, harder to resist, and harder to separate from the desires of his body. Fighting bandits in the streets at night and hunting Tal-Vashoth on the coast provided an outlet, but these activities could only take him so far.

Furthermore, word was starting to spread among the criminal underworld that hardly anywhere in Kirkwall was safe at night – for outlaws. It would have been amusing if the reason for it weren’t so dire. Even Aveline was growing suspicious at the unusual quiet on the illegal side of Kirkwall, although fortunately none of her guards on night patrol had ever encountered Hawke.

With the Qunari largely gone from the city, Hawke lacked a clear and consistent external enemy to contend with. Despite his unwillingness to fight them, the Arishok and his men had posed an obvious threat to the city on which Hawke could focus his wrath.

Lacking that focus, his bloodlust was intensifying, and his eagerness for battle and desire for sex were becoming increasingly intertwined. Both he and Anders knew that eventually, as these factors outpaced his willpower, Hawke’s control would start to slip.

In the late spring of 9:34 Dragon, the day they had long feared finally arrived.

∞

Hawke led several of his companions on an “outing” – a hike along the coast, taking advantage of the beautiful weather to look for a Harlot’s Blush flower for the Formari herbalist, Solivitus. At the same time, he asked the others to keep an eye out for any remnants of the Tal-Vashoth. A Qunari envoy in the city, Taarbas, was offering compensation for their blades.

Varric accompanied Hawke as usual, as did Anders and Isabela. Aveline came along to keep an eye on them all and to investigate reports of brigand activity in the area. Merrill tagged along as well; she had been spending a lot of time at the Hawke estate recently, and she had bonded with Hawke’s Mabari hound, Reaver.

The two of them, the massive warhound and the young Dalish elf, romped about in the grass in a way that Varric had a hard time not thinking of as “frolicking.” Reaver was clearly having a wonderful time dancing around Merrill and running to fetch items she threw for him. These items included several sticks and rocks, a broken and decaying shortbow, a human leg bone, a recently dead rabbit, and a half-rotted qunari javelin.
The day was sunny but cool, the sky cloudless and inviting. A gentle salty breeze drifted in from the placid ocean on their right, the occasional slip of a breaking wave the only other noise from that direction.

Anders watched the path ahead while Isabela traded snide banter with Hawke, who seemed to be in an unusually good mood. Varric kept an eye on Merrill while Aveline scanned far-off rocks and checked behind them frequently, watching for potential ambushers.

As it turned out, she needn’t have bothered. All of them heard the first clashes and shouts of a distant battle long before they saw it.

Merrill froze in the act of an overhand throw, undisturbed by the fact that the leg bone in her hand still had some scraps of flesh clinging to it. Reaver went still, his ears perked up, growling. Everyone else paused to listen.


Hawke nodded. “And humans,” he said. “Possibly elves, too. I think we’ve found your highwaymen, Aveline.”

“Let’s investigate,” Aveline suggested. “But stay out of sight as long as possible.”

Hawke led the way towards the distant sounds of combat. All of them were alert now, silent and creeping forward as quietly as they could.

Reaver stalked ahead of Merrill, his eyes darting about and searching for danger. Isabela had her blades already in hand – Varric hadn’t even heard them whisper from their sheaths. He himself unstrapped Bianca from his back and deployed her, loading several bolts.

They approached a bend in the path with the ocean on one side and a high bluff of rock and loose soil on the other. The sounds of battle were close now, and unmistakable. The fight seemed to be occurring just around the bend, obscured by the bluff.

Hawke indicated with his hand that the others should wait, but gestured for Reaver to come forward with him. He moved to the edge of the bluff and peered around it.

After a few moments of observation, he returned to the group. His face was unexpectedly lit up by an amused grin.

Anders, watching the warrior approach, felt his heart lift. He hadn’t seen Hawke smile in months.

“What is it?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t think we need to worry about being heard,” Hawke said, but he kept his voice down too. “It looks like a Tal-Vashoth warband ambushed some highwaymen – humans and elves. But their fight also happened to disturb a nest of those really big spiders. It’s a three-way brawl, and nobody’s winning.”

Varric smiled. Isabela snickered quietly, also seeing the humour. Merrill just looked fascinated.

“Do you suppose the Tal-Vashoth drove the highwaymen into the spiders?” Aveline wondered.

Hawke shrugged, his armour clanking with the movement. “I suppose it’s possible. But I saw spiders attacking Tal-Vashoth and the brigands both. If that was their intention, they failed pretty spectacularly at keeping the spiders’ attention off themselves.”
“Bandits versus oxmen versus spiders,” Isabela said, still giggling a little. “This I’d like to see. I’m rooting for the spiders, myself.”

“Aren’t we all,” said Aveline. “But we shouldn’t leave it to fate. If any of those highwaymen survive, they’ll keep terrorizing this area of the coast. They must be dealt with.”

Hawke turned around and went back for another look. Aveline went with him, and the others followed a moment after.

“That *does* rather look like an ambush gone terribly, horribly wrong,” Aveline commented after peering around the bluff. Isabela nudged her aside to get a look herself.

“Ripe for a fourth party to charge in to scatter them all like rats, don’t you think?” Hawke said eagerly, his eyes dancing. He reached behind him and freed his greatsword from its sheath.

“No yet,” Aveline began. “If we wait a little longer, they’ll whittle each other down and-”

Her suggestion fell on deaf ears. Before any of them fully realized what was happening, Hawke had yelled a battle cry and charged around the bluff into the fray, Reaver at his heels.

“...we can move in to mop up the survivors,” Aveline finished dryly. She sighed and shook her head. She drew her blade, readied her shield, and charged after Hawke.

Isabela darted after her. Varric cursed and went too, keeping close to Isabela’s side. Anders and Merrill hung back before following more sedately, it not being immediately obvious where their magic would be the most helpful.

As the battle came into view, it was clear that it was already winding down anyway.

Dead humans, elves, and Tal-Vashoth littered the sandy ground. The path here widened into a fairly large, open area; the Tal-Vashoth appeared to have leapt out from behind rocks, or down from an overhanging ledge above the path. Neither they nor the band of highwaymen they had ambushed appeared to have realized that underneath the ledge was a cave in which a number of giant spiders nested.

Around a dozen highwaymen and five or six Tal-Vashoth remained alive. The battle had evidently shifted since Hawke’s report, because the spiders were clearly winning, and more of them were constantly emerging from the cave.

Everyone that remained, ambusher and ambushed alike, had banded together temporarily to fight back the flood of angry arachnids. Unfortunately for them, the nest they had disturbed was far larger than was indicated by the narrow cave opening. The air was filled with the clashes of weapons, shouts of bravado, fear, and pain, and the hissing and screeching of the spiders.

The outlaws’ slim chance of victory, born of solidarity in the face of a common enemy, rapidly dwindled to certain doom as Hawke arrived on the scene.

He tore into the defenders’ line from behind with his greatsword. The armoured warrior had decapitated two humans in the span of a second and a half, impaled an elf struggling with two short swords against a spider, and engaged a wounded Tal-Vashoth before anyone but the spiders had realized his presence on the battlefield. Cries of terror and frustrated rage ensued.

Reaver immediately went for a spider that reared up to menace Hawke, tearing its front legs off with his jaws. Aveline arrived at Hawke’s side shortly thereafter, defending his right flank from the horde of spiders.
The remaining highwaymen, seeing their chances for survival plummeting by the second, turned tail and fled. Several spiders gave chase, and a few Tal-Vashoth roared their contempt.

“Isabela! Varric!” Aveline shouted. “Stop them!”

Isabela darted through the battling Tal-Vashoth and spiders, somehow managing to evade injury even as she slipped among heaving blades and skittering spider fangs. She slid behind some rocks on the far side of the path near the cave opening, heading towards the fleeing highwaymen. Varric, meanwhile, selected one of his prized explosive bolts and took aim.

“Watch out, Rivaini!” he yelled in warning, and fired.

His bolt passed over Hawke’s shoulder as he was exchanging frenzied blows with a massive Tal-Vashoth warrior and impacted solidly into a retreating human. It burst in a voluminous spray of liquid fire, killing the human instantly and knocking several of his now-charred comrades to the ground.

Isabela appeared through the smoke as if from thin air and dashed among the groaning, disabled highwaymen, unscrupulously running her blades along their exposed throats as she passed. One or two remained upright and still fleeing; the pirate called out a challenge to them, and they turned back to fight her, incensed at her taunts.

Isabela appeared not to notice that five or six spiders were still coming right at her from behind, so Varric fired again, his impeccable aim pinning one of the spiders to the rock face behind it.

Anders and Merrill stepped in to take care of the rest. Anders erected an energy barrier to block the spiders’ access to the dueling pirate and her opponents, and Merrill summoned a barrage of fiery projectiles, raining incandescent death down onto the indignant creatures.

Hawke, meanwhile, had managed to gain the upper hand over the skilled Tal-Vashoth he was fighting. He cut downwards across the warrior’s body with a triumphant yell, and the Tal-Vashoth fell to his knees as weakness and blood loss overcame him. Hawke rapidly impaled him through the throat and moved on.

At his side, Reaver was snarling and bloodied, savaging the spiders that had gone for Hawke while he fought the Tal-Vashoth. Several ichor-stained corpses lay crumpled and twisted about him, most of them missing at least two limbs.

Their next opponents were all spiders – only two other Tal-Vashoth remained alive, fighting on the far side of the path and beset on all sides by the enraged arachnids. They wouldn’t last much longer.

Beyond them, Isabela had handily defeated the two highwaymen, and was now preparing to toss a sticky tar bomb into the mass of spiders.

Varric continued to snipe individual spiders, defended by Hawke, Reaver, and Aveline. Yet even firing Bianca as fast as was mechanically possible, he could see more and more of them continuing to emerge from their nest, all of them livid and eager for blood.

“Blondie!” Varric said, attracting Anders’s attention. “Do you think you could collapse that ledge in front of the cave? If we don’t stop the horde, they’ll just keep coming. Maker knows how many of them there are still lurking in that hole.”

“Yes,” Anders said. “Good idea. Merrill – can you help me?”

“I think so,” said the elf. “If you push from above and I pull from below, I think we can break off the
rock and seal the cave.”

“Good. Let’s do it, then. Ready? One – two – three!”

Merrill gestured emphatically with her staff at the same time Anders slammed his into the ground. The rock ledge cracked ominously, releasing a puff of dust along its length, then came crashing down with a roar.

Dozens of spiders were crushed flat under the sudden onslaught of rock and debris. A few others managed to escape the rockslide, but were stunned or otherwise injured by flying chunks of cliff face.

The staggering, bewildered, and annoyed spiders, already wounded and covered in dust, were even less amused when Isabela’s tar bomb exploded in their midst, showering several with devilishly sticky black gunk. Several of those that had been lucky enough not to be trapped by falling rocks were immediately stuck where they had been, flailing their few unhindered limbs ineffectually as they struggled to free themselves. One or two, their faces covered with the ooze, were unable to breathe and suffocated right there.

Hawke roared with gleeful laughter at the sight and tore into the spiders with renewed ferocity. He carved a swath through them, sending dismembered spider fangs and limbs flying in every direction and stabbing several of them through their large, round bodies. Reaver darted and lunged around him, mauling with teeth and claws any spider that got too close to his master’s back.

Aveline could barely keep up with Hawke as he rampaged through the horde. When some of the spiders managed to interpose themselves between the two warriors, she desisted and fell back to defend Varric and the mages, who were picking off stragglers from afar.

There were now a manageable number of the arachnids on the battlefield, and it was only a matter of time before they died.

Isabela dodged and weaved around the edge of the melee, stabbing some of the creatures with poison glittering on her blades and slicing off others’ fangs as she passed. Varric and Bianca sniped any that detached themselves from the horde to come at her. Merrill chose to magically alter the spiders Isabela targeted, making them stumble around in confusion or freeze with alien terror.

Anders kept an eye on Hawke, readying a healing spell in case it was needed, but the maverick warrior was moving around and swinging his sword too quickly for Anders to see if he was even wounded.

Aveline, for her part, was kept busy stabbing several spiders who went for Varric, Anders, and Merrill. Many of them she cut up enough to leave floundering and issuing gouts of black blood, too wounded to continue their attack. Others she simply bashed hard in the face with her shield, crushing their heads or rendering them stupefied and easily dispatched.

Soon enough, only a few spiders remained alive, crawling over piles of their dead comrades. The remaining Tal-Vashoth had long since succumbed to the claws and venomous fangs and lay trampled beneath a wash of dead spiders.

Isabela made her way, panting and covered in spider guts but impressively uninjured, over to where Aveline stood with Varric, Anders, and Merrill. She turned to watch Hawke, his greatsword slicing through the few spiders that remained alive, taunting them into falling against his blade.

That was when he made his mistake.
A confused spider emerged from a mound of its dead brethren near where Isabela had killed the fleeing highwaymen. It cast around dazedly, spotted Merrill, and skittered towards her with a drunken weave to its gait. It hissed and screeched a challenge, attracting Hawke’s attention.

“Reaver!” Hawke called, pointing. “Get that one!”

The Mabari hound, his thick coat having protected him from the spiders’ fangs and still enthused for combat, barked happily and charged from his master’s side to assail the attacking spider.

“There’s no need,” Isabela said, entertained, as Merrill raised her staff threateningly. “There are five of us here....”

Hawke didn’t hear her, still kicking and stabbing at the spiders attacking him. Aveline started moving towards him, ready to render assistance, but Hawke’s careening blade was almost as dangerous to approach as the massed spiders.

“He can finish them off,” Varric said to the Guard-Captain. “Let him have his fun, it works off stress.”

Aveline acknowledged the dwarf’s comment but continued to move forward, just in case. Her caution proved timely.

Hawke gave a final roar and a mighty slice, slicing off the entire top half of a spider and then unnecessarily cutting the twitching bottom half into quarters. Panting with the exertion of battle, he leaned over, sword resting against the dead human on the ground.

Anders looked at Hawke closely. His pupils were widely dilated, having covered most of the green in his eyes.

Exhausted, still coming down from his battle high, Hawke didn’t notice the one last spider going stealthily for his back. Reaver, teeth and claws buried in the other spider across the path, wasn’t around to defend his back as usual.

“Hawke! Look out!” Aveline said, and Hawke turned around in time to get a face full of spider claws.

The enraged creature leapt at him from atop several of its dead nestmates. Its fangs found his neck and sliced; its clawed appendages scrabbled at his armour, the sides of his face and the top of his head. Unable to raise his sword in time, Hawke dropped it and fell over backwards with the spider on top of him.

Isabela and Merrill let out startled gasps, and Varric chimed in with a succinct “Oh, shit!”

Anders was already halfway towards the scene, but Aveline was closer still. She impaled the spider cleanly, lifted its entire body on her sword, and hurled it against the rock face with a splat. It didn’t move from where it fell.

“Michael!” Anders exclaimed as he came upon Hawke. The warrior was alive and blinking, breathing hard, but his face and neck were savaged.

Anders reached down to help him up, but Hawke leapt to his feet on his own. Anders looked at him, the words forming on his lips asking him to stay still so he could heal him.

Hawke cut him off with a fiery kiss before he could speak. His tongue invaded Anders’s mouth; his arms crept around the mage’s shoulders to grab the back of his head.
Aveline furrowed her brow in bemusement as she wiped her blade clean on the hairy body of a dead spider. Merrill giggled, while Isabela made an appreciative noise and fanned herself. Varric rubbed his forehead and said “Hawke, is this the time?”

Hawke ignored them all. Anders tried to push him away, and because Hawke didn’t appear to be expecting it, he succeeded somewhat the first time. They were parted long enough for him to catch a glimpse of the warrior’s eyes.

They were completely black, totally inhuman.

Hawke closed the distance between them and locked his mouth on Anders’s once again.

Anders struggled. He managed to free himself long enough to say “Help! Help!”

Aveline looked up from what she was doing with a frown. Merrill abruptly stopped giggling; Isabela paused, her hand still in the air. Varric started forward worriedly.

Anders freed his mouth from Hawke’s hungry kissing again, but it was becoming impossible to keep the warrior off him. Hawke’s tongue and teeth were moving all over the mage’s face and neck, smearing his own blood on Anders’s skin. The warrior’s arms were wrapped around his, making it hard to gain any leverage.

“He’s lost control!” Anders yelled, an edge of panic in his voice. “Get him off me, hurry!”

Aveline had no idea what was going on, but she could hear the panic in Anders’s voice easily enough. She stepped in and grabbed Hawke by the shoulders, attempting to yank him back and away from the mage.

Hawke snarled at her, raising his hand to strike. Aveline gasped, startled backwards by his empty, ebony eyes and the resonant, otherworldly groan in his voice.

“Holy Andraste!” Aveline said. “Anders, what’s wrong with him?”

By this time, Isabela and Varric had reached them. Isabela pulled Anders away as Hawke was going for him again with his teeth bared in an animalistic snarl. Varric slid around Anders and attempted to trip Hawke.

The warrior turned his glare on Varric and started to reach for his throat, but a burst of spirit magic sent him reeling. Hawke turned to Merrill as Varric scampered away.

Merrill looked terrified and astonished at what she’d just done, but her face and voice were determined as she raised her staff and pointed it at him.

“Hawke,” she said, a barely perceptible tremor in her voice, “relax. Listen. Come back to us.”

Aveline had recovered herself and was heading for Hawke again as he lunged for Anders and Isabela. The pirate stepped forward, one of her blades raised threateningly, but Hawke easily dodged around it and backhanded her hard enough to knock her to the ground.

He let out another furious roar, and a clearly inhuman and otherworldly wail simmered under his voice. It was like no sound any of them had ever heard before. Covered in blood, snarling like a demon, and with eyes black and deadly, Hawke had suddenly become terrifying and dangerous and utterly unfamiliar.

“Maker’s breath!” Varric exclaimed. “What is that?”
“Aveline,” Anders panted. “Hold him for a minute – I’ll try to contain it!”

Aveline wrapped her arms around Hawke in a bear hug from behind. He immediately struggled, trying to wrench his arms free and tossing Aveline around on his back like a clinging child.

“Flames, he’s strong!” Aveline cried. “Reaver! Help me!”

The Mabari hound charged forward, perhaps recognizing a change for the worse in his master or perhaps obeying the Guard-Captain whom he knew almost as well. He locked his powerful jaws around Hawke’s wrist and tugged him off balance, allowing Aveline to secure her grip.

Hawke snarled again, incoherent in his mania. The otherworldly resonance was deeper this time; everyone present felt its thrum in their chests.

“Hurry, Anders!” Aveline yelled.

Anders gestured, green creation magic flowering around his palm and his staff as he twisted it in an arc before him. A green glyph flashed into being under Hawke’s feet. Its magic surged upwards, paralyzing him where he stood.

“Back away, Aveline,” Anders called.

She did so. Reaver let go and backed off as well.

Anders lifted his staff, and the glyph rose out of the ground, rotating around Hawke and tracing a shimmering green cage of spiraling light to keep him contained. The glyph continued to rise and fall within the cage, constantly renewing the paralysis magic.

Merrill and Varric helped the stunned Isabela to her feet as they all gathered around the imprisoned warrior, staring at him in fear and wonder.

Hawke was frozen in place, his face twisted into a defiant snarl, his teeth bloody and his eyes completely black. He was giving off a powerful scent of fresh blood, much more even than would be expected from his wounds, tinged with something else – something spicy and indistinctly wrong.

His eyes were the most uncanny part of him. They were totally alien, with no visible trace of sclera. If there was even still a person behind that magic-twisted face, it wasn’t anyone they knew.

“That is absolutely not normal,” Isabela remarked. She sounded afraid, and more than a little peeved, as she cradled her bruised jaw. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Yes,” Aveline said. “What is wrong with him, Anders? What in Andraste’s name was that noise he was making? I’ve never heard anything like it. The human throat is not supposed to be able to make that kind of sound.”

“It sounded like-” Merrill began, but Anders silenced her with an urgent gesture. Aveline and Varric looked at him suspiciously.

“It’s... a bit of a long story,” Anders said cautiously. “First let me heal him. I think the serious injury is what triggered this... state. Reversing it should bring him back to normal.”

The rest of them watched in silence as Anders raised and pointed his staff, flicking diaphanous tendrils of blue energy off it to swim through the green magical cage and curl almost tenderly around Hawke’s injured neck.
Before their eyes, the healing magic closed the lacerations, knit the rent flesh back together, and staunched the flow of blood. In moments, Hawke was healed.

As it happened, he underwent a remarkable transformation. His pupils shrank to their normal dimensions, his eyes becoming fully human again. The spicy scent around him disappeared as quickly as it had manifested. Although his face and body remained frozen as they were, the unearthly menace seemed to drain right out of him.

When it was done, he was Hawke again, just paralyzed in a threatening pose.

Anders tapped his staff on the ground with a brief flash of green force. The translucent spiral cage remained, but the paralyzing glyph oscillating inside it faded away.

Hawke stumbled against the wall of his prison and bounced off of it, his hateful glare melting away into a panicked frown as his hands moved to scramble at his neck.

“Spider!” he yelled. “I-what?”

Anders and Merrill exchanged glances. Aveline was frowning intently.

Hawke rapidly realized that the spider wasn’t there. He stared down at his hands, then looked around for his sword. Finally, he raised his eyes to see everyone else watching him through the filmy green barrier.

“What...?” Hawke repeated. “Maker’s breath, where’s that spider? Why am I...?”

He reached out to touch the barrier, feeling its solidity. It buzzed and flared in response, denying his exit.

Nobody said anything. Hawke tapped the barrier a few times, his face growing irritated.

“Speak,” he demanded. “What just happened?”

“Michael,” Anders said cautiously. “What do you remember?”

Hawke squinted at him, looked down at the ground, and lifted his hands to run his fingers through his hair.

“Uhhh... fighting. Tal-Vashoth and some brigands. Lots of spiders. I killed quite a lot of them, but then one snuck up on me and it bit me in the neck.”

Carefully, he felt his neck and face with his hands. Finding no wounds but a lot of still-congealing blood, he looked up again angrily.

“Would someone please tell me what is going on?”

“He doesn’t remember anything after the spider attacked him,” Isabela muttered. “Convenient.”

She rubbed her bruised jaw gently, looking away from Hawke’s penetrating gaze.

Anders raised his staff. “I’m going to release him.”

Aveline stopped him with a gauntleted hand on his wrist. “Are you sure that’s wise?”

“Um, I’d like to echo that concern,” Varric put in. “How do we know he won’t go nuts again and kill us all?”
Anders shook off Aveline’s hand. “He won’t. He’s fine now. It’s only when he loses control that he becomes dangerous. And he won’t lose control again.”

Aveline stared at him, hard. Anders stared right back, refusing to look away.

Eventually Aveline nodded slowly. “Alright then. But when we get back to Kirkwall,” she warned, “the three of us are going to have a talk about what just happened.”

Anders shook his head. “Fine. Whatever.”

He tapped the green barrier with his staff, and it vanished. Hawke, who had been watching their exchange with narrowed eyes, was now able to stretch his arms. He did so, looking around for his sword.

Varric raised his hand. “I think I’d like to be included in that discussion.”

“Me too,” Isabela agreed.

Hawke glanced from one of them to the other and folded his arms. This time, it was he who looked away from Isabela’s accusing stare.

Varric looked at Merrill. “How about you, Daisy?” he asked. “You should probably come, too. This... seems like it might affect all of us.”

Merrill looked embarrassed. “I... um... kind of already know about it,” she mumbled.

Aveline looked at her in surprise. “What? What do you mean, you already know? What do you know?”

She glanced over at Hawke, who glared back in sullen silence, arms still crossed. He seemed to have worked out what had happened on his own, and was uncharacteristically allowing them all to discuss him in his presence without interrupting.

“This is serious,” Aveline added. “Hawke is the Champion of Kirkwall. Whatever’s going on with him, it has the potential to affect the stability of the city.”

“Yes, probably,” Hawke said. Aveline blinked.

“Daisy... what is it exactly that you already know?” Varric asked.

Merrill looked uncomfortable. “Anders can explain it better than I can,” she said. “He’s the one who really understands. I’ve just... helped him with some things he wasn’t as familiar with.”

“What things?” Aveline said severely, but she could read the answer in Merrill’s uncomfortable silence as easily as she could read it in the distressed expression on Varric’s face. Blood magic.

“Stop bothering her, Aveline,” Hawke cut in. He bent down to retrieve his sword, gave it a quick wipe on the ragged shorts of a dead Tal-Vashoth, and sheathed it. He glanced around at the various other qunari corpses strewn about. Most of them were almost entirely obscured by dead spiders.

“There should be some swords here for Taarbas, and I think I see a Harlot’s Blush over there on the far side of the path. Let’s collect what we need and head back to the city.”

He glowered around at all of them, daring them to contradict him – but nobody, not even Aveline, argued with the clear tone of command in his voice.
In silence, Merrill went to collect the flower while Aveline and Hawke recovered a few undamaged Qunari blades, carrying them carefully over their shoulders. Isabela and Varric searched the rest of the non-spider bodies for anything else of value.

Reaver sniffed the ground around Hawke’s feet, at one point looking up at his master with apology in his eyes. Hawke smiled down at his hound and rubbed his head, not even knowing what the dog had done but not caring, either.

Merrill presented the harvested flower, its roots left carefully intact, to Hawke. He took it and thanked her gruffly, and she returned a tentative smile.

Hawke set off back towards Kirkwall without another word. The others had little choice but to follow him, still in thoughtful silence.

∞

Hours later, there was one more surprise waiting for them all as they entered the Hawke mansion from Hightown.

Aveline had determinedly followed Hawke first to Taarbas, then to Solivitus, and then all the way to his home. He hadn’t objected, recognizing that she would not leave him alone until she had answers, but nor had he consented to speak of the matter at hand until their privacy was assured.

Anders had stayed with him too. Varric and Isabela, realizing Aveline’s intent, followed suit. Merrill seemed to want to peel away and head for the alienage, but reluctantly remained with the group at Anders’s quiet request.

They filed through the estate’s narrow doorway into the antechamber. Bodahn appeared at once, searching for Hawke. He seemed anxious, but in a cheerful way.

“Messere Ha- ah! More guests! Er... Messere Hawke?”

“Yes, Bodahn,” Hawke said tiredly, not looking up from unfastening his breastplate. “Fetch us some tea, if you please... wait, did you say more guests? Who’s here?”

“Well, that’s the thing, Messere....”

Bodahn stepped aside as a silhouetted figure appeared in the light of the common room behind him.

“Maker’s breath,” Anders breathed. “I... I didn’t expect you’d come in person.”

Hawke looked up, surprised.

A petite elven woman with copper-coloured skin and deep brown eyes, somehow looking wiry and imposing despite her slight stature, stood next to Bodahn and watched Hawke with interest. Her dark auburn hair was pulled into a severe bun behind her head. Intricate, angular tattoos – not Dalish – undulated across her face.

She wore a suit of light plate, covered in nicks and scratches that attested to its past effectiveness even as it seemed to curve effortlessly around her, enhancing her shape and natural beauty. Two swords, one of them glimmering with obvious enchantment, were crossed on her back.

“Michael Hawke,” said the woman. She reached out to shake his hand, and he reciprocated in bewildered silence.
“The fabled Champion of Kirkwall! I’ve heard a lot about you. It is an honour. My name is Eingana Tabris. I am the Warden-Commander of Ferelden.”
Hawke shook the Warden-Commander’s hand in mute surprise, his armour still only half unstrapped.

“Shall I prepare the sitting room, Messere Hawke?” Bodahn asked, eyes moving among the group and counting their numbers.

“The...? Oh. Yes.” Hawke was still recovering from his shock. “And, uh... one more will be joining us.”

“I shall see to it, Messere.” Bodahn disappeared.

Hawke indicated that Eingana should move into the common room, the antechamber being rather crowded. She did so, and most of the others followed.

“Who else is joining us?” Anders asked.

“I’ll send Reaver to get Fenris,” Hawke said. “Everyone else is here... he might as well hear it too.”

Anders grimaced, but he nodded.

Hawke called his dog over and knelt down to rub his sides. Only Anders was still there to notice the quick hug he gave him.

“Go get Fenris, boy,” Hawke said. “Bring him here.”

Reaver barked an affirmative and licked Hawke’s face, then bounced around in front of the door until Anders opened it for him. He dashed off into Hightown.

Anders and Hawke entered the common room. Belatedly remembering his manners, Hawke turned to Eingana.

“Um... the honour is mine,” he said as sincerely as he could. His tone of voice tended to default to either sarcastic or threatening, so he had to make an effort. “Welcome to my house. I trust Bodahn’s been accommodating?”

Eingana smiled. “Oh, yes. Bodahn and I are old friends. We’ve been catching up.”

Hawke’s eyes widened as he started to work absently at the remaining catches of his armour.

“Right... I remember him mentioning that he knew you, way back when I first met him. Years ago. At the time I wasn’t sure whether or not to believe him.”

“Bodahn was a great help to me during the Blight,” Eingana said. “And Sandal’s enchantments saved my life, more than once. Even helped take out the archdemon.” She indicated the shimmering blade sheathed on her back.

“I don’t doubt it,” Hawke said. “That dwarf’s helped me out of some serious scrapes, too.”
He looked around and found Anders, who had resumed staring at Eingana as if he could not quite believe what he was seeing.

“Take it the Commander here is one of the friends you wrote to?” he asked.

“Yes,” Anders said. “Eingana has rather more experience fighting blood magic than I do. I met her in Amaranthine after the Blight – she’s the one who recruited me into the Grey Wardens.”

Eingana moved forward to hug him. Anders’s face reddened slightly as the Hero of Ferelden folded her arms around him.

“Anders,” she said. “It’s good to see you again. How have you been?”

“I’ve... uh... been better,” he answered, slowly hugging her back. “But I’m hanging in there.”

“Well, that’s something,” she said as she drew back. “And Justice?”

A little start of surprise rippled around the room.

“He’s been better, too,” Anders said quietly. “Eingana, it’s not that I’m not happy to see you, but... why are you here? Surely you didn’t come all this way just to answer my letter in person?”

“Not just that,” she said. “I have business in Kirkwall.”

Hawke turned around from mounting his armour on a stand in the corner of the room, taking quick stock of his companions.

Isabela was watching him openly with a salacious smile, admiring his muscular physique which his undershirt did little to conceal. Aveline was fidgeting, clearly wanting to speak to Eingana but politely waiting for an opening. Merrill seemed to be shyly avoiding eye contact with the new arrival, while Varric was standing with his arms folded, failing to stifle a smile.

“I’m going to get changed,” Hawke said as a few more moments passed in increasingly awkward silence. “I’ll be back in a few minutes. Introduce yourselves to the Hero of Ferelden, would you? Don’t just stand there like a bunch of imbeciles.”

He left, thumping up the stairs and out of sight. Anders glanced at Aveline once and coughed surreptitiously before following him.

Eingana laughed. “I think I like him,” she said. “Is he always so blunt?”

“Yes and no,” Varric said. “He’s actually rather... sharp, most of the time. For Hawke, that was positively polite.”

“Oh my,” said Eingana.

Varric moved toward her to shake her hand. “Varric Tethras, at your service. It’s an honour – I’ve heard all the stories. Even made up a few. I hope you don’t mind.”

Eingana smiled as she shook his hand. “On the contrary, Varric. Stories give me great pleasure. I’ve spent some time in Orzammar – normally I would compliment you on your beard, but since you don’t seem to have one, I will instead remark upon your chest hair. It is... magnificent.”

Varric chuckled. “Why, thank you! My family does come from Orzammar, but I was born on the surface, so I’ve thankfully never had to deal with caste politics. Well – not real caste politics, anyway.”
Eingana’s gaze moved on to Isabela, who was waiting in a sensual pose by the staircase. Her eyes lit up.

“Isabela!” she said, striding towards the pirate. “It is you.”

Isabela greeted her with a smile and a warm hug, which Eingana returned in kind.

“I was wondering when you’d notice me there,” said Isabela.

“You two know each other?” Varric asked in surprise.

“We met in Denerim,” Eingana said. “Before the archdemon laid it to waste, that is. I could never not notice you, Isabela. Still dueling? Educating fools, stealing their gold?”

“Of course,” Isabela said with a wink. “How’s Alistair? I do miss him. He was ever so... enthusiastic.”

Eingana waved her hand. “Oh, you know. Just as much of a royal bastard as ever.”

Aveline couldn’t restrain a scandalized gasp at hearing the king of Ferelden spoken of in such terms. Eingana noticed, and calmed her with a reassuring smile.

“The king and I grew quite close during the Blight,” she explained. “He wasn’t the king, then. The ‘royal bastard’ joke is a reference to his parentage, or official lack thereof. He was actually the one who made it first!”

Aveline still looked a uncomfortable, but she shook it off and stepped forward.

“Ma’am – it is a very great honour to meet you. My name is Aveline Vallen.” She bowed. “I fought at Ostagar. Thank you, so much, for saving our homeland. And the world. You are truly deserving of the title ‘Hero of Ferelden.’”

Eingana looked flattered. “Why, you’re very welcome,” she said, touching her forehead self-consciously. “Years later, and people still call me that. All I really did was kill the equivalent of a high dragon. Well, two, really, but the one... actually, that other one... technically just three high dragons. ...And there were two more after that, now that I think about it. But still.”

“I’ve done that,” Hawke said as he descended the stairs in his finery, Anders behind him. Eingana turned to him, politely pretending not to notice that Aveline was staring at her with her mouth open.

“Not five, but I have killed a high dragon,” Hawke added. “Several... er, lower ones, too. Interesting battle.”

“Oh? A high dragon, around Kirkwall?” Eingana asked with interest. “Not a threat to be taken lightly.”

“She was terrorizing a mine I had some share in,” Hawke said idly, straightening his tunic as he reached the bottom of the stairs. Anders stepped off the last riser next to him. “Her brood had been a pain in the ass for years beforehand. We took care of it, though,” he said with satisfaction. “Remember that, Varric? Anders and Isabela were there, too.”

Isabela shuddered. “Ugh. Don’t remind me.”

Varric chuckled. “I had fun that day. She was the biggest, meanest, most pissed-off thing I have ever seen. I’m just glad she never even looked at me while I was firing bolts at her mouth and eyes. She
was having far too good a time picking up Hawke and tossing him around like a rag doll, slamming
him into things and spitting fire at him.”

“Asshole,” Hawke said darkly. “That thing was an asshole.”

Eingana looked impressed. “But you killed it anyway.”

Hawke nodded. “Eventually, and with help.”

He drew his sword from where it hung in its sheath next to his armour stand. The greatsword was
massive and heavy, but Hawke easily lifted it before him with one hand, regarding it fondly.

“I had to get onto its neck and stab it through the head... five or six times. All the while it was
thrashing around underneath me, and Isabela was dancing about its feet, jumping up and slicing its
wings to ribbons wherever she could reach.”

“I was absolutely drenched in dragon’s blood,” Isabela said ruefully. “Stank like the Void.”

“It was a good look on you,” Hawke said. “And then, when it finally died, I managed to fall right off
the fucking thing and wreck my shoulder really bad.”

He spun the sword in his hands a few times, making it sing and catch the afternoon light streaming
through the window. He looked at Anders and mustered a rare smile.

“Luckily, my mage was there to heal me.”

Anders met his eyes and returned the smile, albeit tinged with melancholy.

Eingana didn’t seem to notice the current flowing between the two of them. Her eyes were dancing,
reminiscing about past battles with dragons.

“It’s a rush, isn’t it?” she asked in a lively tone.

Hawke’s eyes went to her and his smile grew decidedly feral.

“Like nothing else,” he agreed.

“But then, afterwards,” Isabela said. “Why did you have to do that? It was disgusting. I still have
nightmares about you—”

“Rivaini,” Varric cut her off sharply.

Isabela looked at him. “What?” she asked, not noticing that Anders was clearly annoyed and that
Aveline was looking between her and Hawke with suspicion.

“He retrieved an oiled rag, determinedly ignoring Aveline’s stare, and began to do a more
thorough job of cleaning the crusted blood and spider ichor off his sword.

“Have you met everyone?” he asked Eingana.

“Not quite everyone,” Eingana said tactfully. She cast a friendly smile towards Merrill.

The quiet elf seemed to be trying to hide behind Varric, failing for obvious reasons. Noticing
Eingana’s attention, she blushed lightly, stepped around the dwarf, and curtsied.
“Andaran atish’an, Warden-Commander,” she said. “I too am honoured. Your actions have done immeasurable good for the People. Thanks to you, we are that much closer to what we once were. On behalf of myself and my clan, ma serannas.”

For the first time, Eingana looked a little uncomfortable. “I don’t know that my actions have really benefited our kind,” she said. “I’m... er... not even really one of the ‘People’. Not truly. I grew up in an alienage. I don’t even know the old tongue.”

“You don’t?” Merrill looked briefly shocked, but she recovered quickly. “No matter. You are still one of us. Your heroism has brought glory to all elvhen.”

She brightened as an idea seemed to strike her. “I could teach you! The old tongue, I mean.” She reddened. “That is, if you’d want to learn. From... me. If you have time – if you’ll be in Kirkwall long. I know you must be very busy.”

She took a breath and made a visible effort to stop babbling.

“I’d like that,” Eingana said warmly, and Merrill beamed, clearly relieved that she hadn’t caused offense.

“This is very touching,” Hawke said without looking up from cleaning his sword. “Cultural reunification of the elves sounds like a fantastic idea. But maybe for now, could we sit down instead of standing around in the common room like awkward nobles at a party?”

He glanced at Aveline. “In heavy plate, even?”

Aveline blinked and shifted self-consciously.

“I, for one, would like to know why the Warden-Commander has chosen to grace us with her presence,” Hawke went on. “Aren’t you all tired from trekking around and fighting spiders?”

He gave his sword a final wipe and sheathed it with a snap, looking up to see everyone staring at him.

Varric was once again hard at work suppress his smile, and Anders looked pensive. Eingana was watching him with one eyebrow raised archly.

“The sitting room is that way,” Hawke added after another beat in which nobody said anything. He gestured emphatically.

“There are other matters that still need to be discussed,” Aveline said tersely.

Hawke rolled his eyes. “This is the same thing, Aveline. Anders wrote to the Commander for advice on dealing with my....”

He scowled and averted his eyes. “Would you just go and sit down? I’ll wait for Fenris.”

Isabela broke the confused tension by lurching forward from her relaxed pose against the stairs and heading in the direction Hawke had indicated. Varric, Merrill, and Eingana followed her. Aveline looked hard at Hawke for a moment before going with them.

Anders tried to take Hawke’s hand in his own, but Hawke brushed him away.

“Go and sit with them,” he said without making eye contact. “I’ll be in shortly.”

“Michael,” Anders said softly. “Are you-?”
“Enough, Anders,” Hawke snapped. “I told you upstairs, I will not discuss this right now. I haven’t changed my mind in the last five minutes.”

Anders exhaled softly, nodded, and left for the sitting room.

Hawke spent some time brooding silently and polishing his armour, listening to the murmur of voices in the other room and the clatter of the teapot being passed around.

Presently there was a commotion in the antechamber as Reaver returned with Fenris, butting his head against the door to open it and barking enthusiastically.

Hawke put down his polishing cloth and went over to meet them in the antechamber.

“Fenris,” he said as he knelt down to pat Reaver in gratitude. “Thank you for coming. The Warden-Commander of Ferelden is here. I think you’ll want to be included in this discussion.”

Fenris looked down at him for a moment, his lyrium-etched face inscrutable. Then he said, “Does this have anything to do with you losing control of your bloodlust and using it as an excuse to abuse your mage lover?”

Hawke’s eyebrows shot up and he rose to his feet.

“Excuse me?” he said sharply as Reaver disappeared into the depths of the mansion with the clicking of Mabari paws.

“I’m not blind, Hawke,” Fenris said evenly. “Nor am I deaf, nor stupid. I know what kind of fervour you experience in battle. I call upon something similar myself – except I know how to control it. I don’t become sexually aroused by bloodshed, and I’ve never turned on my allies.”

Hawke’s face twisted and anger tightened his gut. He resisted the urge to lean forward and grab the lean elf by his neck, since that would only prove Fenris’s point.

Instead he said softly, “I seem to remember you telling me a story about some time you spent on Seheron. Who were those friends of yours, again? The ones who taught you what it meant to be free? Oh, right... the Fog Warriors.”

Fenris glared at him. “That was-”

“Under orders from your master at the time, yes. And you only really realized that you had a choice after you’d hacked them apart. Well, I don’t have the convenient scapegoat of an Imperial magistrate who thinks he owns me and is clearly ordering me to do things I don’t want to do. It just happens. Do you think I want to become a blood-crazed animal and get off on cutting up the man I love?”

“I think it’s rather obvious that you enjoy it,” Fenris shot back. “Perhaps to the point that you do not wish to stop.”

Hawke turned away abruptly, choking on his rage, biting his tongue in an effort to force himself not to speak.

His heart was pounding and he was starting to hyperventilate. He had to get control of himself. Already he was itching to get ahold of his sword, which hung sheathed and newly polished only steps away in the common room. He could practically smell the blood already, the imagined scent filling his nostrils and making his pupils dilate.

With a supreme effort of will, Hawke reined in his surging bloodlust and turned back around. Fenris
watched him with narrowed eyes, obviously feeling that Hawke’s reaction only proved his point.

“Fenris, this is a serious problem,” Hawke said with forced calm. “Yes, I enjoy battle. I enjoy violence. I always have and I always will. But I don’t want to completely lose control of myself just because of that. And I don’t want to hurt the people I care about, no matter how it might make me feel in the moment.”

He took a deep breath. “Anders thinks I may be affected by blood magic.”

Fenris’s eyes widened and he backed up half a step. His frown deepened, and he opened his mouth to speak.

“Whatever the cause,” Hawke pressed on before the elf could say anything, “something is clearly wrong with me. It’s getting worse and if it isn’t fixed, it will keep getting worse.”

He indicated the rooms behind him with a jerk of his thumb. “We’re all here trying to discuss possible solutions. We – I would appreciate your input, seeing as how this could easily affect you and you’ve seen blood magic do Maker-knows-what in Tevinter. That’s the situation; join us or don’t.”

Pulse still high, Hawke turned around and left the antechamber, heading for the sitting room. He heard the door close behind him.

A moment later he unclenched his fists in relief as he sensed rather than heard Fenris’s silent presence behind him.

∞

Bodahn was setting down a platter of biscuits and a fresh pot of tea when Hawke entered the room with Fenris in tow.

Varric, Isabela, and Merrill sat together on one of the plush upholstered couches. Anders and Eingana occupied another couch set at a right angle to the first.

Aveline sat on a wooden stool she had evidently carried in from the kitchen. Despite Hawke’s implicit suggestion that she change, she was still wearing her heavy plate armour.

Eingana was looking around, apparently impressed by the art and sculptures that decorated the room. She looked at Bodahn as he was gathering up the empty teapot.

“Is Sandal here?” she asked.

Bodahn paused briefly in his task. “He’s asleep right now, ma’am, but if you stay a while, I’m sure he’d be delighted to see you again.”

“I’d like that,” Eingana said. “I may very well be here for a while. I miss him.”

Bodahn noticed Hawke and Fenris as he was straightening from setting down the new teapot. “Greetings, Messeres,” he said, nodding to Fenris. “Is there anything else I can get you?”

“No,” Hawke answered. “Thank you, Bodahn.”

Bodahn bowed and departed with his tray.

“Fenris, this is Eingana Tabris, Commander of the Grey Wardens out of Ferelden,” Hawke said. “Commander, this is Fenris, a... friend of mine.”
Fenris’s mouth quirked a little at Hawke’s choice of descriptor, but he didn’t contradict him.

He inclined his head to Eingana. “Greetings.”

“Pleased to meet you,” she replied as Hawke sat down in an armchair across the short, broad table from where she sat with Anders. The mage gave him another concerned look; Hawke avoided his gaze.

Eingana examined Fenris’s lyrium markings with interest. “Are those – Dalish tattoos?” she asked carefully.

“No,” said Fenris, and offered no further details.

Rather than joining Eingana and Anders on the couch or taking the other empty armchair, he carried the simple wooden chair over from the writing desk and sat down on it.

Eingana looked curious, but Hawke headed her off. “The markings are a bit of a long story,” he said. “If you ask him about it another time, perhaps Fenris will tell it to you.”

Fenris glanced at Hawke, his eyebrows furrowing slightly. He nodded.

Eingana clasped her hands before her. “Very well, then,” she said. “To business.”

“Pardon me, Commander,” Aveline spoke up. “I’m not sure how much you know about what is going on, or what your involvement is.”

She eyed Anders, sitting beside Eingana.

“ Anders – and Merrill, for that matter – seem to know a lot more about whatever is going on with Hawke than the rest of us do. All I know is that after we engaged a nest of giant spiders in battle today, as well as the highwaymen they’d attacked, Hawke seemed to... to....”

She shook her head, searching for the right words to describe what she had seen.

“He went crazy,” Isabela said helpfully.

She looked at Hawke, who looked back at her impassively.

“His eyes turned completely black, and he made noises that sounded like a demon,” Isabela elaborated.

“I did?” Hawke’s eyes widened. He hadn’t known that.

“You don’t remember what happened?” Eingana asked him.

Hawke scowled and shook his head.

“I usually do,” he said. “But that time I just... blacked out. A spider was on top of me, biting my neck open, and I fell over. The next thing I knew I was standing upright in a magical cage – no spider and no neck wound.”

“I don’t know if I would call the sounds he was making... demonic,” Aveline said thoughtfully. “Personally, I was reminded of an abomination.”

She looked at Hawke as if inviting an explanation. Hawke glowered back at her in silence.
“What else did he do?” Eingana asked, glancing contritely at Hawke as if to apologize for discussing him in his presence.

“He started making out with Anders,” Isabela said immediately. “Licking him and stuff, and trying to bite his ears. At first it was even... well, kind of hot.” She smiled charmingly.

Eingana looked startled. Anders reddened, and Varric coughed.

Hawke sat in annoyed silence, grinding his teeth together.

“He also hit me really hard,” Isabela went on. “In the face. With his metal gauntlet on. And he nearly got Varric by the neck – and he shoved Aveline backwards when she tried to stop him.”

She looked around. “Did I miss anything?”

“No,” said Anders forcefully. “Thank you, Isabela. That will do.”

“Here to help,” Isabela said cheerfully.

“And do you always... erm....” Eingana’s eyes moved back and forth as she searched for words.

“Act like that when you lose control, Hawke?”

“Only when he’s alone with Anders,” Varric chimed in. “Or thinks he will be shortly. Ever since-”

Hawke silenced the dwarf with a furious glare, and then turned to Eingana.

“How much did Anders tell you in his letter?” he asked, a little heatedly. He was starting to regret allowing everyone else to be present for this meeting.

Anders answered his question by addressing the Warden-Commander. “Eingana, do you remember what I said concerning the way his bloodlust had intensified after he fought a certain blood mage?”

“Yes,” Eingana said softly, looking at Hawke. “The one that killed your mother.”

Hawke nodded stiffly.

“The night of that battle was the first time he... well, lost control,” Anders continued. “Like that, I mean. Hawke’s always been...”

“Violent,” Isabela suggested.

“Bloodthirsty,” Varric added.

Fenris said, “Excited by-”

“Would all of you please shut the fuck up?” Hawke snapped, his fists clenched.

Nobody spoke as Hawke took several deep breaths.

“Warden-Commander,” he said in a tone that suggested he’d come to a decision he knew he would regret. “Are you familiar with the term ‘reaver’?”

Eingana nodded slowly. “Yes. I once encountered a cult of dragon-worshippers in the remote Frostback Mountains. Many of their fighters were reavers.”

Hawke looked at her for a moment as he slowly, carefully, unclenched his fists.
Then he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. He started to talk, quietly.

“When I was seventeen, a band of travelers passed through Lothering. One of them... was a reaver. I met him in the tavern, and we got to talking over drinks. He mentioned that his people hunted dangerous creatures. I told him about how I enjoyed fighting, how talented I was at spilling blood. How it awakened a kind of – primal lust to fight inside me, how I felt more alive the closer I came to my own death. He told me that he knew exactly what I was talking about. He invited me to go hunting with him the next day.”

The silence in the room had grown thick. Everyone was still, watching Hawke and waiting for him to continue. None of them save Anders had ever heard Hawke talk about his life in Lothering.

Anders himself was staring at Hawke with alarm in his eyes – even he had never heard this story. Fenris, however, was frowning deeply, apparently already having an idea of where this was heading.

Hawke Anders for a moment, rubbing his fingers over his forehead and through his hair. He resumed looking down at the floor.

“In the morning, at first light,” he went on, “someone else from his band showed up to come with us. A woman who I only found out later was a mage.

“We hiked for half a day to the foot of a cliff, way out in the wilderness – farther from Lothering than I’d ever gone before by myself. I asked the man what we were hunting, but he wouldn’t say. I had no idea what to expect.

“I knew I was taking a risk with these people. I’d only met the man the night before and I didn’t know the woman at all. I don’t think she said a word for the entire trip. But him... he’d said that he knew what I was talking about, and the look in his eyes when he said it – I – I believed him. Nobody else had ever understood me like that.”

Hawke took a deep breath and lowered his hands to his lap. He flexed his fingers, staring at them, but not like he was really seeing them. His eyes were distant, lost in memory.

“There was a cave a ways up the cliff. We had to climb the rock face to reach it. It was brutal, with a greatsword on my back and having just hiked for six hours through trackless wilderness, but I did it. I was determined not to disappoint this stranger.”

“What was in the cave?” Merrill asked in a hushed voice. She was leaning forward, staring at Hawke with wide eyes, absorbed by his tale.

Hawke didn’t immediately answer, so Fenris did for him.

“A dragon,” he said.

Hawke nodded.

Merrill gasped. Varric’s mouth fell open. Isabela looked confused for a moment, but then an expression of dawning realization crossed her face. Anders just looked worried.

Aveline, meanwhile, was clearly appalled by the idea that any person would invite a seventeen-year-old boy they didn’t know out on a dragon hunt.

Only Eingana displayed no reaction. She continued to watch Hawke steadily.
“There was... a fairly large dragon in the cave,” Hawke said. “When we reached the entrance, we rested there for a while. I heard it roar. It wasn’t a high dragon – the man said it was a mature male. He said it was what we had come there to hunt.”

Varric’s eyebrows were as high as they could go as he shook his head in mute disbelief.

“I asked him if he was crazy,” Hawke said. “I was already worn out from the hike and the climb, and he wanted to go fighting a mature dragon with just three people? It sounded like pure stupidity. The woman was a mage, but I didn’t know that at the time. I was only seventeen – okay with my sword, but far from seasoned, and I knew it. I wasn’t even wearing armour.”

Hawke paused for a few moments as he twisted his fingers together, still avoiding eye contact with anyone.

“He told me... that he was willing to teach me a powerful secret, one that would change me forever but that would let me reach my full potential. He said helping him kill the dragon was my test, and that he wanted me to pass it. He said he’d thought for sure back in the tavern that I’d had what it took. He asked me... if I was going to disappoint him, after all.”

Hawke’s fists clenched involuntarily and a snarl crossed his face. His voice rose with remembered anger.

“I wasn’t going to let him talk to me like that! I wanted that secret. I had no idea what it even was. I knew it would be dangerous, but... I didn’t care. It would make me powerful, that much I was sure of. It would make me like him, and I could feel how powerful he was. It was like a... a smell that came from him, but not an actual smell that you sense with your nose. It was more like a sensation, one that got stronger the closer to him you were. It made your skin tingle and your heart beat faster. I’d seen the way people avoided him at the tavern, out of fear, but I also saw that he didn’t care at all what they thought or what they might do. Supreme confidence. Nothing fazed this man, nothing scared him. I didn’t know what it was about him, but I knew I wanted what he had.

“We went into the cave. That was when I realized that the woman was a mage – she had a walking stick with her, but it wasn’t obviously a magical weapon until the tip started to glow to light our way. We walked for less than five minutes before we found the dragon.

“We walked for less than five minutes before we found the dragon.

“The man and I fought it – I had my sword, and he had the biggest axe I’d ever seen. The woman used magic on it, made it kind of slow and stupid, so it was fairly easy for me to avoid its talons ripping open my hunting leathers. Its teeth weren’t so easy to dodge – it got me on the arm a few times, nearly bit my hand right off.

“But... it was the weirdest thing. I don’t know if it was because the man was so near me, or if the woman had done some magic on me and just I hadn’t noticed. But there was no pain at all. It just made me angrier. It made me want to fight even harder and kill that thing, and that’s what I did.

“We fought the dragon for... I don’t know. It took a long time to kill it. It felt like half the day, but was probably less than an hour. The man kept hacking at it with his axe and cutting off its talons one by one. Near the end he cut off its tail, right near the root. Made it scream like nothing else I’d ever heard.

“The woman shot lightning at it whenever neither of us were in the way. I’d seen magic before – my father and sister were both apostates – but what she did was far beyond anything I’d seen either of them do. And she did it all in silence. Even when the dragon got her too, a few times – it singed her pretty badly at one point – she never made a sound. Maybe she was mute, but I got the impression
more that she was perfectly capable of talking and just preferred not to. She was damn impressive.

“And the man – it was like he was dancing with this dragon. He darted around it, laughing at it, sometimes even letting it slash at him or dodging a lot more narrowly than he had room for. He taunted it even as he sliced it open with his axe and got its blood all over him. It was beautiful, the way he fought.

“I went at its wings. They were completely shredded by the end. I stabbed it pretty good a couple of times – got my sword buried in its flank up to the hilt, but even that didn’t kill it. Slowed it down quite a bit, and there was blood all over the place, but it kept struggling. A few times I slipped and almost fell. If I had, I would have died. It would have taken off my head with its teeth or its talons before I could get up.

“And the man – we’d just about killed it when it smacked him hard with its head, thrashing about in its agony. Threw him against the wall and stunned him, and then it went for me.

“I just... reacted. I charged the dragon and I screamed at it, and I shoved my sword into its mouth as it was yawning open to incinerate me. It still got some fire out – burned my hands and arms black. I couldn’t feel or move anything below my elbows, but I just kept shoving my sword forward. It came out the back of the dragon’s head with a spray of blood. It was... beyond exhilarating. It was euphoria. Like an-

Hawke stopped talking abruptly. He didn’t seem to want to say the word orgasm.

Anders clearly understood what he meant, as did Isabela, Eingana, and Fenris.

Everyone else seemed to miss the implication. Merrill was enthralled – her eyes were huge and both hands were clasped over her mouth. Aveline had a revolted expression on her face, but she hadn’t looked away in several minutes, listening carefully to everything Hawke said. Varric had a quill in his hand and was looking around urgently for something to write on.

“It was still twitching a bit, bleeding out, when the man came up beside me with a bottle,” Hawke said. “I had no idea where he’d been keeping it – maybe the woman had had it. She was there too, and she healed my hands and arms in about ten seconds. I never even felt the pain of the burns.

“The man collected some of the dragon’s blood in the bottle, filling it up about halfway. Maybe a teacupful.”

Hawke pointed at the untouched cup of tea on the table before him.

“He gave it to the woman and she started... doing things to it. Adding bits of powder and herbs from pouches on her waist. The man congratulated me, said I’d passed the test. I’d never felt better in my life than I did that moment.”

Hawke finally looked up, his face flushed with the emotion of the memory, his eyes alive. His pupils were slightly dilated for the level of light in the room.

“I asked him if he would teach me the secret now. He said he couldn’t tell me what it was, he could only show me. I asked him to do it – demanded, really, because I was so worked up and excited from the battle. He told me to be patient.

“The woman finished what she was doing and swirled the bottle around to mix whatever ingredients she’d added. Then she put it down on the floor of the cave and did something else to it – I don’t know precisely what. She cut herself, used blood magic.”
Fenris made a disgusted noise and rolled his eyes. Aveline pursed her lips, clearly having expected this. Anders looked upset, but he didn’t interrupt.

“The blood inside kind of... glowed after that. Well, no, not really glowed, but it – it sparkled, almost, not like it was giving off light but like there was light shining on it that didn’t reflect off anything else. She gave it to me. The man just looked at me and waited – he didn’t need to tell me what to do. I knew. I drank the blood. All of it.”

Merrill now looked frightened, her hands frozen over her mouth as if she’d forgotten they were there. Aveline finally looked away, pressing the back of her hand to her lips.

Hawke’s eyes drifted closed as he remembered. His voice was hushed. Varric, Eingana, Isabela, and Merrill leaned forward to better hear what he said.

“It was... it was like... I can’t describe it. It was the most amazing thing I’ve ever felt in my life, before or since. I could sense the entirety of my physical being. My whole body: every cell, every bone, every drop of blood. My heart was beating so fast I could hear it. I could feel the blood pulsing through every artery and vein down to the tiniest vessel. And I could sense... kind of my inner self, as well. For the first time in my life, I knew who I was. I saw everywhere I’d been and how it had all led me to that moment. I could see the man I would become. I knew what I still needed to do, and where I would have to go. In that moment, everything was clear.

“That was how I became a reaver.”

Hawke opened his eyes and fell silent at last.

The room was quiet and still.

Hawke watched dust motes dancing in the sunbeams that penetrated the room from the high windows and waited for the others to react.

“Hawke,” Eingana began.

Hawke looked at her. Nobody else was speaking or even paying much attention, still absorbing the impact of his tale.

“This man – did he ever tell you his name?”

Hawke shook his head. “I never got around to asking him the night before, and we didn’t talk much on the way to the cave. On our way back to Lothering, he told me about how a reaver’s power functions, how it affects a person physically and mentally. He told me he didn’t think I would change very much outside of the powers, endurance, and strength I would gain.

“By the time we got back, it was well after dark and I was exhausted. I thanked him and stumbled back to my own house. I looked for him at the tavern in the morning, but the innkeeper said he and his party had left before dawn. I never did find out who they were.”

“What did he look like?” Eingana asked, her face and voice carefully neutral.

Hawke frowned in concentration. “Tall and muscular. Tanned white skin. reddish brown hair, thick beard. Deep voice. Religious. Charismatic. There was a scar on the left side of his face.”

Eingana nodded as if she had expected this answer. “How did you get to talking to him in the first place, that night in the tavern?”
Hawke looked at her with something the Warden-Commander had never expected to see in his eyes—fear. He was clearly wondering how she knew exactly what questions to ask.

“I... I liked how he smelled,” Hawke muttered eventually, averting his eyes from the Warden-Commander’s steady gaze. “Like blood and sweat and... like blood and sweat. I approached him. That smell... turns me on. It always has, since long before I met him.”

Eingana nodded again. “One more thing. Did he or anyone else happen to mention where they were heading? Which direction? Or where they’d come from?”

“Uhh...” Hawke rubbed his forehead and squinted, trying to remember. “They’d come from Denerim, I think, and they were heading... west and south.”

Eingana looked faintly troubled. She looked at the table, chewing her lip thoughtfully.

“Damn, Hawke,” Varric finally said. “I never knew you were such a storyteller. That was intense.”

Hawke looked at him sourly. “It’s all true, Varric.”

“I believe you,” the dwarf replied. “That makes it even better! This is gold. You should be an orator.”

“I really don’t think I’m of the right temperament for public speaking.”

“Well, leave it to me then,” Varric said. “Can I use that? As an origin story, it suits you perfectly. More so than just because it actually is your origin story. I doubt many will believe it, but it’s too good a story to waste.”

Hawke shrugged, shaking his head indifferently. “Whatever.”

Aveline suddenly looked stricken. She’d lowered her hand from her mouth a few minutes ago, but now she raised it again reflexively.

“The high dragon,” she said. “That story you told earlier. Did you-?”

“Yes,” Hawke said, cutting her off before she could finish asking him if he’d drank its blood.

Aveline’s face was rather paler than usual. “This explains... much,” she said faintly.

“You think I’m a threat to the city, don’t you,” Hawke said tonelessly.

Aveline eyed him. “Frankly, I’ve thought that since you lost control earlier,” she said. “Now I merely know a little more as to the reasons behind it. Not enough, though.”

Hawke watched her with a mildly suspicious crease in his eyebrows.

“I’m not going to turn on you, Hawke,” Aveline told him. “Not for this – unless it escalates. We’re still friends, of a strange occasionally hostile sort I never thought I’d have, but there it is. You’ve done a lot for me, and for Kirkwall, and I’d rather not see you... well, I’d rather not see this situation, whatever it is, end badly for you. Or anyone else. But you can rest assured that if you become dangerous and there is no other choice, I will kill you.”

“You mean you’ll try,” Hawke said dryly. Aveline sighed.

Hawke looked at Eingana, who still looked pensive.
“Does that help any?” he asked. “Do you have any idea what might be wrong with me? I’ve always been able to control my bloodlust in battle – right up until a few months ago. Now I still can, most of the time, but sometimes I just – it’s like I lose everything outside myself. Something else takes over. I can’t think rationally at all.”

He looked at his silent lover out of the corner of his eye. “Especially if Anders is with me.”

“I do have some ideas, yes,” Eingana said.

She turned to look at Anders.

“You said you also wrote to Wynne,” she said. “Have you heard back from her?”

“Not yet,” said Anders. “I’m actually getting a bit concerned. Cumberland isn’t that far away, and I sent the letter just days after Michael’s first episode. She is, you know, getting on in years – I’m concerned she might have-”

“She’s fine, don’t worry,” Eingana said. “I’ve been in touch with her – my enchantress at the Vigil is in regular contact with Cumberland and Kinloch Hold, through means much more efficient than missives. Wynne has hinted to me that she may know what is causing Hawke’s – er – condition. She’s on her way here, in fact. She ought to be arriving within the next few days.”

Anders was startled. “Senior Enchanter Wynne is coming here too?” he asked.

“From Cumberland, you said?” Hawke added. “Is that really necessary?”

“Well, she wouldn’t elaborate on whatever idea she has about your condition,” Eingana said. “Not through her particular channel of communication – she said it might be unsafe to do so. She did, however, say that if her hypothesis was correct, reversing it would take a rather unusual sort of mage. Herself, for instance, or Anders. Maybe even both.”

Hawke looked at Anders suspiciously, as did Varric and Aveline. But Anders just looked bewildered and alarmed.

“Why me?” he asked. “It can’t be that I’m a Grey Warden, because Wynne isn’t.”

Eingana arched one eyebrow.

Anders continued uncertainly, “I mean... you all know that I’m possessed, and in control of my faculties – most of the time – and that does make me unusual, but what could that have to do with Wynne?”

Eingana’s mouth opened slowly, and then closed again.

“She... never told you?” she asked.

Varric heaved a great sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. “If this Enchanter, whom you trust and have invited to Kirkwall, is also an abomination, I will suffer some considerable distress.”

“So will I,” Aveline said. “A Senior Enchanter? That’s rather a lofty position in the Circle hierarchy to entrust to an abomination of all things, isn’t it?”

“She’s not an abomination,” Anders insisted. “She’s a good person, one of the kindest I’ve ever known, and a powerful mage. A healer of rare ability, far more skilled than I am. Practically everything I learned about restorative magic, I learned from Senior Enchanter Wynne at Kinloch
Hold. She was always kind to me – she helped me avoid templar scrutiny more than once, although she never approved of my escape attempts.”

He looked at Eingana with a pleading look in his eyes.

“Please, tell me she isn’t possessed,” he said. “I don’t regret merging with Justice, but everyone here knows the problems it’s caused me. I... I don’t think I could stand it if it turns out that Wynne was somehow manipulating me or something, all that time.”

“She wasn’t!” Eingana exclaimed. “You’re reading far too much into this. Wynne is exactly what you say she is – an extraordinarily kind-hearted and talented healer. But she’s also... I don’t even know what the term is, or if there is such a term to describe her condition. ‘Spirit-touched’, maybe.

“When she was a child, she met a spirit of Faith in the Fade. It watched over her all her life, guiding her and helping her develop her ability with healing magic.

“When Uldred took over the Circle during the Blight, he sundered the Veil. Hundreds of demons came through and possessed many of the mages and templars in the tower. Others incarnated physically and attacked the survivors. Wynne was struck down in battle, defending another mage from a demon. She nearly died, but Faith intervened – it bound itself to her and kept her alive. It’s sustained her ever since.

“She thought she wouldn’t live very long afterwards, especially given the Blight, but she gradually regained her strength – even more so after the archdemon was defeated. It’s true that she likely won’t live much longer – probably less than two years. But she is no danger to anyone who isn’t harming anyone else. I don’t believe she even is truly possessed.”

“She is possessed,” Fenris said. “Whatever you want to call it, when a spirit ‘binds’ itself to a mage, that is possession. She is an abomination.”

Eingana shook her head. “That may be true in the basest possible definition of the word, but Wynne is anything but a monster. She is the best a mage can hope to be: respected and revered by mages and templars alike, beloved by non-mages for the healing and compassion she provides without a thought for herself. She would be First Enchanter of the Circle at Kinloch Hold were she not serving at the College of Magi in Cumberland.”

“She is lucky to have never gone through what I did,” Anders said. “Justice was – is – a very direct kind of spirit. In his native environment, thinking and acting are identical. He saw injustice and seethed to correct it, and when he merged with me, he was twisted by my anger into Vengeance. Spirits of Faith are different. They’re cool and calm, soothing entities who value strength of will and reasoned conviction over religious fanaticism. I suspect Faith would be much less susceptible to distortion by its host’s emotions than Justice proved to be. Even if it wasn’t, Senior Enchanter Wynne was, and as far as I can tell, still is a genuinely thoughtful, warm-hearted person. She has no zealotry inside her that might corrupt the spirit.”

Fenris still looked dubious, but he shrugged. “If you are willing to trust this mage, it is your own head. But....”

He glanced at Hawke. “For all our sakes, I hope you’re right.”

“Forgive me for asking, Warden-Commander,” Varric said. “But if it’s this Enchanter whose help we need, why did you come to Kirkwall?”

“As I said, I have business here,” Eingana replied. “Among other things, I am here under orders from
the First Warden himself to investigate the primeval thaig your expedition uncovered.”

Varric was surprised. “Now that is not what I expected.”

“Why is the First Warden interested in the ancient thaig?” Anders asked curiously.

Eingana gave him a sidelong look and didn’t answer.

Anders held up his hands. “Right, sorry. Secret Warden business and you can’t say.”

“Not in front of the others,” Eingana said. She looked apologetically at Hawke. “I’m sorry.”

Hawke shrugged his indifference.

“Nathaniel and Velanna are with me,” Eingana said to Anders. “As well as some others you don’t know. They’re making preparations – I’ll have to leave to meet with them eventually, hopefully after Wynne arrives and some progress is made on helping Hawke. Sigrun is on her way as well, via the Deep Roads from Kal-Sharok.”

“The Deep Roads?” Varric asked incredulously. “All the way from Kal-Sharok? They’re infested with darkspawn and spiders and choked with cave-ins. That’s insanity, Grey Warden or no. How is that any safer or more expedient than traveling above ground?”

“It’s more expedient, certainly,” Eingana said. “She has a route planned, scouted out beforehand to ensure it’s passable. Sigrun is far from unfamiliar with the Deep Roads – she was a Legionnaire of the Dead before she joined us. And she’s not alone. Several Wardens and a contingent of Rock-Knockers are with her, and we have other allies.”

Anders looked at her with an unreadable look on his face. Privately, despite not caring about the Wardens’ business in general, Hawke burned to know just what sort of “other allies” they had that weren’t dwarves. Yet he knew better than to expect an answer.

“In any case, Sigrun’s group will not arrive for some time,” Eingana continued. “We may end up leaving Kirkwall without her and meeting her in the Deep Roads before we proceed to the thaig. In the meantime, however, Wynne has requested that I be present when she arrives for her... erm... I suppose you could say her consultation.” She nodded at Hawke.

“Pardon me for asking, but why is that?” Aveline asked. “Not that I doubt your ability, but clearly you are no mage.”

“Mainly due to the experience I have fighting blood mages and – other things,” Eingana said. She politely refrained from using the word demons, but all present could hear the unspoken word hanging above the room like a thundercloud.

“How many blood mages have you fought?” Varric asked with interest.

Eingana touched her temple as she thought.

“Oh... a great many,” she said ruefully. “Denerim was positively infested with them at one point. And Amaranthine was even worse. That’s two cities’ worth of underground blood mage societies, right there. I also killed quite a few of them at Kinloch Hold during Uldred’s coup... and the cultists in that remote mountain village that I mentioned earlier – they were quite fond of blood magic. And there have been a few more since all that. I even have one working for me, now – strictly supervised, of course.”
“Do you think it likely that blood magic was involved in whatever is wrong with Hawke?” asked Fenris, surprising them all by breaking his characteristic moody silence.

“I...” Eingana seemed hesitant to answer. “Yes, I do. Again, though, I am no expert. I know a great deal more about darkspawn and the type of magic they use – which is only somewhat like blood magic, and only sometimes. When Wynne arrives, her authority must be lent more credence than mine.”

“To that end, one wonders what could possibly be wrong with Hawke that it may only be reversed by a possessed mage,” Fenris said in a hard voice.

Everyone turned to Eingana, waiting for her answer.

Hawke’s fists clenched involuntarily. He met Anders’s eyes across the table and searched for some solace in them, but his lover only looked afraid.

Eingana spread her hands. “That is the question, isn’t it.”

“You said you had some ideas,” Aveline said.

Eingana hesitated before answering.

“I... do,” she said. “Just guesses, really. They’re as likely to be wrong as right.”

“Still, I would like to hear them,” Aveline pressed.

“I as well,” Fenris agreed.

“And I,” Hawke said, trying to sound firm. Only Anders heard the tremor in his voice.

Eingana rubbed her temples wearily and took a deep breath.

“It may simply be that some malevolent, long-acting spell you were infected with by the blood mage who killed your mother has interacted with your – your reaverness in an unforeseen way,” she said haltingly. “If not that, then... well....”

They all waited, at once feeling certain that they knew what she would say and deeply hoping they were wrong.

“Demonic possession is not out of the question,” Eingana finished with extreme reluctance.

The only reaction Hawke noticed was Merrill’s. She was staring at him, unable to hide the fear in her eyes.

Merrill, who dealt with spirits and openly employed blood magic, was afraid of the very idea that he might be possessed.

Hawke felt a painful twist of shame in his gut, accompanied by a healthy dose of fear of his own. He had no desire to be a demon’s plaything.

But mostly, he felt what he had been expecting to feel, because these days he rarely seemed to feel anything else: churning, hot-blooded rage.
For nearly a full minute, nobody seemed to know what to say.

Hawke sat staring at the teapot on the table, his usual capability to direct a smoldering glare at people until they quivered with fear having failed him rather often in the last few hours. He didn’t want to look up and see the worry in Anders’s eyes, or the pity in Eingana’s, or the fear in Merrill’s or anyone else’s.

Varric finally broke the silence with a mild cough.

“Shit,” he muttered. “Possessed Hawke would be at least as bad as a possessed mage. Worse, even.”

“I agree,” Aveline said gravely. “You may not be a magic user, Hawke, but you’re just as dangerous – if not more so.”

Incensed, Hawke turned his gaze upon her, and she winced at the look in his eyes.

“I’m flattered that you think so, Guard-Captain,” Hawke snarled sarcastically. “How very fortunate for you all, then, that when I erupt into an abomination and attempt to lay waste to Kirkwall, our new templar-run government shall be ready and able to hack me apart!”

Nobody met his eyes. Everyone in the room was uncomfortable, but none more so than Aveline.

“All they’ll need,” Hawke went on, his voice dripping with cutting irony, “is their friendly neighbourhood apostate to heal the wounds I’ll carve into them. I won’t even need my sword, I’ll have gleaming razors growing right out of my hands. Anders – you’ll be perfect. Here at last is a solution to the problem of mage oppression – all you needed was a common enemy! All we have to do is make sure I don’t kill you before I go completely batshit and the city will be safe.”

Eingana opened her mouth to speak, but Anders beat her to it.

“Michael,” he said reprovingly. “Stop.”

Hawke threw up his hands. “Why?” he demanded. “Why wait? You’re all in enough danger as it is. Like Aveline said, I’m dangerous enough when I’m in my right mind, aren’t I? You’d be much better off killing me right now, while I’m still possessed of my faculties.” He laughed bitterly at his own pun.

“Hawke, get a hold of yourself,” Eingana said firmly. “I know you’re upset, but please remember that we don’t even know if you are possessed. I told you, I’m no expert in these matters. It’s a guess. There could be any number of other explanations for your condition that do not involve demons.”

Hawke’s face was twisted like there was a foul smell in his nose.

“Please,” Eingana said. “Don’t do anything rash until Wynne arrives. She will know what is wrong
and what to do. I strongly doubt you’ll have to die in order to be free from whatever is influencing you.”

Hawke leaned forward and rubbed his face with his hands. He didn’t argue, but neither did he agree.

“I, um, I should be going,” Isabela piped up in the ensuing silence. She started to stand up.

“Yes, me too,” Merrill said immediately. “Shall we walk together, Isabela?”

Isabela smiled at her. “Sure thing, Kitten.”

Hawke pulled his hands away from his eyes but didn’t look at either one of them as they moved towards him and the doorway to the common room. He looked up when he realized Merrill had stopped in front of him.

“It will be okay, Hawke,” Merrill said with a brave attempt at a steady, reassuring voice. She hesitated, and then leaned down to hug him.

Hawke was startled, but after a moment he hesitantly folded his arms around her. He closed his eyes, welling with shame for his outburst and humbled by her gesture.

“Thank you, Merrill,” he mumbled.

Merrill nodded shyly as she stood up and slipped away. Isabela moved forward to hug Hawke too.

“Don’t you do anything stupid,” she whispered in his ear. “I don’t believe you’re possessed. You’re much too handsome to become an abomination.”

Hawke let out a bark of sarcastic laughter but squeezed Isabela gratefully. She straightened and winked at him before moving away, trailing one hand on his shoulder. She paused and turned to the Warden-Commander.

“Will you be in Kirkwall long?” she asked.

“Oh, I expect we’ll see each other again,” Eingana said archly. “You know, I’m still not over that defeat in Denerim. Interested in a rematch?”

“You’re on,” Isabela said with a smirk. She squeezed Hawke’s shoulder, waved to Varric and Aveline, and winked at Fenris as she swept past him and away.

“I must leave as well,” Fenris said. His mouth quirked a little. “It may surprise you to know this, but I do engage in other activities in Kirkwall apart from occasionally accompanying you on your escapades.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Hawke said. “Thanks for being here, Fenris. Stay safe.”

“And you as well. I... very much hope you are not possessed, Hawke. I will check in with you in a few days.”

Hawke nodded his thanks. Fenris inclined his head to the Warden-Commander and departed.

“Not to jump on the wagon of apparently fleeing from the possibly-possessed bloodthirsty warrior, but I have to go too,” Varric said as he stood. “I have some business with the Merchants’ Guild that I’ve been putting off for several weeks, and if I delay it any longer, there’s a good chance I’ll be assassinated.”
“And,” he added, glancing meaningfully at Aveline, “I imagine the Guard-Captain ought to update her people on the brigands we killed. And the Tal-Vashoth. And the brigands and Tal-Vashoth who killed each other. And the, um... spiders.”

“Succinctly stated,” Aveline remarked.

“There’s no need to make excuses, Varric,” Hawke said coolly. “I understand perfectly well why you’d want to leave. It’s not like there’s much left to discuss. We all know what the situation is and what’s to be done about it – which is wait for the Enchanter to arrive.”

Varric walked over to where Hawke sat and clapped him on the shoulder.

“You’re my best friend, Hawke. I don’t want you to die in any way that involves demons but not your glorious death in battle surrounded by hundreds of their sundered corpses. Anything else... well, it would be a tragedy, and I’ve invested in you rather heavily as a gallows comedy at this point.”

Hawke mustered a wan smirk. “You always know just what to say, Varric.”

“I’ll be here for you, whenever,” Varric added. “You know where to find me.”

“Thanks.”

Aveline looked faintly amused as Varric ambled away and paused near the door to wait for her. She looked at Eingana.

“Warden-Commander,” she said. “Despite the circumstances, it was a privilege meeting you. Do you need accommodations? I can arrange quarters for you at the Viscount’s Keep, if you like. I’m afraid there would be rather a lot of fawning nobles, but the Hanged Man is not exactly... safe. Or clean.”

“I haven’t actually made any arrangements yet,” Eingana said.

“You’re welcome to stay here if you like,” Hawke offered. “There are plenty of extra rooms. It’s just Bodahn and Sandal here with me, and sometimes Anders.”

He refrained from commenting on the possibility that he might lose control and kill her in her sleep. Eingana noticed, and seemed to appreciate it.

“That’s kind of you, Hawke,” she said. “Thank you. I accept. I don’t have much on me to trade at the moment, but I can arrange-”

Hawke held up his hand to forestall anything further. “Please. You saved my homeland and the entire rest of the damn ungrateful world from the archdemon and its underlings. I was at Ostagar, too – I saw the bloody horde, and I saw what it did to Lothering. The least I can do for the Hero of Ferelden is offer you a secure place to sleep where you won’t be drooled on by the Marcher nobility. They are legendary sycophants.”

Varric laughed. “He’s got a point there,” he said. “Fancy that – the Champion and the Warden-Commander staying at the same estate. I pity any burglars that might make the mistake of targeting this place. I think this might set a new record for most badass under one roof!”

Eingana chuckled good-naturedly. Hawke just rolled his eyes.

“Sleep well, Hawke,” Aveline said, her voice and face guarded. “For what it’s worth, I’d be much more concerned for any demon that tried to possess you. I doubt there are many that could survive the experience.”
Varric laughed, and Eingana covered her reflexive grin.

Hawke looked at her with eyebrows raised, confused and not at all certain that that was a compliment. “Uh... thanks, Aveline. I think.”

She smiled unexpectedly. “Can I come by tomorrow and take Reaver to the barracks? My recruits could use some exercise.”

“Aveline nodded her thanks. She and Varric finally departed, leaving Anders, Eingana, and Hawke alone in the sitting room.

Hawke stood up and rolled his shoulders to work off the tension. He cracked his neck and looked up at one of the windows. The sun had sunk low enough that the shadows were above his head.

“Supper’s at seventh bell,” he told Eingana, who was watching him neutrally. “There’s food in the larder if you’re hungry beforehand. I’ll show you where it is, and I’ll have Bodahn prepare a room for you as well.”

Eingana nodded. “Thank you, Hawke.”

She stood and twisted her torso back and forth to stretch. “It’ll be nice to change out of my armour. I came here as soon as I arrived. I haven’t slept indoors in....” She smiled ruefully and touched her forehead. “Quite some time.”

“Take a hot bath,” Hawke suggested. “If there’s one thing I can say in favour of Kirkwall over Ferelden, it’s the preponderance of ancient Tevinter magical plumbing.”

“Oooh, a bath! That does sound wonderful. I think I’ll do just that.”

Hawke glanced at Anders as he was turning to leave the room.

The mage was still sitting silently on the couch. He no longer looked panic-stricken at the thought of Hawke being possessed, but nor did he seem at ease.

“You staying here tonight, Anders?” Hawke asked, startling him from his reverie. Anders looked up.

“Yes, if that’s alright,” he said. “I... I’d like to be near you.”

Hawke nodded without a word and gestured for Eingana to follow him. She smiled reassuringly at Anders before leaving the room behind Hawke.

Anders took a deep breath, inhaling the cool, still air of the sitting room. Hawke’s and Eingana’s voices faded away as they climbed the stairs, and quiet descended.

Shadows crept up around Anders. He sat there on the couch, thinking, for a long time.

∞

Later that night, long after the sun had vanished below Hightown’s blocky skyline, Anders emerged from his laboratory in the cellar of the Hawke estate, stretching and yawning.

He’d been conducting one last (fruitless) search for any ideas on what to do next besides visit the Black Emporium. Having accepted that there was no other choice, Anders decided that now was as good a time as any to ask Hawke about it. He ascended the stairs and headed for the master
bedroom.

Anders entered Hawke’s bedchamber to find him standing in his smallclothes in front of a wall-mounted mirror, trimming his beard with a small pair of scissors. A single stout candle remained lit on the dresser next to him, bathing him in its warm glow. The soft radiance of a lantern on the nightstand beside the bed provided the only other illumination.

Anders paused at the door; all thoughts of the Black Emporium and its possible contents fleeing his mind as he drank in the sight of his lover.

Demonic possession. Anders could barely stand to conceive of the notion, let alone consider its implications for the future. It was even harder to acknowledge that such a scenario made perfect sense as the missing link that completed his theory.

The reaver initiation that Hawke had described earlier also made several somewhat disjointed pieces of the puzzle fall neatly into place. Anders had long suspected that Hawke had undergone some sort of ritual to become a true reaver, but he’d never dared ask about it.

Hawke had revelled in combat for as long as Anders had known him, since before the Deep Roads expedition years ago on which he’d incurred much of his wealth. It had always been rather obvious during battle. And he’d been curious ever since the first time he’d seen Hawke fight: when he’d helped him kill templars in the Chantry at night, after Justice’s outburst at his final meeting with Karl.

But asking Hawke about his bloodlust had always seemed... impolite. Like prying, but with the very real possibility of provoking Hawke into defending his secrets with violence.

Since the discussion earlier, Anders had been trying to convince himself that there might be other explanations that could tie his theory together as well as demonic possession did. He’d come up with a few flimsy ideas, but they didn’t offer much in the way of real potential, or hope.

He had been avoiding thinking seriously about what might happen if and when his trip to the Black Emporium confirmed the worst, and the probable became the actual. Now it was creeping up on him like the inevitability of nightfall.

What would he do, if Hawke were possessed? What could he possibly do?

Nothing. If Hawke was possessed, he was doomed. His bloodlust would overcome him and he would have to be killed.

Anders watched Hawke trimming his beard, his fingers and blades slipping along his face with the skill of years of practice. His eyes darted here and there in the mirror, the muscles of his biceps and shoulders shifting ever-so-slightly beneath his skin.

He was as calm and in control as he’d ever been. He was the most beautiful creature that Anders had ever seen, and every instinct and nerve in his body screamed at him to preserve this man, to protect him, to heal him. To do whatever else it took to keep him as he was now, in this moment.

Anders closed his eyes and prayed.

Please, Maker, he whispered in his mind. Let it not be a demon. Let him be healthy. Let him be free.

I submit myself to Your mercy. I am already possessed – I am already damned. Take me instead. Take me instead.

He felt a soft touch on his face, and when he opened his eyes Hawke was right in front of him,
brushing away the tear that had slipped out. Hawke held his face gently, brushing soft kisses across his cheek.

“Michael,” Anders breathed, managing to control his emotions.

“Anders.” Hawke drew his head back, meeting Anders’s eyes as his hands moved downwards, gently undoing the buckles of his robe. “Relax. I’m going to be fine.”

That was the closest a man like Hawke was likely to come to words of comfort without prodding. The irony of Hawke consoling Anders when he was the one in danger was like a crushing weight on the mage’s chest.

He grabbed Hawke’s shoulders and kissed him on the mouth, hard.

Hawke hadn’t been expecting that, but after a moment he responded. His hands slid into Anders’s loosened robe and around his back, warm and soothing on his cool skin. Their tongues pressed back and forth. Hawke’s hands drifted up Anders’s chest and over his shoulders, then moved down, helping him slip out of his robe.

Hawke’s response to Anders’s advances after months of no intimacy at all, coupled with his unexpected gentleness, were like a balm on the mage’s soul. He felt a warm glow of affection for his lover.

He broke the kiss and wrapped his arms around Hawke, hugging him tightly and nuzzling his shoulder. He’d needed this closeness, Anders realized, for a long time. It felt good, and right. He was elated that Hawke trusted himself around him – and that he still trusted Anders around himself.

Hawke seemed to understand his mood and just held him for a time. His thumbs stroked Anders’s back softly. Anders enjoyed the warmth and closeness of Hawke’s body, feeling wonderfully safe.

Presently Hawke helped Anders finish the process of removing his robe and guided him over to the bed, blowing out the candle on his way past it. He threw back the coverlet and pushed Anders down onto mattress.

Anders remained sitting upright, looking up at Hawke. The comfortable setting and renewed intimacy had reawakened many of his old desires. He wanted rather intensely to feel Hawke inside of him.

Given the circumstances, however, that was a terribly unwise idea, and he had a feeling that Hawke would refuse any attempt on his part to advance things further.

“Lie down, fool,” Hawke said, pushing Anders to make room so that he could climb into the bed as well.

Anders shifted himself over to the other side of the bed. Hawke collapsed gratefully onto the sheets. He slid his legs under the thick quilt, but left it thrown back – the window was open, and the late spring night was warm and not too humid.

Hawke made himself comfortable and looked over at Anders. His eyes roved down Anders’s body. Suddenly, he started laughing.

“What?” Anders asked.

Hawke reached over and toyed a little with the metal ring in Anders’s right nipple.
“Why are these still here?” he asked. “I mean, not that I don’t like it... it’s sexy. I just thought you would have removed them as soon as you had a chance.”

Anders smiled. “To be honest, I was in so much pain after – that time – I forgot about them for a while.”

He smile faded. “I healed myself rather indiscriminately. They started to itch the next day, and that was when I actually looked and realized they were still there.”

Anders couldn’t really say why he hadn’t just removed the piercings. It seemed like a subtle act of submission on his part, leaving Hawke’s marks of domination in place. It wasn’t like they severely disfigured his body or prevented him from functioning. And Hawke thought they were sexy.

Hawke flipped the ring in his fingers up and down. It looked to have been attached securely and healed well, with no obvious scarring.

“Isn’t it... unsanitary?” he asked.

“Not with cleansing magic.”

“You have a solution for everything,” Hawke said, amused.

He reached over to fondle the other ring. He glanced up at Anders with a sly look in his eyes, and then slowly leaned in and flicked the right piercing with his tongue, never breaking eye contact.

Anders exhaled softly at the sensation. He felt an answering thrill run along his skin, and a conveniently timed cool breeze drifting in through the window induced a delightful shiver. Goosebumps rose across his chest and up and down his arms.

Hawke’s mouth drifted upwards, his tongue briefly working at Anders’s nipple and then softly kissing his chest and the hollow of his throat. Anders ran his fingers through Hawke’s thick hair, breathing deeply and inhaling his lover’s scent.

There was a faint hint of blood – Hawke was covered in it so often that it seemed unlikely it would ever to go away – and an arousing tinge of his sweat. Mostly, however, the scent was that strange, exotic spiciness that Anders still couldn’t identify. It seemed far less rancid than it had in the past, and correspondingly more pleasant.

Hawke’s mouth reached Anders’s throat, and he spent some time kissing his neck, making Anders squirm with the subtle pleasure. Blood was already surging to his cock, making it stiffen against the fabric of his smallclothes. Hawke noticed, and reached down to fondle him with his right hand.

Anders’s fingers clenched slightly, still buried in Hawke’s hair. Hawke’s lips and tongue on his throat were igniting his desires further, the sensations and closeness powerfully stimulating.

Hawke’s mouth moved upward again, tracing light kisses along Anders’s jaw to his ear. Anders felt a wet tongue exploring the planes and arches of his ear and shuddered his enjoyment.

“Michael... kiss me,” he murmured.

His eyes were closed, so he saw no movement, but he felt Hawke oblige him a moment later. He parted his lips to receive his lover’s tongue. His reached around with his left hand and slid it across Hawke’s back, relishing the broad muscles, drifting down to squeeze his firm ass.

Hawke moaned softly against Anders’s lips and broke the kiss. He exhaled and rolled suddenly
away, coming to rest on his back with no contact between them.

His hand moved temptingly over the considerable bulge in his own shorts, but with a visible effort of will he took it away and folded both of his hands under his head, eyes closed with a frown.

“Michael....” Anders couldn’t help his disappointment. He thought things had been going rather well. “What’s the matter?”

Hawke opened his eyes, but avoided looking directly at Anders. His pupils were slightly dilated.

“This isn’t safe,” he muttered. “You know why. I’m sorry – I shouldn’t have done any of that.”

“I’d have been disappointed if you hadn’t.” Anders ran the back of his finger against the dense patch of hair in Hawke’s armpit.

Hawke squirmed a little at the sensation and couldn’t help smiling.

“Stop,” he murmured, but Anders didn’t stop and Hawke made no move to enforce his request.

Anders ran his fingers along Hawke’s biceps, over the roundness of his shoulder muscle and across his chest. He traced lightly under Hawke’s pecs, tweaked his nipples a little just to see the amusement on Hawke’s face, and ran his fingers through his fine chest hair. It was fairly dense over his pecs, but below that it was mostly confined to a thick tuft that ran from the base of his sternum down between his rippled abs to his groin.

Hawke’s hand flashed out to grab Anders’s wrist before his questing fingers could get any lower. Anders was startled; he’d never seen Hawke move so fast outside of a fight.

“Anders... don’t,” Hawke said, a hint of pleading in his voice. “You know I can’t resist you for long. You’re not making this easy for me.”

“Why should I?” Anders said softly. “What’s the danger? You’re fine, you’re in control. You’re not cutting me up or howling like a demon out for my blood. You’re not punishing me for anything. We’re just two men in a bed who love each other, expressing our affection through physical intimacy.”

Hawke frowned, his eyes half closed, and said nothing. After a moment, he released Anders’s hand.

The bulge in his shorts hadn’t subsided at all. Anders caressed it with his hand, cupping Hawke’s confined dick and squeezing it gently to stimulate further blood flow. Hawke groaned softly and shifted his hips, pushing against Anders’s hand.

Anders continued to fondle him as he moved his head over to kiss Hawke again. He pulled away after only a moment, looking deeply into Hawke’s eyes, their faces inches apart. Hawke’s pupils were a little more dilated than they’d been a few minutes ago, but they were still well within the limits of normal human physiology.

“I’ve never shown you my electricity trick, have I?” Anders asked, struck by sudden inspiration.

“What?” Hawke was perplexed. “What are you talking about?”

Anders trailed a series of kisses down Hawke’s jaw, neck, and shoulder, breathing deeply to inhale the spicy scent from his beard.

“Do you remember,” he murmured between kisses, “once not long after we met...? We were in
Hightown, looking for a pair of boots for Bethany—”

“To replace the ones she’d lost in that swampy pit, where the slavers had taken Feynriel,” Hawke finished. “Yes. And... oh... Isabela was with us, and she started talking about some whorehouse in Denerim. Yes, now I remember her mentioning that.”

“Trust me,” Anders said. “You’ll like this.”

He placed one finger of his left hand directly over Hawke’s navel, and used his magic to induce a mild electrical current as he kissed Hawke on the shoulder to complete the connection.

“Whoa!” Hawke jerked beneath him, forcing Anders to pull his face back.

“Good, right?” Anders said, unable to keep the smirk out of his voice. “It’s better if you let me do it for longer.”

“So do it again,” Hawke said, his breath coming a little faster.

Anders splayed his left hand over Hawke’s abs and slowly slid it down to his hip. He ignited the current and closed his mouth over Hawke’s nipple.

“Nnnh!” Hawke arched his back, trembling at the unfamiliar, yet undeniably pleasurable sensation. It was the gentlest tingling, stimulating nerves all over his body in a euphony of touch. It strongly reminded him of the hyper-aware experience he’d had after drinking the ritually prepared dragon’s blood and becoming a reaver, years ago.

Coupled with Anders’s warm, wet mouth over his nipple, where the current left his body, it was exquisitely, intimately sexual.

“Ohhh,” Hawke sighed, relaxing his tensed body as Anders lifted his head, cutting off the current. “Damn it, man. Why have you never shown me that before?”

“I honestly don’t know why I didn’t think of it before now,” Anders said.

He trailed his hand across Hawke’s chest, stimulating a minor current between the span of his first and second fingers. Tiny tendrils of static writhed across Hawke’s skin, provoking a pleased rumble from his throat.

Anders pushed himself upward with his other hand and straddled Hawke’s waist. Their eyes were locked together as Hawke’s hands explored their way up Anders’s sides and down his arms.

Anders reached down and took Hawke’s hands in his. He spread their arms as he leaned down to kiss him, creating a slightly more powerful current from each hand.

Hawke moaned into his kiss and arched beneath him as the electricity flickered between Anders’s lips and first one of his hands, then the other, alternating back and forth several times a second. Hawke’s grip tightened, and Anders squeezed back.

Eventually Anders pulled his lips away, resting his forehead against Hawke’s. Both of them were panting, excited by the magical stimulation.

“You’ve been holding out on me,” Hawke breathed, twining their fingers together. “I can’t believe you’ve always been able to do that and I never knew until now.”

“I’m a man of many talents.”
“Yeah?” Hawke nipped at the mage’s lips. “What other naughty tricks have you been hiding, huh?”

He squeezed Anders’s hands again, this time hard enough to be uncomfortable.

Anders sat upright, looking down at Hawke. His pupils had dilated further, and his breathing rate hadn’t slowed. The scent of blood coming from him was noticeably stronger than it had been a few minutes ago.

“Michael,” Anders said. “How are you feeling?”

Hawke blinked at him in confusion, then his face abruptly blanked as he seemed to realize what was going on. He detached his hands from Anders’s and covered his forehead with them. He closed his eyes.

“Horny,” he said. “We should really just go to sleep. This is exactly what I was worried about. It’s too risky.”

His eyes opened, and Anders felt a start of fear at the feral hunger in them.

“As much as I’d like to....” Hawke seemed to be struggling with himself. He squeezed his eyes shut.

“I can’t,” he whispered, more to himself than to Anders. “I can’t lose control. I won’t.”

Anders chewed on his lower lip, wondering if there was any way he could be intimate with Hawke without setting him off. He hadn’t yet mentioned that his “electricity trick” could also be used as a defensive weapon – if Hawke got too aggressive, Anders could shock him hard enough to briefly stun him without causing permanent harm. He wondered if Hawke would agree to such a safety measure.

He wondered if he would be rational enough to use it. If Anders was being honest with himself, he also had trouble remaining “in control” – once Hawke started to mix pain with pleasure, Anders couldn’t help the enjoyment he got out of it. Just as inflicting pain was a turn-on for the warrior, receiving it was a turn-on for Anders.

“Michael,” Anders said, coming to a decision.

Hawke opened his eyes and looked at him. His pupils had contracted slightly, and his breathing was more even.

“Relax,” Anders said. “Just... lie back, and enjoy yourself. Don’t think about blood or battle. This is just me, pleasuring you because I want to and I like doing it. Just like we used to do, before all this started. Stay in control, and if you lose it, I swear to you – I’ll defend myself.”

Hawke looked at him steadily for several moments.

“Are you sure?” he said eventually. “You need to control yourself as much as I do.”

Anders returned his gaze steadily. He’d expected Hawke to say something like that, for the man was neither stupid nor forgetful.

“I promise I will,” Anders said, and this time he meant it.

Hawke took a deep breath and nodded.

Anders shifted his way downwards, trailing his fingers down the line of hair in the middle of Hawke’s chest and abs. He reached the waistband of his shorts and tugged on them, exposing more
of his hips. Hawke lifted his butt off the bed to help Anders remove his smalls.

Once freed, his cock lifted upwards, already sporting a pearly bead of precome on the tip. His erection had softened somewhat during their conversation, but Anders had soon gently stroked it back to an impressive stiffness.

Hawke watched him, once more folding his hands behind his head and remaining still as Anders curved one hand under his balls and caressed them.

Maintaining eye contact, Anders leaned in and ran his tongue up the shaft of Hawke’s cock. Hawke let out a long, contented exhalation through his nose, eyelids drifting a little lower.

Anders swirled his tongue around the head and ran it back down the other side of the shaft. With his free hand he stroked it slowly, enjoying the sensation of skin sliding over hard flesh beneath his fingertips.

Hawke’s eyes were now mostly closed. He let out a quiet, appreciative “Mmm” as Anders finally closed his mouth over the engorged head of his cock. He moved both hands down, taking a gentle hold of Anders’s head and stroking his hair.

Anders pushed forward, taking more of Hawke into his mouth and working the shaft with his tongue. Hawke bit his lower lip, clearly enjoying himself. Still with careful gentleness, he pushed his hips upwards, wanting Anders to take him deeper.

“Yeah... that’s nice,” he whispered. “That’s good. Man, I’ve missed this.”

Anders had too. He bobbed his head up and down, still slipping his tongue over Hawke’s shaft as best he could with it filling most of his mouth. He worked on suppressing his gag reflex, getting Hawke’s thick cock deeper into his throat with each downward bob.

After a few minutes’ working up to it, during which Hawke groaned his quiet pleasure and patiently refrained from forcing Anders to deep-throat him before he was ready, Anders managed it.

He pushed himself all the way downwards, groaning his pleasure as he felt Hawke’s swollen dick pop into the depths of his throat. He drew off long enough to exhale and breathe in through his nose, absorbing the heady scent of Hawke’s sweat and body before going down on him again.

“Fuck, Anders,” Hawke sighed. “That’s excellent. Ohhh, yeah.” He gyrated his hips, shifting his cock around in Anders’s mouth even as it was buried up to his balls.

Once more Anders withdrew to breathe and went back down, starting a slow but steady rhythm. He worked his tongue across Hawke’s shaft on each pass.

Hawke tossed his head back as Anders started to speed up, and his groans became growls of pleasure. He started pushing his hips upward to meet Anders’s mouth, his grip tightening ever-so-slightly.

Having found a rhythm, Anders reached up to caress Hawke’s chest and ribs. As Hawke was thrusting up into his mouth, he ignited a powerful current, just barely weak enough not to be painful.

“Nnnnnhh!” Hawke cried out his pleasure, arching his back and pushing his cock as deep as it could go into Anders’s mouth. “Maker’s breath! Oh, fuck... ohhh, wow.”

He was panting, his entire body shuddering at the magical stimulation. “You are one talented cocksucker, Anders. Fucking talented. Yeah... mmm.”
Anders cut off the current, and Hawke let out a whimper that was part relief, part disappointment. Anders waited a few seconds, giving Hawke a chance to steady himself, and then resumed the magical stimulation.

Hawke cried out again, loosing a string of colourful and occasionally blasphemous cursing.

Anders ceased his stimulation and pulled his mouth off of Hawke’s cock, needing a respite. He ran his lips and tongue up and down the shaft, taking the opportunity to catch his breath.

Hawke took his cock in hand and smacked it against Anders’s mouth a few times, snickering a little.

“You’re such a good boy,” he breathed.

Anders looked up at him with an alluring smile as he prepared to go down on him again. He froze. Hawke’s eyes were wide open and totally black. They were empty of any human features, reflecting none of the lantern’s dim light.

Fear pulsed through Anders’s body. By his behaviour, Hawke didn’t appear to have lost control, but when else did his eyes ever look like that? It definitely wasn’t natural, and was almost certainly connected to whatever had altered his bloodlust.

For a few tense heartbeats, Anders was paralyzed, wondering if he’d made a terrible mistake and pushed Hawke too far. Even if he hadn’t, how could he know how close Hawke was to losing control? Would stopping now bring Hawke back to himself, or would it anger him enough to push him over the edge into bloodlust?

But Hawke didn’t even seem to be aware of his own hyper-aroused state. He was pushing Anders’s head back down onto his cock, but it was with the clumsy, lustful impatience of a man near his climax – not the rough, violent assault that Anders had endured before.

“Come on, man,” Hawke breathed. “Don’t stop, do it again. I’m so close... keep going.”

The pleading in his voice sounded entirely normal, and Anders relaxed a little. He supposed there was no harm in continuing. Maybe this was a good sign – perhaps it was possible, after all, for the two of them to be intimate without Hawke becoming violent.

He decided to continue, and made a mental note to mention the change in Hawke’s eyes to him later. Maybe he would remember something, a feeling or insight that might prove useful to reversing his condition. It was clear that the alteration to his bloodlust had a sexual element, but less so as to how that related to his violent impulses.

There would be time for further speculation later. Anders went at Hawke’s cock with renewed gusto, swirling his tongue over and around the shaft, relishing the smooth, uneven planes of its veiny girth. He stroked the skin under Hawke’s balls and, feeling them start to tighten, ignited a strong pleasurable current from his hand on Hawke’s chest.

“Oh, fuck yes!” Hawke yelled, his whole body jerking beneath Anders’s hands. He pumped himself upwards into Anders’s mouth, eager to reach his imminent release. “Maker, yes, I’m coming... unnnh, fuck!”

He ejaculated explosively in Anders’s mouth, his balls clenching and muscles spasming. Heat washed through him, the electricity making hair all over his body stand on end. His hands fell to his sides as he rode the wave, panting for breath.
Anders stayed on him and swallowed for as long as he could, but the flood of spunk into his throat eventually forced him to pull back or choke. He ran his tongue around the swollen head, collecting what he’d missed. At the same time, he gradually reduced the intensity of his electrical current until it was minimal.

“Oh, yeah,” Hawke groaned. “I fucking love how you swallowed all that come. Such a good boy... lick it all up. Fuck, that’s hot.”

Anders obeyed him, finally dropping the magical stimulation.

“Mmm.” Hawke bit his lip in appreciation as he watched Anders cleaning up his cock and stroked the sides of his face affectionately. His skin was damp with sweat, but not to the point of being drenched, which was nice.

Anders looked up at him carefully. Hawke’s eyes were still black, but his grossly enlarged pupils were steadily contracting back to their normal size.

Hawke giggled sleepily. “Fuck, Anders. That was, wow. That was....”

Anders smirked and arched his eyebrows. He didn’t want to congratulate himself too heartily just yet, but it seemed like they’d done it. He’d gotten Hawke off without him losing control.

“ Incredible,” Hawke finished, unable to find a better word. “So good. You talented, talented man.”

Anders’s smirk became a genuine smile as he climbed up Hawke’s body to kiss him. Hawke groaned appreciatively into his mouth, his hands moving up Anders’s back as their tongues twined together.

Eventually Anders rolled off of Hawke and lay next to him. He wanted to tell Hawke that he was proud of him for not giving into bloodlust, but he couldn’t seem to find the appropriate words.

He still wasn’t quite sure what had happened – it had superficially appeared that Hawke had lost control, but his behaviour hadn’t reflected the physiological change. Anders needed to give the matter more thought before he could figure it out completely.

Hawke was now on his side, kissing Anders’s shoulder and trailing caresses down his body. He didn’t look done.

Anders smiled. “What are you doing, love? Now it really is time we went to sleep, don’t you think?”

“Not yet,” Hawke said. “I want to return the favour.”

Anders looked at him. Hawke’s pupils were still highly dilated, but at least the natural deep green of his irises could be seen around them.

“You were incredible,” Hawke said again. “I... I want to give you the same thing. I can’t make electricity between my hands or anything, but I still know how to please a man.”

Anders was sorely tempted, but he was also exhausted and more than a little wary of pushing Hawke any further. He had no idea if being on the other end of their act of intimacy would set Hawke off, but he was willing to wait until morning at least to try. It had been rather a long day.

More to the point, now that Hawke’s eyes were showing green again, Anders didn’t really want to get him worked back up. He didn’t know if he could enjoy Hawke giving him oral sex while looking at him with those frightening, inhuman eyes.
“Let’s hold off for now,” he said, adding a reassuring smile when Hawke frowned. “No need to tempt fate, right? Besides, I have just as much fun getting you off as I do getting off myself. Just... differently. Tomorrow, though....”

Hawke still looked disappointed, but the promise in Anders’s voice seemed to satisfy him, and he nodded. He gave Anders’s cock a brief squeeze through his smallclothes anyway, squirmed a little on the sheets as he pulled his own shorts back up, and made himself comfortable. Finally, he leaned over to extinguish the lantern.

Hawke turned onto his side and extended an arm invitingly. Anders was happy to snuggle in close to him with a contented sigh. He rested his head on Hawke’s shoulder as Hawke folded his arm around him. Hawke stroked his skin with one finger, and Anders reciprocated the gesture.

Their closeness, Hawke’s warmth, and the smell of his body was a great comfort. Anders was closer to true happiness than he had been in a long time, and he felt a welcome surge of confidence that Hawke’s condition could be fixed, demon or no.

Wynne would know what to do, he was sure of it. They would be okay.

A cool breeze whispered through the room. Hawke pulled a single sheet over them. The night was so warm that the light covering was enough to keep them comfortable.

As Anders relaxed and his eyes drifted closed, his mind turned to the future. If and when they did succeed in correcting whatever was wrong with Hawke – what would happen then? Certainly all involved would be changed by the ordeal, but whether it would be for better or worse remained to be seen.

“Michael,” he murmured without opening his eyes.

“Hnh?”

“What do you think will happen to us?” Anders asked.

Hawke didn’t answer for a while. But for the faintest rustling of the curtains and the occasional distant call of some local wildlife, the room was silent.

Anders was beginning to wonder if Hawke had fallen asleep by the time he finally spoke.

“You want to know what I think will happen?” he asked.

Anders nodded against Hawke’s shoulder.

“Most likely, I’ll become an abomination.”

Anders furrowed his brow in confusion and distaste. “Michael-”

“They’ll embrace passionately,” Hawke cut him off. “Orsino will requite her feelings and admit that
his rage at her was really the only way he could deal with his own stormy, confusing emotions. She’ll tell him she has no choice but to implement the Tranquil Solution, and he’ll tearfully understand. He’ll live out his days as her emotionless secretary and boytoy. Tevinter will be overthrown and mages will become extinct, solving the problem of oppression, ending the threat of blood magic and demonic possession forever, and ushering in a new Golden Age of peace and prosperity throughout all of Thedas.

“And you and I – our story will be highly distorted by Varric and the passage of time. We’ll be revered as the heroes who made it all happen, our noble sacrifices remembered forever and taught to children as shining examples of courage and selflessness.”

There was silence for a moment.

“Michael, none of that was funny,” Anders said once he was sure that Hawke was done. “At all.”

“I was being one hundred percent serious.”

Anders sighed. Just when he’d been feeling so optimistic, Hawke’s bitterness had resurfaced with a vengeance.

He tried hard to let go of his anger at Hawke for saying such things and filled in the space with understanding. He was afflicted with a potentially ruinous, unknown condition that might well indicate demonic possession. Surely Anders, who understood all too well the dangers of even voluntary possession, could make some allowances for his lover’s pessimistic mood.

“Alright, not completely serious,” Hawke said after further silence from Anders. “I’m sorry. Some of that was a bit tasteless. Well – most of it, really. What were you expecting me to say, Anders? I have no idea what will happen, and I can’t say I’m especially excited to find out.”

Anders blinked in the soft moonlight, thinking.

“I... I’m afraid,” Hawke whispered, so softly that Anders barely heard him. “I don’t want to turn into a monster.”

“Join the club,” Anders said bitterly, unable to bring himself to offer the comfort he really should have. “Although it’s far too late for me, of course.”

Hawke didn’t respond for a moment. Then he said in a quiet voice, “Now I know.”

“Know what?”

“What it’s like to wonder if... that... might be my eventual fate. I think I might understand you a little more, now.”

Anders closed his eyes to hold back tears as a rush of powerful and conflicting emotions surged through him. He squeezed Hawke, hoping for wordless comfort, and received it when Hawke squeezed him back.

“We’ll make it through this, Michael,” Anders said softly. “Together. You will not become a monster. I’ll make sure of it. I swear to you, I won’t let it happen.”

“Thank you,” Hawke mumbled. “For protecting me. From myself. Consider this... permission, in advance, to do whatever you need to do. And....”

Anders stroked Hawke’s chest affectionately. It took a very long time for Hawke to finish his
sentence, long enough that Anders began to fall asleep.

Finally Hawke added, in a barely-audible whisper, “I’m sorry for everything I’ve done to you.”

“I forgive you,” Anders murmured, drifting away as sleep overcame him. “I’m yours, remember.”

“Mine. Yeah. And I’m... yours.”

It was the last thing Anders heard as he sank gratefully into soft, warm darkness.

∞

Hours into the night, Anders entered a strange, lucid dream.

He seemed to be falling through a surreal environment of sepia-toned clouds, but there was no sensation of gravity or movement. He could easily have been hurtling upwards or along any random vector.

Anders knew he was unlikely to be awake given this kind of environment, so he reasoned that he was in the Fade. The surrounding cloudscape was filled with wondrous arches and swirls of puffy shapes, but only what he was looking at directly had any detail.

Regardless, it was difficult to concentrate on the cloudscape. Four smooth ribbons were wound around his body, and their silky sensations took up the majority of his sensory attention. They extended backwards, or upwards, or behind him, as far as he could see; and they seemed to fall infinitely forward as well. One was a bright intense yellow, one a rich green, one a deep satisfying blue, and the last was a vivid and passionate red.

The ribbons slid easily over his body as he progressed down his path. As he examined each in turn, Anders realized that he was naked. The blue ribbon slipped over and around his left leg, with the green in a mirrored position on his right. The yellow one spiralled around his left arm as he plummeted, the smooth whirr of its passage over his skin a pleasant accompaniment to the cool, gentle whisper of its touch.

The red ribbon flowed around his neck and over his chest. It was the widest and most flexible, and it felt the nicest. Its shiny surface wasn’t cool like the others, but comfortably warm.

Two more ribbons of distant energy curved in a vast helical tunnel around his vector, but they were so far away as to be visible only as sparkling lines of not-cloud. They were only infrequently noticeable at all.

Anders had never had a dream like this that he could remember, nor had he ever encountered any such landscape or phenomena in the Fade before. It was bizarre and unexpected, but not entirely unwelcome. The sensations and sounds were pleasing and the scenery beautiful.

Gradually, he sank into a dim half-aware state, drifting along with the ribbons wherever they took him and simply enjoying the dream.

Abruptly, it changed. The yellow ribbon ended with a flit of noise, gone from his arm. He looked up just in time to see its fluttering end vanishing into the clouds.

Before he could really consider the fact, Anders emerged from the clouds and his surroundings changed dramatically.

He was now unquestionably plummeting downwards in the open air. He seemed to be several miles
up, above a turbulent ocean. He could see for a great distance, and the coast near the horizon looked
vaguely familiar.

As he fell further, the sense of familiarity increased. It wasn’t long before Anders was certain that this
area of the Fade had replicated Kirkwall and its surrounding environs, and that below him was the
Wounded Coast.

Since he was rotating slowly as he fell, he also couldn’t help noticing that opposite the coast, in the
remote, hazy distance, was the outline of the Black City.

The green ribbon ended. A moment later, the blue one did as well.

Only the red continued to flow over and around him like a river of blood. Its passage over his body
was still warm, but it was no longer comforting and smooth. Now it felt scratchy, and seemed to be
generating more and more heat with the friction of its flow.

Anders looked around and saw that he was surrounded by spirits. They were swirling in a maelstrom
about him, none of them having definite shape but all unquestionably watching him with interest.

Voices echoing across the Fadescape reached him, apparently from the spirits. They were much
farther away than they appeared. Farther out still, the glittering helix had become wildly erratic,
surging in and outwards as if it was trying to get to him, but was constantly rebuffed.

*We are distraction made flesh.*

What? Anders tried to say. His voice sounded faint and hollow, like the sound was only returning to
him after a delay of several seconds and through banks of muffling fog.

*Away from this, always in peripheral, another mind – untethered.*

The ribbon was starting to become uncomfortably abrasive and hot over his chest as he continued to
fall. He was so far above the ocean below that he barely seemed to have moved in relation to it. He
tried to get a hand underneath the ribbon to lift it away from his body.

*His form, shattered.*

Anders looked down, trying to see if the ribbon ended anywhere below as the other three had. As far
as he could tell, it extended all the way down to the distant, storm-tossed surface of the water.

*Does an afterthought prove the gods when direct action is long missing?*

The ribbon seemed to be contracting, but when he examined it, he realized it was merely becoming
more and more twisted. The heat was a little more bearable now that it was concentrated on a smaller
area of his skin, but the discomfort from the roughness of what had essentially become a rope racing
past him was mounting rapidly.

*Stay focused,* the spirits whispered.

Or was there only one spirit, divided into many reflections of the same self? How often did this many
spirits speak and act in such perfect unison?

*Whims escape to their own action.*

Unexpectedly, the ribbon suddenly billowed out into a vast, fluttering shroud of fabric. It wrapped
Anders completely in its gossamer folds, and he lost sight of the spirit or spirits, the distant energy,
the ocean, and the coast.

Even as he fell into the encompassing red blanket, a ridge of it continued, impossibly, to chafe a long burn into his chest. By this point, the pain was bad enough that he was whimpering.

Then Anders felt warmth on his lips – a kiss.

The brilliant scarlet all around him darkened to black. The heat and fiction vanished, and their absence was a great relief, although some pain lingered.

Pinpricks of light bloomed all around him. He was falling through the night, and he could see nothing but stars.

The invisible kiss became more insistent. The lips and whiskery beard felt familiar, and Anders responded instinctually.

Abruptly he was awake, lying in bed at the Hawke estate. Hawke himself was leaning over him, nuzzling his neck, his beard bristling against Anders’s jaw. His face was limned in moonlight, his eyes out of sight.

“Michael?” Anders said groggily, unsure of the source of his sudden fear, or why his heart was beating so fast.

Hawke lifted his head to look at him, and the moonlight fell across his face.

His eyes were black. None of the watery radiance reflected off his eyes – they were yawning voids, and Anders recoiled in fear from the terrifying sensation that he was being pulled into them.

The pain across his chest from the friction burn still hadn’t abated, but now it felt qualitatively different. Anders glanced down and saw the knife clutched in Hawke’s hand, and the long, bleeding gash in his own body.

“I love you,” Hawke whispered to him, and although Anders had ached to hear those words again for many months at this point, he had never wanted to hear them like this.

“Michael,” he breathed, his heart racing painfully as he tried not to twitch from the sting of the wound in his chest. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to finish what you started earlier,” Hawke murmured, and leaned down to sink his teeth into Ander’s ear.
Indestructible

Chapter Summary

“Master is angry.”

Anders flinched and cried out in pain as Hawke savagely bit his ear, harder than he ever had before. It hurt a lot, and there was no pleasure in it. He felt warm blood dripping onto his neck, and he whimpered again as he tried unsuccessfully to push Hawke off him.

“Oh, I know,” Hawke said breathily. He raised his head to loom inches from Anders’s face; his lips were dark with blood. “Isn’t it... isn’t it... ah, what is the word I search for?”

Anders didn’t answer him. Tears spilled from his eyes, not just from physical pain but emotional torment as well. What had gone wrong? How had Hawke lost himself so thoroughly?

They had been so close to stability, earlier. So warm in each other’s arms.

So normal.

“Sublime,” Hawke groaned, and kissed him.

Anders tasted his own blood as Hawke forced his tongue into his mouth. He cringed as he felt Hawke pressing the knife into his side, beginning a new wound.

This is my fault, Anders thought. I believed I could be with him, if we were just careful and I didn’t push him too far. But I was wrong, and now he’s lost. He’s gone over the edge.

Will I ever get him back?

Will I survive long enough to try?

“No, Michael, you’re really not,” Anders said. “I just asked you to stop, and you didn’t. You’ve lost control. We made so much progress earlier tonight. Don’t you remember?”

“Of course I remember,” Hawke crooned in his ear. “I remember every exquisite detail. You were wonderful.”

He lifted his head back up to run his tongue across the cut he’d just made, shivering with delight.
“You’re so good to me, Anders. So loving, so affectionate, so... understanding. You understand everything about me, and you still accept me – as I am. Nobody else has ever done that.”

Hawke kissed him on the forehead. “I don’t deserve a man like you.”

“What?” Anders was bewildered and agonized by Hawke’s words. “Michael, don’t you see what you’re doing? This isn’t you. You’re acting exactly the way you’ve been trying your hardest not to for months!”

“Bullshit,” Hawke said, moving his knife hand down to Anders’s arm. “I’m pleasing you. Don’t deny it.”

He paused over Anders’s neck, just below his jaw. He kissed there, and the dual sensations of his lips on Anders’s skin and the blade sliding along his arm produced a strange and unwelcome thrill.

Anders suppressed his desires as hard as he could. Enjoy it he might, but only to a degree, and Hawke wouldn’t stop there. More to the point, Anders had made a promise to him that he intended to keep.

“No,” he said. “Michael, stop. Now.”

“We can be together, Anders,” Hawke said softly against his neck. “I haven’t lost control. I’m not assaulting you. I’m not savagely using your body for my own enjoyment. This is all for you.”

He reached down and started a new cut up Anders’s thigh.

“You’re hurting me!” Anders cried, choking back a sob.

“Anders, relax,” Hawke said soothingly. “Just lie back and enjoy yourself, alright? This is just me, pleasuring you because I want to and I like doing it.”

Anders’s own words from earlier echoed back to him now were like bitter claws in his heart. He tried again to shove Hawke off him, but the muscular warrior wouldn’t budge.

“I know you like it like this,” Hawke whispered to him.

He smiled, but while Anders usually felt joy at seeing Michael Hawke smile, his dark, empty eyes inspired only heartsick terror.

“You don’t need to be ashamed. This will be good for both of us.”

Hawke leaned down to bite Anders’s shoulder, free hand squeezing his left arm in tandem. His knife hand roved with the point of the blade over Anders’s skin, searching for a new place to cut.

“Michael,” Anders said tearfully, “I know what you’d want me to do, if you were still you.”

He began to gather magical power in his hands, preparing to deliver a powerful jolt.

“I swore I’d defend myself if you lost control. Please, just stop this now. I don’t want to hurt you, even for a moment.”

Hawke laughed affectionately. “You can’t hurt me, Anders.”

He kissed him on his neck again, this time without adding the knife, and again Anders had to fight down a surge of his own want. Hawke smelled so good – his spicy, sweaty, bloody scent was like an intense aphrodisiac. And he was so beautiful, muscles limned in the moonlight, his features half
shadowed by the planes of his face.

Even the shadowy pits of his eyes were strangely alluring – drawing him in, promising ecstasy.

Anders mustered his willpower and forced himself to remain focused. He clung to the energy building in his palms and fingers that had begun to dissipate, drawing it back.

“You’re not well, Michael,” Anders said softly. “You’re forgetting something rather important. I... I just hope you forgive me for this later.”

“What?” Hawke raised his head and looked at him, frowning.

Anders touched Hawke on both sides of his chest and released an intense electrical current.

Hawke convulsed, groaning as the painful shock briefly paralyzed him. He collapsed on top of Anders, almost pinning him to the bed, but Anders had been ready for this response. He shoved Hawke to one side, adding a touch of magical force to accommodate Hawke’s weight. Then, finally, he squirmed out from underneath him, rolling his way off the bed.

As fast as he could, Anders staggered to his feet and made for the door.

“Fucking mage,” Hawke snarled behind him.

He recovered far faster than Anders would have thought possible. He had just enough time to close his hand over the door’s latch before Hawke slammed into him from behind, forcing him against the door and keeping it closed with his weight. Anders grunted hoarsely as the breath was knocked out of his lungs.

“You bastard,” Hawke growled in Anders’s ear.

The affection was utterly gone from his voice, replaced by cold, terrifying anger.

“You treacherous little shit. So you were right after all. You never told me your ‘electricity trick’ could be ramped up that hard, did you? Sneaky, sneaky mage. I was foolish not to realize – but I won’t make that mistake again.”

He grabbed Anders’s wrists and forced them behind his back, crushing them painfully together with one hand. His other arm came up to curl around Anders’s throat, constricting his airway.

“As if it didn’t occur to me, after everything I’ve seen you do,” Hawke said as Anders struggled to free himself, gasping for breath.

His tongue flicked out to probe Anders’s mangled ear. “I should never have let myself forget that you’re a Maker-damned abomination. You can’t even accept love and intimacy from a man without twisting it into something as rotten and corrupted as you are. Thank you for reminding me, Anders.”

Hawke shoved him hard against the door, but Anders continued to fight him weakly, his head pounding and vision blurring from lack of oxygen. He felt Hawke’s arm sliding along his neck, saw the blade in his hand glinting in the moonlight inches from his face.

“You want twisted? You’ll get twisted,” Hawke hissed. “Time for your punishment, maleficar. Don’t try to pretend you don’t want it. You know you deserve it, and this time I’m not going to be gentle.”

Chewing on Anders’s shoulder, he started to drag him back towards the bed.
On the verge of passing out, Anders scrounged up the dregs of his willpower and forced a desperate spell out of his body.

He thrashed once. A wave of power burst from him, flinging Hawke back against a bedpost with a loud *bang*.

The house itself seemed to shake with the force of the omnidirectional shockwave; the mirror cracked, and several other items in the room were tossed about or knocked over. It took a second or two before the rumble subsided.

Anders, coughing and gasping for breath, heard Hawke groan in pain. He was deeply relieved not to have killed him, but he was also aware that he needed to get out of there *fast*, before Hawke recovered.

His wrists, shoulders, and neck ached, and the various cuts on his body still stung, but his vision was clearing and he was breathing easier. He lurched back to the door, yanked it open, and fled the room, pulling the door closed behind him.

He came to a panting halt against the balustrade on the mezzanine, overlooking the common room.

Where could he possibly go? Hawke would be on his feet and after him again in moments. He needed help. He especially needed his staff.

His robes would have been nice, too – really, anything more substantial than the pair of smalls that was all he had on – but there was *no way* Anders was going back into that room to get dressed.

He started for the stairs, intending to retrieve his weapon from where it leaned against the wall next to the writing desk on the lower level.

A voice stopped him. “Anders?”

He looked around. It was Eingana, emerging from her room across the mezzanine.

Though her hair was tousled and unbound, the Warden-Commander’s eyes were focused and alert. She was dressed in a pale green shift with a faded emblem of the Denerim alienage on it, but the gentle domestic image was rather ruined by the iridescent longsword in her left hand.

“What in the name of Andraste’s flaming ass is going on? I heard raised voices, and then the whole house shook.”

“Commander,” Anders said, eyes flicking towards the door to Hawke’s chamber, expecting the enraged warrior to charge through it at any moment. “We have a very serious problem.”

He couldn’t help feeling immense relief that the formidable Warden was awake. In the stress of the last several minutes, he had in fact forgotten that she was even here. With Eingana present, he felt a surge of hope that they might actually be able to contain Hawke.

Yet the *last* thing Anders wanted was to expose her to Hawke’s wrath. Eingana had done a lot for him once upon a time – among other things, he owed his present freedom to her.

“Let me guess,” Eingana said with the topical instincts of a seasoned adventurer. “Hawke’s lost it.”

“I am, indeed, perilously close to losing my temper,” said Hawke from the doorway of his bedchamber. “If that should occur, the situation may become deeply *unpleasant.*”
The side of his face sported a nasty bruise, and a trickle of blood dripped down from under his hairline. His eyes were unnaturally wide and still totally black. His teeth were bared in an animalistic snarl, his chin and lower lip still covered in drying blood.

He was still wearing only his shorts, but his knife had been joined by another – a larger dagger in his other hand. Anders had never seen the weapon before, and he couldn’t help wondering where it had come from.

Eingana whistled.

“Damn, Anders,” she said appreciatively, running her eyes up and down Hawke’s body. “That is one gorgeous hunk of man-flesh you’ve scored.”

She tilted her head, arching one delicate eyebrow consideringly. “For a shem, anyway.”

“No, Anders,” she said appreciatively, running her eyes up and down Hawke’s body. “That is one gorgeous hunk of man-flesh you’ve scored.”

She tilted her head, arching one delicate eyebrow consideringly. “For a shem, anyway.”

“Not now, Eingana,” Anders hissed at her, backing away as Hawke started to advance.

“Warden-Commander,” Hawke said in an even tone. “This is a private matter, no concern of yours. You need not involve yourself with this... lover’s quarrel. Please return to your bed.”

“Oh, I don’t think I can do that, Champion,” Eingana said wistfully.

She looked over her shoulder at Anders with no trace of levity whatsoever in her expression.

“Get your staff,” she commanded. “Now!”

Anders nodded and scampered the rest of the way to the stairs as Hawke roared his fury and charged. Eingana barely deflected his dagger with her blade, twisting nimbly to one side to avoid the knife in his off-hand.

Clashes of metal on metal resounded behind and above him as Anders descended the stairs as fast as he could. He leapt from the last few risers and snatched his staff from where it leaned against the wall.

He heard a noise right behind him and whirled, gripped for a moment by heart-stopping terror that Hawke had killed Eingana already and had darted, with his inhuman swiftness, down the stairs for him.

It wasn’t Hawke, however. It was Sandal, wearing a long nightshirt and holding a glowing, enchanted stone. He looked up at Anders with his usual blank, innocent expression.

“Hallo,” he said.
“Sandal,” Anders whispered urgently, glancing up to the mezzanine. He saw flashing blades, glimpses of Hawke’s dark red hair and a flutter of Eingana’s shift. Everything else was obscured by shadows. “What are you doing awake?”

“Bathroom.”

“You have to hide,” Anders urged. “It’s not safe here. Go wake your father and tell him to-”

That turned out to be unnecessary.

“Messere Anders?” Bodahn’s voice reached him through the sitting room from the hallway beyond, accompanied by the approaching glow of a lantern. “What’s the matter?”

Anders cursed, thinking that more people nearby would only give Hawke more targets. His eyes darted between the whirling knife/sword battle going on upstairs to Sandal, still standing in front of him and watching him with his wide blue eyes.

“Bodahn,” Anders hissed as the dwarf entered the room. “It’s – it’s Hawke, he-”

Frustrated, he trailed off as his mind careened over the cliff of how to possibly explain what the matter was.

Bodahn looked with concern up the stairs, his eyes widening at the echoing clang of blades meeting in combat, accompanied by grunts of exertion from Eingana and furious growls from Hawke.

“He... uh... has Hawke or anyone talked to you about his... problem?” Anders asked, keenly aware of the urgency and absurdity of the situation. There really wasn’t time to be explaining the complicated magical/possibly demonic alterations to Hawke’s behaviour when said alterations were posing a serious and imminent threat to their lives.

“He mentioned – er, something, many months ago,” Bodahn said nervously as he watched Anders practically bouncing in place with anxiety. “He told me it was nothing to worry about, and that you were looking into it.”

“It’s now become something to worry about,” Anders said, stifling a hysterical urge to laugh at the gross understatement. “You and Sandal need to get out of here immediately. Hide in the cellars, or better yet, leave the estate. Go get Aveline, maybe.”

What could Aveline even do, he thought despairingly. They needed Wynne, and they needed her now.

“I’m not sure I should do that, Messere,” Bodahn said. “I have sworn to-”

Both of them winced at a crash from above. Hawke had slammed Eingana into the balustrade, nearly cracking the wooden railing and forcing his dagger against her neck. Bodahn gasped as Hawke’s face, black-eyed and with blood and spit dripping from his snarling lips, leaned into the light of his lantern.

“Anders!” Eingana choked out, barely managing to keep Hawke’s blade from slicing open her throat. She was wielding her longsword one-handed, her other hand keeping Hawke’s wrist with the knife away from her ribs. “If you feel like stepping in, soon if not now would be fantastic!”

Anders was already racing up the stairs. “If you won’t leave, at least get yourselves somewhere safe!” he exclaimed over his shoulder to Bodahn.
Hawke glanced at him as he approached, his snarl deepening as rage flashed in his eyes.

Eingana took advantage of Hawke’s sudden distraction to shove him back hard and simultaneously knee him in the groin, freeing herself from his pinning weight. Hawke stumbled backwards, recovering his balance quickly but not in time to prevent Eingana from darting out from under him.

Rather than trying to reestablish his hold on her, he instead went for Anders with teeth bared and blades raised.

Anders spun his staff, trying to raise an energy barrier to ward off Hawke’s charge, but the warrior closed the distance so quickly that he never had time to finish the spell.

His staff deflected Hawke’s dagger thrust seemingly by pure chance. Anders leapt backwards, barely avoiding the other blade slashing at his throat. Panicking, he pounded his staff against the floor, laying down his oft-practiced emerald paralysis glyph faster than he ever had in his life.

The magic rapidly twisted its way up Hawke’s legs, freezing them in place. Contrary to Anders’s expectation, however, the glyph flickered and weakened before the ensnaring tendrils had gotten any higher than Hawke’s knees.

Hawke shouted in wordless fury, flailing and trying to hit him as Anders scrambled away. His voice was resonant with something distinctly inhuman, something from a far different plane. He continued to twist back and forth, lashing out with his dagger and knife as he struggled to free his legs from the binding magic.

Frightened, Anders backed against a wall as he raised his staff. His hands trembled as he pointed it at Hawke.

He had mastered the paralysis glyph many, many years ago. He’d never seen anybody, not even magic-resistant dwarves, fail to completely succumb to the emerald bonds upon stepping into the glyph.

And yet the restraining magic hadn’t even gotten halfway up Hawke’s body.

“Anders,” said Eingana, circling around Hawke as he continued trying to yank himself free. “Did you mess up that spell?”

“No,” Anders replied angrily. “He’s become resistant to magic! I shocked him in the bedroom earlier, and it should have stunned him for a lot longer than it did. What could possibly...?”

His voice trailed off as he steadfastly ignored the voice in his mind that whispered demon.

“What do you think we should we do?” Eingana asked, never taking her eyes from Hawke as she came level with Anders.

Both of them tensed as Hawke managed to wrest one leg free of the magical glyph, even as its magic tried futilely to snatch him back. Hastily, Anders channelled power back into the glyph and invoked a second one right next to it.

Hawke’s freed leg fell right into it the new glyph. Both glyphs surged, and paralysis crept back up to Hawke’s mid-thighs.

Anders’s sigh of relief was cut short as Hawke, bellowing in frustration, hurled his dagger right at Eingana’s head. With extraordinary reflexes, her sword flashed up and deflected the projectile.
As Hawke panted and glared at them both, Eingana snatched up the dagger from the floor and held it in her right hand. Her face was noticeably paler than usual.

“This isn’t a throwing weapon,” she said. “But that would have got me right in the eye.”

“I think,” Anders muttered in response to her earlier question, “that we should knock him out. While he’s unconscious, I can weave a magical confinement that he’ll have a lot more trouble breaking.”

“How are we supposed to knock him out if he’s resistant to magic?”

“The old-fashioned way,” Anders said. “Just be careful not to damage his brain. And try not to cut him.”

“Why not?” Eingana asked. “Not that I want to, necessarily, but-”

“He’s a reaver, remember?” said Anders. “The more injured he is, the stronger he gets.”

“Oh, yeah,” Eingana said dryly. “Fantastic. That will make this so much easier.”

Hawke had stopped struggling, but now stood with his chest heaving, glaring at the them both and slowly licking his bared teeth. He flexed his fingers around the knife he still clutched in his left hand.

“Look,” Eingana said sharply, pointing.

Anders looked. The green bands of magic that kept Hawke rooted to the two overlapping glyphs were receding steadily down his legs.

Anders tapped his staff on the floor twice, reinvigorating the magic in both glyphs – but although their drain slowed considerably, the magic did not creep any higher.

Eingana began to circle carefully around Hawke, inching closer to him as she did so while staying carefully out of his reach. She watched him closely for any sign that he might try to throw his knife.

Hawke turned his head to follow her movement. He returned her regard just as intently, apparently judging her to be a greater threat than Anders.

Anders took the opportunity to examine Hawke, looking for wounds on his body. Eingana appeared to have inflicted a number of superficial lacerations during their earlier fight. Perhaps if he healed them....

His eyes fell on a long scratch on one of Hawke’s muscular arms, and his eyes widened at what he saw.

The air above the cut was waver  ing. Rather than blood, tiny threads of translucent red energy undulated above the clean slice, fading away less than an inch from Hawke’s skin.

Anders ran his eyes quickly over the rest of Hawke’s body, his unease rapidly intensifying as he saw the same strange effect over each of Hawke’s injuries. It was as if the damage to his body was leaking magic instead of blood. What was that?

Another symptom to add to the list, he thought. Yet another manifestation of... whatever this was.

He ran through a litany of swearing under his breath as he tried to work out a way to end this peacefully without anyone being killed or maimed in the process.

If they rendered Hawke unconscious, then he ought to be himself when he woke up. Oughtn’t he?
It was horribly frustrating that, after months of research, Anders was still certain of precious little concerning what precisely was wrong with Hawke. He wished he’d been awake earlier, at the point when Hawke had seemingly spontaneously lost control – if only so that he could have seen how it happened, or what if anything provoked it.

Hawke had been in perfect control for months, but he’d already gone over the edge once in the past day – fighting the spiders. Afterwards, he’d claimed to have no memory of what he’d done during his brief loss of control.

When it had seemed to happen again during their earlier intimacy, Hawke had exhibited no behavioural alterations at all. Outwardly, he’d been fine. He’d retained his memory of those events, as attested by his earlier comments in his altered state.

So what had gone wrong in the meantime?

If a demon truly was responsible, then it had been influencing Hawke for months already. At this point it would be enormously difficult, if not outright impossible, to dislodge the creature from his body.

_I did this, Anders thought bitterly. If it had stayed dormant, we might have had a chance. But I unleashed it, and now it will stop at nothing to consume Hawke and me both – not to mention Eingana, and Maker knows how many others._

He cursed his own weakness, his desire for closeness. He should have been wiser. He should never have encouraged Hawke to let his guard down. For that matter, he should never have let his own guard down.

Oh Hawke, my love....

Anders shook his head, angrily fighting back tears. He flat-out refused to accept that Hawke was beyond saving. He would find a way to fix this – whatever it took. He would save Michael Hawke or die trying.

Eingana suddenly leapt forward and engaged Hawke with her longsword, face creased in concentration.

Even armed with only the small knife versus her dagger and longsword, and having to fight twisted to one side with his legs paralyzed, Hawke effectively fended her off. He made several grabs for the dagger when Eingana occasionally feinted with it, but she narrowly managed to hold onto it every time. She seemed to be trying to get the knife away from him rather than slashing his skin, as she easily could have.

Anders was grateful that she was doing as he’d asked, but his concern for her safety continued to increase the longer she stayed within Hawke’s reach. She clearly hadn’t been exaggerating when she’d alluded to the difficulty of the task with her sarcastic comment.

Anders began to work a new spell, weaving magic of haste around Eingana to make her able to move much faster than Hawke could.

Just as he was about to complete the spell, Hawke slapped Eingana’s longsword aside with his bare forearm and let out a thunderous shout.

Anders felt the otherworldly resonance in his chest interfering with his magic, making him stutter and spit over the words. His gesturing hand twitched in discomfort, and his spell dissipated.
The floor shook, and the paralysis magic – still slowly sinking around Hawke’s shins – abruptly failed, all at once. Both glyphs disappeared before Anders could recover himself enough to renew them.

Hawke lunged, palming the startled Warden-Commander in her chest hard enough to send her stumbling backwards. She fell, dropping both of her weapons.

Hawke stalked after her, pulling his knife arm back, preparing to strike.

Panicking, recognizing that Eingana had been stunned by the blow and was protected by nothing but a paper-thin shift, Anders rushed forward.

He barely thought about what he was doing. In his mind, there was no interchange of language between *intent* and *action*.

Magic surged along the length of his staff as he struck Hawke hard across the back with it. The rapidly built-up energy discharged into the warrior at the moment of impact.

Hawke’s limbs seized and he fell to his knees with a startled, guttural wheeze. His knife slipped from nerveless fingers and clattered to the floor. Eingana, panting and wincing from hitting the floor, kicked it away as she shoved herself backwards and away from him.

Mind still racing, Anders quickly decided to try a more powerful and direct spell of paralysis. He gathered and shaped the requisite magical forces and reached out with his staff to touch Hawke and complete the spell.

His staff crystal, glittering with the prepared entropic energy, was less than an inch from Hawke’s back when the warrior sprang upwards, spreading his arms with a demonic howl and emitting an expanding sphere of crimson force.

The shockwave slammed into Anders, lifting him off his feet and flinging him backwards. Every nerve in his body ignited with searing pain, and he screamed as his staff was torn from his fingers.

The jolts as he collided with the wall and then the floor were worse than the initial hit.

Briefly, Anders lost the world in a dizzying blur of magical pain and a terrifying inability to breathe. He thrashed, flailing limbs searching for his staff or something, *anything*, to hold onto.

Breathe, was all he could think. I need to breathe.

Eventually the burning in his chest subsided. The worst of the full-body pain went with it, but he still ached everywhere he could feel, and his breaths were short and pained.

As the world came back into focus, Anders became aware of the renewed clashing of metal on metal. Had Eingana engaged Hawke once again?

He did his best to blink the blurriness out of his vision. Then, head still pounding, he blinked a few more times – just to make absolute sure of what he was seeing.

Hawke, snarling savagely, was indeed fighting again. He’d picked up Eingana’s longsword.

His opponent, however, was not the Warden-Commander... but his own manservant, Bodahn.

Absurdly, the dwarf was defending himself with a long fireplace poker.

Anders had never known Bodahn to take part in any kind of combat whatsoever, nor to have any
skill in that regard. Yet amazingly, he was holding his own – or at least, he was managing to avoid being killed despite having Hawke’s undivided attention.

As Anders stared, massaging his forehead with one hand and groping for his staff with the other, Bodahn briefly made eye contact with him.

“Run, Messere!” he called. “Get away from here – I will hold him!”

Behind him, Eingana groaned, also recovering from the magical shockwave that Hawke had unleashed.

“Milady Commander,” Bodahn added, maintaining a respectful tone of voice even as he dodged this way and that to avoid being impaled, “I recommend you find something rather more modest to wear. That shift will not protect you from cold steel!”

He ducked under the enchanted longsword as Hawke swung it, two-handed, at his neck.

Anders staggered to his feet, seeing Eingana doing the same on the other side of the unexpected battle going on in the middle of the mezzanine. He registered what Bodahn had said and looked down – he himself was still dressed only in his smalls, and the wounds that Hawke had inflicted earlier remained untended. Finding something more protective to wear sounded like a good plan.

He rushed into Hawke’s bedchamber as fast as his aching body could carry him, snatching up his robe from where it lay draped over the wooden chair at Hawke’s desk. Not wanting to be cornered if Bodahn’s desperate distraction failed, Anders then fled the room without taking the time to put it on. He could do that when he was sure he would have a few moments to do so in safety.

As he was leaving the bedchamber, he was struck by an idea – a way that might, just might, allow everyone present to survive the night. Including Hawke.

How, though, could he communicate his intent to Eingana and Bodahn without also alerting Hawke? There was no way. Anders would have to be away and safe from Hawke for at least a little while in order to set it up.

But he couldn’t simply abandon Bodahn to Hawke’s mad bloodlust. Despite the dwarf’s tremendous courage, there was no way he could keep Hawke occupied for long. Anders needed them both to follow him... just not right away.

For the moment, against all odds, Bodahn continued to hang on. Hawke was growling, sounding more annoyed than enraged. His natural human voice was increasingly lost beneath the otherworldly resonance.

Feeling horribly guilty even though he had no intention of leaving Bodahn to die, Anders darted around the combatants and descended the stairs as fast as he could. Before he’d even reached the bottom he was struggling into his robe, eschewing a few of the less important straps and buckles.

Anxiously, he looked behind him, sighing in relief as he saw Eingana.

She joined him at the bottom of the stairs, also hastily buckling on her leathers and light plate. Several knives and daggers adorned the belt at her waist, but only one of the large sheaths carried a sword – her primary weapon had been taken by Hawke.

“Bodahn saved both our lives,” she panted. “I never knew he had it in him!”

“I know,” Anders said. “Me neither. We can’t leave him to die. But as for how to draw Hawke off –
I’ve no idea. It’s like every spell I cast against him increases his resistance to my magic. And he has
magic of his own! What in the Void was that spell he did?”

“Couldn’t tell you,” Eingana said. “I’ve never seen anything like it, but it felt like blood magic. If
we’re all going to live through this, we need to think of something fast. Where’s Hawke’s hound?”

Anders cursed fluently.

“Why didn’t I think of that? Reaver!” he called, looking around for the Mabari hound.

There was no immediate response, but if the dog was asleep, it might take him a few moments to get
up and reach them from elsewhere in the mansion. Anders called again, and moment later the dog
appeared the doorway of the sitting room.

“Thank the Maker,” Anders breathed. He looked at Eingana. “What’s your plan?”

“I was thinking of sending him to get Hawke’s friends,” she said. “Merrill’s Dalish, right? She must
know some of the old magic. We’re going to need her help, and the others too.”

“Good idea,” Anders said.

He knelt down and put his hands on either side of Reaver’s head. The dog looked at him
questioningly.

“Reaver,” Anders whispered. “go find the others. Okay? Can you do that for me, boy? This is very,
very important. Wake them up – bite them if you have to, but not too hard. Bring them here. Start
with Merrill.”

Reaver woofed and tried to lick his face. Anders instinctively recoiled – he was a cat person at his
core.

But then he remembered seeing Reaver respond to Hawke’s commands in the same way.
Begrudgingly, he allowed the dog’s wet tongue to slather his cheek.

“Thank you,” Anders said.

Reaver woofed softly and charged off through the antechamber.

“How does he open the door?” Eingana asked as Anders wiped his cheek on the sleeve of his robe.

“I have no idea,” he said. “He does, though. Is this really the time?”

“Well... no,” Eingana admitted.

She looked up. Hawke had driven Bodahn across the mezzanine, and the dwarf was mere steps from
the edge of the stairs.

“What do you think?” she whispered. “I’ll take any idea you have at this point.”

“I thought we could lure him into the cellar,” Anders muttered back. “I have a number of magical
defenses set up down there. If we made him cross one of them and I cast at the same time, I think I
could knock him out. Assuming that by the time we get there, he isn’t completely immune to all
magic and he hasn’t leveled the mansion with whatever power he has.”

“I think I can arrange that,” Eingana said. “Where’s the most likely trap you have set up?”
Anders outlined a path down the stairs, past the warren of chambers and the vault immediately below them, into the cellars that eventually connected through a maze of dusty rooms and narrow corridors to a passage near his clinic in Darktown. One of the largest of those rooms, and nearest the mansion, was where he had set up his laboratory for his experiments with blood magic. A few turns down a hallway before that room was his most powerful magical ward.

“Alright,” Eingana said after Anders had described to her how to get there. “Go down there and reinforce it. Make it stronger, add whatever else you can think of that might penetrate his resistance. Create new traps, relocate old ones – anything that might give us the edge we need. I’ll give you as long as I can and lure him down there, get him to cross the trigger. If it doesn’t work... well, hopefully, we’ve got reinforcements coming.”

Anders nodded and took a deep breath. “Good luck,” he said, and gave Eingana a quick hug.

She squeezed him once reassuringly, then pushed him towards the cellar door. “Go.”

Anders took a last look up the stairs at the monstrous juggernaut his beloved had become.

Then he mustered the shreds of his optimism and ran for the cellar.

He descended into stale, dusty darkness, unable to help wondering if he ever see Eingana Tabris or Bodahn Feddic alive again.

As for Hawke – Anders still utterly denied the possibility that he might be permanently lost to whatever force was influencing him.

Hope was all he had. Without it, he would come undone.

∞

Sometime later, Anders wove the last finishing touches with his staff into his completed magical trap. He’d done everything he could; he was exhausted, but relieved that it was finished while he still had time.

He stood back from the trigger-spot, leaning on his staff and probing with his magical senses to examine his work.

He had originally designed the trap-ward with templars in mind, taking into account their penchant for annulling hostile magic. He had worked on its basic web for months, weaving its magical threads together in an unnecessarily complex and labyrinthine way that would theoretically make it much harder to annul. He hoped this feature would enable the trap to more easily penetrate Hawke’s acquired resistance to magic.

The last thing that Anders wanted was to kill Hawke, so he’d removed everything from the existing web that was invariably lethal. To compensate, he’d amped spell up considerably in power. He’d also drastically reduced the time interval between its staggered bursts, originally intended to account for cautious templars leaving some of their forces in reserve. Now, every component of the blast would pretty much go off simultaneously.

The resulting trap, which Anders would arm once Eingana had passed over the invisible trigger glyph and hopefully before Hawke followed her, was strong enough to render an entire charging qunari warband deeply unconscious.

Ideally, the spell would do no permanent damage to Hawke’s mind or physical brain. If it succeeded to the best possible extent, he would only wake up when magical intervention was employed to
remove the webs which the trap would cast over his mind. Anders could only hope the rather intense magical flux – the end result of many months of paranoid work coupled with the last frantic twenty minutes or so of tinkering – would be sufficient to drop Hawke in his enraged, magic-resistant state.

There was nothing left to do but wait, so Anders sank into a tired crouch against the wall of the dusty corridor.

The long passage was illuminated by a few torches and little else. It was essentially indistinguishable from much of the maze of corridors that honeycombed the depths of Kirkwall, into which the cellars of the Hawke estate dissolved.

Hawke claimed to have thoroughly explored all of the nearby passages and sealed off all entrances to his mansion except for the hidden one in Darktown that Anders knew about. Anders had done his own explorations in the past few months, and he was certain that the corridor he was in was the only route between the rooms behind him and the rooms ahead. There was no way that Hawke could circle around behind and take him by surprise, unless he went down to Darktown and came back up from the other direction.

At least, so Anders hoped.

He waited for a few more minutes, wondering how long he should delay before going to ensure that Eingana and Bodahn were okay. It hadn’t been that long since he’d left them, but given the state Hawke was in, twenty minutes was like an eternity. Anders didn’t dare hope that Hawke had somehow come down from his crazed battle fervour and that the news merely hadn’t reached him yet.

A shuffle behind him made Anders leap to his feet, staff poised and ready. Who could possibly be behind him?

Unless he was wrong about there being no other way around, and Hawke actually had snuck up on him-

Anders lowered his staff and exhaled in relief. For the second time tonight, he’d been startled by Bodahn’s son, Sandal. The quiet savant had appeared from an alcove a little ways down the hallway, where he’d evidently been hiding.

“Hallo,” said Sandal.

“Hey, Sandal,” Anders replied. “Are you alright?”

Sandal smiled at him but didn’t answer. Anders took that as a yes.

“Did your father tell you to hide down here?” he asked as Sandal approached him, stopping a few feet away.

Sandal nodded.

“Do you know why?” Anders said.

Sandal’s smile faded. “Master is angry,” he said sadly.

Anders sighed and wearily ran his fingers through his hair. “No kidding.”

There was a moment of silence.
“Angry master makes you sad,” Sandal observed.

Anders looked at him. The dwarf’s crystal blue eyes were bright and honest, his expression sympathetic. Anders felt a rush of affection for him.

“Yes,” he said softly. “You’re right. Michael is... very ill.”

Sandal tilted his head in confusion.

“There’s something wrong with him,” Anders elaborated. “He’s – he’s sick.”

Why was he trying to explain this, of all things, to Sandal, of all people?

“He’s not normally like this,” he went on. “Something’s changed inside him to make him... angry.”

“Not sick,” Sandal said.

Anders eyed him.

His first thought was that Sandal was trying to reassure him and really had no idea what he was talking about. Then some pieces of information in his mind, fractured by stress, reunited. He gave the matter more thought.

Sandal’s ability with enchantment was, as far as he knew, unique. He knew of no other beings – be they dwarven smith, mage (Tranquil or otherwise), or something else – that could do what Sandal could do with lyrium.

Might he possibly know of something else so singular – something that pertained to Hawke’s condition – but which he was simply unable to meaningfully communicate?

Anders was invigorated by a sudden rush of excitement, but he forced it down. He didn’t want to raise false hope in himself. But what harm was there in asking?

“Sandal,” Anders said with quiet seriousness, “do you know what’s wrong with Michael? Do you know why he... becomes dangerous, like he is now? Is it....”

His voice dropped further, thick with emotion, and Sandal leaned in to hear him.

“Is it a demon?”

Sandal shook his head, his eyes wide with fear. “No,” he said, and continued shaking his head as if for emphasis.

Not a demon, Anders thought. How could Sandal possibly know that?

But it was something. Sandal was far from ordinary; perhaps there were things he knew, or things he saw, that others did not or could not.

It was a reason to hope, at least. A somewhat flimsy reason, but more than he’d had before.

Anders reached out and took the dwarf’s hand.

“Thank you, Sandal,” he said, blinking away tears. “Hawke isn’t possessed. That’s an incredible relief.”

But then... what answer did that leave? Blood magic, obviously, but of what sort, and how? What
alterations could have possibly been inflicted upon Hawke to give him magic of his own, like he’d displayed upstairs? None of the research Anders had done had indicated anything like that.

But Sandal wasn’t done.

“Possessed,” he repeated slowly, looking at his hand in Anders’s.

“Hm? Oh... his body taken hold of by a demon,” Anders explained. “A creature from the Fade, the world of dreams.”

“Possessed.” Sandal nodded, looking at Anders as if providing an answer to a question he’d been asked.

Anders was confused. “Michael is possessed?”

Sandal nodded again, smiling, clearly glad to have been understood.

“But not by a demon.”

Sandal nodded again.

Anders furrowed his brow, resisting the urge to demand more details. If Sandal could have told him anything else, he would have.

Or would he have? Maybe it was up to Anders to ask the right questions.

He crouched down in front of Sandal, facing him at eye level.

“How can Michael be possessed, if not by a demon?” he asked.

The moment he said it, he felt like a fool for missing the obvious. He himself was possessed, and not by a demon. Justice might have become something para-demonic, but that wasn’t how he’d begun his existence.

Anders’s mouth fell open. Could it be...?

“Another kind of spirit?” he whispered. “Something else, something...” his blood ran cold “-worse?”

Sandal’s eyes widened and he started to back away.

“What’s the matter?” Anders asked, alarmed. He pushed himself to his feet. Surely it wasn’t his question that had so frightened the dwarf?

Sandal continued to back away, raising his arm to point.

Anders whirled around, the words forming on his lips to arm the trap.

The corridor was empty.

Anders glanced around back at Sandal, but the dwarf had vanished as suddenly as he had appeared. Anders was alone.

He didn’t feel alone, though. He watched the shadows at the end of the corridor intently, straining his eyes for any movement. His heart was beginning to race, adrenaline already seeping into his veins in anticipation.
There was noise – shuffling footsteps. A quiet grunt of pain.

A shape appeared in the darkness, too short to be either Eingana or Hawke. Anders tensed.

The shape moved forward, into the pool of torchlight.

It was Bodahn. One eye was bruised and swollen shut, and he was limping, the left pant leg of his nightclothes dark with blood. He was holding his arm across his stomach, which also appeared to be wounded.

“Bodahn!” Anders called out in concern, starting forward.

The dwarf looked up and relief washed across his face.

“Messere Anders,” he said, still shuffling forward as best he could on his wounded leg. “Thank goodness you’re alright! I bear a message from the Warden-Commander – she’s leading Messere Hawke towards your trap. They will be here at any moment.”

Anders rushed forward to help the injured manservant, gathering healing magic along the length of his staff as he did so. He made sure to accumulate rather more power than was strictly necessary to heal Bodahn’s wounds, to account for the inherent resistance to magic possessed by all dwarves.

He reached Bodahn, who took his offered hand gratefully, and brought his staff down in an arc. Soft blue light washed over him, knitting his wounds together and restoring some of the blood he’d lost.

“Oh... that’s wonderful!” Bodahn exclaimed. “What a relief! Thank you, Messere!”

“Come on,” Anders said, urging the newly restored dwarf onwards. “We need to get to the other end of the corridor before-“

A crash from behind them finished his sentence for him. Without looking, both Anders and Bodahn broke out into a run.


“You did?” Bodahn asked urgently. “Please, Messere, is he safe?”

“He’s perfectly fine, Bodahn, but hiding again – wise boy, you should follow his example. Go!”

Bodahn needed no further urging. He hurried off down the corridor, checking various alcoves along the way, searching for his son.

Anders turned around in time to see Eingana lurch into view, dragging her mundane sword. She was barely keeping ahold of it with weak, bloodstained fingers. Her face and arms were bloody, her armour heavily damaged.

“Anders,” she gasped. “Act-activate–”

She never finished her sentence as she was thrown forward from behind by a bolt of red energy. She landed face-down and groaned.

Hawke stepped into view, carrying Eingana’s enchanted longsword and one of her daggers. He was still dressed in only his shorts, and his arms, chest, and face were slashed with a number of new wounds.
Anders’s mouth opened in horror.

Red fingers of energy drifted away from Hawke’s skin, everywhere. Some of them radiated away like bizarre, magical plant life sprouting from his pores. Most, however, curled back around his limbs, loops undulating open and closed and drifting through flesh and bone as if they weren’t there at all.

His whole body shimmered with buzzing, crimson force. It was like looking at a magically constructed image of a man while the man himself stood right behind and visible through it. Anders had never seen anything like it in his life.

He met Hawke’s eyes, and he immediately staggered forward, vertigo sweeping through him like a sickness. The black pits seemed to draw his gaze towards them, and his body with it. It was extraordinarily difficult to look away.

As he continued to try, Anders realized that Hawke’s eyes were longer entirely black. New lights had appeared—flecks and glints of red, sparkling like the reflections on a piece of polished obsidian.

And in the very center, stars of colourless, incandescent brilliance: windows into the Fade, or beyond.

It was at once the most achingly beautiful and perfectly terrifying sight that Anders had ever laid eyes on.

As Hawke stepped over Eingana’s prone body, she made a feeble effort to push herself upwards. Hawke paused and reached out with his bare foot, touching it to the back of her neck. Briefly, her body convulsed as Eingana was seized by a crimson aura. Then she was still, and fell silent.

Hawke’s opened his mouth and spoke in a voice that was not his.

“Anders,” he said. “There you are at last, my love. Why are you hiding down here in the cellar?”

The voice was heavily resonant, androgynous, and utterly inhuman. It sounded like no demon Anders had ever encountered before.

He’d never been more terrified in his life. The one thought that kept spiraling through his trembling mind was Enchanter Wynne is on her way. She’ll know what this is. She’ll fix it. She’ll know what this is. She’ll fix it.

Hands shaking, Anders gestured with his staff and mouthed the words to arm the trap. He doubted it would work, but it was his only hope.

He backed away from where the glyph would trigger, his eyes never leaving the creature his beloved had become.

“Stop,” said Hawke, and Anders halted unsteadily, against his will. Hawke continued to advance, albeit slowly.

“What are you?” Anders whispered hoarsely, fear making his throat clench. His mouth was dry, his tongue tasting of ash.

“We are everything and nothing,” Hawke said.

His voice echoed down the hallway, coming at Anders from every direction. He felt its thrum in his chest.
“We are always and never, eternal and instantaneous, everywhere and nowhere. We are you, maleficar, and you are us.”

“No riddles,” Anders said as forcefully as he could. “Tell me what manner of spirit you are.”

“Intense,” Hawke said, and Anders very nearly rolled his eyes.

Hawke’s expression was like stone, blank and neutral. He continued to advance. Anders eyed his progress – a few more steps, and he would cross the trigger glyph.


“There are no such spirits,” Anders snapped. “I say again, creature, tell me what you are – tell me in a way I will understand. Tell me your name!”

“We have no name.” Hawke’s voice boomed around, under and behind him. “We are the horizon. We are limitless. We are indestructible!”

You had better be lying, Anders thought. If you can be destroyed, I will destroy you.

But how could he do that without killing Hawke?

Struck by a sudden idea, Anders reached out with his staff just as Hawke’s foot was falling towards the trigger glyph. Desperately, hoping to complete his spell before the trap activated, Anders cast with every last dreg of mana he had in him.

He succeeded. In the instant before the trap ward activated, azure fire swirled upwards around Hawke, healing all his wounds in the blink of an eye.

Hawke paused, startled. He blinked. His foot hit the glyph.

Light exploded around him.

Anders threw up a trembling arm to shield his eyes. A ferocious ringing noise roared down the corridor in both directions, as if a titan had struck a bell the size of a mountain.

The thunderous knell shook the very walls. Dust rained from the ceiling. Hawke was invisible, lost in the glare.

Anders was stunned into total, speechless stasis. He had made the trap as powerful as he could, but it shouldn’t have been anywhere near that powerful.

He had no time to consider what might have happened. As the turbulent energies washed over him, they carried his mind with them. His awareness expanded outwards, exponentially, with the wave of light.

His thoughts stretched into incomprehensible hugeness, racing along patterns and conduits built into the city itself.

For a few wondrous, transcendental moments, Anders knew the entirety of Kirkwall on an impossibly intimate level. Every building, every brick, every chamber, every hidden corridor, every nook and cranny, every particle of dust, every organism living and ethereal was within the limits of his awareness.

He was Kirkwall, and he watched in fascination and wonder as the bright white river of power that he had unleashed spread throughout a network of ancient channels, filling them and sending spears
of radiance into the sky. Geysers of power all around the city lit the dawn.

Anders saw, with his hyper-inflated consciousness, the grand logic behind the original Tevinter magisters’ designs for the layout of Kirkwall. Streets and alleys formed the shapes of runes – symbols of gathering, accumulation, amplification, storage, power. Channels ran along and under the streets to funnel sacrificial blood to a vast central pit – now lost and forgotten in the city’s bowels.

Sealed by cave-ins, the passage of time, and more recent construction, the growth of the new had long ago obscured the old. Only one passage had still connected to that empty place – the heart of the city.

Until now.

Anders saw, then, what had happened. The entirety of the city was designed to render the Veil thin and intensify magical power.

The trigger glyph for his trap was directly aligned with a ley line: an axis of power, one of the city’s main arteries along which energy flowed. Some of these ancient channels still crept with condensed motes of old, forgotten magic. They were a shadow of the system’s full potential, but the city was large, and the motes were many.

Activating the trap atop this particular node, in this particular corridor of this cellar in this city, Anders saw, could have produced nothing less than the cataclysmic eruption of magic that had rocketed his awareness to these heights.

But how was that possible? How could it be that his trigger glyph had just happened to be set right atop a node of an ancient magical superweapon that just happened to retain some dregs of magic and enough connections to the rest of the network to trigger a cascade like this?

Was it fate? Chance?

Was there any way, really, to know for sure... and did it matter?

All of this took place in an instant. His perception of time slowed to near-stasis by the enormity of his mind, it felt like much longer to Anders – but in reality, barely more than a heartbeat passed as he experienced the startling transcendence.

Then it all drained away. His massive mind shriveled and receded back into himself. His awareness dissipated, his perception dwindled, and he was left standing, miraculously upright, in the corridor in the cellar of the Hawke estate.

Most of what he had seen he instantly forgot, but he grasped dimly the gist of what had just occurred. He remembered that his glyph had somehow brought all the residual might of the ancient city of Kirkwall to bear against the creature who had taken Michael Hawke from him.

Anders sat down where he stood and rubbed his head and eyes, trying to clear the ringing from his ears and the spots from his vision. In his mind, he thanked the Maker and Andraste for their providence.

As his senses came back, he blinked rapidly, still trying to sort through what had happened. He had hoped that his last-second healing of Hawke might have some positive effect on containing the demon, or whatever it was – injuries seemed to agitate the creature’s energy and stir it into further activity, as well as manifest Hawke’s reaver abilities.

It appeared he had been somewhat successful, although the trap, amplified as intensely as it had been
by the city’s magic, hadn’t quite worked the way he’d thought it would.

Hawke was now suspended in midair, his arms out straight at his sides, his whole body shimmering behind curving panes of white light. The red energy had vanished with his wounds. Eingana’s sword was embedded in the ceiling above him, and the nonmagical dagger had vanished entirely.

Anders crept closer, examining Hawke. The warrior’s eyes were closed, so he couldn’t tell if they were still otherworldly black. He probed the confinement field with his magical senses; it responded solidly.

Satisfied that Hawke was safely contained and alive, Anders rushed past him to check on Eingana.

To his intense relief, she was already stirring before he reached her. Until that moment, he hadn’t known for sure whether she was alive or dead.

“Commander,” Anders said as he reached her. “Are you alright?”

Eingana groaned and rolled onto her back. She was wounded in several places.

Anders quickly ran his hands along her body, deploying restorative magic. He was near exhaustion, head pounding and heart beating rapidly, but fortunately his brief ascent to embodying the entire city of Kirkwall had left enough mana within him to heal Eingana.

“Anders,” she muttered. “Is he...?”

“Hawke is contained,” Anders said. “How do you feel? Do you know what he did to you?”

“No. It hurt a lot, though.”

Eingana pressed one hand to her forehead as Anders helped her into a sitting position. The gash that had decorated it a moment ago was gone, leaving only a faint scar.

“That’s... much better, though. Thank you.”

“Anders,” she muttered. “Is he...?”

“Don’t mention it,” Anders said as he supported her the rest of the way to her feet. He turned her around to carefully examine the spot on her neck where Hawke’s magic had touched her.

“There doesn’t seem to be any permanent damage,” Anders said. “I’m near tapped out, though. I’d like to examine you later, once I’ve rested, to make sure there will be no lasting effects.”

“Sure.”

Eingana took her hand away from her face and looked over to where Hawke was suspended and frozen. “That was... a lot,” she said. “I was barely conscious and I still felt it. Was that what was supposed to happen?”

“No kidding,” Eingana said. “I think it shook the whole city.”

“I imagine it did.”
As if their words had provoked a confirmation, a tremor ran along the ground under their feet.

Both Anders and Eingana stumbled, grabbing the walls and each other to remain upright. The whole corridor shook for several seconds, rustling more dust from the ceiling.

“I think the spell may have dislodged a bit more than a few dregs of ancient magic,” Anders said unnecessarily. “It remains to be seen what the consequences will be.”

Another tremor made them both briefly lurch to one side before regaining their balance.

“So you broke the failsafe,” Eingana said. “Now the city’s awake. Nice job, Anders.”

The third and most powerful tremor came mere moments later. The two of them once more braced themselves against the walls of the narrow passage to remain on their feet, but it was a near thing.

Ahead of them, Hawke’s magical prison began to brighten. The twists and loops of confining energy began to flare and change shape erratically.

“Anders,” Eingana said waringly.

“Crap,” Anders said. “It’s-”

Before he could finish his sentence, the light-limned warrior flashed so brightly that for a moment neither of them could look at it.

There was a thud, and when they could see again, Hawke was on one knee in front of them, hands against the floor.

Anders and Eingana froze. Anders gripped his staff tightly as they waited, while Eingana drew one of her remaining small daggers.

Hawke looked up, and Anders breathed a sigh of relief. His eyes were green. Normal. Human.

“What... happened?” Hawke rasped, his voice papery and faint.

Their eyes met.

“Anders?”

“Michael,” Anders cried, rushing forward and reaching down to help him up.

He never completed the act.

Hawke’s shoulders spasmed as he rose to his feet in one smooth motion. As Anders and Eingana watched in shocked, weary horror, Hawke’s pupils flash-dilated. In the span of a breath, his eyes were fully black and empty.

His face twisted into a snarl. Anders and Eingana were already backing away.

Before Hawke could do anything else, a small, stout hand appeared on his wrist, tugging it.

Surprised, Hawke turned around. It was Sandal.

Anders and Eingana watched, open-mouthed, as the dwarf held out a small round stone.

Hawke stared down at it, plainly baffled.
“Boom,” said Sandal.

The stone exploded.

Anders staggered backwards, managing to remain upward by planting his staff firmly behind him and leaning on it. Eingana kept to her feet by grabbing his arm.

As compared to the most recent magical explosion to rock these halls, this was a mere puff of force – but Hawke had been right in front of it.

He was thrown hard right against the wall, rendered unconscious in an instant. He collapsed bonelessly to the floor.

“Maker’s breath,” Anders gasped as Eingana started to laugh with an edge of hysteria.

Sandal still stood with his hand outstretched, smiling. His enchanted stone was intact.

Bodahn appeared behind his son, clapped him on the shoulder, and hugged him, saying “That’s my boy!”

Still giggling, Eingana moved up and knelt down to check on Hawke. Her hand brushed his neck, and she looked up at Anders.

“Alive,” she said. “Out cold. I suggest we take him upstairs and figure out a way to keep him under control until Wynne arrives, and fast. There’s no way to know how long we have before he regains consciousness on his own.”

“Agreed,” Anders said.

He allowed himself a moment to close his eyes and take several deep breaths. He swayed with exhaustion.

They had survived. Hawke was alive and, for now, under control.

Furthermore, before the thing had retaken control of him, he had recognized Anders and said his name. His mind – his true mind, the man that Anders loved with all his being – was still intact.

There was still hope.

Wynne would arrive in a few days. Could they keep Hawke alive and contained for that long?

We’ll have to, Anders thought. What choice do we have?

Bodahn released his son from his hug as Eingana, with great effort due to her exhaustion and aches, leapt up and yanked her sword from the ceiling.

Sandal looked up at Anders and said “Could I have some salamanders, please?”

Anders laughed, knelt down, and hugged the dwarf tightly.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes you can. You can have all the salamanders you want.”

Sandal clapped his hands behind Anders’s back.
Michael Hawke awoke from a very strange and disturbing dream.

He’d fallen asleep in the arms of his lover, content and harbouring a secret glimmer of hope for the first time in a long, long while. Then he’d tumbled into a confusing swirl of red clouds, voices that assaulted him with meaningless noise from every direction, and occasional random bursts of pain.

The chaos around him seemed to be constantly trying to order itself into faces or other defined shapes. It never succeeded. Half-formed thoughts – unfocused, undirected, and essentially devoid of intelligible meaning – wandered around him with only himself to provide any definition to their natures or locations in space. Only two feelings were clear and continually present: rage and lust.

Gradually the clouds and storms drained away, and Hawke found himself floating in a strange bodiless place where he could see the world but not touch or interact with it in any way. Everything seemed blurred and hazy, as if he was seeing it from a great distance through thin fog.

The random pain and the voices remained, but Hawke was lost in barely-aware state only a step above true unconsciousness. He heard the voices, but he was unable to distinguish them as anything other than noise. He felt the pain and twitched away from it, but it never went away and never startled him into any higher level of wakefulness.

This went on for some time, and the distant, unfocused world he saw was a stage for a series of unpleasant dreams.

He saw himself biting and slashing Anders, after which followed an even fuzzier period where he made out only flashes of images and scenes. He saw himself holding his dagger against Eingana’s throat, exchanging blows with Bodahn (who wielded a fire poker with the kind of astonishing skill that seemed likely only in surreal dreamscapes such as this one), and finally chasing the two of them into the cellars of his estate, eager to kill. He saw his hands flexing and brandishing an unfamiliar longsword that carried an enticing tingle of magic.

Then there was an eruption of agonizingly bright light, and with brutal suddenness Hawke was entirely awake.

He had no idea where he was. He was kneeling on a dusty floor, and his whole body was wracked with pain. His head and chest in particular throbbed with a slow, burning ache.

Hawke looked up with difficulty, wondering what in the world had just happened.

He was startled to see Eingana and Anders standing in front of him, tense and with weapons raised as if expecting him to attack. Both of them were battered and bloody, and they looked exhausted.

Awful comprehension began to dawn on Hawke as the blurred-together images of the past few hours came back to him in a rush. He felt bile rising in his throat. What had he done this time?
At least they’re alive, he thought. At least I haven’t killed anybody. Have I?

“What... happened?” Hawke managed to rasp out. His throat was dry and scratchy; he felt like he’d been swallowing sand.

“Anders...?”

“Michael,” Anders said with obvious relief. He reached down, presumably intending to help Hawke to his feet.

Just before their hands touched, Hawke blinked – and with no intermediate sensory experience whatsoever, the world around him was different.

His vision was once again blurry, but he could tell that he was in the common room of his estate. It was daytime, with the grey, musty light of a heavily overcast sky streaming in through the windows. No candles or lanterns warmed the room with their illumination, so it remained suffused in a gloomy twilight.

Startled by the sudden change, Hawke instinctively tensed, trying to bring up his hands in a defensive posture. The result was him struggling weakly to lift his arms from his sides and largely failing to move them at all. He was still in pain, although it was mercifully lessened to tolerable aches and stiffness.

He tried again. He discovered that he could in fact move, but only barely, and it was exhausting. The effort to lift his hands even a few inches was almost more than he could muster. It felt like he was forcing his limbs through thick molasses.

Hawke blinked several times, trying to clear the sludginess and sleep of a long unconsciousness from his eyes. He shook his head slowly a few times. Eventually, it became easier to see.

He became aware of Merrill and Varric watching him from near the entrance to the antechamber. Reaver sat between them, eyes and ears alert. All three were silent and seemed strangely lower to the ground than was usual.

That was when Hawke realized that he was suspended in midair, surrounded by a faintly shimmering column of transparent blue energy.

Looking down at himself, he noticed two things. First, he was dressed in nothing but tattered trousers, and there were gleaming manacles on his wrists and ankles. Second, the air around him and within the magical blue tube was filled with drifting, glittering sparkles. They congregated most densely around the manacles, otherwise drifting in slow spirals around his limbs and torso.

With difficulty, Hawke managed to raise one arm to his face. He rubbed some of the itch of dried sweat out of his hair, trying to evaluate whether or not he was as hurt as he felt and if so, how bad it was.

At some point, as his hand drifted down to examine his face and neck, Hawke realized that there was a metal collar around his neck. It felt as solid as the manacles.

Slowly, lowering his hand back down to his side, Hawke let out a long sigh. He’d been wondering for a while now if or when something like this would happen. He was trapped, imprisoned within enchantments as securely as he had ever seen anyone or anything confined in his life.

Being so thoroughly bound was a novel and deeply unsettling experience. And he knew, with a creeping sensation of horror and guilt, exactly why it was so.
It took Hawke a few tries before he could talk. His throat still felt raw and painful. He coughed a few times, cleared his throat, and then coughed for quite a while longer after inhaling some phlegm or saliva and choking on it.

Covering his mouth and massaging his chest were difficult, since it took supreme effort and rather longer than usual to raise his hands into position. His legs curled beneath him during the ordeal, but he remained suspended and vertical within the force field. The lack of anything solid beneath his feet was almost insufferable.

A few minutes and several slow, deep breaths later, Hawke finally got control of himself.

Merrill and Varric had watched him silently throughout. Varric was dryly amused, while Merrill seemed to be wavering between concern and fear.

“What did I do?” Hawke ground out.

Reaver barked and sprang forward, wagging his tail. He seemed happy to see him, but he’d kept silent until his master spoke – as if until that moment, he hadn’t been sure that it was really him.

Hawke whistled faintly through his teeth. Reaver immediately trotted the rest of the way across the room, stopping at the limit of the barrier and looking up at him. Reaver panted, somehow managing to pull off a doggy expression of concern.

Hawke smiled down at him and wished with aching intensity that he could hug his dog and bury his face in his fur. Reaver always forgave him.

“So... you went nuts,” Varric answered belatedly.

Hawke rolled his eyes.

“Gathered that, thanks,” he growled. “Did I hurt anyone? Did I kill anyone? How long has it been? Did anyone manage to find out anything useful about my... condition?”

“Nobody died,” Merrill said. “It’s been about twelve hours since you were... subdued. You hurt Anders, Commander Tabris, and Bodahn quite badly, but they’re all right. Anders healed them, and himself.”


“From what I hear, he went after you. With a fire poker,” Varric said with a chuckle that didn’t quite hide his unease. “Gave Blondie and the Commander time to get their armour and weapons and set up some kind of magical trap. He saved both their lives.”

Hawke was impressed. He knew himself, and he knew that he could be terrifying enough in combat quite apart from preternatural bloodlust. Bodahn was brave indeed, and clearly deserved a raise.

“You said he was hurt,” Hawke said. “Not too badly, right? Nothing that Anders... couldn’t fix?”

“He’s fine,” Merrill said. “A little shaken up, but fine.”

Relieved, Hawke nodded. “And... Eingana? Anders? They still have all four limbs?”

He swallowed, trying hard not to remember what he might have done to them during the night. Merrill had said they were fine, but he still needed to ask.

“Yes,” Varric said. “They sent Reaver out to bring help, but it was over before we got here. They
lured you over some kind of magical glyph – Blondie explained it to me, but I still don’t really get it. Apparently he was able to tap into some kind of ancient magical reservoir that powers the entire city. Or... is powered by the entire city. That part made very little sense to me.”

“Huh,” said Hawke, furrowing his brow.

“But get this,” Varric crowed. “It was by accident! He didn’t mean to do it, he didn’t even know the reservoir was there!”

“...Huh,” Hawke said again, frown deepening. He had a sneaking suspicion that he already knew more than Varric did about the ancient magic that Anders had unwittingly tapped.

“But when you set off that trap,” Varric continued, “it shook all of Kirkwall. Quite a few buildings in Lowtown collapsed. Even some damage in Hightown. Darktown’s a bit of a mess... the quake ruptured a few chambers of chokedamp, started a few fires, released a few demons here and there. Nothing really major, although several mages escaped from the Gallows in the confusion. We’re still getting tremors, too – last one was about half an hour ago.”

Hawke closed his eyes and opened them again slowly, shaking his head and trying to wrap his mind around the information he was receiving. “Did you say it released a few demons?”

Varric snorted. “That’s not even the best part.”

Hawke groaned and looked away. “I don’t want to know what the best part is.”

“Even with a city’s worth of magic powering his trap, it still wasn’t enough to take you down!” Varric said. He voice was tinged with equal parts amusement, awe, and unease. “Blondie said the spell should have kept you under until he removed it, but you broke it in about two minutes. Congratulations, Hawke... you’re hard core.”

Hawke gave him a withering look.

“Right,” Varric said. “Er, it might also have had something to do with the first few tremors after the initial shock. There were about five or six, all in less than a minute. I’m told you were contained, but then there was a tremor and you were free again. Blondie, Commander, and the dwarves were still the only ones here – Reaver hadn’t come back with Daisy yet – and I understand they were about at their wits’ end by that point. But then-”

Varric started laughing again.

“What?” said Hawke, annoyed. There was no way Varric would be so amused if he’d done something truly horrific, so that was a small comfort, but he would still much rather the dwarf just tell him what had happened.

He tried to squirm, or at least move around a little to make himself more comfortable, but it was no use. The enchantment field pushed back whenever he tried to curl his spine in any direction, and the manacles around his wrists and ankles felt like they were weighted with lead.

“Sandal stepped in,” Merrill supplied while Varric sorted himself out. “You were about to attack, and he used one of his enchantments on you. Threw you against a wall and knocked you out cold!”

At that, even Hawke couldn’t help smiling. He decided he forgave Varric for being so amused. He had to agree that the idea of the shy, unassuming dwarf stopping him in his enraged, demonic state was rather comical and unexpected.
“Good boy,” Hawke said. “Remind me to get him some salamanders later.”

“Anders already did,” Merrill said matter-of-factly. “Bodahn insisted he only get them a few at a time though, or else he could blow up the mansion with out-of-control enchantments. So he said.”

Varric was still snickering a little, but Hawke’s smile faded along with the humour as reality seeped back. His eyes wandered.

“Where did you get the manacles?” he asked, examining the gleaming metal circles around his wrists.

“Blondie borrowed them,” Varric said.

“Who does Anders know that has manacles?”

Varric coughed. “Isabela.”

“Oh,” Hawke said, raising his eyebrows knowingly. “Of course. Silly question.”

He exhaled and looked out the window as his hands were slowly pulled back down to his sides.

The sky was grey and mottled. A race of heavy clouds was rushing visibly past. The window glass was spattered with a few rain drops, and the high winds were audible even from inside. There appeared to be no actual precipitation occurring at the moment.

“What time is it?” Hawke asked.

“A little after midday,” Varric said.

“And you two are... what, standing guard?” Hawke asked with a tinge of bitterness in his voice.

“We can’t be too careful, Hawke,” Merrill said apologetically.

“No, I suppose you can’t.”

“You did almost kill three people,” Varric pointed out. “And what stopped you cold the first time was technically a completely random magical accident.”

“Right,” Hawke said sourly. “So, since I was on such a rampage last night, you must know for sure now, right? Out with it, then.”

“Know what?” Merrill asked.

Varric looked down and pinched the bridge of his nose. Hawke stared at him, waiting for an answer.

“Know what?” Merrill repeated, concerned and seemingly genuinely perplexed.

“If he’s possessed or not,” Varric said without meeting Hawke’s gaze. “And I’m sorry, Hawke, but if I understand what Blondie told me correctly, the answer seems to be pretty definitely yes.”

“No, you’re wrong,” Merrill said at once. “I was there too, Varric. I heard everything you did. It’s not a demon.”

“What else could it possibly be?” Varric asked her.

“I don’t know,” Merrill said firmly. “But I’ve been helping Anders research Hawke’s condition for
months now. I’ve read and learned all about the kinds of things that happen to people who are possessed. This is like none of them.”

“I know what things happen too,” Varric said with his eyebrows raised. “They become crazy and powerful and dangerous. Don’t they?”

Merrill shook her head. “Of course they do, but that doesn’t mean Hawke is necessarily possessed. I do know a few things about spirits, you know, Varric.”

“Well, you definitely know a lot more than I do,” Varric admitted. “So then, Madam Blood Mage, what do you think it is? It must be something.”

Hawke started to ask a question, but Merrill spoke first.

“Yes, it’s clear that something is influencing Hawke. But I don’t think it’s a spirit. Or if it is, it’s nothing like the kind of spirits we’ve fought before. The Dalish have lost much, but we have long memories. There are no known precedents for this, no spirits who behave like... like....”

She glanced at Hawke, her voice trailing off.

“Yes, I’m still here and not yet functionally deaf,” Hawke said acidly. “Like what, exactly? What, pray tell, did I do?”

“You used magic,” Merrill said. “Anders said it looked like you were emitting raw energy from your wounds, and you cast multiple spells.”

Hawke frowned at her. “That... can’t be right. You must have misunderstood.”

“Nope, that’s what he said,” Varric confirmed. “Verbatim.”

“But I have no magic,” Hawke said. “I mean... it’s in my bloodline, but the most sorcery I’ve ever accomplished is becoming insensitive to pain when I’m fighting and bloodthirsty.”

Varric shrugged. “Well, you can apparently now also emit bursts of agonizingly painful blood magic, and induce seizures and coma with your touch. You also shrugged off Blondie’s paralysis glyph, and you withstood a catastrophic magical explosion that happened right underneath your feet. Consider it... an upgrade?”

Hawke just stared at him, saying nothing, his frown becoming hostile and stony.

“And, um, there’s more, actually,” Varric went on, glancing around casually in an effort to get Hawke to stop looking at him like that. “You talked quite a bit. About... well, I don’t really remember the specifics, but I remember it being confusing and scaring the shit out of me.”


“I remember what Anders said,” Merrill cut in, looking at Varric admonishingly. “When he asked you – or whatever was controlling you – to identify itself, you said, ‘We are everything and nothing. We are always and never, eternal and instantaneous, everywhere and nowhere. We are you, maleficar, and you are us.’”

Hawke’s eyebrows went way up his forehead. “What the fuck does that mean?”

That was just batshit terrifying, he thought. Nothing that talked like that could possibly be any good
Merrill shrugged and shook her head. “I wish I knew, Hawke. I’ve never heard of any spirit that talks like that, or that claims to be... any of that. There’s more, too – Anders kept asking it, telling it to speak plainly. He asked what manner of spirit it was. It said, ‘Intense. Indestructible. Transfinite. Illimitable. Boundless. We have no name. We are the horizon. We are limitless.’”

“Is ‘transfinite’ even a word?” Varric asked, watching Merrill askance and clearly uncomfortable.

Hawke barely heard him, deep in thought. Quite apart from the awful-to-contemplate implications of all that eldritch nonsense, something that Merrill had said had triggered a deep memory, long buried. Illimitable... we are limitless. Blood magic, spirits, intense, indestructible... what was it? He was sure he knew something, but what?

*Why* could he recall every moment of ghastly but probably irrelevant pain he had experienced when fighting the blood mage Tarohne, and yet this critical detail was fleeting – dancing just beyond the edges of his conscious mind, taunting him with the answers it withheld? Why, Maker damn it, *why* couldn’t he remember what the words reminded him of when it was now so important?

Hawke squinted, racking his mind, trying to force himself to recall the information. It was no use. The memory had feld, less clear now than it had been when Merrill first spoke. In moments, it was gone completely.

It made Hawke’s blood hot with frustrated rage.

His pulse was accelerating. He felt like the magical cylinder around him was closing in on him, squeezing the breath from his chest and slowly suffocating him.

Hawke closed his eyes and forced himself to focus on his breathing. Panicking would be bad. He could not panic. If he did, he would lose whatever tenuous control he had, dredge up the demon or whatever it was, blast himself free with magic, and then... and then people would die.

“Hawke?” Merrill asked with a touch of concern in her voice, watching his face. “Does any of that... mean anything to you?”

“No,” he growled. “Yes. I can’t remember.”

“Whatever it was, Blondie said it gave him an idea,” Varric said consolingly. “He didn’t say what it was, though. I’m sure he’ll know more by the time he gets back.”

“Speaking of Anders,” Hawke asked, voicing a question that had been nagging at him for a while now. “Back from *where*? Where did he go?”

“The Black Emporium,” Merrill said. “There’s a book there he wants to look at.”

“Oh,” Hawke said, feeling a welcome little trickle of relief. “Yeah... I bet old Xenon knows something that can help us. Help *me*. I’ve been meaning to take Anders there for a while, now. I offered a few times, but he always said no.”

“He said he’d planned to ask you last night where it was,” Merrill said, “but never got around to it. The Warden-Commander knows it, though. She went with him.”

“They left hours ago,” Varric added. “They ought to be back fairly soon.”
“Good,” Hawke said darkly. “The sooner we know something, the sooner we can fix it and the sooner you can let me out of this thing.”

∞

Anders paused outside the dank, poorly-lit corridor that led to the Black Emporium, peering into the shadows to try to see what lay beyond the distant doorway. Whether or not seeking aid from Xenon the Antiquarian was their only viable option at present, he still couldn’t shake the feeling that it was a bad idea.

Eingana, heedless of his misgivings, marched on into the musty gloom as if she did it every day. She had proceeded for nearly a dozen paces before she realized that Anders hadn’t kept pace.

Glancing around for him, she stopped and looked at him over her shoulder.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

Nothing seemed overtly amiss, so Anders did his best to shrug off his unease and stepped forward.

He wondered if he was imagining the chill that settled over his flesh the moment he entered the corridor. His eyes darted around ceaselessly, looking for... something; he didn’t know what. Anything that might justify the apprehension he felt just being near this place.

“This has always been a last resort,” he muttered, walking fast to catch up with the Warden-Commander. He kept close by her side as she moved on. “I’ve heard quite a bit about Xenon the Antiquarian and his Emporium... all of it disturbing.”

Anders tried to probe the rooms ahead with his magical senses, but he detected no obvious traps. What he did feel was an invisible, impenetrable wall that overlapped the actual wall ahead of them. He had a feeling that he could throw catastrophic magical forces at that wall without so much as scratching it.

“I understand your concern, but there’s really no need,” said Eingana. “Xenon’s certainly eccentric, but he isn’t dangerous. Not really. As long as you don’t steal anything and make all agreed-upon payments, anyway. Oh, and don’t annoy the golem.”

“The golem?” Anders asked in amazement.


“Of course I know what they are,” said Anders, annoyed. “Xenon has one?”

“He has three or four, I think,” Eingana said with airy unconcern. “One of them is even for sale.”

They reached the doorway. Eingana pushed, and it opened with eerie silence. She stepped immediately into the large, dimly lit room beyond. After a final moment’s hesitation, Anders followed.

“Ah, visitors!” said a croaking, reverberating voice that seemed to come from every direction at once. “Welcome to the Black Emporium!”

The voice drew out the words to unnecessary length, hitting the k in ‘Black’ particularly hard.

As Anders looked around, searching for the source of the voice, his eyes widened at the wondrous objects clustered and piled on shelves all around him. There was far more than could be taken in at a
simple glance, although a few things stood out.

For instance, the golem.

Anders hadn’t expected to see one so soon, or so close to the entrance, and yet the huge, hulking stone figure beside him could be nothing else. It stood utterly still, softly luminous from the many intricate traceries of lyrium embedded in its form.

“Warden-Commander!” the voice continued, forming the words out of a gravelly, yet deeply enthused groan. “Welcome back. So nice to see you again! Have you brought gold?”

Anders looked towards the approximate centre of the vast chamber, startled to find that Eingana had already advanced far into it and left him alone with the golem near the door. He hurried to catch up with her.

“Hi, Xenon,” Eingana said. “Yes. How’ve you been?”

“Oh, you know,” the voice replied. “Hanging around.”

Much cackling ensued. The noise was disturbingly wet.

Anders was unsure what to make of the twisted, fleshy object that seemed to have become, or merged with, a decaying wooden throne propped on a dais that sat in the center of the room. Most of the chamber’s illumination came from a shaft of light, dense with swirling dust motes, that fell on the thing through a chaos of intersecting rafters high above.

If he squinted and used his imagination, Anders could see how the creature in the throne might once have been a human being or something similar – but if that was so, it had been a long, long time ago. Whatever had happened to it in the meantime seemed to involve partial desiccation, an utterly horrific chemical stench, and the growth of several more than the usual number of limbs.

“How is your friend?” said the voice. It was somewhat louder right next to the flesh-chair thing, but its source was still not from any obvious direction.

Anders, hand over his mouth and nose to try to filter out the awful reek, wondered how the thing (which was clearly Xenon the Antiquarian) could talk at all. He could see a gash near the top that might have been a mouth at one point, but it never so much as twitched.

“I don’t remember inviting him,” Xenon added, and Anders was chilled at the suddenness with which the entity’s voice went from slightly crazy cheerfulness to cold and unfriendly.

“This is Anders,” Eingana said. “He’s a good friend of mine and his credit is excellent.”

“Oh,” said Xenon, once again proverbially all smiles. “Well, that’s alright then. Welcome to my shop, Anders! Ah – why don’t you say hello to Thaddeus?”

Confused, Anders glanced at Eingana, who nodded behind him.

Anders turned around and couldn’t contain a startled yell when he saw the golem looming right behind him.

*How*, by the Maker, had it gotten there so quickly, let alone so quietly?! Anders hadn’t heard a single sound but for Xenon’s and Eingana’s voices and the distant, rustling creak of footsteps in Darktown overhead. He hadn’t even felt the floorboards shift.
“Oh, don’t be intimidated, he’s gentle as a lamb,” Xenon said amidst more coughing and cackling. “As long as you don’t make any trouble, of course. Then he gets quite violent!”

To Anders’s amazement, Eingana reached out and shook the golem’s hand.

“Thaddeus,” she said. “You’re looking well. Been alright?”

The golem didn’t appear to visibly react – until Anders looked closer and saw that its stone fingers had actually curled slightly around Eingana’s entire forearm. He began to seriously contemplate the possibility that the entire world had gone completely mad, or that he might in fact still be dreaming.

Eingana looked at him askance and hissed “Don’t be rude, Anders.”

Anders bit back a deep sigh, gave himself an internal shake, and – heart pounding – reached out to shake the golem’s hand too.

“Thaddeus,” he said with forced calm. “Charmed.”

The golem’s grip in his hand – or rather on it, since it essentially enveloped his entire hand up to his wrist – was firm, but surprisingly not crushing or even painful.

Anders squinted; had the stone being’s rigid face just... smiled at him?

Surely not. Surely that was impossible.

“Have you come seeking anything in particular?” Xenon asked as Thaddeus turned around and stomped, quite audibly this time, back to its post at the door. “Or are you just browsing?”

“Browsing, myself,” Eingana said. “Anders is looking for something specific – a rare book. What did you say it was called, Anders?”

It took Anders a moment to get over the absurdity that was going on around him, and Eingana reacting to it as calmly as if it were a trip to the market for bread.

“Right,” he said once he’d found his voice. “It’s the, uh... the Emergent Compendium.”

“Ahh, yes,” Xenon said fondly. “A wondrous tome indeed! I have it hidden away – can’t trust the folk who come in here not to stand around, absorbing its secrets for free... you understand. Quite powerful secrets, sometimes! URCHIN!”

Anders jumped at the sudden and intense increase in volume.

The Black Emporium was only getting weirder by the minute. At Xenon’s shout, a filthy child – dressed in rags and with shaggy, unwashed blond hair – appeared from the shadows behind Thaddeus. He trotted up to Eingana with a grin on his face.

“Hey, Urchin!” Eingana greeted him as if reunited with an old friend. She ruffled his hair affectionately. “Put ’em up, hoss.”

The child extended his fist, and Eingana bumped hers against it.

“Urchin,” Xenon boomed. “Fetch the Emergent Compendium for the customers, if you please.”

Urchin eyed Anders for a moment, his face unreadable. Anders returned the regard evenly, keeping his expression carefully neutral.
“Chop chop!” Xenon yelled, and the child darted away, disappearing into the darkness before Anders could really focus on where he was headed.

“He’ll be a moment,” Xenon announced, and although his tone of voice had quieted to a mutter, it still seemed to come from every direction at once. “In the meantime... look around! Look around! There’s so much to see.”

He cackled some more. Anders was palpably relieved when it finally stopped.

“Check this place out, Anders,” Eingana added. “Lots of stuff here you won’t find anywhere else.”

She wandered over to a disorderly pile of chests and boxes, some of them hanging open and others sealed with multiple locks both mundane and magical. Anders could sense the pulsations of some of the wards on them from where he was standing.

He walked quickly to Eingana’s side, not wanting to lose track of her in the gloomy, unpredictable Emporium.

“So I see you’ve been here before,” he said in a mildly accusatory whisper.

“Once or twice,” Eingana said absently as she opened a chest and rifled through its contents – a mass of tarnished jewelry and amulets.

“How long have you known about this place?” Anders persisted. “Do you come here... often? All the way to Kirkwall, just for this?”

“Not that often,” Eingana said. She flicked her hand nonchalantly. “Xenon and I go way back.”

“How far back, exactly?” Anders asked with an edge in his voice.

In the spear of light behind them, Xenon chuckled quietly. Anders shuddered as he felt a chill run along his spine.

Eingana made eye contact with him and smiled thinly. “Why don’t you check out the books? See if there’s anything else here that might be useful.”

Anders sighed, acknowledging that she wasn’t going to give him a straight answer. Ultimately he was here to help Hawke, not pry into Eingana’s secrets, so he looked around for a bookshelf.

He had no doubt that anything he found for sale here would be fantastically expensive. He barely had two copper bits to rub together – running a free medical clinic for the poor the Chantry neglected while helping rebel mages and evading templars wasn’t exactly a profitable business.

Hawke, though, had deep pockets, and he’d readily offered to pay for anything that helped Anders find a solution. Presumably, this was what Eingana had meant when she’d said his “credit” was good.

He spotted a rickety shelf of tomes wedged in between a large oval mirror set in an intricately carved wooden frame and a tottering pile of what appeared, disturbingly, to be entire human ribcages. Anders made his way over to it, carefully avoiding looking too closely at the bones or into the mirror – just in case.

On his way, he started away from an ornate wooden box that suddenly emitted a muffled, tormented scream. Xenon said nothing and Eingana didn’t even look up. Anders decided that everything would be simpler if he didn’t ask, and moved on.
He reached the bookshelf and scanned the ancient, cracked leather bindings for any titles that looked interesting. Quite a few were in languages he couldn’t identify. Several more had only bizarre, sometimes gruesome pictographs, or no markings at all. Of the few titles he could read, most were unnerving enough that he would rather have not read them at all. One or two he forgot the instant his eyes left the spine.

Finally, his eyes fell on a title he recognized.


He looked at the price scrawled on a scrap of parchment tucked under the book and he cursed fluently.

“What?” Eingana asked. She had moved on from the box of assorted jewelry and was now poking through the ribcages.

“I rented this book on the black market – I had it for less than a week – and look! Here it is for sale, and for two-thirds the price I paid!” Anders complained. “Here I thought this place would be more expensive than anywhere else! Bloody Marchers think they can get away with gouging a Fereldan apostate just because he’s foreign and they have Maker-cursed lyrium-addicted templars in their pockets....”

His words dissolved into angry mumbling. Eingana smiled, patted his shoulder sympathetically, and sidled past him (having apparently lost interest in the ribcages).

Anders stepped back from the bookshelf and folded his arms, eyes wandering impatiently as he waited for Urchin to return with the book. The Emergent Compendium was the only thing he really needed. If there’d been anything else that might have helped Hawke, he wouldn’t be here at all.

Besides, he had a feeling that searching all the books in this place – aside from taking far more time than he had – would lead only to temptation, frustration, or (most likely) madness.

Eingana was now rifling through several containers of what appeared to be mundane crafting ingredients.

“Hey, Xenon,” she called out. “Got any spindleweed? Or glitterdust?”

“Check... the back room,” Xenon croaked.

Anders turned around in time to see Eingana disappear behind a far-off decorated curtain with a swish and a clatter of wooden beads, leaving him alone in the main chamber with Xenon and Thaddeus. She was very fast, he reflected.

The curtain continued to clatter for several moments longer than seemed reasonable. Anders was confused until he realized that the floor itself was shaking gently, rattling objects all around the room.

Xenon grumbled something about delicate objects and shouted for Urchin to hurry up. The tremor soon subsided.

Anders paced in a slow circle around the perimeter of the main chamber, examining the assorted items and relics that were scattered about the place in no apparent order.

He wondered what was taking the boy so long. There must have been a great deal more hidden in the back rooms – hoards of treasure, perhaps, and doubtless many more artifacts and tomes. Dangerous magical items, arsenals of enchanted weapons and armour, libraries of long-forgotten or
What had that boy’s life been like, Anders wondered, to end up as assistant to Xenon the Antiquarian? Where were his parents? Did they know where he was? Were they even still alive?

That last seemed unlikely. What might have happened to them, though?

There were so many ways to die in Kirkwall. Gangs, slavers, templars, rogue mages, abominations, demons....

For the first time in many months, Anders allowed himself to think of the young woman he’d killed – the mage who had been fleeing Ser Alrik.

Her name, he’d discovered, was Ella. She had been taken from her home abruptly, while her mother was away, upon the templars’ discovery of her magical ability. It had been her further misfortune to encounter Ser Alrik during her desperate flight, and to be pursued by him – even as he himself was being pursued by Anders, Varric, and Hawke.

It seemed like a lifetime ago. Justice still burned inside of him, but since that day in the caverns beneath Darktown, Anders had forced the spirit down into a deep, cold part of himself and locked it there with the entire force of his willpower.

The brutal and blatant oppression of mages by the templars had only worsened since Knight-Commander Meredith had stepped into the Viscount’s seat. Justice continued to clamour and seethe for action, but Anders had been too afraid to continue confronting templars directly. He hadn’t wanted Justice to turn in blind fury upon any other mages.

He’d tried to settle himself by helping out in other ways – assisting the mage underground, sheltering mage refugees in his clinic – but it was never enough to satisfy Justice. Anders had long since gotten used to ignoring the demands of that part of himself, of simply living with the smoldering burn of his spirit’s twisted need for vengeance gnawing away at his insides.

At present, the majority of his energy was devoted to helping Hawke. Freeing his lover from the madness that afflicted him had become the main focus of his life – and Anders was absolutely determined to see it through to its end.

Right now, given what he’d witnessed last night, it seemed far more likely that Hawke would be consumed by the alien influence than freed from it. Anders would be killed trying to save him, and whatever monster Hawke became would lay waste to Kirkwall.

Eventually, just as Hawke had predicted so bitterly and sarcastically in his despair, the templars would succeed at bringing him down. They would pay for it dearly, but they’d do it.

Perhaps the rigid determination came from Justice – focusing the will that Anders denied elsewhere into a direction he did allow – but he still absolutely refused to let that happen. He would stop this spirit, and return Michael Hawke to the way he had once been: normal. Slightly crazy and bloodthirsty, yes, and definitely arrogant and snarky and frequently downright nasty, but a good man at his core. A strong and intelligent and beautiful man, a man who cared about people and fought on their behalf despite trying his hardest to project indifference.

A man who, despite his flaws, was worth loving. And a man who loved Anders in turn, despite his own considerable imperfections.

Anders couldn’t not do everything in his power to save him. Justice demanded no less. He would see Michael Hawke free and sane – at least, as sane as he had been before all this – or he would die
Anders wondered. What if he did succeed?

Could they continue on as they had – Hawke killing lowlifes and giant spiders and hunting apostates, ostensibly for the glory of Kirkwall but really to sate his bloodlust, and Anders tagging along and healing his wounds, pretending not to care about anything else? Pretending he could ignore the openly vile way that mages were treated in this city and everywhere else?

Anders buried his face in his hands, wondering how it was possible that his life had become this screwed up.

When had everything gone wrong? Why couldn’t the Chantry just leave his kind alone? Why couldn’t people realize that the templars were an army of trained abusers leashed by lyrium addiction, and the Chantry wicked and dictatorial?

Why couldn’t he have realized, before it was too late, that a spirit of Justice could be just as dangerous a demon of Pride? Why couldn’t he have never met Michael Hawke, the bloodthirsty bastard, and fallen so hopelessly in love with him? Why couldn’t he have been born a normal person with no magic – or better yet, never have been born at all?

Anders choked on his tears. He wouldn’t, couldn’t give in to despair. He had to keep going. He had to keep fighting, keep putting one foot in front of the other, somehow. What choice did he have? No one else was willing to do the things he was. If he killed himself, who would help the mages? If he died, who would save Hawke?

His shoulders heaved. The anguish in his heart was like physical pain.

Anders felt slender, calloused fingers on his wrists, gently pulling his hands away from his face. Eingana folded him in her arms, rubbing his back and making wordless, soothing sounds.

Anders returned Eingana’s embrace, choked by a powerful rush of gratitude and affection for her. Yet he resisted allowing himself to cry into her shoulder. If he started, it would take him a long time to stop.

Eingana was a Grey Warden. Technically so was he, but he was foremost an agent of Justice. She comforted him because they were friends who had grown close in Amaranthine during the chaotic aftermath of the Blight. But her duty would forever come first, and so would his.

Presently, Anders recovered his composure and gently disengaged himself from Eingana. He wiped his face and cleared his throat.

Eingana looked at him with concern in her deep brown eyes.


“No need to be sorry,” Eingana said, rubbing his shoulder. “We all have our burdens. We all have times where it gets to be too much. What’s important is not giving up.”

It was like she had read his mind.

“Yes,” he said. “So how do you do it? I mean – I know some things, because I was with you in Amaranthine, but the things you must know, and have to do... surely it must be overwhelming at times. How do you cope?”
“One day at a time,” she said simply.

Anders nodded, rubbing the last of his tears away from his eyes and squaring his shoulders.

“Ohem,” said Xenon.

Anders turned around to find Urchin holding out a vast, thick tome, its stained leather binding black and featureless. Anders took the heavy book with a nod of thanks, and the child vanished back into the shadows as quickly and quietly as he had appeared.

“Set it down over here,” Eingana suggested, indicating a stool nearby whose three legs appeared to be carved from coral.

Anders followed her instruction, setting the tome down with a heavy thud.

“Xenon charges for examining this thing by the half-hour,” Eingana said as she joined him beside the stool. “I suggest we find what you need as fast as possible.”

“Is it for sale?” Anders asked as he gingerly opened the book. Several pages fluttered open with the cover.

Another tremor briefly disturbed the stillness of the room, prompting another bout of cursing and complaining from Xenon.

“I asked Urchin,” Eingana said, lowering her voice to a murmur. “Technically yes it is, but the price he’s asking for it could bankrupt every noble in Val Royeaux.”

“I heard that,” Xenon ranted. “That volume is one of a kind – I can’t let it go for piddle!”

Eingana waved at him to be quiet as Anders flipped through the leaves of the book. At first he did so carefully, and then with increasing speed as just how “one of a kind” the book really was became apparent.

Try as he might, Anders could not find the first page.

No matter how many leaves he turned, theoretically advancing towards the front cover where an index might be located, there were always more and more to turn.

They slipped like sand between Anders’s fingers. Pages upon pages of indecipherable text, innumerable designs for strange objects, sketch after sketch of unfamiliar faces – all flashed past in a blur even though only a few pages appeared to separate the book’s front cover from the vast remainder of its text. And no matter how many he flipped through, the book’s thickness never seemed to change.

“That’s kind of cool,” Eingana said after a while, “but also very, very scary. Are you sure this is the book you need? I don’t want to... get sucked into it, or something.”

“This cannot be,” Anders breathed. “It’s physically impossible. There’s no magical way it can be like this, either – I’d be able to sense it. It’s utterly mundane. This... simply cannot be a real object. It can’t.”

“And yet.” Eingana tapped the book with her finger to make her point. “What are you trying to prove by going back and back and back like that? All you’re doing is letting the book flaunt its cannot-beness. It’s probably leeching away our sanity just watching it.”
Anders stopped flipping the pages at once. That seemed unlikely, but he wasn’t about to take any chances with an object like this.

“I was trying to find an index. Do you think there’s a first page, or does it just go on forever?”

“I think if there is a first page,” Eingana said, “it would take impractically long to find it. Even if we did, witnessing the index might well drive both of us mad from the revelation.”

“Yes... probably,” Anders agreed.

He pondered the conundrum of how to search a potentially infinite book for the one specific piece of knowledge he needed. No inspirations came to him.

Hoping for ideas, he dug around in a pocket of his robe for the piece of vellum on which he’d noted down the reference that had led him to the Compendium in the first place.

The other tome had mentioned a specific design found in the Compendium. Its author, seemingly aware of the problem of finding anything in the impossible book, had cited an approximate depth from its front cover at which the design might be found again.

At the time, Anders had had no idea why the reference had been worded so strangely. Now he did.

Hardly daring to hope that such an imprecise guideline would be worth anything with such a mutable artifact, Anders ran his fingers down the block of pages to the specified depth and opened.

He was confronted with a wall of indecipherable language resembling no alphabet used in Thedas or anywhere else he knew of. He started to flip the leaves forward, hoping to get lucky.

“Here,” he said to Eingana. “Keep your finger there. I’ll look towards the back, and you look towards the front. Keep an eye out for this design.”

He showed her the vellum on which he’d copied the reference. Eingana nodded.

Keeping the place where he’d opened the book noted with their fingers, Anders and Eingana searched forwards and backwards into the book, flipping pages up ninety degrees and holding them aloft so that they could both see the text at once.

It was far from the most efficient means of searching for information – and yet after only seven or eight minutes, Anders found the design he had copied.

“Here,” he said excitedly. “This is it.”

Relieved, Eingana dropped the pages she had searched, enabling Anders to fully open to the page he had come to. The design occupied the upper half of the left-hand page, and below it – quite fortunately – was text in the common tongue.

“What are we looking for?” Eingana asked.

Anders indicated the design in the Compendium with his finger.

“This is a convergent sigil,” he explained. “It’s a kind of visual representation of a blood magic spell. Any blood mage can replicate the spell using whatever power source they have on hand.

“This one affects the target’s desire for violence. It involves the... well, it’s complicated and the details are rather disgusting, and I’m ashamed that I know them at all, so never mind. What matters is, the book I found this in talked about convergent sigils a lot, and it reminded me of something
Michael told me. I asked him to write down what he remembered about several battles he’d fought with powerful blood mages in the past. His description of how one particular spell that was cast on him felt led me to this sigil. I looked into it further, cross-referenced it with....”

Anders rubbed his chin, noting that Eingana’s eyes were glazing over.

“It’s a long and complicated story, really, this theory that I’ve been working on for the last few months with Merrill’s help. It involves several other sigils like this one, and I don’t know if I could explain it to a non-mage in any way that you’d understand.”

“Then don’t worry about it,” Eingana said. “Get to the point. What’s so important about this particular sigil?”

“I managed to match it and various others to spells that Michael remembered being cast on him. Most of them were by a mage named Tarohne or one of her cohorts, and there was one more by Quentin – that’s the mage who-”

“Yes, I remember,” Eingana interrupted. “Continue.”

“Well, all of it kind of fit together – and that story Michael told about his reaver initiation helped me put a few of the final pieces into place – but not quite. There was something, some connecting element that was just... not there and should have been. Not there that I was aware of and could detect, anyway.

“All of those spells cast on him, interacting with his physiology and the reaver ritual he’d gone through all those years ago and each other – they all added up to the symptoms Michael was experiencing, provided there was another critical element present. Something that connected everything and would have activated the, I guess the ‘syndrome’ he was experiencing. But I couldn’t find that element. There were a few things it could have been... one of them being a demon. But....”

Anders was turning the pages of the Emergent Compendium frantically, eyes skimming over the text, years of study as a mage and months of study of this subject in particular enabling him to pick out crucial words here and there. Several more convergent sigils were depicted, and Anders nodded at each, saying “Yes, that one... and that one....”

He turned a final page, and both of them stared in shock at the image depicted there.

It was a man – no one either of them recognized, but still eerily familiar, rendered in breathtaking detail. He was covered in slash and stab wounds, the blood flowing from them depicted in startling realism. His hair and beard were long and shaggy, matted with blood. His teeth were bared in an animalistic snarl. He was dressed only in ragged breeches, and he stood in a defiant, aggressive stance, ready and eager for combat. One hand gripped a bloodstained axe, and the other held high a severed head.

Tellingly, wavy lines wandered about his body, originating in the wounds. Neither Anders nor Eingana would have understood what they were meant to depict if they hadn’t seen Hawke bleeding raw magic from his injuries the night before.

Even more telling were the man’s eyes. His brow was clenched in rage and his eyes were unnaturally wide – shaded entirely in black, except for sparks in the center where the artist had left no ink.

“Andraste’s ass,” Eingana breathed. “That’s it, isn’t it? That’s the same thing. What does it say?”

Anders was reading frantically, eyes darting back and forth over the page. Memories of strange
dreams were awakening in him as he desperately absorbed information as fast as he could, processing it alongside his previous understanding and knowledge, searching for the connection.

_Distraction made flesh._ Yes, of course, that made perfect sense – but why had he thought that? _Why_ did it make perfect sense? Where had he heard that before?

_Always in peripheral, another mind – untethered._ Unfocused. Not paying attention, distracted – _distraction made flesh._

“No,” Anders grunted. “That dream. Fuck, what did they say? What was it?”

“What are you talking about?” Eingana said. Anders silenced her, thinking intently.

_His form, shattered._ Shattered, yes, and bleeding – once shattered, no longer whole or subject to the rigid order of the physical world, the energy could seep out, become stronger – more able to _affect_ the world-

What had Hawke said the night before? _Illimitable._ _Boundless._ _We are the horizon._... But what did that _mean_?

Then he saw it.

_Stay focused – whims escape to their own action._

“It’s not a demon,” Anders breathed.

“No?” Eingana said. She was staring at him, waiting impatiently for him to work through his epiphany and share it with her.

“It’s from the Fade,” Anders said eagerly, trying desperately to sort together the mass of information swirling in his mind, each moment combining and recombining into new answers. “Not a demon or spirit, but still an entity from beyond the Veil – something to do with – with _thought_, but not focused like a spirit is. Not something fueled and defined by a single virtue or sin, not like Justice or Pride, but something... loose, distracted, unfocused....”

Eingana’s expression froze. Her face became ashen.

Anders barely noticed.

“‘We are everything and nothing,’ he quoted. ‘Always and never, eternal and instantaneous, everywhere and nowhere’. ... It’s no single thing at once, because it’s multiple things brought together in an incoherent mess, but there’s so much of it and it’s so old that it’s gained a kind of pseudo-sentience on its own-”


“Yes, that too, because... what?”

Anders looked at Eingana, only now seeing the shock and dismay on her face.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

Her eyes went to his, then down at the engraving in the Emergent Compendium. Her hand went out to touch the drawing. Her fingers trembled over the inscription beneath it: _Does an afterthought prove the gods when direct action is long missing?_
“Did I ever tell you,” she began softly, “about the Watchguard of the Reaching?”

Anders blinked, baffled. “Uh... no, I don’t think so.”

Eingana shook her head, her eyes wide in amazement, taking slow, deep breaths.

“It was during the Blight, when I went to Kinloch Hold to recruit the mages – that was when Uldred had taken over the tower and filled it with demons and abominations. You heard about that.”

“Yes,” Anders said quietly. “I was lucky not to be there at the time. That was after my... eighth escape attempt, I think. It’s probably the reason I’m still alive. Well, one of the reasons.”

“But there was something else in the tower, too,” Eingana said. “Something that had already been there, not one of the spirits that came through the sundered Veil. It was very old and very powerful, but until then it had been trapped behind countless wards. It was released as the tower was damaged by the fighting and the intense magical energies being thrown around, and all those ancient spells came unraveled. Wynne was with me – she knew more about what was going on than I did, and I only barely understood it when she explained it to me at the time. We ended up having to fight it on the way out, after we had killed Uldred.”

Anders listened with wide eyes, eager to know more. If Eingana had encountered something like this in the past, and killed it....

“It ambushed us on the ground floor, coming up from the basement,” she went on. “It very nearly killed a few apprentices – just children, ones that Wynne had rescued and left there under the protection of some surviving mages. Luckily for them, Alistair was with us – he jumped right in its path as it was charging, roaring with energy and red flames. Leliana was there too, I’ve told you about her.

“She and I and Wynne fought it, and the mages that were protecting the children helped us, but it was still a very near thing. Alistair kind of... seized when it touched him, and then he just... suddenly had horrendous burns all over his face and arms. His armour was melted right into his chest. Completely ruined the breastplate, and if Wynne hadn’t been there to heal him, he would have died in agony. He was out of commission for the rest of the fight.

“We did eventually kill it, but like I said... after everything else we’d fought, we were all exhausted and wounded and drained. It was very close. One of the closer encounters of my life. And just... terrifying, in a way nothing else in that tower had been. Not even Uldred and the thing he’d become was that scary.”

“And...” Anders fumbled with the phrasing of the question, his mind still racing with the possibilities of this knowledge. “Did you ever find out – I mean, do you know what it was? Do you think – if there was another thing like that – could it-”

“Possess someone? I don’t know, Anders, but I think... I think whatever’s got Hawke must be the same kind of thing. Wynne called it....”

Eingana twisted her lip in concentration, trying to remember.

“She called it Shah Wyrd. I don’t know if that was its name or some kind of arcane classification... she said it was like a spirit, but not quite the same. It embodied distraction, daydreaming, lack of focus. All thoughts create echoes in the Fade, and this thing had been born from some foolhardy explorers centuries and centuries ago who hadn’t had enough control or drive to prevent their whims from escaping.”
“-to their own action,” Anders finished, nodding.

He was stunned. He looked back at the Emergent Compendium, skimming under and around the drawing, searching for anything important he might have missed.

“It was a grueling fight,” Eingana said softly, more to herself than to Anders. Her eyes were distant with memory. “The *smell* it gave off was... was overpowering. It was like saffron, almost, but horribly rancid. Something rotten underne-”

“Saffron!” Anders yelled. Eingana jumped, looking at him in surprise.

“That’s it!” Anders went on. “Maker’s breath, that’s it!”

Eingana frowned in confusion. “The thing that’s got a hold of Hawke is saffron?”

“No, no, no,” Anders said impatiently. “It *smells* like saffron, but – not really saffron, like you said, but like it’s gone bad. Like it’s saffron mixed with something else, something rotten.”

Eingana continued to frown. “I’m not following you. If it’s the same kind of entity, logic dictates that it *would* smell the same – so what? What does that have to do with what we’ve just learned?”

“Nothing, really, it just confirms it,” Anders said. “The last few times Michael’s lost control, and gone into his – his ragey state where his eyes are black and all that – there’s been a kind of... smell around him. Do you remember, when he was telling us the story of his reaver initiation – he said there was a certain smell about the man who initiated him, but it wasn’t a *smell* per se – more like a sensation? Not a smell you smell with your nose. It’s been like that, and *so* familiar, but I’ve never made the connection until just now. It’s not familiar to *me* – it’s familiar to Justice. He remembers the ‘smell’, for lack of a better term, of things from the world of spirits.”

Eingana’s mouth opened in dawning comprehension. “I see. And you perceive this smell-sensation as saffron, but with underlying decay?”

“Yes. I first noticed it... I think it was just the second time Michael went crazy with lust for me, out on the coast after we’d fought a band of raiders and their blood mage leader. It was the morning after, literally the next day after his mother died, when I first noticed that smell. It’s been bugging me ever since. I’ve been trying to remember what it reminded me of, but I would never have gotten anywhere searching my *own* memories. All this time, it was never anything from this world. It’s from the Fade, and it was the spirit inside me that was remembering it, not me.”

“Well,” Eingana said with a weary exhalation. “Good work, team. I think we’ve just solved a considerable chunk of this mystery.”

“Yes, we have,” Anders said enthusiastically – but as soon as he said it, he felt dread welling up in him, overpowering his elation and drowning it to a spark.

At least now they knew Hawke wasn’t possessed by a demon. Unfortunately, the thing that had him in its grip was in many ways *worse* than a demon.

The entity that Eingana had fought hadn’t even been in possession of a host. It had been forced to manifest physically its own, raw form. From her description of Shah Wyrd, whatever rare and extraordinary kind of being that was inside Hawke was sure to be incredibly dangerous and very, very old. It would never willingly relinquish a foothold in the physical realm.

Furthermore, there was no known way to reverse spirit possession. So what chance was there to free Hawke from an entity far more powerful and unpredictable than a spirit? Really, what hope was
there at all of Anders ever having his beloved Michael Hawke back, alive and healthy and sane?

Eingana could clearly read the fear on his face, because she took his hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “Wynne knows about spirits, and other things that are like spirits but not really. She’ll know what to do with this information, how to use it to find a solution. Don’t give up hope just yet.”

Anders sighed and returned her squeeze, massaging his aching forehead with his other hand. She was right. As long as there was a chance, he couldn’t give up. He couldn’t sink into despair about this any more than he could about his own guilt over killing Ella or the dire situation of Kirkwall’s mages.

Michael Hawke, despite his violence, was the one good thing that Anders had to call his in the whole world. He wasn’t everything, but he was.

“Come on,” Eingana said. “Help me copy down the most important bits of this. Wynne ought to examine it when she gets here. Then we’ll go. Hawke’s probably awake by now, and he’ll want to see us – you in particular.”

Anders didn’t have the energy to return her smile. He simply did as she suggested, copying down several crucial pieces of information provided in the text on the nature of entities composed of unfocused thought.

As he wrote, he found his eyes continually drawn to the engraved image. The rage in the man’s eyes, even two-dimensional and rendered in pen and ink, was unsettling in its familiarity. It could have been Hawke staring back at him from the page.

Finally, they’d transcribed everything they thought Wynne might need to know, and several other things just in case. Eingana shut the Emergent Compendium and began to haggle good-naturedly with Xenon over the price of their time with it.

Anders tuned out their dialogue. He found himself resenting the ninety minutes or so of walking that it would take to get from the Black Emporium in Darktown to the Hawke estate in Hightown.

His mind was already there, roving over his lover’s body, whispering in his ear that everything would be okay, that he would fix this.
The late afternoon sun hovered radiantly over the roofs of various estates. Anders squinted into the blinding light as he crested the last of the stairs and entered Hightown proper. It had been a long, tedious climb from the lower city, and despite his Grey Warden stamina, he was out of breath.

By contrast, Eingana wasn’t so much as sweaty. Anders supposed that, even for those preternaturally enhanced by the darkspawn taint, regular exercise was still necessary to build endurance. He’d given up the adventuring life some time ago, but she’d been at it for years.

Anders had been perpetually thin for what felt like a long time after merging with Justice. It was partly due to stress, but mostly (he suspected) because he’d spent so long investing the majority of his resources and energy into helping others. Living hand-to-mouth in the sewers hadn’t exactly been conducive to a robust constitution – not that he regretted any of the good he’d done.

Hawke had been feeding him regularly for a few years now, and although Anders had gained some weight, he was still lean. Despite Hawke’s repeated encouragement that he eat his fill, the instinct to be frugal with what food he kept for himself had proven difficult to break. Hawke had never pressed him when he refused more, for which Anders had always been grateful, although he’d sometimes regretted not acquiescing later on.

Once they passed into the shadow of a building, Anders took several deep breaths of the cool, late spring air, trying to slow his heart rate. Thinking about Hawke (and peripherally, Bodahn’s cooking) made him anxious to return to the estate as soon as possible. He wanted to see his lover and ensure that Hawke was still himself and contained, as well as relay what he and Eingana had learned.

Anders still doubted whether their new knowledge would be of any immediate use. Even knowing what kind of being had Hawke in its grip, there wasn’t much he could do to resolve the situation by himself.

“How do you know when Enchanter Wynne is due to arrive?” he asked Eingana as they wove their way through the Hightown market. He noticed that business was curiously slow, even for this time of day. Several regular merchants had apparently packed up their stalls and departed, and those that remained were by no means doing a brisk business.

“I expect she’ll get here sometime tomorrow,” said Eingana. “Early the day after, at the latest. The local Knight-Commander has insisted that she be accompanied by one of Kirkwall’s templars well before she enters the city. She might need to wait for her escort before she can proceed past a certain
Eingana looked at him in surprise.

“Meredith has no business interfering with the affairs of a mage as influential and proven loyal as Wynne,” Anders said to explain his annoyance. “For Andrastra’s sake, she represents the College of Magi itself! Like you said yesterday – she is exemplary, an inspiration to mages and non-mages alike. She ought to be treated with the respect she’s due, not escorted around like a criminal.”

Eingana spread her hands. “I happen to agree with you, Anders. But it’s not like there’s much I can do about it. I may be a Warden-Commander, even the Hero of Ferelden, but here I’m just another dog-lord – and an elven one at that. The nobles here might put up a pretense of civility and respect, but I doubt I could scare more than a handful of them into doing what I asked. Wynne herself probably has more influence with the Chantry and the aristocracy than I do.”

“I know,” Anders sighed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that to sound like I was blaming you. It just... irritates me how Meredith acts like every single mage is constantly on the verge of erupting into an abomination or lashing out with blood magic. Especially when she is the one who oversees systemic abuse, torture, and rape. Wynne’s not only a loyal mage, she’s a veteran of the Blight! She helped save the entire world!”

“Yes,” Eingana said. “She and several other mages – including you – proved crucial to defeating the darkspawn. There’s no way we could have killed the archdemon or the Mother without your help, loyalists and apostates alike. But do you really think the Knight-Commander cares about any of that? Or that anyone else in the Free Marches would, either? The Blight never reached Kirkwall.”

“Thanks to you. And several mages, like you said. I don’t think the bloody Marchers have ever even acknowledged that they’d all have died in terror or been dragged underground and transformed into horrors without our help.”

Justice was beginning to seethe inside him, but Anders forced himself to let go of his anger when he saw Eingana’s weary expression.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “I know none of this is your fault, and there’s nothing you can do about it either. I guess I just... needed to vent a bit.”

Eingana smiled understandingly and touched his shoulder. “It’s okay, Anders. I’m your friend, and it’s a friend’s duty to listen.”

They climbed another grand set of stairs out of the market and headed down a street towards the Hightown Square, where the entrance to the Hawke estate was located. As if to underscore Anders’s complaints, several of the well-dressed people they passed on the way gave them dirty looks – glancing pointedly at their obvious weapons, utilitarian and less-than-clean garb, and Eingana’s ears.

Eingana rolled her eyes and mouthed “nobles” to Anders. He mustered a wan smile for her.

“Why didn’t we just use the secret entrance to the cellars in Darktown?” Anders asked. “We could have been back fifteen minutes ago, and with no stuck-up Hightowners sneering at us.”

“This is safer,” Eingana said as they entered the square. It was curiously deserted. “There are-”

She was cut off as a shadowy figure loomed out of nowhere right in front of her and slashed downward with ragged claws. Eingana leapt backwards, narrowly avoiding evisceration, and drew
her swords.

Anders reached for the staff strapped to his back, but before he could touch it he felt a horrid wrenching sensation in his core, followed by overpowering weakness. He sank inexorably to his knees as a shadow fell over him.

Eingana dodged and whirled her blades in a deadly blur in front of her, fending off strikes not only from the shade that had attacked her but several others that had materialized around the square. All were closing in fast.

Anders could feel that the deathly chill enveloping him was concentrated on the back of his neck. He struggled to move as the shadow deepened around him, but he was paralyzed with weakness. His fingers clutched ineffectually at his staff, still trying to free it from its straps on his back.

Sure that he was about to die, Anders blinked in surprise when the shadow and the chill simultaneously vanished. An otherworldly groan of pain arose behind him, accompanied by a wet, gruesome tearing noise.

Strong hands gripped him under his arms and hauled him to his feet. Anders looked up at his rescuer, blinking to clear his blurred vision.

It was Donnic, Aveline’s husband and Anders’s occasional drinking buddy.

“All right there, healer?” Donnic asked. Behind him, Anders glimpsed Aveline slashing at several more shades with her sword.

“I will be,” Anders grunted, feeling his strength returning slowly but steadily. He grabbed his staff and freed it at last, feeling a blessed surge of power as his hand made contact with the wood.

“Thanks,” he added as Donnic stepped back and drew his sword, confident that Anders could stand on his own. “Your rescue was timely.”

“You’re not rescued yet,” Donnic said. “Watch Aveline’s back, would you?”

Anders nodded, and Donnic rushed to help Eingana.

Anders glanced around quickly, appraising the situation and mentally cursing up a storm at the unexpected demonic attack. The spirits had materialized suddenly and come at them from two opposing directions at once.

Not far away, Aveline raised her shield in plenty of time to deflect several gobs of fiery matter hurled at her by a bellowing rage demon. She was handling herself well enough for the moment, so Anders checked on Eingana.

She, on the other hand, was nearly overwhelmed by the mass of shades swirling around and above her. They extended their shadowy fingers as they came within reach, slashing or trying to suck away her life force as they had nearly done to Anders. She sliced apart several with her blades, but more were able to affect her with their draining strikes.

Donnic disrupted their plans by charging into the fray, scattering the diaphanous demons. He took up a defensive stance beside Eingana, sword and shield raised.

Anders turned back to Aveline. She was fighting furiously, stabbing and slashing apart the shades that were trying to attack her, but she couldn’t advance without exposing herself to the rage demon’s fury raining on her from afar.
Anders selected the fiery creature as his target and began to gather up his magic for a frost spell. Energy swirled along his staff as he gestured, and the rage demon was enveloped in a dense, contracting cloud of icy fog.

The creature shriveled and hardened under the magical assault, forced to pause its attack on Aveline. She took advantage of the opening to charge forward through the clustered shades.

The demons scattered with a chorus of resonant groans. Several met Aveline’s blade and were torn to shreds that rapidly dissolved into denatured, foul-smelling ooze. A few more fell to icy missiles from Anders’s staff.

Anders chanced a glance back at Eingana and Donnic. Side-by-side in the entrance to the square, they were successfully defending themselves against the churning horde of shades, but two more rage demons appeared to be tearing through the Veil beyond them. More worrying was the way the air was flickering and wavering in the center of the square, a sure sign that a more powerful demon was attempting to manifest.

Anders summoned and compressed as much magic as he could hold without releasing it. His hands trembled as he packed more and more force into a small area. The crystal atop his staff began to ring with the song of the Fade.

Having gathered near the limit of what he could contain, Anders altered the magic’s resonance to wash away external arcane alteration from whatever it touched. Then, tapping into Justice’s magic as well, he added a mystical charge that would corrode the corporeal manifestations of demons.

“Casting!” he called to warn his comrades of what he was about to do, and with a grunt of exertion he released his spell.

A sphere of cloudy blue-white energy burst forth, expanding in all directions. As it passed over Eingana, Donnic, and Aveline, it dispelled lingering weakness from the shades’ attacks. The shades themselves were pushed far back by the wave, the weakest ones burned into crisps of degenerate char.

Taking advantage of the demons’ sudden disarray, Eingana and Donnic charged after them, slashing apart the ones that had survived Anders’s spell.

Anders looked around for Aveline and saw her fatally stabbing the now pathetically-shriveled rage demon. She was fine, so he returned his attention to the square.

The rippling between the vine-festooned central pillars was growing more intense. Anders reached out with his magical senses and discharged raw mana against the disturbance, attempted to shore up the local Veil so as to prevent the spirit from emerging. The last thing they needed was a demon of desire or pride breaking through and wreaking even more havoc.

His efforts appeared to succeed, and the rippling and bulging of the fabric of reality ebbed and finally ceased.

Unfortunately, concentrating on the greater threat had allowed lesser ones to emerge. While Anders was occupied, the two rage demons managed to fully manifest themselves. A third was working hard to follow suit, and fresh swarms of shades surged through the rents left by the rage demons before they closed.

Across the square, the door to Hawke’s mansion burst open. Fenris charged out, lyrium markings ablaze and brandishing his greatsword. Anders caught sight of Isabela darting after him, but she
slipped into the shadows at the edge of the square and he soon lost sight of her.

Having dealt with the demons in the street behind them, Aveline rushed forward to join her husband and Eingana, who were now engaging the next wave.

The situation continued to escalate as more spirits emerged from the Fade. A number of city guards appeared from other streets in twos and threes and joined the battle.

Looking around as the fray grew more intense, Anders spotted two templars locked in battle with a huge rage demon on the far side of the square. He hung back as the fighters did their work, unwilling to employ magic openly with templars so nearby – but he kept an eye on his friends, ready to step in and heal them or provide backup if they needed it.

He searched the melee for any sign of Isabela, but the only trace of her presence was a shade here and there spontaneously withering into ribbons of degenerate matter, or the occasional viscous burst of a tar bomb amidst the clustered demons.

There were now dozens of shades churning around the square, and at least four rage demons roaring their displeasure and tossing flaming, malodourous scum at the mortal combatants. Fenris was right in the thick of the battle, his face calm and focused as he carved a swath with his greatsword through the shades on his way to one of the rage demons. His lyrium markings flared with gleaming undulations of power, occasionally lashing out at an attacking shade.

Several city guards, directed by Aveline, had surrounded one of the fiery demons and were stabbing at it from all angles. A templar, seeing an opportunity, dodged away from the shade that was hounding him and sheathed his mace. He gestured emphatically with both hands, conjuring a blue aura between them.

The rage demon cowered as its flames died away, extinguished by the templar’s annulment magic. Thus suppressed, the maddened creature was hacked apart by the guards – but not before it lunged with a furious roar, bowled one of its attackers over and crushed his face with its molten fist.

On the other side of the square, Eingana had become a deadly whirlwind of flashing blades. Her enchanted longsword sliced effortlessly through multiple shades with each swing. Her second blade carried no gleam of magical enhancement, but she used it just as effectively – each stab seemed to hone in with uncanny precision on the sensitive, glowing eye-spots of the shades, sending them flitting backwards with resonant groans of fear and pain.

Anders caught sight of a rage demon, its slug-like body lurching forward and shoving a path through the turbulent maelstrom of shades with unusual determination. It was headed right for Eingana’s back.

Anders hesitated just long enough to check if either of the templars were watching. Both appeared to be engaged, one fighting beside the guards and the other working to annul the rage demons’ fire.

Eingana was in grave danger, so he threw caution to the winds and gestured forcefully with his staff.

A small boulder, rock-solid despite Anders having conjured it from the air, hurtled from his staff towards the rage demon and collided hard with its heaving flank. The demon was uninjured, but the missile threw it off balance and stunned it long enough for Anders to prepare another spell. A cone of vicious, biting ice swirled up around the demon, cooling its fires and making it wither in pain.

Eingana turned around to face the demon at the sound of its pained roar – but before she could attack, Isabela had appeared at her side and landed a powerful kick against the demon’s face. Made
brittle by the icy attack, the amorphous demon’s “head” came right off with a snap.

Isabela used her knives to make short work of what remained of the demon’s fume-spewing corpse, and within moments Anders had lost sight of her again.

Eingana saluted Anders in thanks with one of her blades and launched herself back into the fray, once more slicing shades into ribbons. She headed in the general direction of a rage demon that was forcing Donnic, inch by inch, back against a wall.

“Anders!” Aveline yelled.

Anders looked over at her. She was taking a moment to regain her breath after dispatching her most recent opponent. She indicated a corner of the square to Anders’s right.

When he looked where she was pointing, he saw a renewed frenzy of bulges and distortions building in the air. Another powerful demon was attempting to break through the Veil.

“Anders!” Aveline yelled.

Anders looked over at her. She was taking a moment to regain her breath after dispatching her most recent opponent. She indicated a corner of the square to Anders’s right.

When he looked where she was pointing, he saw a renewed frenzy of bulges and distortions building in the air. Another powerful demon was attempting to break through the Veil.

“I’ll deal with it!” Anders called to Aveline. She nodded, returning to the battle and directing several of her guards to the aid of the templar who had helped them earlier, now beset by rage demons on two sides.

Anders attempted to repeat what he had done before, venting raw mana into the atmosphere around the disturbance to reinforce the Veil.

This time, however, his efforts felt pitiful and weak compared to the might of whatever was trying to emerge. Anders stumbled as the mana he’d forced against the growing rift was projected back against him twofold. He narrowly managed to stay upright by leaning on his staff, but his concentration was broken.

The Veil tore, and the air ripped open with a ghastly, earsplitting shriek. Anders had time to catch a glimpse of the violet fires and twisted horns of a desire demon before it flashed across the square and possessed the templar that Aveline’s guards were attempting to help.

Anders watched in horror as the man was lifted into the air, screaming a desperate plea to the Maker. Purple flames engulfed him, roiling out from within his own armour.

As his figure contorted, the demon released a shockwave that knocked mortals and shades alike back from its tormented host. His skin bubbled and burst, armour deforming horribly from the inside as his body was gruesomely reshaped into an abomination. The man’s drawn-out scream of agony pierced the clamour of battle, becoming increasingly garbled and inhuman as his body mutated around his lungs.

Finally, the unfortunate templar – now possessed by the desire demon – crashed back to the ground with a roar that shook the entire square and sent a thrum of power through the chests of all present. Partially encased in the ruined shell of the templar’s armour, the emblazoned Sword of Mercy still visible on the breastplate, the abomination charged at the nearest guard and clawed him cleanly in half.

A general cry of fear arose around the square, but to their and Aveline’s credit, none of the guards fled. Directed by their captain, the guards began forcing the shades and the four surviving rage demons towards the walls and corners of the square, clearing a space around the central pillars.

Anders was momentarily confused, but he realized Aveline’s intent when Fenris charged the abomination as it was rising from its grisly kill. Snarling, his lyrium tattoos burning brightly, Fenris slashed a mighty downward blow at his opponent.
He cut deeply into its arm and knocked it off balance, but his attack only seemed to enrage the creature. It rounded on Fenris, pushing him back with a flurry of blows from its horrific claws.

While the abomination was occupied with Fenris, Anders saw Eingana charging at it from behind, but he missed what happened next. Several of the shades had noticed him lurking in a shadowy corner of the square, and perhaps sensing his reserves of mana, went for him eagerly.

Backed into a corner, Anders swung his staff in an arc before him, unleashing a torrent of razor shards of ice onto the shades. Most of them were at least slowed by the magical attack, and one or two ripped completely apart.

One particularly hardy shade, however, powered through the icy storm and latched onto Anders with its clammy, nebulous hands.

Anders had no time to react before the shade sucked hard on his spiritual energy. He fell to his knees in pain as hideous weakness bloomed throughout his entire body. Nearly drained of mana and paralyzed by the icy dullness the shade’s attack inflicted, Anders had no energy to conjure a spell.

Determined not to give in, he struggled to raise his staff and strike the shade with it.

His blow was weak, but it gave the shade momentary pause, and the release of its filmy grip from his shoulders was a blessed relief. Anders staggered to his feet, scrounging up the few dregs of mana that remained within him for a final attack.

He was spared the effort by an armoured figure that slammed into the shade shield-first. It was the other templar.

The demon was crushed against the wall of the square. The templar’s blade finished it off, plunged into the fluttering body and causing it to dissolve into fetid mist.

“Thank you,” Anders said warily, not letting his guard down as the templar straightened. There was no way his rescuer could have missed the elemental spell he’d cast.

The templar turned to him, and Anders realized with a start that he recognized the man. It was Knight-Captain Cullen: Meredith’s second, formerly of Kinloch Hold, and an acquaintance of Hawke’s.

“You’re welcome,” said Cullen, panting with the exertion of battle. He cocked his head, eyes first narrowing and then widening as he recognized Anders.

“I know you. You’re Anders, right? Hawke’s man.”

“Yes,” said Anders, not taking his eyes off Cullen and still holding his mana ready for a spell – just in case.

“You’re a mage,” Cullen stated. “You escaped from the Circle Tower in Ferelden... many times.”

“That’s right,” said Anders curtly, unable to help the scowl that was starting to cross his face. Did Cullen intend to arrest him right now, in the middle of a demonic emergence? Or even accuse him of summoning the very spirits that had almost just killed him?

It struck Anders that the irony of a powerful demon choosing a templar for its host, rather than the only mage present, was almost funny. He might have laughed – bitterly – if the horror that the possessed man had become wasn’t screeching and thrashing in the center of the square right now, pieces of the bisected guard still clinging to its claws.
Cullen’s eyes scanned the square, taking in the few remaining shades falling to the guards. The rage demons were proving more difficult, but Aveline and Isabela were dealing with them. Among the central pillars, Fenris and Eingana still battled the hulking abomination that had once been Cullen’s fellow knight.

To Anders’s surprise, when Cullen turned back to him, his expression was not one of suspicion or mistrust, but desperation.

“Please,” he said softly. “Help us. Too many have died already.”

He turned away, raising his sword and preparing to charge.

Anders felt a wash of surprise and even a little sympathy. Possession by a true demon, after all, was a fate much worse than death. Cullen had not only lost a comrade, he would now be forced to fight the twisted monster that the man had become. At least there was still a chance that Hawke, who was also apparently possessed, could be saved.

Anders was more than willing to help, but there remained one problem: he was utterly exhausted. The shade’s attack had left him drained and barely able to remain upright.

“Anders,” he called before the Knight-Captain had gotten too far away. Cullen paused and looked back at him.

“Do you...?” Anders took a deep breath, hating himself for what he was about to ask. “Do you have any lyrium?”

Cullen’s fierce, impatient expression softened as he saw the exhaustion and weakness on Ander’s face.

He returned to the mage’s side, producing a sparkling vial of blue potion from a recess in his armour. He pressed it into Anders’s hands without breaking eye contact.

“Don’t waste it,” he said tersely.

Anders nodded, hiding his shock that Cullen had actually given it to him.

Cullen charged off to help Fenris and Eingana. Anders unstopped the vial and downed the potion in one gulp.

He immediately felt a tingling sensation spread throughout his body, not entirely unpleasant. More importantly, it released a surge of magical energy into his frayed nerves, giving him the stamina he needed to cast a few more spells. Where he chose to deploy those spells might prove crucial to the outcome of the battle, so he watched carefully for an opportunity.

Donnic and the other guards had destroyed all of the shades and were now helping Aveline and Isabela overwhelm the remaining rage demons. Fenris and Eingana were busy with the abomination, shortly to be joined by Cullen.

Anders thought it odd that no new shades had appeared, especially as the large rent in the Veil created by the desire demon had taken almost a minute to repair itself. He could hardly complain about a lack of demons, though. As Cullen had said, too many had died already – as evidenced by the bodies of fallen guards lying here and there.

The reason behind the demons’ attack in the first place was still a mystery, although Anders had a horrible suspicion that it was something to do with the tremors that had been rumbling through the
city at irregular intervals all day. The intense magical forces discharged from the cellars of the Hawke estate had evidently weakened the Veil, perhaps more so in particular spots throughout the city – like right here, above where the trap had been sprung.

Observing how many of the guards were wounded, some of them grievously, Anders placed both hands on his staff and began to weave a spell of mass healing to spread throughout the square. It wouldn’t be as effective as a single spell targeted at an individual, but it would mend minor wounds and staunch the flow of blood from severe ones – enough to revitalize the guards and their captain so that they could defend against any further demons that emerged.

The crystal on his staff began to glow a brilliant blue. Finishing his spell, Anders spread his hands, gesturing slowly with his staff to send a wash of restorative magic over the square. It slipped over the demons without affecting them, but suffused the humans and elves of the guard with comforting warmth that restored their wounds and left them feeling refreshed and alert.

Aveline shot him a grateful look before rallying her guards, some of them now able to fight again after having been too injured to move. Under her command, they dispatched the last of the roaring rage demons. At this point, the square was liberally splattered with both dark red bloodstains and the stinking, crusted remnants of spirits.

In the center of the area, the massive abomination was engaged in simultaneous battle with Fenris, Eingana, and Cullen. Anders was rather concerned to see it easily fending off their blows – in fact, it simultaneously had all three of them on the defensive.

The creature’s deadly claws were whirling so fast that it seemed to be in several places at once. Eingana was barely managing to parry its strikes with her blades, and Cullen was forced to hunker behind his increasingly battered shield. Fenris only managed to avoid horrific injury by utilizing the lyrium brands in his skin to phase himself wherever the demon’s claws landed, causing them to pass harmlessly through him as if he were made of smoke.

Still waiting for an opening, Anders watched in amazement and wondered how the abomination could move so fast while encumbered by the nearly useless fragments of the templar’s armour. Then he realized with a shock of horror that the creature had actually grown an extra pair of limbs. It didn’t just appear to have several sets of claws – it did.

The city guards hung back from the battle at Aveline’s order, vigilant for any further demonic emergences, while the Guard-Captain herself moved forward to join the battle. Carefully, she approached the flailing monster from behind, shield held in front of her and sword ready to strike.

Before she could even attempt to land a blow, the abomination whirled on her with a roar of fury. It charged and swung with two limbs, carving several gouges into Aveline’s shield.

At the same time, Eingana darted forward, taking advantage of the creature’s distraction. Her enchanted longsword flashed with magic as she lashed out, lopping off one of the abomination’s other arms.

A fountain of black blood spurted forth, but Eingana was fast and agile enough that only a few drops of it landed on her. Skin burned and armour warped wherever the tainted blood touched. The creature raised an otherworldly wail of pain, and Anders felt the hair on his arms and the back of his neck stand on end.

“Hey there, sparkly guy,” said a voice, and Anders jumped. Isabela had appeared next to him as if from nowhere.
“Nice healing spell you did there,” she said. “Thanks for that.”

“My pleasure,” Anders said. “What’s the matter? Not up for a piece of abomination pie? I hear it’s delicious with fresh rage demon char.”

Isabela rolled her shoulders. “Ah, they’ve got it well in hand,” she said good-naturedly. “I’d just be in the way.”

“Of course,” Anders said with a wry smirk.

“What’s with all this, anyway?” Isabela asked him, gesturing around to the signs of battle. “Do demonic invasions just kind of... happen here from time to time? And if so, why has nobody told me? There’s no way I’d still be hanging around this city if I’d known it was a hotspot for lonely spirits seeking long-term mortal companionship.”

“This doesn’t seem like business as usual, no,” said Anders. “It’s like you said – demonic invasions on this scale don’t just randomly happen. Not even in Kirkwall. Something caused this, and I hate to say it, but I think it was the magical trap I set for Hawke last night. Did you hear anything about that?”

“A bit,” Isabela said, frowning thoughtfully. “Varric said something about an ‘ancient magical superweapon’ that you tapped into without even realizing you were doing it. Sounds like it was a real party last night – sorry I missed it.”

“Right,” Anders said. “Well, it was so much fun that we’re having another one right now. The Veil was already thin in Kirkwall, and I think that magical explosion weakened it further. There could be demons popping in throughout the city, for all we know. I just hope the guards can deal with it.”

In the center of the square, the abomination let out a beastly howl and charged bodily into Cullen. The Knight-Captain braced himself behind his shield and withstood the slam for a moment, but the creature’s sheer strength was too much for him. He scrambled to keep his footing, failed, and was pushed roughly onto his back.

Anders saw an opening. With Cullen lying on the ground, he could fire a spell at the abomination without risking hitting anyone else. Eingana and Fenris were attacking the abomination to either side, and Aveline was obscured from view behind it.

Thinking quickly about what might be the best spell to use, Anders settled on a spell of entropic draining, a malicious kind of magic he rarely used. Violet energy fizzled around the crystal of his staff as he gestured and cast.

The abomination shuddered, its body wracked with pain and its senses dulled. Its movement slowed to a crawl, its remaining claws drifting in a vague arc as if unsure whether or not they really wanted to strike.

Fenris took advantage of the creature’s weakness to lash out with a powerful, lyrium-enhanced kick, knocking it over.

Cullen clambered to his feet as Eingana and Aveline fell upon the monster with their blades. The abomination let out another resonant bellow – this time of pain. The noise stirred up dust in the corners of the square.

As soon as the spell faded, the creature burst back to its feet, throwing back the fighters hacking at it. It was now seriously injured, and it had lost another of its limbs. Addled by blood loss and the last vestiges of the spell, its motions became increasingly sluggish even as it put up a terrific last-ditch
effort.

Relieved that his spell hadn’t been wasted, Anders continued to watch the battle closely. It was only a matter of time before the abomination fell, but he had one more good strike in him left if it was needed.

The demon lunged for Fenris, shoving him backwards before he could interpose his greatsword. The abomination then swung its remaining claws, slashing a deep wound down his arm. Fenris retreated, pressing a hand over the wound to try to staunch the flow of blood.

Aveline’s sword hacked at the abomination’s back, and seemingly satisfied that Fenris was disabled for the moment, the creature turned on her. She raised her shield to deflect its claws, but the abomination unexpectedly whirled to strike Eingana instead as the elf was still readying her blades.

Eingana leapt backwards to evade the attack, but she had been taken by surprise. She hit painfully against one of the square’s central pillars, only barely out of the creature’s range. The abomination pressed its attack, lurching forward with both of its remaining limbs poised to go for Eingana’s face.

Cullen intervened before it could strike, bashing the abomination with his shield as hard as he could. His blow knocked the creature off balance, causing its claws to scratch against the marble pillar next to Eingana instead of embedding themselves in her head. She took the opportunity to recover and slip out from under the claws, scoring a long cut on the abomination’s flank as she escaped.

Anders began to circle around the square, looking for another opening. Isabela kept pace with him, her eyes on the battle as well. The abomination was nearly finished, but it wasn’t defeated yet.

As the creature raised its arms with a howl and slashed downwards, Anders felt the Veil ripple and sunder. A fresh horde of shades burst into the world around the square.

Prepared for a renewed attack, Donnic and the other guards tore into the demons, preventing them from aiding the abomination.

Anders continued to watch for the opening he needed. Isabela protected him from the few shades that broke away from the swarm to attack them. Fenris was too wounded to attack again, but Eingana, Aveline, and Cullen were preparing to charge the creature from three different directions.

Seeing his chance, Anders made a rapid gesture with his staff and spoke a word of power. A bolt flung from his staff crystal darted between battling shades and city guards and impacted the abomination solidly in the face. It let out a keening wail and shuddered with pain, briefly paralyzed.

It was the last noise it made. The warriors closed in, and three blades – one each from Aveline, Cullen, and Eingana – pierced the creature’s flesh in three different places. Eingana’s second blade came crashing down on its head, splitting it open horribly.

The abomination’s wail faltered and died away as it fell first to its knees, then down to the ground. It continued to twitch in death for some time.

A cheer went up from the guards as they dispatched the short-lived counterattack from the Fade. All around the square, weary fighters dropped or sheathed their weapons and broke into applause, praising the four who had engaged the abomination and ended its brief existence.

Anders sagged in exhaustion against his staff. Isabela reached for him in case he needed help standing, but he waved her away. The demonic threat was dealt with.

Maker, he was tired. He needed to rest. More to the point, he needed to see Hawke.
“Michael,” he murmured. His eyes fell on the door to the Hawke estate across the square. How likely was he to be able to slip through the exuberant guards unnoticed?

“What?” Isabela asked.


Isabela bit her lip and looked at him with uncharacteristic uncertainty in her eyes.

“He’s alright,” she said. “Still himself last I checked. I think he really doesn’t like the magic cage thing, though. He’s getting... antsy. Frustrated. I can’t say I blame him.”

Anders nodded.

Across the square, someone had provided Eingana with some bandages. She was now dressing the wound on Fenris’s arm while he watched intently. Anders noted the care Eingana took to avoid touching Fenris’s skin, and nodded to himself. He knew from experience that Eingana was perceptive and deeply intuitive – she’d only barely met Fenris the day before, and already she seemed to have deduced how he preferred to be treated.

Aveline was exhausted and bloodied, but smiling as she graciously accepted the congratulations of her guards. Cullen, on the other hand, was kneeling next to the ruined carcass of the abomination, deaf to the commendations of the men and women around him as he apparently searched for something. Anders thought he saw the glitter of a tear on the Knight-Captain’s cheek, but it might have been an illusion.

The shadows had stretched over the square during the battle, as the sun had now disappeared behind the blocky rooftops of Hightown.

Anders tried to take advantage of the shadows to make his way around the perimeter of the square to the Hawke estate, but he was no Isabela. Several times along the way, he was intercepted by guards who wanted to thank him for his healing spell and the other magical assistance he’d provided. Not wanting to be rude, Anders accepted their thanks and tried to move on graciously from each before a conversation could begin.

If any of them realized he wasn’t a Circle mage, none of them mentioned it. Perhaps having used magic openly in front of a templar, and the Knight-Captain of the Gallows to boot, was enough assurance for them as to his trustworthiness.

Eventually, Anders made it to the door, where he was met by Eingana. Isabela slipped inside ahead of them; Fenris, his arm freshly bandaged, followed her.

“So,” Anders said wryly to Eingana. “What was that you were saying before we were interrupted? Something about this route being safer than the passages in Darktown?”

Eingana rolled her eyes and smiled. “Nothing like an unexpected attack by demons to keep you on your toes.”

“At least they’re more personable than darkspawn,” Anders commented.

Eingana shrugged and nodded her agreement.

The guards began to disperse to their various destinations, several of them helping their injured comrades and others collecting the bodies of the dead.
Aveline joined them by the door.

“Is anyone injured?” she asked.

“Fenris’s arm was pretty bad, but I’ve dressed more wounds in battlefield conditions than anyone I know,” Eingana said. “Bodahn can get him anything else he needs. He’ll be fine.”

“And you, Warden-Commander?” Aveline asked.

“A few cuts and bruises,” Eingana answered. “Anders’s spell took care of the worst of it. The biggest problem was the shades’ stamina drain, and for that I need nothing but rest.”

Aveline nodded to Anders. “As to that spell – thank you, Anders.”

“You’re welcome,” said Anders said warily, suspicious of her tone of voice.

His eyes went to Cullen as he approached them. The templar was staring down at something in his hand.

“Knight-Captain,” Aveline said as he reached them. “Are you well?”

Cullen looked up. His eyes were slightly red.

“Alive,” he said. He shook his head and clenched his fist, dropping it and the unknown object within to his side.

“Warden-Commander Tabris,” he said, nodding respectfully to Eingana. “It is a pleasure to see you again. I am grateful for your help.”

Eingana returned his nod. “Well met, Cullen. I’m glad you’re alive.”

“Your leadership was exceptional, Guard-Captain,” Cullen said to Aveline. “Thank you for your help defending the city. I’m sure the Knight-Commander will award you a commendation for this.”

“No need for that,” Aveline replied. “I was simply doing my job. Thank you for your assistance as well. I’m... sorry about your friend.”

Cullen’s eyes flicked to the grisly sight of the dead abomination. He nodded, his face inscrutable.

“He will be missed,” he said quietly.

“Might you know what caused this?” Aveline asked him.

Cullen shook his head. “Since the tremors started in the night, there have been two major demon emergencies just like this one,” he said. “I believe something has seriously weakened the Veil, but as of yet I am not sure what it is. The mages at the Circle are looking into it.”

Both he and Aveline looked at Anders, who frowned and remained silent.

“A number of other incidents throughout the city today have been brought to my attention,” Aveline said, speaking to Cullen but still looking at Anders. “Violent crimes have spiked for no obvious reason. Thefts, break-ins, murders – and now demon attacks.”

“We experienced something similar at the Gallows,” Cullen said, though he didn’t elaborate. “Whatever this is, it’s unlikely to be over just yet. Keep your men on high alert, Captain. They may yet be needed during the night.”
Aveline nodded.

Cullen looked at Anders. “Thank you as well, Anders. We would surely have perished without your magic.”

Aveline looked surprised that the Knight-Captain was openly acknowledging an apostate without the slightest indication he was going to arrest him. She looked between Anders and Cullen, her brow furrowing.

“You’re welcome,” Anders repeated. “I’m glad I could help.”

He felt as though he ought to say something about Cullen’s friend who had been possessed – apologize for failing to prevent the desire demon from emerging, perhaps – but he couldn’t seem form the words. He was far from unsympathetic, but it was hard to ignore the fact that the man in front of him routinely turned a blind eye to the torture and rape of the mages he was supposed to protect.

“I will send someone to deal with the abomination’s body, and the residue left by the shades,” Cullen said. He nodded respectfully to Eingana and Aveline. “Commander; Captain. Maker be with you all.”

He departed, and it was only then that Anders noticed Cullen was walking with a slight limp and favouring his shoulder on the same side. He couldn’t help feeling a little relieved that the templar hadn’t asked for healing. If he had, Anders would have been bound by his conscience to provide it, regardless of Cullen’s crimes.

“Well, Anders,” said Aveline. “You’re damn lucky he didn’t haul you in.”

Anders scowled at her. In his view, Cullen was the one who was lucky, since Anders hadn’t let Justice out to give him what he had coming.

“It’s only because you’re involved with Hawke, you know,” Aveline continued. “You’d best be careful.”

“Enough, Aveline,” said Anders. “I didn’t summon the demons and I have no idea where they came from. In case you didn’t notice, I helped fight them, and I healed your guards.”

“I wasn’t accusing you of summoning demons!” said Aveline, offended. “I’m grateful for your help. But I wasn’t exaggerating about the incidents in the city. Cullen said something’s been going on at the Gallows, too. It seems very likely that all this was caused by the incident in the cellars last night, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, probably,” said Anders irritably. “But I’ve told you already, I didn’t intend for that to happen, and if it hadn’t Hawke might well have slaughtered half the city by now.”

“It hardly matters, does it?” Eingana cut in. “There’s nothing more to be done about that. The past is past, so let’s adapt to the present.”

“Indeed,” said Aveline. “But I think there is something that can and should be done.”

“What’s that?” Eingana asked.

“I think the templars should be notified about what’s going on with Hawke, and the measures we’ve taken to contain him,” said Aveline. “Including the one that’s weakened the Veil and endangered the entire city.”
“No,” said Anders at once, forcefully. “Absolutely not.”

“Anders-”

“No, Aveline,” Anders said again, glaring at her. “Are you insane? They’ll kill him! Not all templars are as reasonable as Cullen is, and that’s saying a lot for someone who’s no better than a war criminal. If you tell the templars what’s happening, they’ll cut Hawke’s throat while he sleeps – and if you bring them here, you’ll be putting Merrill and me in danger, too. Is that what you want?”

Aveline sighed. “The last thing I want is to put anyone else in danger, Anders, but you have to admit that continuing to do nothing about Hawke is endangering more people than just us.”

“We’re not doing nothing,” Anders argued. “Eingana and I were just at the Black Emporium, conducting research, and we’ve found out what’s wrong with him.”

“Oh?” Aveline said curiously. “Well?”

“It’s complicated,” said Eingana. “He is possessed by something from the Fade, but it’s not a demon, not even a spirit of the usual kind. We copied down all the information about it we could. When Wynne gets here, I’m confident she’ll know what to do. She and I killed a creature of the same type at Kinloch Hold.”

Aveline looked at Anders.

“Please, Aveline,” Anders said, unable to keep the desperation out of his voice. “Please just... let us try. At least wait until Wynne arrives, and listen to what she has to say. She’ll be here soon. She will know how to fix this without involving the templars.”

“And if she determines that nothing can be done?” Aveline demanded. “What then?”

Anders’s voice dropped to a whisper. “We can still save him, Aveline. Please. I have to believe we can save him. Just a few days – that’s all I ask.”

Aveline pursed her lips and looked away. She thought for several long moments, then shook her head and shrugged.

“Alright,” she relented. “A few more days, because it’s Hawke. Because of everything he’s done for this city, and because I know what he means to you. But-”

She held up a hand, forestalling Anders’s words of gratitude.

“If this Enchanter cannot solve the problem, and Hawke cannot be contained, something will have to be done,” she said. “There is nothing else for it.”

“Whatever is done,” Anders said firmly, “it will not involve templars. I will not allow it.”

Aveline was unmoved by his threat. “We’ll see, won’t we?” she said.
Temptation

Chapter Summary

On the psychological effects of magical confinement.

Chapter Notes

Updates may slow down a bit from here on, as I've gotten rather carried away working on the sequel to this fic and haven't been working on revision as much. I'm still going to try to post at least one new chapter per week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Varric met Anders and Eingana in the antechamber as they removed their boots. Aveline came in with them, but left her boots on, as she would not be staying long.

“Everything alright out there?” said Varric.

“Same old Kirkwall,” Anders replied.

He felt a curious numbness, a desire to sleep and to stop thinking. He was so tired. But the one thing he wanted more than sleep was to see Hawke.

“How is he?” he asked. “Isabela said he was getting-”

There was no need to specify who he meant. Varric knew.

“Stir crazy? Yes,” said the dwarf. “Well, that’s how I would describe it.”

Eingana shuffled their sheaf of notes copied from the Emergent Compendium. Anders wondered where she had kept them during the battle. Amazingly, the vellum was still crisp and undamaged – not even a bloodstain.

“I should put these somewhere safe for Wynne to look at when she arrives,” she said. Anders nodded.

The four of them proceeded into the common room. As they entered, Merrill’s greeting was drowned out by a burst of strange noise and a flash of light.

“ Anders!” Hawke barked. He pounded his fists against the magical force field, producing the noise again. The whole barrier flickered when he touched it.

“Let me out of this thing,” Hawke demanded. “Now.”

He looked angry, but his eyes were mercifully human. His forehead was banded with sweat.

Anders stared at Hawke in concern. He’d seen him excited during combat, enraged and lustful
before being possessed, and maddened with both at once afterwards.

But this kind of agitation was entirely new. This was more like the rage of an injured, cornered animal. Hawke looked... panicked.

“Michael,” Anders said regretfully, “the last thing I want is to confine you against your will. But you know I can’t let you out. Not yet.”

Hawke glared at him with a ferocious and entirely human rage in his eyes.

“You will let me out,” he growled, “or so help me, when I get out of here myself I will wring your scrawny little neck!”

Ignoring Aveline’s pointed look, Anders leaned his staff against the wall and collapsed gratefully into the chair beside the fireplace.

Hawke’s eyes followed him intently. When Eingana slipped silently out of the room with the sheaf of papers, he didn’t seem to notice.

His hands were flat against the barrier. It sparked and emitted a buzzing sound at the contact, but remained solidly impenetrable. The manacles on his wrists were vibrating, and the metal collar around his neck crawled with glowing inscriptions – Sandal’s handiwork.


Merrill began to answer, but Hawke cut her off.

“In the sitting room,” he said testily. “I told him to offer our guests dinner. He did so. Fenris and Isabela are in there now. Anders-”

“Varric,” Anders cut him off. “Why don’t you and Merrill go and have something to eat? Thank you for staying with him. I’m sorry we couldn’t get back earlier.”

Varric hesitated, glancing between Anders and Hawke.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Merrill asked anxiously, her gaze flicking back and forth as well.

Snarling his frustration at being ignored, Hawke pulled his arm back and punched the barrier as hard as he could. It flashed brightly and emitted a noise like a soft thunderclap.

“Yes,” Anders said. “We know what the problem is.”

Merrill’s relief was obvious. “That’s wonderful! What is it? Can you fix it?”

Wearily, Anders rested his elbows on his knees and leaned down to support his face in his hands, massaging his temples.

“It’s very complicated. There’s not much we can do until Wynne gets here. I’ll explain later.”

He looked up. “Merrill, please. Go with Varric into the sitting room. Just for a little while.”

“That’s alright, Anders,” Merrill said kindly. “We ate already.”

Varric coughed and stood up. “Daisy,” he said. “I’m actually still a bit peckish. Come on and sit with me.”
Merrill looked at him in surprise. “Surely you can’t still be hungry,” she said. “You practically inhaled.”

“Let’s go, Daisy.” Varric took Merrill by the arm and steered her out of the room.

Anders exhaled softly in relief.

“Aveline,” Hawke said in a strangely subdued tone of voice that made Anders look over at him. “Please... make him let me out. I-I can’t stand this. It’s driving me insane. I can’t be confined like this, I can’t. Please!”

Anders’s concern was growing. Hawke had failed to move him with rage, and now he was getting desperate. He was clawing at the barrier like he was trying to dig through it. His fingernails were bleeding and his hands were burned. His arms and chest were shiny with sweat, and his breath was coming faster than it had just a minute ago.

But possession-wise, he seemed perfectly fine. His pupils were normal and his voice held no trace of otherworldly resonance. Would it be so bad to let him out of the magical cage to calm down and stretch his legs?

Aveline was watching Anders, not Hawke, and she could see him wavering.

“I’m sorry, Hawke,” she said. “I can’t in good conscience condone releasing you until we have some guarantee that you’re safe to be around. Just... close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, and relax. You’ll be fine.”

“I’m perfectly safe to be around!” Hawke cried, the pitch of his voice rising. “Look at me – I’m in complete control! I didn’t mean that thing about wringing Anders’s neck, I just was angry! I swear I won’t attack anyone, and if I do you can just knock me out again. Come on!”

Anders had never imagined he would hear Hawke asking to be knocked out. It wrenched at his heart to see his lover so unsettled.

“If only it were that simple,” Aveline said softly. It was clear that she genuinely regretted what she was saying. “I’m sorry, Hawke. I wish you needn’t be confined like this, but it’s just too dangerous.”

“No!” Hawke yelled, pounding his fists against the magical cage. It flashed rhythmically with his strikes. The manacles on his wrists were still vibrating. “No, you have to let me out! I’m not dangerous! You have to let me out!”

Anders stood up and walked over to Aveline, turning away from Hawke.

“Aveline,” he muttered. “Surely it wouldn’t-”

“No, Anders.”

“Look at him,” Anders said to her, still under his breath so that Hawke couldn’t hear. “Those manacles should make it impossible for him to move his arms fast enough to pound on the barrier like he’s doing. He’s already broken though some of the enchantments by himself. That means the thing inside him is still making him resistant to my magic. Aveline, it’s ancient. It might well break through the rest of the cage eventually – especially given the freaked-out state he’s in.”

“Doesn’t that just prove how dangerous he is?” Aveline said, also keeping her voice low. “If it’s as you say, why in the world would you take the rest of the magic down for him? What point are you trying to make, Anders?”
“Why not let him out for just a little while?” Anders said. “The enchantments are also suppressing the – creature.” He refrained from going into details about the entity’s precise nature for the sake of brevity. “If we let him out for a while, he’ll calm down. The spirit should remain suppressed for a while longer. He’s going to need to eat at some point, Aveline. And then – maybe after he falls asleep – we can trap him again and I’ll renew the magic. Redouble it, even.”

Aveline stared at him, thinking

While Anders waited, he glanced at Hawke out of the corner of his eye. Hawke was glaring at them suspiciously, clearly aware he was being discussed.

At last Aveline nodded.

“But first I want you to tell the Warden-Commander what you told me,” she said, “and only proceed if she agrees. And he must be watched at all times, Anders. I would stay and do it myself, but I must return to the barracks. Someone has to prevent the city from falling into chaos while we wait for the Enchanter.”


Aveline looked at the warrior hovering in the magical cage. Hawke had fallen silent. His breath was choppy, and he clutched his head as if suffering from a headache as he stared at her with wide, haunted eyes.

“Goodbye for now, Hawke,” Aveline said. “Be safe.”

She departed, ignoring his bitter, hysterical laugh.

Anders approached the enchanted cage and looked up at Hawke. He raised his palm to press it against the barrier, causing it to flicker and hum.

Suspended several feet in the air, Hawke reached down to put his larger hand over Anders’s splayed fingers. The solidity and warmth of the magical wall prevented any contact between them.

“Anders,” Hawke said, and Anders was shocked to see tears in his eyes. “Please. I-I just want to touch you. I’ve been floating here all fucking day. I won’t....”

He took a deep, shuddering breath, angrily brushing tears out of his eyes.

“I won’t lose control if it’s just for a moment,” he said. “Just your hand, just for second. Please.”

“I will,” Anders whispered, suppressing his own heartache for Hawke’s sake. “I just need to talk to Eingana first. Just... hang in there for a few more minutes, Michael. My love.”

Hawke closed his eyes and hunched his shoulders, taking forcefully slow breaths. His fists clenched and unclenched rhythmically.

“Okay,” he said in a hushed voice. “Yeah. Just a few minutes. Just a few minutes.”

“Hey, Varric,” Anders called.

The dwarf appeared at once in the doorway to the sitting room.

“Can you stay with him for a little bit more while I find Eingana?” Anders asked. “Talk to him?”

“Sure, Blondie,” said Varric.
“Thank you.”

Silently thanking the Maker for friends like Varric, Anders set off through the mansion, calling Eingana’s name.

He eventually found her in the drawing room on the far side of the first floor. She appeared to be fiddling with some of the books in a large wooden bookcase that was stuffed with volumes from floor to ceiling.

“What are you doing?” Anders asked curiously. She glanced over at him, then beckoned him to approach.

“I’ve hidden the notes in this book,” she said in a low voice as he came level with her. She pointed to one of the leather-bound tomes on the shelf.

Anders looked closely and read the title aloud: “Songs of Old Marches: Inscriptions collected by Philliam, a Bard! Huh. Alright, then. Why the secrecy?”

“I thought it would be better if only you and I knew where it was,” she said. “You know... just in case.”

“In case Michael snaps and tries to destroy the information, or torture its location out of someone else?” Anders said belligerently.

“Well... yes.”

Anders shook his head and shoved his annoyance aside. He wasn’t even sure why he was annoyed. It was a wise precaution, really.

“Right. Fine. Good idea,” he said. “By the way – I’m going to let him out.”

Eingana turned to look at him in shock. “What? Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

Anders looked at her pleadingly. “Just for a little while. Eingana, he’s going crazy. I think he’s claustrophobic or something. He’s having panic attacks, but he hasn’t lost control. He’s reminding me of how I get in dark, cramped spaces. His eyes are normal and his voice is normal and I don’t smell rancid saffron at all.”

“Could you even smell anything through that barrier?”

“The barrier is weakening,” Anders plowed on, ignoring her question. “It’s supposed to make it difficult and tiring for him to move, but he seems to have completely overcome that since we left. The antsier he gets, the more he’ll panic and try to get out. If we leave him in there as he is, he might break the rest of the enchantment by himself, or his agitation might even stir up the entity enough to make it surface and blast its way out with magic. And then we’ll really be in trouble.”

Eingana nodded slowly. “I take your point. So what’s the plan?”

“Let’s let him out just for a few hours,” Anders said. “I’ll stay close by and calm him down, reassure him. I’ll tell him what we’ve discovered and that Wynne will be here tomorrow or the next day. When he’s calm again, hopefully he’ll be able to fall asleep and get some rest. Then, I’ll re-enchant him to keep him under control in case the entity spontaneously emerges while he sleeps, like it did last night. It seems to be gripping him from the Fade, so maybe a deep, dreamless sleep will help.”

Eingana pursed her lips thoughtfully and then nodded once more. “Okay – but if he loses control
while you’re with him? Before he calms down?”

“That’s why I’ll want you and maybe a few of the others close by,” Anders said. “If he does lose control I’ll defend myself, but it’s clear that at least some of the resistance he built up to my magic has lingered. Just... stand by in case I need you. I doubt you’ll be able to prevent him from realizing you’re there – he’s like that. But I—”

He looked away and lowered his voice. “I’d like some time alone with him. Even if it’s just a superficial aloneness. I love him, Eingana. I have to be here for him.”

Eingana sighed and shook her head. “This is dangerous, Anders. I’ll trust you on this, but I hope you know what you’re doing. I’m concerned your emotions may be clouding your judgment.”

“I can see why you’d think that,” Anders said. “I’m aware that’s a risk, and I’m trying my best to be rational. But I don’t want Wynne to show up to save him only to find that he’s been completely mentally broken by his ordeal.”

“Alright,” Eingana said. “It is rather a lot of stress for any person to go through.”

“No doubt,” Anders said. “Although Michael Hawke isn’t just anyone. But sometimes even Champions need to be saved.”

∞

When Anders and Eingana returned to the common room, they found Varric sitting in a chair polishing Bianca while Merrill recited a story about Fen’Harel, the trickster god of the Dalish pantheon, to Hawke and his Mabari hound.

Reaver sat upright, watching Merrill attentively. Hawke had his eyes closed and his arms folded – but he was clearly listening, as he smiled slightly whenever Reaver barked at Merrill to continue.

Even so, he wasn’t completely relaxed. His shoulders and neck were visibly tense, and his breathing was still unnaturally slow and deep.

Anders approached the containment field as Merrill, sitting cross-legged in a storyteller’s pose, was finishing her tale.

“Ever since, Fen’Harel thinks twice about playing his tricks when dogs are on guard,” she said solemnly.

Reaver wagged his stubby tale and barked.

“I’m so glad you enjoyed it!” Merrill said warmly, clasping her hands together. “So few animals are interested in Dalish history.”

“How many animals do you tell?” Hawke asked, opening his eyes. He saw Anders nearby and immediately unfolded his arms, reaching out to touch the barrier – to renewed buzzing.

“Well... not many, truth be told,” Merrill admitted. “Halla are wonderful creatures and very friendly – to elves, anyway – but they can be downright standoffish if you don’t brush them every day. Their eyes always glazed over whenever Hahren Paivel started to talk....”

Her voice trailed off wistfully, eyes distant with reminiscence about her clan.

Hawke had stopped listening the moment he’d opened his eyes. He was staring at Anders, his breath
starting to quicken again as he waited.

“Blondie?” Varric said cautiously as Anders raised his hands to touch the barrier. “What are you doing?”

The barrier pulsed at Anders’s touch. It began to flash in a regular rhythm, in time with his heartbeat. He closed eyes and focused his magic.

“Brace yourself, Michael,” Anders murmured.

Merrill looked over at him. She stood up quickly.

“Anders – you’re letting him out? Is that safe?”

“Stay calm, Merrill,” Eingana said as she entered the room. “Hawke will be fine for now. Let’s give him and Anders some time alone.”

“I’m confused,” Varric said. “Isn’t that exactly what everyone’s been saying we shouldn’t do?”

Anders was barely paying attention to the conversation, and Hawke wasn’t listening at all. He was watching his wrists as the sparkly quality in the air within the containment field converged on the manacles, appearing to be absorbed into them.

“I’ll explain,” Eingana said, gesturing for Varric and Merrill to exit into the sitting room. “Everything is going to be fine, but if you don’t mind, I’d like you two to stay with me in the next room. Just in case we’re needed.”

Merrill looked alarmed, and Varric concerned, but both acquiesced to the Warden-Commander’s request and left the room.

Eingana looked over at Anders once before following them. Her wordless, pointed glance communicated more than any warning might have. Anders nodeded to her and turned back to Hawke.

The barrier let out an increasingly high-pitched buzz, culminating in a soft *mmpf* as it vanished entirely.

Hawke fell several feet and landed on one knee with a much louder *thud*. The manacles on his ankles and wrists snapped open and clattered to the floor.

Anders stepped back and waited, his guard cautiously up. Now he really would learn whether or not his emotions had clouded his judgment.

For a moment Hawke was still, poised on one knee, hands splayed on the floor beside the open manacles. Then he let out a long, relieved exhalation and stood up slowly.

Anders watched him rise. Hawke’s eyes remained green, and the panic-stricken look was mercifully gone from his face.

Hawke stared at him for a moment, then moaned in relief and lunged forward, enfolding Anders in a crushing hug.

“Thank you,” he cried. “Anders... I’m so sorry. Thank you.”

Hawke wasn’t holding back at all, and his hug was almost painfully tight. The enchanted metal collar around his neck dug painfully into Anders’s sternum.
Anders didn’t mind. He felt no malice from Hawke, and he welcomed the closeness. He returned the embrace gladly and closed his eyes, savouring Hawke’s warmth.

“I know this can only be for a little while,” Hawke mumbled against Anders’s neck. “I know... you’ll have to put me back in that thing eventually. But thank you for trusting me outside it.”

He squeezed Anders even more tightly for a moment, inhaling deeply. “Nnh... you smell so good.”

Hawke smelled just as good to Anders. The surge of desire he felt at Hawke’s warmth and strong arms wrapped around him was bittersweet.

Anders sniffed again discreetly as they disengaged from one another, although Hawke held onto his hands. Fortunately, there was still no trace of the saffron scent that was apparently how his brain interpreted Justice’s memory of the Fade.

Now that they’d been close together for more than a few moments, however, he detected a certain rankness to Hawke’s strong, musky scent. It was unsurprising – given that he’d had been hovering all day, imprisoned by enchantment and sweating his anxiety. Before that, he’d gone on a possessed rampage dressed in only his smallclothes, which he still wore underneath his trousers.

Anders knew without having to think about it that the others would not appreciate Hawke’s body odour the way he did. Nor would they thank him for re-imprisoning Hawke in the common room smelling like dirty laundry.

“Are you alright, love?” he asked, thinking he would ultimately steer the conversation towards a tactful suggestion to bathe. “Um... did you know before today that you were claustrophobic?”

Hawke let go of his hands and rolled his shoulders in a motion that was half a shrug, half shaking his head.

“I don’t think it was claustrophobia. I’ve been in enclosed spaces plenty of times before. Sometimes dark, cramped, dusty spaces. Don’t you remember that time in the Deep Roads?” he asked, with a momentary sly gleam in his eye.

Anders nodded thoughtfully. That had been their first intimate encounter – buried under a cave-in in the Deep Roads, of all places.

Hawke was right, though. Anders was the one who had panicked then, not him.

“Maybe it was the feeling of the magic making you anxious,” he said, following Hawke as he went over to sit on the stairs. “Or the manacles,” he added, wondering if there was a way to complete the enchantment without them.

Rubbing his wrists, Hawke eyed the discarded manacles with hate in his eyes. “That’s plausible, yes. Do you have to use them?”

“I’ll look into finding a way to remove them from the equation,” Anders said carefully, not wanting to make any promises.

He sat down next to Hawke and decided to change the subject, gently guiding Hawke’s thoughts away from his confinement.

“You must be hungry. You haven’t eaten anything all day.”

Hawke shrugged. “A little. I’ll eat later.”
“Then how about a hot bath?” Anders suggested. “A nice relaxing soak would do you good.”

“Mmm.” Hawke’s eyes closed and he leaned his head against Anders’s shoulder. “That does sound good. And food afterwards.”

“What do you want?” Anders asked. “I’ll ask Bodahn to prepare it for later.”

Hawke smiled without opening his eyes. “You know, I’ve been craving something Ferelden,” he said. “It’s been a while. I miss home.”

“Meat and potatoes?”

Hawke squeezed his knee. “My thoughts exactly.”

His eyes opened, gaze wandering across the room as his smirk faded.

“Go run the bath,” Anders said. “I’ll meet you up there.”

Hawke nodded and stood up, turning around to climb the stairs. Anders pushed himself off the last riser and headed for the sitting room.

Fenris and Isabela were polishing off plates of lamb chops, steamed broccoli, and mashed potatoes, he on a stool and she perched on the arm of a couch. Varric and Merrill were sitting on the other couch; Varric seemed to be in the midst of a story that had Merrill blushing and giggling.

Eingana sat in one of the armchairs with a journal open in her lap, scratching busily with a quill. She looked up at Anders with one eyebrow raised.

“He’s gone to take a bath,” Anders said by way of explaining his choice to leave Hawke alone. “He’s completely fine. I left the collar around his neck, and the entity is still suppressed. It might even be enough to keep him calm until Enchanter Wynne arrives. I’ll go up in a minute to keep an eye on him, but I think we’re okay for now.”

Everyone else in the room had paused what they were doing and saying to listen.

Eingana nodded. “Good.”

“Where’s Bodahn, do you know?” Anders asked.

“Here, Messere,” said the dwarf, appearing behind him. Anders moved aside so that Bodahn could enter the sitting room.

“Is the Master... well?” Bodahn asked. “He seemed agitated in that magical field you had him in earlier. I passed through the room three times, inquiring after his health twice, and he never even seemed to notice I was there.”

“Really?” Anders hadn’t known that. It was a little worrying, but it could be chalked up to Hawke’s lack of focus due to his apparent phobia of magical containment. Still, he ought to ask him about it later.

“That’s strange, but I don’t think it’s anything to worry about,” Anders said. “He’s fine now that he’s out, and I think the risk of him snapping again is low. For now, at least.”

Bodahn retrieved Fenris’s empty plate, smiling at the elf’s nod of thanks, and turned back to Anders.

“I’m glad he’s okay, Messere,” he said. “The Commander tells me you’ve discovered the nature of
his condition, and that Enchanter Wynne will be arriving soon to help.”

“That’s true,” Anders said. “We have good reason to hope that Michael will soon be back to normal. Relatively speaking, of course.”

“Wonderful,” said Bodahn, his relief evident. “I shouldn’t like to have to take up that fire poker again. Is there anything I can get for you or Master Hawke?”

“He’s going to take a bath,” Anders said. “He’ll be an hour or so, probably, but he’ll want a meal when he’s finished.”

“Mmm,” Isabela piped up from across the room. “Hawke will love this lamb. It’s amazing, Bodahn! You are truly a talented chef. I could use a dwarf like you on my ship!”

She paused, then added somewhat ruefully, “If I had a ship. When I get one, there’s a job for you if you want it.”

Bodahn chuckled. “I’m afraid the pirate’s life is not for me, milady, but I appreciate the offer.”

“I’m serious, this is amazing,” Isabela said. “What kind of seasoning did you use? It’s like I’m having an orgasm in my mouth. Maybe you shouldn’t give this to Hawke – it might set him off again.”

Anders grimaced. Fenris gave Isabela a withering look. Eingana raised an eyebrow, and Varric coughed delicately.

Merrill looked baffled, and seemed on the verge of asking for clarification in her usual oblivious manner.

“Er,” Bodahn said uncertainly. “I think you overestimate my cooking abilities, milady.”

Isabela looked up and seemed to realize the effect her words had had.

“Oh... I’m sorry,” she said. “That was a bit tasteless, wasn’t it? My bad.” There was a brief pause, and then she grinned and started laughing. “Hah! Tasteless, get it?”

“Just stop, Rivaini,” Varric said, smiling despite himself.

Merrill still looked confused, and in the interest of forestalling her inevitable awkward questions, Anders spoke to Bodahn again.

“Thank you for all your help during this... crisis, Bodahn,” he said. “I appreciate that you’ve stayed on with Michael when you’ve had ample reason to leave. I’m sure he’s grateful that you haven’t taken what he did to you personally.”

“Oh, it’s fine, Messere,” Bodahn said modestly. “The Commander explained everything. I know that wasn’t really Master Hawke. I have served him for long enough to get to know him, after all. He can be... abrasive at times, but he’s always been kind to me and my boy. There aren’t many who’d take on an odd pair like the two of us. The master is a rare man. He’s earned my loyalty and my trust, and I daresay my affection as well.”

Anders was touched. “Thank you, Bodahn.”

“I’ll have a hot meal ready for the both of you in an hour,” Bodahn said. He made his way out.

“Wait,” said Isabela. “Can I have some mo-?”
She was too late. Bodahn had left the room.

“Balls,” Isabela said with a sigh. Anders couldn’t help laughing a little.

“Isabela does love her meat,” Eingana commented nonchalantly without looking up from her journal.

“That I do,” Isabela replied readily. “But... there’s only so much you can do with meat.”

Eingana met her eyes, a smile creeping across her lips.

“Ahem,” Varric coughed loudly. “Where was I, Daisy?”

“You’d finished, actually,” said Merrill. “It was a very interesting story, Varric. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to look at that tailor in Lowtown again without giggling.”

“Oh, that’s far from the end of the story,” Varric said smoothly. “So there I was, I shit you not-”

Anders turned to Fenris as he rose from his stool and replaced it near the wall where it usually sat. The surly elf met his eyes as he made his way towards the doorway.

“Fenris,” Anders said guardedly. “Nice work in the battle outside. Bloody demons are popping up all over the city, or so I’m told.”

“Lucky for us this city is full of guards and templars who have experience fighting demons, isn’t it?” Fenris returned.

Anders was too tired and his mind too full of other things to get into an argument, so he let the implicit snark slide.

He indicated the bloodstained bandage on Fenris’s arm with a gesture. “I can heal that, if you like.”

Fenris frowned at him and said nothing.

“I can even leave the scar, if you want badass points or something,” Anders added.

Fenris watched him for a moment more, and then said “Very well.” He extended his arm.

Anders was frankly surprised. Fenris almost never wanted magical healing – he usually only allowed it in dire emergencies.

His offer had been genuine, though, so he concealed his reaction and wove a regenerative spell between his hands. It was fairly low-power compared to some of the others in his vast mental library – he was still drained from the battle outside, after all – but it would be enough. Finally he extended his hand over Fenris’s arm, causing the blue aura to creep under the bandage to soothe and repair Fenris’s wound.

Fenris reached over to unwrap the bandage as Anders withdrew his hand. The strip of cloth fell away, revealing the elf’s smooth brown skin unbroken but for his lyrium brand. The only sign of the wound was a faint scar.

Fenris turned his arm this way and that, flexing his hand as if testing its function. “Thank you.”

Anders was surprised again, but he couldn’t pretend he didn’t appreciate the gratitude. It was nice not to have to deal with the drama of their personal feud for a little while, even though he and Fenris would probably never agree on a lot of things.
“You’re welcome,” said Anders.

Fenris nodded. “I’m going back to my mansion. If you need me, send the dog.”

“Sure thing,” said Anders.

Fenris nodded to the others and, without another word, disappeared through the common room and out the front door.

“I’m heading out too,” Isabela said, standing up and stretching. “Although I hate to eat and run. I told Bodahn I loved his cooking, didn’t I? Tell him again for me.”

Anders rolled his eyes as she made her way over to him.

She paused in the doorway, and he met her gaze steadily. Isabela’s eyes flicked to Eingana and back to Anders.

“So... Hawke’s going to be okay, right?” she asked in a low voice, out of earshot of Eingana, Merrill, and Varric.

Anders searched her face for some clue as to how she really felt, but her concern seemed perfectly sincere. He answered her honestly.

“I don’t know, Isabela,” he said. “The thing that has him is very rare, very old, very powerful. I’d never heard of its like until Eingana and I found the reference today. She says Enchanter Wynne will know more, and that they actually fought and killed something like it before, but that was in its own manifested form – not a possessed host.”

Isabela chewed her lip. She knew – not as intimately as he did, but she did know – that spirit possession was supposed to be irreversible. Her eyes darted again over to where Eingana was sitting.

“And Wynne’ll be here soon?” she asked.

“Likely tomorrow,” Anders said. “Early the next morning if not.”

Isabela nodded. “Okay. Well – like what Fenris said, I’m here to help. For you and that hunky warrior guy of yours. I don’t know how much good I’ll be against a demon, or whatever the bloody Void that thing is that’s got him. But I know I want it dead. Or even if... even if you just want to talk. You need me, you send for me. Got it?”

Anders nodded, and on impulse reached out to hug her.

Isabela stiffened in surprise, but then returned the gesture. She patted his back affectionately.

“Try not to die,” she said as they parted. “Mmm... Hawke taking a bath.” She shivered theatrically. “I just hope you can control yourself, sparkly guy.”

Anders smiled wanly. So did he.

Isabela said her farewells to the others and sauntered away, out into the dark of the Hightown evening.

“Watch out for demons!” Anders called after her as she entered the antechamber. She saluted without looking back.

Once the door had clunked shut, Anders tilted his head to listen. Hearing the expected splashing of
water from the second floor, he made to head for the stairs.

Varric caught his attention first. “Blondie,” he said, and Anders turned to them.

“Daisy and I were just talking. We can stay over here tonight, if you want. There’s plenty of room, and we can be on hand if you need help from Bianca and I, or the lady with the blood magic.”

Merrill nodded. “It would just be for a little while,” she said. “The healer will be here soon anyway, and then – well, then hopefully this will all go away. Wouldn’t that be nice, if everything just worked out perfectly? I’m sure it won’t, because it never seems to, but we can always hope, you know?”

“That would be terrific, indeed,” Anders said, comforted by the idea. “And yes – I’d appreciate it a lot if you two would stay. I think Michael would too.”

He and Eingana together were formidable, but they hadn’t been able to stop Hawke the previous night. If the worst happened and the entity emerged again, reinforcements might make all the difference.

“Just get Bodahn to show you where there are empty rooms,” Anders said. “He might need to whip up some linens.”

Varric nodded. “Will do.”

Anders caught Eingana’s eye. She’d just closed her journal with a soft noise and was looking at him expectantly.

“Okay,” Anders said quietly. “Bath time for the possessed warrior.”

“I’ll be nearby,” Eingana said, and Anders nodded his thanks.

He headed up the stairs, crossed the mezzanine and entered Hawke’s bedroom.

Hawke was standing just outside the bathing chamber, limned by the warm glow of the candlelight within. He was in the process of removing his trousers as Anders entered.

Hawke looked up as Anders sat down on the bed. “Water’s hot,” he said, stepping out of his trousers and dropping them into a nearby basket of dirty laundry. “Are you going to join me?”

Anders looked at him in surprise. “Join you... in the bath?”

Outside the room, he heard Eingana’s footsteps on the stairs and then on the mezzanine as she entered her own room, leaving the door open.

“No,” Hawke said. “Join me on a pleasant night-time stroll up to the Viscount’s Keep. Yes, in the bath.”

Anders was sorely tempted. His gaze slipped almost involuntarily down Hawke’s muscular body, lingering over the bulge in his shorts.

He wanted to say yes. He really wanted to say yes.

“No,” he said. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Hawke came closer to him, clearly aware of the effect he was having and enjoying it.

“Don’t you?” he said. “You know, Anders, you don’t exactly smell like cinnamon and roses either.
You could use a bath too.”

Anders winced. That was fair – so much for being tactful earlier, apparently.

“Alright, I’ll come too,” he said. “But only to have a bath, Michael. Nothing else.”

Hawke looked disappointed, but also like he’d expected this answer and already resigned himself to it. “I know.”

Well then, Anders thought. This ought to be nice and simple.

∞

And mercifully, it was.

Not long after, the two of them were thoroughly clean and drying themselves off to get ready for dinner.

In the midst of toweling his hair dry, Anders’s eyes fell on Hawke’s writing desk near the door, where the warrior occasionally (mostly at Varric’s prodding) recorded his “exploits” in a journal. Sitting atop the leather-bound book, which had lain closed and abandoned for some months now, were the manacles for Hawke’s wrists and ankles that were part of the binding enchantment.

Anders paused what he was doing. Eingana must have brought them up, he decided. He wondered when she’d put them there.

He glanced at Hawke as he resumed his drying motions. Hawke had retrieved a fresh, clean pair of shorts and put them on, followed by one of his fine red velvet robes that made him look both comfortable and lordly, like the noble he was. He tied the sash loosely, leaving the robe partly open.

Anders donned a different but also clean pair of Hawke’s shorts, for the sake of convenience but also because he enjoyed wearing his lover’s underwear. Then he too put on a robe, one of similar comfort and style that Hawke had had fitted for him over a year ago.

When he looked up from trying the sash, Hawke was watching him with his arms folded. He didn’t appear to have noticed the manacles on the writing desk.

“Hungry?” Hawke asked.

“Ravenous,” Anders said truthfully. “Let’s go.”

Eingana was waiting for them on the mezzanine, dressed in airy nightclothes made rather out-of-place by the gleaming blades sheathed on a belt she wore over them. In one hand she carried a book, the title of which Anders made out through her long, slender fingers as *The Search for the True Prophet*.

Eingana’s gaze followed Hawke as he began to descend the stairs. She turned to look at Anders.

“Have a nice bath?” she asked in a perfectly neutral tone of voice.

“Yes, actually,” Anders replied, allowing her to see a tiny smirk to let her know that he appreciated her not making any insinuations.

“Good.”

They made their way towards the stairs.
“Have you eaten?” Anders asked.

“Yes,” said Eingana. “But I’ll still be nearby, just in case.”

She gestured for him to go ahead of her. Anders did so, although not without a sense of creeping unease at how well things were going.

∞

After they had eaten, Anders and Hawke returned to the master bedchamber while Eingana slipped away to her own room. They’d hardly seen her throughout their entire meal, but Anders had felt her presence.

In the bedchamber, Hawke slipped out of his robe and left it on a hook attached to the wardrobe. Not one to wear pyjamas, he moved over to the bed in his shorts, taking a candle with him from the dresser. He set it down on the bedside table and then let out a loud, expansive yawn, stretching his arms and rolling his head and shoulders around to crack various joints.

Anders hung up his robe next to Hawke’s. Clean and with a full stomach, he too was yawning and could barely keep his eyes open, but he needed to stay awake a while longer in order to re-enchant Hawke’s bindings. His brow tensed a little at the thought.

He turned around. Hawke had sat down on the bed and was now eyeing the manacles on the desk. He met Anders’s eyes, looking sullen and resigned but in no hurry to get the re-binding over with.

Anders joined him, sitting down beside him on the bed and reaching around to run his hand comfortingly up Hawke’s back.

“It’ll be nice to sleep in a bed instead of upright in a magical barrier,” he said, hoping the idea would help Hawke relax a little.

Hawke smiled thinly and didn’t quite meet his eyes. “You’re going to wait until I’m asleep before you put them back on, right?”

“Yes,” Anders said.

Hawke looked relieved, but when he glanced at Anders, there was lingering resentment in his eyes. One of his hands lifted, apparently unconsciously, to finger the metal collar around his neck.

Anders felt conflicted. He’d never seen Hawke quite so miserable and subdued before. Usually the man brought an almost crackling intensity with him to whatever he did and said, even when he was in a calm mood.

Right now, he looked nothing so much as impatient to be unconscious. It was intimately painful for Anders to witness this odd mixture of boredom, irritation, and subdued fear that was so far from Hawke’s normal.

“Let’s lie down,” Anders said.

Hawke tugged the coverlet back and maneuvered himself into bed somewhat stiffly. He shifted around, making himself comfortable, as Anders climbed in next to him.

He had a book on the nightstand which he planned to read while Hawke fell asleep, to ensure that he didn’t also drift off before he could re-invoke the binding spell. His hand was about to close over the book when his other was suddenly caught in a powerful grip.
Anders looked over, surprised. A start of fear ran through him at the possibility of what he might see, but Hawke’s eyes were still his ordinary green and entirely human. He was holding Anders’s wrist like it was a lifeline.

“Anders, do you have to... do you have to use those?” he asked quietly, gesturing with his head towards the manacles desk.

“Yes, Michael,” Anders said regretfully. “I’m sorry. I have to – they’re part of the enchantment. I haven’t had time yet to try to figure out a way to dispense with them. I promise I’ll look into it tomorrow.”

“The ankle ones I can deal with,” Hawke said, once more with an unnerving tinge of panic in his voice. “But on my wrists – it’s making my heart race just thinking about it. Isn’t there anything else you can use?”

Anders looked into Hawke’s eyes. It occurred to him that Hawke might be trying to manipulate him by projecting an air of control while acting weak and afraid, so that he would take pity on him and thereby weaken the binding enchantment.

Hawke wasn’t the kind of man who would ever do such a thing, as far as Anders knew. Maybe the entity possessing him really did somehow have a way to puppet Hawke without giving any sign of its presence, but who could say for sure? The distress on Hawke’s face certainly looked as genuine as the scowls and rage Anders was so accustomed to.

His eyes went to the manacles, wondering if there was any way that he could make Hawke more comfortable.

The binding of the wrists and ankles was part of the symbolic harmony of the spell. He’d used manacles because they were convenient to lock and unlock and because metal was easy to enchant quickly.

(Early that morning, Anders had been on the verge of going out to find a smith from which he could buy or commission a set of manacles. Fortunately, Isabela had volunteered a set of her own. Why she had them and what she had done with them beforehand, Anders had studiously avoided contemplating.)

Really, what else could he use? He needed something metal that went around Hawke’s wrist to enchant.

Metal. Of course.

“Your gauntlets,” Anders said.

Hawke blinked, then looked intensely relieved as he understood. “Would that work? If I just had to put them on, that would be okay. Can the spell work with the manacles on my ankles and gauntlets on my hands?”

“Yes,” Anders muttered, his mind racing through the reworked spell he would have to cast. He would have had to re-enchant the manacles anyway, so there wasn’t really anything major he’d have to do differently. Of course, he’d have to add an extra layer to the spell to prevent the gauntlets from being removable by the wearer, but that was easily done. All that mattered for the shape of the enchantment was that the wrists were encircled.

“Yes,” he said again after thinking it through. “That will work.”
Hawke collapsed back on the pillow and let go of Anders’s wrist with a relieved grunt.

“Maker, am I glad to hear that! I can stomach knowing I’ll wake up in that cage again tomorrow, hardly able to move, for everyone else’s safety – until the Enchanter gets here. But those things on my wrists....”

He shuddered and squeezed his eyes shut.

“I don’t know what it is. But I can’t stand the feeling of wearing them.”

Anders reached out and stroked Hawke’s shoulder gently.

“I understand,” he murmured. “This will all be over soon, Michael. I promise I won’t let anything hurt you.”

Hawke snorted bitterly. “That’s not what I’m worried about. It’s not what you should be worried about, either.”

“Nor will I let you hurt anyone else,” Anders continued, and Hawke breathed a long sigh of relief, glad he had been understood.

He reached up to take Anders’s hand, and the mage squeezed him reassuringly. Hawke squeezed back, his eyes drifting closed – peacefully this time.

In minutes he was asleep, their hands still connected.

Anders disengaged from him as gently as he could and sat up.

He pressed his face into the palm of his hands, rubbing his eyes and wishing for many things.

He listened to the soft, regular sound of Hawke’s breathing. It did nothing to dissuade the whirl of worry and lurking, barely-suppressed fear in his mind, but it did bring him some comfort.

Anders leaned over to kiss Hawke softly on the forehead. Then he stood up and left the room, heading downstairs to retrieve the gauntlets.

Chapter End Notes

For those who are wondering what happened to the smut chapter that was averted in this timeline, fear not: it will be posted separately as a stand-alone.
Sitting behind her desk in the barracks, Aveline took a moment while only Donnic was present with her in the room to massage some tension out of her jaw.

She had been up until well past midnight, issuing orders and working with Seneschal Bran. With no Viscount and no word from the Gallows, it was more or less on them to manage the nobility and Kirkwall’s response to the chaos that was erupting around them. After falling into bed last night, Aveline had had all of five hours’ sleep before she was up again and right back in the fray.

The sleep helped, but only to a point. Everyone was tired and on edge, and her guards were being pushed to their limits dealing with demonic attacks and every opportunistic criminal that had taken advantage of the crisis.

For the moment, they were holding strong. The rule of law hadn’t entirely dissolved, even in Lowtown. Casualties were relatively low for there being demons involved. Yet Aveline worried that the longer this went on, the worse it would get, and the more people would be injured, possessed, or killed.

They were going to need help to actually deal with whatever was happening. They needed someone powerful, preferably with a few equally formidable friends, to find the source of the demonic activity and neutralize it.

Aveline rubbed her eyes and then blinked them rapidly, trying to clear a bit of blurriness from her vision. She sighed.

What they really needed was someone like Michael Hawke. If there was anyone in Kirkwall who could tear through a horde of demons until they found the biggest one and then tear through it too, it was him.

The problem was that this time, Hawke basically was ‘the biggest demon’ – or at least its puppet. If Anders was correct, the thing was influencing him from the Fade. The question then became whether it had commanded those demons to invade the waking world, or if they were incidental to the activation of the city’s ancient ley line network.

This was all so arcane and outside of her bailiwick – it was frustrating. Why did Hawke always seem to be the one getting involved in these damnable situations with demons? He attracted chaos like a magnet. Aveline owed him a great deal, and sometimes she even liked him, but she could have done
without the extraplanar bullshit.

What was she even going to do this time? In Aveline’s experience, the best way to solve a demon problem in Kirkwall was usually ‘point Hawke at the demons until they die’. How could she fight something that was not only hiding in the Fade, but mind-controlling her usual demon-killer and trying to point it at her until she died?

“Aveline,” said Donnic, interrupting her reverie and reaching out to squeeze her shoulder. “You’re tired. Maybe you should go back to bed for a little while. Get a few hours’ sleep. We can manage without you for that long.”

Aveline shook her head. “You know I can’t do that.”

“I promise I’ll wake you up if we get news or the Keep is attacked,” he said.

Aveline covered Donnic’s hand with hers and gave him a grateful smile, but she shook her head once more and picked up the latest report.

Donnic didn’t press the issue; he simply kept rubbing Aveline’s shoulder. A rueful smile briefly crossed his face.

**MORNING REPORT: 24 Justinian 9:34.**

We’ve had word from all around the city (Hightown, Lowtown, and Darktown) of assaults by demonic forces. Attackers are mostly shades and wisps, with eighteen verified rage demons scattered alone and in pairs. One sighting of ‘naked purple lady with horns’ is unconfirmed as of this writing, as are rumours of rioting and ‘magical explosions’ in the alienage. Guards are investigating both with due caution.

We’re advising people to remain in their homes and close businesses for the day. Some are doing so, but others are ignoring the directive.

None of our officers have been able to find any templars. Messengers to the Gallows didn’t return even when we sent escorts.

Since the sun came up, demon attacks have slowed but not stopped. We now have five-person teams sweeping Lowtown on the lookout for eldritch or illegal activity. Teams in Darktown are patrolling known routes and staying within sight of other teams at all times. Guards on patrol are being rotated out every two hours per your schedule. Hightown is secure for the moment, but concerns have been raised about ‘civilians wandering around like a demon buffet’.

Guard casualties are low so far. Currently we have a handful in the barracks recovering from serious burns and a few dozen on bed rest for the next day with lingering shade sickness. Only the four you sent to the Gallows are still missing. I’m happy to report there have been no deaths since midnight. –Brennan

“Terrific,” Aveline muttered. “Where are the blasted templars when you really need them?”

“Love?” Donnic said, looking at the closed door of her office. “Um... I think I hear a few.”

Aveline frowned and listened. Donnic’s words were underscored by a commotion of some sort outside her office. She heard a guard’s voice raised aggressively, and an unfamiliar one responding with cold disdain.

Aveline stood up, leaving the report on her desk. She went out into the common room with Donnic
Out in the large central room of their wing of the Viscount’s Keep, a cluster of guards were all talking at once. Looking through their backs and heads, Aveline could see a few armoured figures whose breastplates were emblazoned with the Sword of Mercy.

“How did you know it was templars?” she murmured to Donnic.

“I could smell the self-righteousness through the walls,” he said.

At her disapproving look, he shrugged and added “They had to send someone eventually.”

Aveline pursed her lips. Right.

“Let me through, please,” she called to her guards.

Seeing and hearing their captain, the guards parted before her, enabling her to approach the three templars that stood in the center of the room.

She recognized two of them. The one she didn’t was a bearded blond man with a snide curl to his lip who was glaring at one of her officers. The guard was glaring right back; two of his fellows to either side of him had their hands on his arms and shoulders, as if prepared to restrain him.

Aveline turned to the templar in the middle of the three.

“Knight-Captain Cullen,” she greeted coolly. “Welcome. Are you aware that I’ve been trying to contact you for twelve hours?”

“I am, and I’m sorry it’s taken me this long to respond,” said Cullen stiffly. “You must understand that the Gallows has not been immune to the activity currently plaguing Kirkwall.”

“Activity,” Aveline repeated. “Don’t you mean demonic activity? Isn’t this what you templars are supposed to prevent? What exactly is going on over at the Gallows?”

“Knight-Commander Meredith has put the Circle in lockdown,” said the familiar templar to Cullen’s right. He was older than Cullen by at least a decade; Aveline recognized him as Ser Thrask, a templar she and Hawke had aided a few times in the past.

“She believes unsanctioned activity on the part of the mages is responsible for the outbreak of demonic activity,” Thrask explained. “All but a handful of mages are confined to their quarters. The rest are conducting investigations into the cause of the outbreak under templar supervision.”

Aveline kept her face carefully neutral. She would have liked to disabuse Meredith of her fool notion, but that would have meant revealing what she knew regarding Hawke. She had given her word to Anders that she would wait for Wynne’s prognosis before involving the templars.

Instead she asked “Does a lockdown require every templar to remain at the Gallows? At the moment my guards have the situation under control, but that could change rapidly if more demons appear. Aid from the templars would go a long way towards keeping the city safe.”

“I agree,” said Cullen, “and I have said as much to the Knight-Commander. It wasn’t easy, but I convinced her to relegate some of our templars over to your command for the duration of the crisis. They are yours to deploy as you see fit.”

Aveline was stunned into speechlessness. Actual, tangible help from the Templar Order was very
near the bottom of the list of responses she’d expected.

It took her a moment to find her tongue.

“Thank you,” she said. “Truly. Your aid will be invaluable.”

“Let it be understood,” said the templar to Cullen’s left in a hostile tone, “that the Order does not and will not submit to your authority at any time. You will tell Ser Thrask and I where our forces are needed, and we shall relay your instructions to them.”

Aveline regarded him stoically, although one of her eyebrows might have crept up a little bit as he spoke. When he’d finished, Aveline looked to Cullen as if inviting him to clarify.

The Knight-Captain cleared his throat. “Captain Aveline,” he said. “This is Knight-Lieutenant Karras. He and Ser Thrask here will be Acting co-Knight-Captains while I am away.”

“Oh?” said Aveline, surprised. “Where are you going at a time like this?”

“That is official Order business, and none of your concern,” snapped Karras.

“Enough, Karras,” said Cullen in a tone of weary annoyance. He looked at Aveline. “A Senior Enchanter from the College of Magi in Cumberland is due to arrive in Kirkwall today. The Knight-Commander insists that she be escorted into the city from well outside its limits.”

“An insult,” said Thrask darkly. “Enchanter Wynne is an exemplary mage, a hero of the Fifth Blight highly esteemed in many Circles. The Order should be protecting the city from demons and abominations, not respected mages who have proven their loyalty.”

“I tend to agree,” said Cullen. “It is a waste of time. Kirkwall’s templars have enough to deal with at the moment without conducting escort missions. Therefore I have volunteered myself to accompany the Enchanter into the city. I will personally ensure that she reaches her destination quickly and safely. I know her from my time at the Circle Tower in Ferelden, so it is my hope that she will see this as a gesture of friendship and respect.”

By Karras’s expression, he found the idea of treating Enchanter Wynne with friendship and respect about as appealing as finding dog shit stuck to the bottom of his boots.

Aveline considered this news. If Cullen planned to accompany Wynne all the way to her destination, he would end up at the Hawke estate. The templars might very well find out about Hawke sooner than planned, whether she wanted it to happen or not.

Well, if the templars were going to barge in and make Hawke’s problem their business, Aveline would rather deal with someone like Cullen – or ideally, Thrask – over Karras, who by all accounts was a fanatic as well as an asshole.

“Very well,” she said. “Please convey my respects to Enchanter Wynne, Knight-Captain. Thank you again for persuading your Commander to help protect the city for which she is acting Viscount.”

She let the implied expectation of that pronouncement hang in the air for a few seconds, then nodded once each to Thrask and Karras. “And to you, Sers, for your service and that of your knights. Now, we must—”

“Where is the Champion?” Karras cut her off.

Aveline stared at him, annoyed at being interrupted and not immediately sure what to say. Karras
stared back at her hard, almost accusingly.

“Guard-Captain,” said Cullen a little more tactfully, “er, you’re a friend of the Champion’s, are you not? His help in this matter could save many lives. Do you perhaps know why he did not fight in the square yesterday?”

It was his turn to let words unspoken hang in the air. Hawke’s mansion was in the very square he was talking about, after all, and the rest of the Champion’s friends had appeared from within it to join the battle. What had they been doing there if Hawke wasn’t at home? Why had he, known to enjoy combat, not come to the defense of his estate?

Aveline was so tired. Physically, and of... this. Trying to lie and manipulate templars was not the duty of the Captain of the Guard.

Yet she couldn’t simply refuse to answer. All three templars were waiting for her response, and so (surreptitiously) were most of her own guards.

“Knight-Captain,” Aveline said as she came to a decision. “Will you step into my office for a moment?”

There was a ripple of surprise around the room. Karras started to object, but Cullen immediately silenced him with a look and a flat gesture. He nodded to Aveline, and Karras was left fuming amid Thrask and the guards as she led the way out of the common room and into her office.

Aveline waited until Cullen had closed the door behind them with a snap and looked at her inquiringly before she spoke.

“What am I about to tell you,” she said in a quiet, serious voice, “I have sworn not to speak of until... certain conditions are met. It may alarm you, but I hope you will react with the same cool temper and wisdom I have seen you display in the past. It involves a threat to the city – contained for the time being, but which I believe is connected to the demon attacks.”

Cullen did indeed look alarmed. “What are you talking about? What threat is this?”

“I would like your word that you will not speak of what you are about to hear to anyone besides Enchanter Wynne or myself – particularly not Ser Karras – until some compromise is met.”

“Aveline,” Cullen said in a careful tone. “I cannot make such a-”

“Your word, Knight-Captain,” Aveline insisted. “I must have it, for I am breaking my own by revealing this to you. This is a very delicate matter.”

She folded her arms. “I do not make this decision lightly. I need to be sure that my trust in you is not misplaced.”

Cullen sighed and shrugged expansively with a clank of his armour. “Very well, Guard-Captain. You have my word.”

Aveline took a deep breath.

“The Champion is possessed,” she said.

Cullen’s eyes widened and he opened his mouth to speak. Aveline held up a hand to forestall his immediate barrage of questions.
“Before you ask, I do not know what kind of entity it is. You’re familiar with the healer called Anders, correct?”

Cullen’s brow furrowed. “Yes, but-”

“It is largely through his efforts that Hawke has not yet laid waste to the entire city. We’ve both seen the Champion fight and know what he’s capable of. I saw Hawke succumb to the spirit’s influence only for a brief time, but there have been other incidents reported to me. I’ve seen and heard enough to be certain that while under its control, he becomes extremely dangerous and nearly impossible to impede or disable. When the spirit is active, inflicting injury on him is no viable solution, because wounding him only makes him stronger. I’m told he’s also become highly resistant to magic.

“When I spoke to Anders last night, he claimed to know what kind of entity we’re dealing with, but wouldn’t elaborate. He only said that it is of the Fade, but it isn’t a demon or the usual kind of spirit that attempts to possess mortal hosts.”

Cullen had his gauntleted hands over his face and was pressing his forehead in consternation, staring at the floor as Aveline talked.

“So to answer your question,” she went on steadily, “the reason the Champion did not fight in the square yesterday is because he is presently kept in check only by the most powerful magic Anders can conjure. He believes Hawke may eventually break free, so he must renew the magic constantly. Even that is unlikely to last more than another day at most.”

Cullen nodded slowly, his eyes still wide and his face pale. “I see,” he said. “And Enchanter Wynne? You mentioned that I could speak of this to her. Is this the reason for her visit, then?”

“It is. Anders contacted her for help. He is convinced she will devise some means of freeing Hawke from the entity and returning him to his normal state. I am not so sure, but....”

Aveline sighed. “Hawke has done much to Kirkwall safe, and for me personally. Mages, even apostates, certainly know more about these matters than I ever will. I believe we ought to try however we can to save Hawke, in return for everything from which he has saved us.

“And Anders is... Anders. Suffice it to say that he cares tremendously for Hawke, and he made me promise not to involve the templars until Wynne had arrived and done her best for him.”

“Naturally,” Cullen muttered, his face pensive. “And I suppose the only reason you’re telling me this now is because I would have escorted Enchanter Wynne to the Hawke estate and found out on my own anyway.”

“Correct,” said Aveline. “I would rather not have you surprised, potentially into taking action that could destabilize the situation. I would also greatly appreciate it if you would not bring the wrath of the Order down on a man we may yet save.”

“Yes, of course,” Cullen said. “As long as he is contained, as you say, we can... we can perhaps... wait for Wynne’s evaluation. Since he is not actively dangerous right this moment. Yes... we’ll see. But this entity – you said it’s of the Fade, but neither spirit nor a demon. What is it, then? What else could it be?”

Aveline shrugged. “I asked the same question. I can only assume there’s some arcane distinction, or at least a semantic one. Warden-Commander Tabris is also in the city, as you know, and she is staying at the Hawke estate. She has been helping Anders keep an eye on the Champion. When I spoke to her last, she hinted at some knowledge of the entity’s nature. I’m led to believe she fought
something like it alongside Wynne at the Circle Tower during the Blight. She agreed with Anders that the Enchanter would know how to save Hawke.”

Cullen nodded, reassured. “I’m glad Commander Tabris is about this. After all, she purged the entire tower at Kinloch Hold back when it was full of demons and abominations. Enchanter Wynne helped her do it. They saved me from a horrible fate that day. I feel better about this now, knowing that Eingana believes the Champion can still be saved. If I may ask, who else knows about this?”

“Only Hawke’s companions and servants,” Aveline said. “Varric Tethras, the raider Isabela, the elves Fenris and Merrill, and Bodahn and Sandal Feddic.”

Cullen nodded. “Now for the crux of the matter: what does all this have to do with the demonic activity?”

“That is complicated,” Aveline said. “My understanding is that the night before last, Hawke fell deeper under the entity’s influence than he ever had before and tried to kill everyone in the estate. Anders, the Warden-Commander, and Hawke’s manservant narrowly escaped death at his hands. They only brought Hawke under control by luring him into the cellars, where Anders had set up a magical trap.

“I’m not sure exactly what happened next – it involved details of magical forces that largely went over my head. From what I understood, the glyph that triggered Anders’s trap was somehow coincidentally placed in such a way that a reservoir of magic contained by the city itself was undammed by its activation. The result was a magical explosion that caused-”

“The earthquake, two nights ago,” Cullen interrupted. His face was ashen. “That’s what it was, wasn’t it? The first attacks began soon after.”

“Yes,” Aveline said. “The trap paralyzed Hawke and suppressed the entity, allowing the dwarven enchanter to knock him out. Anders then placed him within his present confinement. Unfortunately, the activation of the old network also weakened the Veil throughout the entire city.

“For all we know, there may have been other effects of the blast that haven’t yet become apparent. The demons may have simply attacked opportunistically, but my concern is that they were summoned by the greater creature influencing Hawke, in order to sow chaos and increase its power. Anders said it was ancient, so it’s safe to assume it’s also powerful and smart.”

“Maker have mercy on us,” said Cullen. “You’re right. In this city, anything is possible. I will find a way to get this information to the mages investigating the attacks without incriminating Hawke.”

“Good,” said Aveline. “So now you know the extent of the situation. It is my hope that, by the end of the day, Enchanter Wynne will have determined what needs to be done. Either the Champion can be saved, in which case we must try our best to do so, or he cannot, and we will have to kill him. While we wait, Anders will keep Hawke contained at his estate, and we shall protect the rest of the city from demons.”

Cullen nodded mutely, still absorbing everything she’d told him.

“You gave me your word that you would not speak of this to anyone who doesn’t already know,” Aveline reminded him. “That includes myself, those at the Hawke estate, and Enchanter Wynne, but no one else. Will you keep your promise?”

“Yes,” Cullen sighed. “Maker help me, but you’re right – we owe it to Michael Hawke. I will update Wynne on the situation as soon as I reach her, and I will tell her what you’ve told me about this... this
entity. From the Fade, but not a demon or spirit. I’m sure she’ll know more of such things, and how to deal with them. What we might do in the event that...”

He didn’t seem to want to finish the sentence. Aveline didn’t really want him to, either.

They were silent for a few moments, each privately contemplating the grim possibilities that lay ahead of them.

Eventually Cullen stirred himself and took a deep breath.

“Thank you for trusting me with this information, Captain Aveline,” he said. “I will order Sers Thrask and Karras to obey your orders without question, and to instruct their knights to do the same. You shall have full authority over this particular company of the Templar Order.”

Aveline was surprised again. “Knight-Captain, I’m sure that won’t be necessary. If Ser Karras will react badly-”

“Then he will be relieved,” said Cullen shortly. “I will not tolerate insubordination from Ser Karras, nor anyone else under circumstances like these. The stakes are simply too high. He will obey my orders, and yours.”

Aveline nodded. “I understand. Thank you, Cullen.”

He returned her nod, then turned and opened the office door, gesturing for her to exit first. She did so.

The guardsmen were all still standing there, talking amongst themselves. They quieted as soon as she appeared, waiting for her orders.

Thrask, too, was waiting patiently. Karras looked to be having trouble suppressing a sneer.

“All well, Captain?” said Donnic.

“Yes,” Aveline said. “Guards, prepare for your shifts. I’ll have your orders shortly.”

“Thrask, Karras,” Cullen said, and the knights looked to their captain attentively. “Your instructions have changed. You will now obey every order the Guard-Captain gives you as if it were my own, and you will instruct your men to do the same.”

Predictably, Karras looked outraged.

“What?” he demanded, shock and disgust evident in his voice. “Knight-Captain, you cannot mean – I will not-”

“Be silent, Karras!” Cullen boomed, startling everyone nearby, including Aveline. Cullen was usually rather soft-spoken.

“I have had quite enough of your insubordination,” Cullen said angrily. “You will follow the orders you are given, either by myself or by Guard-Captain Aveline, or so help me Karras I will have you expelled from the Templar Order! Am I understood?”

Karras’s fists were clenched and he was scowling furiously, but Cullen had loomed right up in his face with his own righteous glare. Karras did the smart thing and nodded, begrudgingly.

“Understood, Knight-Captain.”
“Captain,” Ser Thrask interjected. “If I may ask – is there word of the Champion? Will he help us?”

“The Champion is fighting other battles at the moment, Ser Thrask,” said Cullen. “His efforts align with ours, but for the time being he cannot be called upon. The safety of this city is in our hands.”

Ser Thrask nodded solemnly.

Cullen turned to Aveline. “I must depart,” he said. “It is essential that Enchanter Wynne reach Kirkwall promptly and safely.”

“Agreed,” said Aveline. “Luck be with you, Cullen. I hope for your quick return.”

“As do I,” Cullen said, shaking her hand. “Maker watch over you.”

He strode out of the room.

Aveline turned to her guards and the templars. They watched her silently, awaiting orders. Karras still looked angry, but he nodded to her when she made eye contact, indicating that he would obey.

She had no way to know if the hotheaded templar’s enforced loyalty would last once he was out of her sight. She would simply have to trust that he cared more for his career than he did for assuaging his wounded pride.

“Very well, people,” she said. “We’ve got our work cut out for us. Let’s get started.”

∞

It was an hour after dawn at the Hawke estate.

Eingana and Varric were in the sitting room, examining a map spread out on the writing desk. The map showed the extent of the known Deep Roads throughout much of the Free Marches. A point some ways off any known Road was circled emphatically in red.

“You’re absolutely sure there’s no Road access from this point?” Eingana asked, tapping one of the glyphs on the map not far from the red circle.

“Not unless you’re a nug,” said Varric. “We scouted it out before we ever met Hawke. There were no gaps big enough for people to get through. It could be opened up with explosives or magic, but-”

He shrugged. “It would be expensive, not to mention messy.”

“Hmm.” Eingana scratched a shorthand note with her pencil on the map, next to the entrance in question. She frowned thoughtfully, tapping the pencil against the map as her eyes roved across it, searching.

“And here. This is where you got in?”

“Yes,” said Varric. “But I wouldn’t recommend going that way, either.”

“Oh?” Eingana looked at him levelly. “Why not?”

“It consisted of a long, narrow, descending corridor that we had to squeeze the brontos through in single file. At the end of it was a pitch-dark cave that turned out to be the sitting room for a hundred huge, blight-tainted spiders.”

Varric shuddered in remembrance. “It was a miracle we only lost two hirelings there.”
“The Grey Wardens aren’t afraid of spiders,” Eingana said with just the right amount of disdain in her voice to sound amused rather than nasty. “Really, Varric. We warm up with pests like them on our way to real monsters.”

Varric nodded. “Commander, that was a fantastic line and I’m suitably impressed. But spiders were only the beginning – literally – of the nasties we ran into down there.”

“Anything in particular stand out?” Eingana asked.

Varric traced a Deep Road on the map that was connected to the entrance Eingana had indicated. His finger stopped.

“This is another area where the Road was blocked by rubble. The only route around it we could find led through tunnels filled with darkspawn. We killed them all, but more will have filled up those areas since then.”

He gestured for the pencil. Eingana gave it to him, and Varric marked the location of the collapse. He drew a line along the approximate path his expedition had taken to circumvent it.

“Later on, another Road that intersected ours collapsed while we were fighting darkspawn at the junction. It almost fell on our damn heads,” he recalled. “Blondie and Hawke were buried for half an hour before Bethany could blast them out with magic. Good thing we didn’t need to turn there, because when the dust settled that crossroad was completely blocked.”

Eingana grimaced. “They were buried under rubble for half an hour? Sounds like shit.”

“I never did ask Blondie how that was,” Varric mused. “At the time I didn’t know he was claustrophobic. When we got them out they both seemed relieved, but not like they’d been desperate... although-” Varric rubbed his chin thoughtfully “now that I think about it, just after that happened is when they both started getting a lot handsier with each other. Hmmm...”

“What about the Road you were following?” Eingana asked. “I hope you’re not going to tell me it was impassable after the cave-in. You obviously made it through somehow.”

“We did,” Varric confirmed. “But there was a chasm nearby that intersection that ran parallel to our Road. Darkspawn crawled out of it all along the way. These caves nearby were full of them.”

He marked several more places on the map.

“We had to go through them often to get around blockages in the Road. It was slow going through the infested areas. Hawke and Fenris were busy for hours slicing up spiders, deepstalkers, and darkspawn while the mages and I hung back and covered them. We made a lot better time on the actual Road, but even there we were harassed by shrieks. In the end it took us almost three days longer than we’d expected to get to the thaig – but it was within our safety margin.”

Eingana peered down at the map, tapping it thoughtfully with one finger.

“Assuming the Road hasn’t collapsed further since then, there’s no reason your party can’t take the same route we did,” Varric added. “You might even find a faster one. And there’s one more thing you should be careful of.”

He noted a place on the map with an exclamation point.

“Right here we had to cross a large open chamber full of spiders. One of them was gigantic – easily twelve feet tall, I shit you not, and not even tainted. It was a ridiculous monster I would have called
bullshit on if I hadn’t seen it with my own two eyes. I don’t know if there’s something in the fungus
down there or what, but after what we had to go through to kill it and its babies, I wouldn’t be
surprised if−

“Varric,” Eingana interrupted him. “You know I quite enjoy your tales, but do you have any other
specific comments or suggestions? I doubt very much you know of an entrance the Wardens don’t,
but you have been down there more recently than I. What route would you take, if you had to go
back?”

Varric pursed his lips. “I wouldn’t go back, and I’d do my best to persuade you not to either, if I
thought I’d have any chance of success. I haven’t told you about the rock wraiths yet, have I? But if I
had to go back...”

Still rubbing his chin, he looked at the map.

He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could Eingana looked up at the doorway with
such suddenness that it startled him.

He followed her gaze. There was nobody there.

“What?” Varric asked.

Eingana held up her hand to quiet him.

“Did you hear that?” she whispered.

Varric shook his head.

Eingana eyed the doorway to the common room, leaning back and forth to see more of the room
beyond.

From where they stood, they could see the writing desk and the fireplace on the far wall as well as
part of Hawke’s magical prison. Hawke himself was also visible, albeit from the side. He looked as
docile and asleep as he had since Anders had put them there, around midnight.

Nothing seemed amiss, but something still felt off. Varric sensed it now too, although he couldn’t say
for sure what it was.

“Wait here,” said Eingana.

∞

Anders was dreaming again.

He was traveling down a strange tunnel formed by a dazzling helix of golden light. Wrapped around
the perimeter of the tunnel was a wide red ribbon with frayed, torn edges, intertwined with a spindly,
sparkling thread.

In the murky haze beyond the helix, Anders sensed rather than saw spirits racing alongside him,
keeping pace. All of them were whispering to him at once, which made it impossible to understand
any of them.

Or was it a single being whose multiple voices blended together into noise? There was no way to
tell.

Anders continued this dream for some time, traversing the tunnel amid the whispers. He fell into a
half-aware state in which he remembered that he was dreaming, but his conscious mind was still in a kind of doze.

It took a sudden dramatic change in his environment to start him back to paying attention. With no apparent trigger, the golden tunnel suddenly expanded and dissipated into the gloom. The thread of disjointed sparkles went with it, blooming into an ever-widening spiral that continued to remain visible despite its increasing distance. The curved red ribbon remained unchanged.

As Anders took stock of his new surroundings, wondering about the Fade’s strange mood regarding his dreams lately, an awareness of the Hawke estate materialized around him.

His point of view was focused in the common room, where he could see Hawke hovering in his magical prison. The warrior looked just as Anders had last seen him: wearing a pair of trousers with the hems bunched inside metal manacles, his newly-enchanted gauntlets on his hands, and the metal collar glowing around his neck. He hovered in the cage of force, eyes closed, silent and still.

The only apparent difference between this dream and reality was the continued presence of the red ribbon. As Anders watched, it fluttered out from behind Hawke and wrapped itself with a ripple of fabric around the inside of his prison.

With the abstract senses of the dream, Anders could also see the rest of the mansion and what was going on in it. He knew that Eingana was in the sitting room, poring over maps and charts related to the Grey Wardens’ planned expedition into the Deep Roads. Varric was with her, offering advice on the locations of cave-ins and darkspawn nests.

Reaver was chasing rats in the cellars within earshot of Merrill, who was working on something in the magical laboratory. Fingers of red magic wriggled along her arms and legs as she worked a spell. Blood dripped from the casting wound on her arm and sizzled into power. Anders couldn’t tell what Merrill was actually doing, for the blood magic seemed to absorb all light around it, making the whole room indistinct.

It occurred to him that if his dream was an accurate reflection of the estate, as it seemed to be, he ought to be able to see himself lying in bed in Hawke’s room.

He looked. His body wasn’t there. The bed looked slept-in and unmade.

Concerned, Anders widened his search, combing through his awareness of the entire estate in his mind. He couldn’t find his physical body anywhere.

All he knew was that his focus was centred in the common room, in front of Hawke’s prison – but he couldn’t see his body there, either. Had he been moved, or was he really here, and couldn’t see his body in the dream?

Maybe Hawke would know. He was still the master of the house, after all, even if he was possessed, trapped, and comatose within a cylinder of magic.

“Michael,” Anders said.

His world immediately condensed around the room with the red-wrapped magical cage. His awareness of the estate evaporated, while the clarity and detail of the scene in front of him improved rapidly to near that of real life.

The ribbon had not completely covered the inside of the cage, although it was wrapped around both above and below Hawke. Through the gaps in it, Anders could see Hawke’s face as his eyes opened. They were completely black.
“Michael,” Anders repeated, ignoring a jolt of fear at something he couldn’t quite remember. “Where am I?”

Hawke looked at him a moment, then raised his arms.

The ribbon suddenly pulsed, flattening itself against the inside of the barrier and beginning to glow with near-blinding red light. Before half a second had passed, a toroidal bulge appeared in the containment field centred around Hawke’s position.

Anders had time to see the best magical confinement he could create being blown apart from the inside before he was forced to shield his eyes from the glow. There was a palpable whmmaff as what felt like a wall of warm force shoved him several steps backward.

It subsided quickly. When Anders opened his eyes, the cage was gone and Hawke was right in front of him, his face inches away. Darkness filled his eyes but for hints of that same red glow at their centers.

Meeting that eldritch gaze filled Anders with vertigo. There was a brief sensation of falling forwards before Hawke’s hands were on him. One gauntleted palm had swept around to press from behind against his back, while the other held his chin in a merciless, cold-metal grip.

“Where are you, indeed?” said Hawke, but it wasn’t his voice; it was deep, genderless, resonant, and cold. “Wandering mage, seeing things he shouldn’t. Sneaking around is an offense. You have much to be punished for.”

“Michael?” Anders asked, unable to ignore the fear this time. “What is this? Where is my body in the waking world?”

Hawke pulled him close and bent his head down to run his nose along Anders’s temple, sniffing softly.

“I know where you are,” he whispered.

Anders could feel Hawke’s beard bristling along his cheek. The warrior’s breath was hot on his ear.

“You’re right here, with me. Right where I want you.”

Hawke nosed his way down Anders’s neck to his shoulder, where he abruptly sank in his teeth.

The pain was unexpectedly brutal. As Anders yelled and struggled, his awareness of even the room around him dissolved. All that remained was Hawke’s unyielding grip and the horror of sharp teeth buried in his flesh.

Finally, azure light burst from within him and woke up with a snap.

Anders gasped in fear, scrambling to remain upright and get away from the terror he remembered of an enemy he forgot, an enemy that was no longer there – or was it?

He stumbled a few steps, barely keeping his feet under him as he looked around in astonishment and dismay. He was standing in the chilly common room of the Hawke estate, dim grey light flooding into the room from the open windows.

Hawke hovered before him in his intact magical prison: arms at his sides, eyes closed in sleep.

Anders looked down at his shoulder. It still throbbed with phantom pain, but there was no trace of a
wound. He reached up to touch it gingerly. It didn’t make the pain worse, so he rubbed it a little, hoping it would help.

Around that point was when he noticed that he was also wearing nothing except for the pair of Hawke’s shorts he’d worn to bed.

Starting to shake a little, Anders made his way over to the chair at the writing desk and sank into it. What in Andraste’s name had that dream been about? Had he been sleepwalking? That had never happened before.

Uneasy, Anders looked over at Hawke, who continued to give every sign of being deeply asleep in a floating, upright position. The barrier was solid and the glyphs on his metal collar were steady in their glow.

After a few deep breaths with no sign of further strangeness, Anders began to calm down.

The air was chilly and damp. The fog of yesterday morning, burned away by the midday sun, had returned during the night with a vengeance. Despite the unseasonably low temperature, every window Anders could see was thrown open. The cool breeze was washing through the house in a continuous rustling whisper.

“Anders?” said a voice from the doorway, and he jumped in shock before cursing some more under his breath. It was Eingana, standing at the entrance to the sitting room. He hadn’t seen her appear, nor had he heard any sign of her presence until now.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“I....” How to answer? Until he’d just been badly startled, Anders had still felt groggy and not quite fully awake. There was still residue in his eyes from a long rest.

He rubbed his face and tried to think clearly while he waited for his heart to stop pounding. “I had a dream.”

Eingana approached him, keeping her eyes on Hawke as she crossed the room. She gave the magical prison a wide berth.

“What kind of dream was it?” she asked when she joined him. “Darkspawn?”

Anders shook his head. “It wasn’t a Warden dream. It was about Michael.”

Eingana took in his disheveled hair and lack of clothes and surmised the obvious.

“You just woke up, didn’t you?” she said. “Were you sleepwalking?”

“I think I must have been,” Anders replied. He moved his fingers up from his face to his forehead, trying to remember. He peered at Hawke through his fingers.

“It was so... vivid. Fully lucid. I knew that it was a dream... but then I realized I could feel the whole estate around me. I saw you and Varric in the sitting room, Merrill in the cellar with the dog-”

“That’s right,” Eingana said. “And Hawke? What was he doing?”

“He was the only thing that was different. He was awake, and there was something around him that was... dream-like or magical, or maybe both. It looked like a, almost like a bedsheet, but a continuous ribbon of fabric. A deep rich red, more like rose petals than blood, and at least this wide-”
He stretched his hands as far apart as he could.

“Somehow he used it to break out of the containment field. It wasn’t him, though – it wasn’t Hawke. It was the thing. It started... touching me, and talking to me.”

Eingana looked sympathetic. Anders looked back at Hawke to avoid meeting her gaze.

“Eventually he just... bit me,” he went on. “The pain was exaggerated in the dream. It hurt really, really bad. It hasn’t even gone away yet, not fully. I could feel its malice.”

Eingana’s brows were furrowed in worry. “Shit. That’s way scarier than a darkspawn dream. Do you have any idea what it means?”

Anders shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe a dream of mine and a dream of Michael’s intersected in the Fade. But it was odd – I could see everything in the dream-estate as it was in reality, except for Michael. He, or rather it, saw me. That’s when it broke free of the enchantment, and attacked me.

“I think whatever this thing is, it’s very... angry. Like Michael himself much of the time, I guess.”

“Angry with anyone or anything in particular?” Eingana asked, sounding like she already knew the answer.

“Probably mostly with me,” Anders said. “I think it’s somehow twisted his desires and anger into feeding itself, and I’m the most convenient target for both. It’s certainly adapted his battle rages and reaver powers to benefit itself quite neatly. Maybe those abilities were even part of what drew it to him in the first place... however this came about.”

Eingana nodded, frowning more deeply now as she looked over Hawke’s prison.

“That all tracks so far,” she said. “So is there any way you can strengthen the enchantment further? Just in case it-”

“No,” interrupted a new voice, one that echoed with resonant, inhuman power.

Eingana tensed and Anders immediately stood up, already knowing with a twist of bitterness and fear what he would see.

Hawke’s eyes were open. They were black pits, staring at Anders and Eingana with no trace of humanity in them. His expression was blank, but there were wisps of red steam-like energy rising from his ears, nostrils, mouth, and the corners of his eyes.

“You could no more contain us than you could contain the horizon,” said Hawke.

His voice sounded like a thousand people simultaneously hissing the words in hoarse, broken voices, pitched downward about six octaves but with a faint, high wail behind it that rose steadily with each word. Anders felt the sound thrumming in his chest, and he could hear the glass in the windows rattling.

“You keep saying that,” Eingana said. “Don’t you have a name?”

“Warden-Commander?” Varric appeared at the doorway to the sitting room. “What’s going....”

He took one look at Hawke and froze. “Oh.”

“I wish this would stop happening while I’m almost naked,” Anders complained.
“You want me to go get your robe?” Varric asked, his eyes glued to Hawke’s face.

Hawke turned to look at him, and Varric immediately backed up several steps.

“Uh... yes please, Varric,” Anders said. “That would be very helpful. Thank you.”

Varric darted up the stairs without another word, clearly glad to be out of Hawke’s presence.

Hawke turned to Anders and regarded him silently. His eyes looked less like black orbs and more like empty holes that linked to darkness. Eingana swayed a little, obviously also feeling the vertiginous sensation that arose from looking into them for too long.

“Enjoy that body while you can,” Anders said angrily. “It won’t be yours for much longer.”

Hawke tilted his head consideringly, but said nothing.

“His name is Michael Hawke,” Anders barged on, frustrated by his powerlessness. “The man you’re possessing. If you were to fight him on equal footing, he’d rip you to shreds.”

“Anders,” Eingana murmured, putting a hand on his forearm. “Maybe don’t-”

Anders ignored her. “Fight him yourself, I dare you!” he goaded. “Hawke will eat you alive!”

“We doubt that,” said the entity. It blinked once, and when its eyes reopened the red glow of its ‘pupils’ was visible. “We are boundless. Indestructible.”

“Yeah, you’ve said that a lot,” Anders said. “You haven’t proven it yet, though. See that cage around you? Your bounded. Not so illimitable right now, are you?”

“Anders,” Eingana hissed to him much more urgently this time, “stop provoking it. Wynne won’t be here for hours. Don’t piss it off unless you want to deal with its powers!”

“Were we anything but what we are, we would call such advice wise,” said Hawke. He leaned closer to the barrier, placing his gauntleted hands against it. The magic responded by flaring and emitting a low-pitched buzz.

“Yet provocation is irrelevant. We are in motion already; you are too late.”

“What are you talking about?” Eingana asked, her own fear and need to know overpowering her good judgement.

Varric returned down the stairs with Anders’s robe. He handed it to the grateful mage, who hastily pulled it on and fastened its various straps and buckles.

“This is our vessel,” said the entity. “It is one of many. We are eternal and instantaneous, everywhere and nowhere. We are you, Grey Warden, and you are us.”

Eingana shook her head, but the fear was etched plainly across her face. She continued to shake her head, not wanting to believe what it was implying.

“It’s lying,” Anders said with confidence he didn’t really feel. “It’s trying to scare us. It knows we’re going to kill it and it’s scared for itself.”

Hawke laughed. The sound was wretched and painful to listen to; it was like an ogre gargling gravel. Anders, Eingana, and Varric all cringed and covered their ears. The window glass rattled harder than ever, and a cascading series of thumping and banging noises arose from the cellars below.
“Perhaps we are,” Hawke said when he had stopped laughing and the three facing him had uncovered their ears, all still wincing from the memory of the awful noise. “Or perhaps we lack the means to communicate our true nature to you – helpless bags of meat time drags along out of pity, forcibly limited by your babbling languages of muscle and pushed air.”

Hawke scraped a clawed finger down the inside of the barrier. It flickered and buzzed wildly, and his claw left a scar of brightness in its wake.

Eingana’s eyes widened. Grimacing, Anders went for his staff, leaning against the wall next to the fireplace.

“Should he be able to do that?” Varric said with barely-contained panic. “Should we do something? Send for help? I suggest the templars.”

“What are you?” Anders asked, simultaneously desperate for an answer and afraid of what it might be.

He gestured with his staff and free hand, trying to shore up the magic of the cage, but his staff twisted in his hand as if bucking against his volition. A red glow countered the blue aura in his free hand, pushing it back towards him until Anders was forced to yank his hand away, hissing in pain.

“Illimitable,” the entity thundered. “Transfinite.”

One of the windows cracked as a tremor shook the whole mansion.

Anders tried again, gesturing emphatically with his staff and muttering in ancient Tevene. Eingana, her enchanted blade drawn, tried to sever the questing red tendrils that countered his magic.

Amazingly, it worked for a few moments. The scar of light on the cage faded away as Anders managed to pour more energy into the containment field.

Hawke stopped scratching the barrier and instead touched his bare chest with both gauntleted hands. He began to carve eight horizontal gouges into his skin.

The runes on his collar flared, growing brighter with each passing moment.

“Uh, guys?” Varric said in alarm.

“What are you doing?” Anders yelled. “Stop that! Stop!”

He was a fool. He cursed himself vilely for his lack of foresight.

Of course Hawke’s gauntlets were metal and could complete the enchantment..., but they were also themselves useable as crude weapons.

“Do you see the glow in our eyes?” said Hawke. “We cannot be killed.”

The crimson sparks wavered like an aurora that was trying to find a shape but couldn’t settle on anything recognizable. The undulating colour felt so instinctively wrong to look at that Anders’s stomach turned. Eingana and Varric made sickened noises beside him, similarly affected.

Dripping blood from the wounds on his chest, Hawke reached out to touch the barrier on either side of him. He opened his mouth wide and yet more blinding red light erupted from within. All three horrified onlookers threw up arms to shield their eyes as the painful light grew brighter still.

There was a deep clang like the tolling of an immense bell. Anders felt an expanding wave of heat
engulf him. It seemed to suck all the energy out of him, leaving him exhausted.

As he fell to his knees, his skin began to burn with a painful, crawling itch, like his body was covered in biting insects. He trembled and whimpered and pawed at himself, trying to make the sensation go away.

It subsided, but slowly. He blinked, trying to clear the spots from his vision. A metallic clatter made him look up, squinting to try to make out what was going on in front of him.

The barrier was gone, but Hawke was still floating in the air. The manacles on his ankles had burst and were lying in smoking pieces below his feet. The runes on the metal collar were motionless and dark.

As Anders watched, Hawke reached up, curled his metal-armoured fingers around the collar, and pulled it apart as though it were made of soft rubber.

Anders quailed. Had this creature ever really been contained? Could it have freed itself all along? If it had been biding its time, what for?

An even more frightening thought occurred to him: had Hawke’s behaviour last night been an act intended to manipulate him? Had it been learning about him, perhaps, trying to convince him to use the gauntlets instead of the manacles?

No, Anders tried to assure himself. Hawke’s eyes had never changed at all last night. It had been him, the real him, the whole time. It had to have been.

Please, Maker.

Beside him, Eingana had her sword outstretched threateningly, but she was paralyzed. A bright red version of Anders’s oft-used glyph was flashing beneath her feet, sprouting scarlet tendrils that had spiralled all the way up her body.

Varric was curled into a ball on the far side of the room, rocking back and forth and muttering shrilly to himself. He was surrounded by a purple-red aura that seemed to be stabbing into him and radiating out from him at the same time.

Anders could only do his best to scramble away backwards, in mute terror, as Hawke descended to ground level and approached him. He caught up in seconds, leaning down to pull Anders to his feet.

Anders struggled ineffectually to get away from him, but it was like he was drowning in Hawke’s eyes.

“Do not worry, my love,” said the creature through Hawke’s lips. He brushed a loose strand of hair out of Anders’s face with one bloodstained, gauntleted finger. “You need not be afraid, nor heartsick. Not for much longer.”

Absurdly, Anders was sure he could hear Hawke’s actual voice somewhere in that otherworldly chorus. The affection behind his words and in his touch felt sincere – it was just all but drowned out by the vastness of the mind that used him as its puppet.

Anders latched on to that glimmer of hope. Somewhere, inside the abomination before him, Hawke was still alive.

Hawke kissed him with unexpected gentleness. Knowing there was a faint part of him that meant it made it excruciating. Anders trembled, too exhausted to resist physically or magically as he felt metal
claws trying to cut down the side of his face.

“Soon,” Hawke whispered, his eyes pulling Anders into them with hypnotic force. “Very soon, now.”

Anders was draining away. He was losing his will, his thoughts, his memory, his very self. Dim, thoughtless pleasure was now washing through his body.

“I promise,” said Hawke’s voice, more in his mind than in his ears. “Stop struggling, and this is the last time you will feel pain.”

Clawed fingers pierced deep into his shoulders and neck. Despite his euphoria, Anders screamed.
Anders drifted in a surreal, hazy world of equal pain and pleasure. The hot sting of Hawke’s metal claws was a paradoxical source of soothing coolness. The emptiness of his lover’s eyes was all Anders could see. He couldn’t move, hear, or even think.

Time lost all meaning. It could have been moments or minutes before the hypnosis abruptly ended with an agonizing scraping sensation down his chest. An anguished, otherworldly howl followed.

Brought back to his senses with shocking suddenness, Anders barely managed not to fall over backwards.

Hawke was staggering away from him, clutching his head and howling as shudders wracked his whole body. A dense cloud of dark red energy was attacking his head, filling his mouth, nose, and ears. He clawed at it desperately, snarling in fury and pain.

Meanwhile, all the glass in the windows that hadn’t cracked yet was rattling noisily.

Anders struggled to regain his focus, his thoughts still muddled from whatever the creature had done to him. His hand wavered as he passed it over the wounds on his neck and upper chest, reaching instinctively for restorative magic. It came sluggishly at first. Finally the pale blue aura closed up his wounds, and the reduction in pain helped him concentrate.

He looked around, searching for whoever had saved him from Hawke. He saw that it was Merrill, standing near the entrance to the estate’s cellars with one hand raised in a claw-like gesture. Her wrist dripped blood that sparkled eerily as it was consumed to power her spell. Her other hand held the bloodied knife.

“Anders!” she said, her pale face showing the strain of the magic she was using to keep Hawke in check. “Help the others!”

Yes, he thought. Good idea.

He grabbed his staff from where it was lying on the floor at his feet. It took him a few tries to close his fingers around it, as the tingling was still making his fingers clumsy. Once he had it, he checked on Hawke.

The warrior was backed against the wall next to the writing desk. He was no longer howling in pain, but now sounded more like a rage demon as he bellowed and lashed out at the amorphous red cloud
pressing around him like a blanket. Red electrical energy danced along the claws of his gauntlets, the only parts of his upper body visible through the cloud as he slashed through it. The rents he tore in the cloud closed up again as quickly as they appeared.

Anders had a few moments in which to act. He would have to make the most of them.

Eingana was still paralyzed in front of him, the crimson glyph beneath her feet ensnaring her up to her chest with bands of energy. Across the room Varric lay face down, silent and still, although the spell affecting him had ceased when Merrill attacked Hawke.

Varric probably needed restoration of some sort, but Anders thought he should help Eingana first. If he quickly freed her now, she could then help Merrill regain control of Hawke while he looked after Varric.

He used his magical senses to make a swift examination of the spell binding Eingana. He decided on a method of unravelling it and readied the necessary energies. He drew back one hand to symbolically pull loose the threads of magic, using his staff crystal as a metaphysical spool.

The resistance he encountered was, as he was coming to expect, alarmingly intense. Somehow the modified paralysis glyph reacted with violence to his attempt at dispelling it, seeking to preserve its own existence. It effectively blocked his spell and then latched right on to it, leeching Anders’s mana to strengthen itself.

His staff crystal shuddered and flared a dark, evil red. Anders felt it vibrating. The way this thing kept weakening him and was now outright stealing his mana seriously pissed him off.

“The fuck you will!” he yelled as he reached out and yanked hard on the energy flow, much harder than he had initially. This time, as if the glyph hadn’t been expecting a counter-counterattack, he was successful. In a moment, the magic of the red glyph was drawn through his staff and dissipated harmlessly.

The glyph and its paralyzing tendrils disappeared. Eingana immediately collapsed to her hands and knees, sword stuck beneath her hand and gasping for breath.

Anders,” she said hoarsely. “Help. Weak... so weak.”

Her arms trembled, barely keeping her upright. So Hawke’s magic had drained her, too. They would have to think of a better way to deal with that, and soon.

Anders went to her side and reached down to touch the nape of her neck, infusing the weakened Warden with a powerful rejuvenation spell. Her trembling subsided and she soon caught her breath.

“Andraste’s holy haberdasher,” Eingana hissed as Anders helped her to her feet.

“That’s a new one,” Anders commented, keeping a nervous eye on the struggling, growling warrior still held against the wall by Merrill’s magic. “The spell and the curse. Very creative, Commander.”

“Thank you. What by the Maker did he do to me?”

“I have no idea,” Anders said. “It was like my paralysis glyph, but meaner, and red. When I first tried to dispel it, it started draining me too.”

“Noted for future reference,” Eingana said. “Possessed Hawke’s magic is apparently self-aware and capable of defending itself.”
Anders scowled. “It had better be capable of fucking all the way off, too, because I’m getting tired of its bullshit. Are you okay now? I need to help Varric.”

Eingana nodded. “Do it. I’ll watch Hawke.”

She retrieved her enchanted longsword and levelled it in Hawke’s direction, approaching him a few steps but staying well back out of his reach. She drew her sword’s mundane twin from the scabbard at her waist, keeping it defensively by her side.

Nearby, the blood in Merrill’s casting wound had started to congeal, so she had added another deep scratch to parallel the first. Her wounded arm was outstretched, fingers working at the invisible hooks of blood magic attached to her cloud, while her other hand gestured beneath the dripping wound to catch and shape the power of her own blood.

“I can’t keep this up forever, Anders,” Merrill said with an edge of fear in her voice. “He’s powering through it. It’s taking more and more energy just to keep him where he is.”

As if to emphasize her point, Hawke let out furious snarl, almost like a bark, that released an omnidirectional wave of red-tinted power.

Eingana staggered backwards. Behind her, another window shattered and several items of furniture were knocked violently towards the far wall. Merrill cringed in pain and took a half step backwards, but she managed to keep Hawke pinned.

Over beside Varric, Anders lowered the arm he’d raised to duck his head behind and tried to shake off the traces of itch that had reignited at his fingertips.

“You’re doing great, Merrill,” he said as he resumed his magical examination, trying to determine what Hawke had done to Varric. “You’re saving all our lives at the moment. Keep him still for just a little bit longer... we’ll think of something.”

Like what? he asked himself. He’d already done his best to keep Hawke contained. He had reached the limits of his magic. Now the situation was as precarious as it had ever been, but Wynne wasn’t due to arrive for several more hours. What could they possibly do in the meantime? Send for help and get everyone killed by templars? Lead Hawke on a merry chase around the mansion and hope they survived long enough for Wynne to arrive and perform a miracle?

He couldn’t afford to think like this. He needed to focus on what he could do instead of succumbing to despair at what he couldn’t. He had a few more moments yet, so the first step was helping Varric.

The dwarf’s eyes were moving rapidly beneath his closed lids. He seemed to be caught in an intense dream or vision. Preparing his spell, Anders drew power from his staff to his free hand and brushed his splayed fingers across Varric’s forehead.


“Varric,” Anders said. “Listen to me. Do you know where you are?”

Varric’s eyes opened wider as he noticed Anders hovering over him, and he seemed to come fully awake. He recovered from his coughing fit and nodded.

“I remember,” he said. “Hawke?”

“Merrill’s got him,” Anders said as helped Varric to his feet. “Not for long, though. Any ideas?”
“Think fast,” Merrill added in a strained voice.

Eingana glanced over at her in concern. Sweat beading on her forehead, Merrill’s hand shook only a little as she cut a third casting wound into her arm.

Anders’s eyes were on Hawke as the warrior suddenly lurched forward, trying to shove his way through the cloud of blood magic. With a pained grunt of exertion Merrill pushed him back, pinning him yet again. Anders was impressed.

“I can give you another few minutes at most,” Merrill panted. “He’s becoming resistant to this, too.”

Anders ran his fingers through his hair in agonized frustration. What could they do?

“Think, think!” he muttered to himself.

“Your trap,” Varric spoke up. “The thing you did where the entire city’s magic brought him down long enough to get knocked out. Can you do that again? And do you have one of Sandal’s boom-rocks?”

“That could work,” said Anders, thinking intently. “I’m not sure my glyph would have that effect twice in the same spot – the reservoir connected to it might be drained. And Hawke would remember that I’d trapped that hallway before. But I think you’re on the right track. There could be more old magic stored in those ley lines... a lot more.”

“We need to find a reliable way to counter his magic,” Eingana suggested. “Is there anything in the house that reflects hostile spells? Amulets, enchanted rings?”

“Yes!” Anders said. “Good idea. Hawke has a stash upstairs – he finds magical trinkets all over the place. He’s always given us free access to it whenever we needed an edge. There must be something in there that reflects hostile magic!”

“Go look for something,” Merrill urged. “Quickly!”

She groaned and fell to one knee.

“Daisy!” Varric went quickly to her side, reaching out a concerned hand.

Over against the wall, Hawke’s hands were still all that could be seen pushing out of the red cloud, trying to tear it in half. It continued to roil and close in on him fast enough to keep him inside it... but only barely.

“Let me rejuvenate you before I go look,” Anders said to Merrill.

Merrill shook her head, a tear of pain welling in her eye. “Don’t. It will interfere with the blood magic. Just hurry! I’ll be okay for a little longer.”

“Here, Daisy,” Varric said, pulling back his sleeve. “If it helps, use my blood. Don’t kill yourself trying to save us.”

Merrill glanced down at the dwarf’s bared arm. She hesitated for only a second.

“Thank you, Varric,” she said, guilt and relief both evident in her voice.

Merrill drew her still-bloodied knife from her belt and reached over to cut swiftly down Varric’s forearm. He winced, clenching his hand into a fist. Sparkles of power rose from the blood welling up from the new wound.
“Can’t believe I’m doing this,” Varric muttered. “I suppose this will make a good story... embellished a bit here and there, and with names changed to protect the innocent, of course.” He laughed ironically.

“Go, Anders,” Merrill said with renewed determination as Eingana took up a defensive position nearby them. She shaped her magic with both hands, and the cloudy red force restraining Hawke sprouted new pseudopods to counter his furious struggling.

Anders wasted no more time rushing up the stairs, taking them three at a time.

As he crossed the mezzanine to Hawke’s bedchamber, he thought of Bodahn and Sandal and wondered where they were. He couldn’t remember seeing them anywhere in the estate during his dream-vision, so perhaps they were out in town somewhere. He was glad that neither of them were in the danger zone of Hawke’s fury, but was the rest of Kirkwall really any safer right now?

There was no time to worry about it. In Hawke’s chamber, Anders hurried over to the bed, where he knelt down and drew out a plain wooden chest from under it.

Throwing it open revealed the collection of enchanted jewelry Hawke had accrued over years of adventuring. Some pieces were in their own compartments to prevent the magical forces within from conflicting with other pieces, but most were tangled in a disorganized mass.

Just like Michael, Anders thought with fond exasperation. He knew where the important stuff was, but if he didn’t need something on a regular basis, there was no point keeping it in a regular spot.

Forcing down the heartache that threatened to well inside him, Anders closed his eyes and cast out with his magical senses, looking for any rings or amulets that would neutralize or deflect incoming magic.

In the cluster of many varied enchantments in front of him, he detected four or five voids and two hard, spherical barriers – exactly what he was looking for.

There was also one more that sort of felt right, but its magical signature was unfamiliar and strange. It felt like it would distort incoming magic, among other things, but Anders was in too much of a hurry to examine it more closely.

He reached in with his eyes closed, using a trickle of mana to pull his hands towards the objects he needed. He had to open his eyes to do some disentangling, but luckily things weren’t too badly snarled. Eventually he teased them all free and was rewarded with four rings and four amulets, including the strange one that he thought would distort magic rather than deflect it.

Curious, Anders held the pendant up to the window and the light of the cloudy morning. It was a simple translucent shape bound on a leather cord. Glimmers of darkness curled beneath its surface, which scattered the light in a watery way that made it seem not quite solid. In the center was a tiny piece of what appeared to be carved horn or bone.

Squinting at the amulet, Anders felt a subtle, alien sensation in the back of his mind. He felt breath on his face, even though the air was still. An image of Michael Hawke formed in his thoughts – Hawke as he had been before being possessed, violent and often angry but not really evil.

Yearning welled up within him, made distant and painful by the circumstances of a reality that he could not change. And in a corner of his awareness, Anders thought he heard a deep, gravelly voice whispering to him in a strange language.

He looked up, startled. Was there someone else in the room with him?
No. He was alone.

“What...?” he asked, staring into the cloudy gleam of the amulet. He’d never seen or felt anything quite like it.

_Asit tal-eb_, whispered the voice. _It is to be._

“No,” Anders responded, barely aware of what he was saying. A tear traced its way down his cheek. “I want Michael back the way he was. Well, maybe a _little_ different. I need him! He would never forgive me if I let him be consumed by that thing. He can’t end like this.”

_Existence is a choice_, the voice murmured in his mind. _A self of suffering brings only suffering to the world. It is a choice, and we can refuse it._

“All I want is to give him a chance to make that choice,” said Anders. “So... yes.”

He got a grip on his emotions and clenched the gathered trinkets his fist. He closed the chest, shoved it back under the bed with his foot, and raced back out to the stairs.

As he went, he draped the strange amulet over his neck and tried on a few of the neutralizing rings before he found one that fit. He wouldn’t remember the voice and the strange reaction it had provoked from him until much, much later.

In the common room, Hawke had moved away from the wall and was slashing ferociously with the claws of his gauntlets through Merrill’s spell of blood magic. He appeared to be on the verge of rending it apart completely.

As he descended the stairs, Anders quickly sorted the remaining rings and amulets into pairs. He selected one of the hard deflection barriers for Varric and the other for Merrill, thinking that Eingana with her lightning reflexes and magic sword might stand a better chance of evading Hawke’s attacks or deflecting them herself.

He reached the bottom of the stairs and hastened to Varric’s side. He dropped a ring and an amulet into Varric’s hand and gave him another pair for Merrill, who was still actively casting.

“Thanks, Blondie,” Varric said, putting on a ring and slipping an amulet over his head. His arm now bore a second wound; Merrill was drawing freely from both of them to power her spell. “Let’s hope this works.”

“Anders, we need a _plan_,” Merrill whispered, the strain etching lines of pain on her face.

“Working on it,” Anders said as he rushed over to Eingana and gave her the remaining ring and amulet. She barely had time to slip them on.

Merrill cried out with pain as she fell to her knees. Within moments, the cloud of red magic around Hawke had dissipated. A few tendrils continued trying to cling to him as he stalked forward out of it, eyes burning with rage and reaching for Anders with both hands.

Anders leapt backwards to avoid Hawke’s grapple, now noticing with alarm and fear that the pointed metal fingers of his gauntlets had sprouted blades of gleaming red energy. The claws were no longer just symbolic parts of his armour meant to intimidate – they were deadly weapons.

Eingana’s swords flashed up to deflect Hawke’s next strike, a double downward slash at Anders. He whirled on her in a blur of muscle and red magic, engaging her as easily and as skillfully as if he had actual swords in his hands. Eingana was forced backwards, on the defensive and barely able to keep
Hawke’s claws from her face and neck.

Anders darted around behind Hawke and pointed his staff at the warrior’s bare, exposed back. Beyond the two combatants, he saw Varric draping an amulet over Merrill’s head before helping her to her feet.

Hawke was pressing Eingana closer and closer to the wall. Anders feared what would happen if she was backed up against it.

He gathered as much power as his staff crystal could contain and wove it into an entropic spell of paralysis and weakness. He launched it as soon as it was complete, not wanting to give the entity inside Hawke a moment more to sense and counter what he was doing.

The spell hit Hawke square in the back. He faltered, stumbling forward as he briefly lost his footing.

Anders hadn’t expected the spell to take full effect, but it met the demands of the moment: Eingana had a chance to get away from Hawke’s descending claws. She barely got her blades out of the way in time to avoid wounding Hawke on the arm as she slipped past him. Anders gritted his teeth in approval.

“Knock him out!” he suggested to Eingana as Hawke was still shaking off the spell. Eingana nodded and raised her enchanted longsword, preparing to strike Hawke on the head with the flat of the blade while he was disoriented.

Anders was already rapidly weaving another spell, determined to take advantage of the opportunity he’d created. This time, he would try to stun Hawke by hypnotizing him into hearing deafening bangs that eclipsed all other noise and seeing blinding light everywhere he looked.

Having recovered from her blood magic duel, Merrill stepped up beside him with her curled wooden staff unstrapped. She prepared to strike Hawke at the same time, summoning glittering purple magic – not powered by blood this time, but by conventional mana.

Hawke straightened, rolled his shoulders, and turned around to face them all, spreading his claws at his sides. The spell had been strong enough to paralyze a qunari for an hour, but it had been little impediment to the entity’s power.

Fortunately, his opponents were ready. Before he’d completed his turn, Eingana darted in with her sword extended, the flat of the blade descending towards his head. As she struck him, a white bolt of power simultaneously lanced into Hawke from Anders’s staff and purple-grey energy condensed around him at Merrill’s command.

Hawke yelled in surprise and pain. The sound was like hollow glassware scraping against brick. It sent visible ripples of energy out into the room that left creeping discomfort on the skin in its wake. Yet Hawke collapsed to his hands and knees, jerking his head back and forth as though he was trying to dislodge an animal clinging to his face.

“Hit him again,” Anders murmured to Eingana. He looked at Merrill. “At the same time, both of us – sleep.”

The women nodded. Anders and Merrill prepared spells to send Hawke into a deep coma, holding them to cast simultaneously. Blade poised, Eingana waited for the right moment, hovering near Hawke as he snarled his confusion on all fours.

It almost worked. Eingana was drawing back with her blade to deliver the blow; Anders and Merrill were incanting in unison with one phrase remaining to complete their spells.
At the last moment Hawke reacted, moving with startling speed and manipulating magical forces faster than Anders had thought was fundamentally possible for any practitioner of magic, mage or demon.

It was as though his perceptions of the world were suspended for the span of one heartbeat. All sound and motion ceased, and he beheld only an empty void. There was no pain, but no other feeling, either

When he came back to himself, a swirl of red light was fading away from around his body. He, Merrill, Varric, and Eingana were suspended in the air surrounding Hawke, who stood in the middle of the room with his hands outstretched. All four of them were immobilized by irresistible forces, as Anders learned when he tried to move and found that he simply couldn’t.

He almost choked as despair welled up within him. For Andraste’s sake, what would it take to overpower this beast? Was there no way to defeat it without killing Hawke?

Anders couldn’t stand the thought that his failure to save Hawke might very well doom the city of Kirkwall to this monster’s malice. Perhaps they really should have alerted the templars, after all.

Satisfied that they were all firm in his magical grip, Hawke slowly lowered his hands. Long, worm-like sparks of power continued to twist around his wrists and arms. He looked from one of them to the next, observing the few squirms and wriggles that were all their mightiest efforts could produce.

His abyssal gaze finally landed on Anders.

“Love,” he said, the genderless depth and otherworldly resonance of his voice somehow not quite masking the gentle, chiding tone. “Why do you fight this? Why are you listening to these insects that just want to strike us and limit us?”

Anders couldn’t answer, and probably wouldn’t have even if he could. What did he have to say to such a creature? It might have looked like Hawke and even sounded a bit like him, but in truth it was an eldritch horror using his body as a puppet. The thought made Anders nauseous.

After a few long moments of uncomfortable silence, Hawke gave a tiny little shrug, as if he didn’t care that much anyway. He ran his gaze along his captives once again.

“I have an idea,” he intoned.

Anders stared, first in apprehension and then in amazement as change crept over Hawke. Subtle at first, it became increasingly obvious. The red glow faded from his eyes, followed by the sucking-void quality that made one seem to fall into them. What remained were simply fully black, beastlike eyes in a human face.

His stance changed as well, losing some of its uncharacteristic ramrod stiffness and becoming more hunched. His lips pulled back a little from his teeth as he reached up and pulled the gauntlets off first one hand, then the other. The long magical claws had already disappeared.

The end result was that he started to look a lot less like an eldritch monstrosity animating his body like a marionette and a lot more like a slightly-more-bestial-than-usual Michael Hawke.

“Let’s play a game,” he said, his voice almost normal. The mystical tone was still present, but much reduced from the heavy resonance that had earlier rattled everything from windows to ribcages.

“The four of you each have your own skills,” Hawke went on. “Far from insignificant, all of you – even alone. And in the labyrinth beneath us... oh, yes.”
A tremor that seemed to come from below briefly shook the walls and floor. More noises followed, too faint to interpret but numerous and ongoing.

“It’s been too long since I’ve tasted violence, or had a really interesting challenge,” he said. “Too long since I’ve smelled the fear of one who knows their fate and fights it anyway.”

He sounded almost wistful, now.

“Too long since I’ve tasted fresh blood, and revelled in my prey’s terror and agony as my blade rends their flesh.”

His gaze fell on Anders. Even though they’d lost the frightening void-like aspect, Anders could still practically feel Hawke’s eyes burning holes into his thoughts as he approached.

“Too long since I’ve tasted the carnal pleasure of flesh, bent to my will and utterly within my control,” Hawke whispered, slowly lifting one finger to stroke Anders under his chin.

Anders felt a flash of real terror creep up his spine. Part of him was afraid to know where this was going, but an even deeper part of him – the part he kept suppressed and hidden even from himself most of the time – felt a thrill of anticipation. That scared him almost as much as Hawke’s words.

Hawke formed his hand into a fist and then opened it in a gesture that looked gentle, if deliberate. All at once, the world warped around Anders in a sickening twist of red light.

He spun through banded, spiralling darkness, figures of shadows and light reaching out to him as he plummeted, shoving him this way or that. He fought to contain his nausea, squeezing his eyes shut and keeping a death grip on his staff.

At last it ended. With a final flash of light and a painful, stomach-turning lurch, he was thrown forwards onto a dusty floor. Anders coughed, his body wracked with residual throbs of pain. He almost threw up, but managed to fight down the reflex.

Panting, getting up onto his knees, he looked around.

He was in a dim corridor somewhere beneath the Hawke mansion. He had no idea where specifically, because this network of hallways mostly looked the same everywhere: dry wooden walls, thickly layered dust, the occasional lantern or candle for illumination. Now and then he could hear the creak of shifting old boards in the distance, and the cloying smell of mould was omnipresent.

The cellars of Hawke’s estate were extensive, and they bled indistinctly into the Undercity in several places. All but one of those entrances were supposed to be permanently sealed, but they would be no barrier to the abomination. Conceivably, Hawke could have dumped him a level below the common room, miles away from it in the twisting bowels of Darktown, or anywhere in between.

Growling his frustration, Anders clambered to his feet, using his staff as a crutch. There was no sign around him of Merrill, Varric, or Eingana, but given what Hawke had said before he’d sent Anders here, they had probably also been deposited somewhere in the labyrinth – probably far apart.

But for what purpose? Did Hawke intend to hunt them down for sport, one by one?

Anders shivered. What had the thing said? *Let’s play a game.*

“Fucking wonderful,” he muttered, mordantly.
Before he could think to do anything else, icy cold magic shot up through his body from his feet. A sinister voice filled his mind: _Be patient, my love._

His mind’s eye was suddenly filled with an image of Hawke’s face, eyes black and a feral grin on his face. His teeth and lips were bloody.

_I will find you_, he said.

A storm of abject, irrational terror engulfed Anders, totally repressing the logical part of his mind even as it tried to convince him that this emotion was magically induced. For almost a minute he was paralyzed with dread, curled into a ball against the wall and gibbering nonsense into his knees. He was unable to think in words, barely able to breathe through the insane, sourceless fear.

Finally it subsided, draining away almost to nothing... except for the certain knowledge that Hawke was out there in the shadows, somewhere. Coming for him.

Despite that, with his rational brain returned to him Anders was in no hurry to get moving. He took several minutes to catch his breath and slow his racing heart.

_I will find you_, Hawke had said. Then he’d given Anders a taste of what he wanted him to feel. No doubt the closer he came to following through on his threat, the worse the fear would get.

Was that what Anders had to look forward to – except with the added knowledge that the fear would be real, rather than induced from afar by magic?

Anders scowled as he climbed to his feet for a second time. _We’ll just see about that_, he thought angrily. It was long past time this creature paid for its arrogance and cruelty.

The talisman around his neck suddenly glowed and became warm, producing a comfortable sensation against the skin of his chest.

Anders barely noticed it, as an answering spark from deep within him had eclipsed all sensation. A cold, furious wrath was rising from the pit of his stomach with the harsh inevitability of the tide coming in. It spread throughout his body and along his limbs, making them tingle with the heat of righteous rage.

In that moment Anders realized that he was deeply, caustically _sick_ of this creature. It had tormented Hawke and usurped his body. It had tortured and abused Anders himself. It had harmed his friends and probably also unleashed a minor demonic invasion on the city. When and where would it end? What would it take to satisfy this monster’s appetites? And most importantly, what would it cost? How many more lives, innocent or otherwise, would be affected by its rampage? How many would be ended, and of those, how many would die in agony and terror?

It wouldn’t be just him, Anders knew. If he let the creature win, more than just Hawke and his friends would suffer. Many more.

_No more_, Anders vowed. Not a single person, ever again. He had had enough.

The spirit of Justice surged within him, stirred once more into seething activity. Vibrant blue energy raced along his limbs. Cracks opened in his skin through which blinding azure light shone. His eyes glowed with power.

Blue fire washed over his body, hardening and strengthening him and erasing the remnants of the wounds on his neck. Deep reservoirs of magic that Anders had forgotten he had ever had access to once more opened themselves to him.
“No more,” Anders said quietly, his voice resonant with Justice’s deep, burning ire. “This has gone on for too long already.”

Perhaps the attack of magical fear had been intended to spur him to run, to make him work himself up into that same terror on his own. All it had done was make Anders angry and utterly, brutally determined not to give in, ever again.

This thing had kept them all off balance and afraid. Now it had finally made a mistake. Anders would see Hawke free of its influence and the city spared its wrath, and he would make it pay for ever daring to cross either him or Hawke.

He swirled his staff in a solid, confident arc, casting out his magical senses in a wide net. He probed his surroundings thoroughly and established a detailed map in his mind.

He was several levels below the Hawke estate, not quite in Darktown but a considerable distance from the common room. He could sense several sparks of life within his awareness: Varric, Eingana, Merrill, and one that he thought was Hawke’s Mabari hound, Reaver.

There were others farther off; residents of Darktown, they were of no consequence. They would be safe from Hawke’s wrath unless he decided to leave the labyrinth, and Anders would prevent that from happening.

The first step was to reunite with his comrades. Varric was nearest to him, so Anders set off with a powerful stride.

The air crackled and swirled as blue fire burned the dust in his wake.

∞

Eingana was able to keep a grip on her blades as she was violently spun by Hawke’s magic down into the depths of the estate, but she was rather concerned about what might happen when the tumultuous journey came to an end. It would surely disappoint the creature if she ended up impaled on her own swords before it could torture and maul her to death – not that she’d find that much comfort.

She emerged from the spell several feet above a dirty grey floor. She had a moment, a split second, to get her swords out from under her falling body. She did it, managing not to disembowel herself. She still fell from several feet, however, and she landed face down, unable to break her fall with her hands.

She hit hard with a thump and a pained grunt, turning her face so as not to break her nose. The burning ache of the magic still pulsed through her, so she rested for a moment where she’d landed, catching her breath as she waited for the discomfort to subside.

Eingana couldn’t help a groan of pain as she pushed herself slowly to her feet. Her entire body hurt from the impact, particularly her chest and face. Once upright, she tested her body’s range of motion cautiously, glad to detect none of the awful, scraping pain that signified broken ribs. She would live, and luckily recover quite quickly thanks to the taint.

An inspection of her surroundings revealed that she was likely somewhere in the estate’s extensive cellars, but as to where specifically there was no way to know. The walls and floorboards were old, dusty, and otherwise nondescript. The stench of rot was strong.

Weak illumination came from down the corridor, where a battered lantern hung beside a doorway. A faint, warm glow flickered within the room, as though from one or two candles or a small fire.
When she held her breath and listened intently, Eingana could hear a distant, irregular thumping and a barely-audible series of clicks and scratches far ahead of her that was likely caused by rats. The thumps seemed to be getting more numerous the longer she listened.

Cautiously, Eingana approached the doorway, her footsteps utterly silent. She held her mundane longsword ready to strike and her enchanted blade down at her side, so that the flicker of its magic wouldn’t alert anyone in the room that might be watching for it.

When she reached the threshold, Eingana flattened herself against the wall and peered around it, slowly and carefully.

The room appeared to be a study or library, long disused. There was a bookshelf along one wall that still held some crumbling volumes in its corners. A ragged, moth-eaten sofa sagged in the middle of the room next to a broken table and the rotted remnants of an oval rug. The only sign of life was a fireplace, freshly dusted and with a small fire crackling merrily in its hearth.

As far as Eingana could tell, the room was empty. But who had lit the fire? It couldn’t be more than an hour old.

Suspicious, she moved around to stand in the doorway and get a better look at the entire room.

Instantly the fire exploded into a swarm of sparks and whirling flame. It shot towards the startled Warden-Commander as she leapt backwards with a gasp.

The cloud of living flame contorted from a loose vortex into a crude caricature of a man, his fingers tipped with claws. Even though the magical construct’s face was an indistinct blur of twisting fire, Eingana recognized Michael Hawke.

The construct opened its mouth and howled as it rushed at her, and though Eingana picked up the sound of a distant demonic battle cry, it seemed to come from a long way off.

Right before the fiery apparition reached her with its claws raised to strike, Eingana thrust her enchanted longsword out to meet it. Cleanly impaled, the image immediately dissipated, leaving only an uncomfortable blast of heat and ash to wash over her, accompanied by a far-away echo of distant laughter.

“So that’s how it’s going to be?” Eingana muttered, brushing soot off her face. “A game? Very well then, creature. We’ll see who’s still playing in the end.”

She entered the room to look around, just in case there really was anything worthwhile in there, but the fire had gone out when she’d sprung its trap. Without its illumination, it was nearly impossible to see anything.

She tried using the lantern, sheathing her mundane longsword to pick it up. Its panes were cloudy with ancient soot, and its light barely reached further than her blade could.

Eingana turned up the wick as much as she dared, but her diligence was not to pay off this time. Aside from the ruined furniture, there was nothing in the room.

She exhaled slowly and thoughtfully as she headed back out into the corridor. The lantern revealed a pathetically tiny circle around her, and its supply of oil wouldn’t last long, but it was better than trying to make her way blind. If and when its light failed, she could at least make her way by the faint glow of her sword’s magic.

She started off down the hall, thinking.
Anders, Merrill, and Varric were likely down here somewhere as well. If she could find them, they would certainly stand a better chance together against the creature than alone.

But the entity influencing Hawke clearly had powerful magic at its command. If it could see her and taunt her with fiery constructs from afar, what were the chances it would allow its prey to unite against it? Furthermore, what were Eingana’s chances of finding one of the others before Hawke came for her, or killed them?

She knew little about the layout of Darktown. This was in fact only the second time she’d ever been down here, the first being to lure Hawke over Anders’s magical trap. Bodahn had advised her against exploring the cellars, warning that it was easy to get lost in the endless identical corridors.

Eingana hadn’t doubted him then, and she didn’t now. She counted herself lucky that the corridor she was following hadn’t branched yet, because she had no idea which way was best. For all she knew, she was heading deeper into the maze.

The darkness around her was stuffy, and she couldn’t shake a persistent, uneasy feeling that it was pressing in on her. She was grateful for the lantern and the minimal security of its unsteady light. She was not looking forward to having to make her way by the glow of her sword.

As she rounded a ninety-degree corner, Eingana’s sensitive ears picked up noise close by, and she froze.

The clicking and scratching she’d heard earlier was considerably louder here. There was no way it was coming from rats in the walls; its source was unmistakably just a little ways ahead of her, shrouded in the darkness beyond the lantern’s meager radius. It sounded like a large animal pawing around.

Eingana’s heart picked up. Hawke’s dog had been down in the cellars with Merrill before he’d escaped his prison. If Reaver was still down here, he could be a big help to Eingana. Mabari were smart enough that she could ask him to help her find the others by name, and his nose would lead her right to them.

As long as he cooperated, of course. The company would be nice too.

“Reaver?” Eingana called softly, raising the lantern high in a futile attempt to extend its light farther.

The scratching and snuffling stopped. Before she had time to worry she’d been mistaken, an enthusiastic bark answered her from the darkness.

She heard the fall of heavy paws heading in her direction, but before the dog could take more than a few steps, a loud crack shook the corridor. Light flashed ahead, blinding Eingana’s dark-adjusted eyes. She recoiled, reflexively squeezing her eyes shut, but it was too late to prevent searing spots from crawling across her vision.

A spike of fear touched her heart as she heard a pained whine from the Mabari. The entity controlling Hawke had access to his memories; it would surely know his dog’s capabilities, and what a boon Reaver would be to her in these shadow-choked corridors. It might well try to prevent the two from reaching one another, but would the memory of Hawke’s affection for his dog be enough to stop it from killing him?

“Reaver?” Eingana called out, louder this time in her concern.

She stepped forward, still blinking furiously to clear the spots from her eyes. She was immediately knocked backwards by a wall of magical force. The burst of light that accompanied it set back her
attempt at recovering her night vision considerably – notwithstanding the near-physical pain it caused her eyes.

Reaver whined again, so she at least knew he was alive, but Hawke was apparently determined not to allow the Warden-Commander access to his dog, or vice versa.

Eingana made a frustrated noise as she recovered her feet. She spent some time rubbing her temples, blinking rapidly and trying to assuage the sudden headache the bright flashes had given her. Eventually she could see again – at least, as well as she had with the old lantern – and she would be prepared for future attacks of blinding light.

Carefully, squinting, Eingana reached out with the tip of her sword. She met increasingly difficult resistance before she’d fully extended her arm.

Spidery threads of light sprouted in midair from the point of her sword. When she pushed, the threads extended further and glowed brighter, and a shimmering barrier became visible in the same plane.

Annoyed, Eingana pulled her arm back and delivered a hard downward stroke with her blade. The very air before her seemed to splinter, but with her eyes shielded the eruption of light was nowhere near as debilitating as the previous ones had been.

There was a sound like a soft, stuttering thunderclap, and the light faded. Eingana strode forward unimpeded, and a smirk crossed her face.

She kept her sword out in front of her in case the barrier that had halted Reaver was still intact. It was – she ran into it a dozen paces later.

To her intense relief, the dog was unharmed on the other side. He bounced around happily as she approached.

“Stand back, Reaver, and close your eyes,” Eingana said. The dog obeyed, backing away with a soft woof of acknowledgement and closing his eyes.

Eingana smiled, missing her own Mabari. She closed her eyes and stabbed hard with her sword. The second barrier broke, and Reaver bounded up to her, barking joyously.

“Hey there, doggo,” Eingana said affectionately. “Calm down now, and listen to me.”

Reaver stopped his boisterous on-the-spot dancing and sat down, looking at her attentively.

“Thank you. I appreciate the consideration. Now, look – I know I’m not your imprinted partner.”

Reaver narrowed his eyes at her. Eingana took this as confirmation of her words.

“Right. But you know your actual master is possessed, right? That was him that just tried to keep us away from each other with silly barriers.”

Reaver growled and snapped his teeth aggressively.

“No, of course not,” Eingana said hastily. “You’re right, it wasn’t him. Poor choice of words. But there is an evil, evil thing controlling his body. It’s using him against his will, and it’s that thing that made the barriers.”

Reaver made a sad whining noise.
“Exactly. He put me down here, and Merrill, Varric, and Anders too... down in this dark, dank, cramped....” Eingana shuddered as she looked around. “Creepy maze of corridors and abandoned rooms. He’s trying to kill us, and he’ll succeed if we don’t think of a way to stop him.”

Reaver tilted his head questioningly.

“Yes, really,” she said. “And once it’s done with us, that thing will consume Hawke utterly. It’ll use your master’s nicely-shaped muscles and his stupidly big sword to go on a killing spree, and he’ll kill everyone, Reaver. Humans, dwarves, elves... even dogs.”

Reaver snarled and barked at her angrily.

“I know! What kind of monster, right? So will you help me find the others? If we can reunite with Anders, Merrill, and Varric, we’ll have a chance together to save Hawke. First we’ll have to fight him to get him under control, but when Wynne arrives, she’ll know what to do to get him back. Your master as he should be, normal and sane.”

Reaver blinked and pawed the ground a bit, pulling off a convincingly confused expression despite his lack of human features.

“Fair point,” Eingana relented. “Not sane, per se, but at the same relative sanity level as he was before the thing took control of him. Just as bloodthirsty and generally pissed off he usually is, or so I’m told, but without the awful demonic creature trying to take over his body and kill all his friends.”

Reaver barked happily several times. He really is just like his master, Eingana thought.

“Partners, then?” she said. “We have a deal? You help me find the others and help us get out of these tunnels, or whatever they are, and I’ll help you get your master back like he was?”

Reaver looked at her like he was considering her offer. He opened and closed his mouth a few times, licking his teeth.

“And I’ll throw in a lamb bone for... trust, and as a gesture of goodwill,” said Eingana, getting the picture.

Reaver danced around exuberantly and woofed his approval.

Eingana sighed in relief. “Thank you, Reaver. I promise not to abuse your trust. Lead on, then – Varric, Merrill, or Anders, whoever’s closest.”

Reaver put his nose to the floor and began sniffing industriously. He padded off into the darkness. Eingana followed with the lantern, keeping her sword at the ready.

“Maker, it’s like I’m back in Ferelden,” she commented to no one in particular, breaking into a light jog to keep up with Reaver. “The Free Marches are nice, but you just can’t bargain with the dogs here like you can at home.”
Gloom

Chapter Summary

Are you sure?

Merrill advanced through the dingy corridors at a creep. Her staff was lit, but barely bright enough to see the floor in front of her. She put each foot down with the utmost care for silence. Her entire body was tense as she listened hard for the slightest noise. Her heart was pounding, but she forced herself to take deep, even breaths.

She had no idea where she was, but she was certain that Hawke (or whatever he’d become) was hunting her and out for vengeance. She’d kept him pinned against the wall with her magic for several minutes, and she’d seen how angry it had made him. Of course he was always angry, but even more so since he’d been possessed, and especially at her after that last fight.

Merrill had long been awed by Hawke’s sheer ferocity in combat. She couldn’t help being impressed by the mighty strength with which he swung his blade, and how frequently he seemed to find limbs or necks with it. She’d seen him impale men in heavy plate and cut Qunari soldiers in half. Even when his blows didn’t leave his enemies in pieces, they almost never missed.

And his muscles moved in such nice ways when he did it. Not that her own people were unattractive, but there were no elves Merrill knew of who were physically built like Hawke. She’d always taken a secret pleasure in watching him fight.

That had all been before it was her on the receiving end of his fury. Now, of course, she was quite terrified and fervently hoping she would never learn what those bisected Qunari had felt during their last, agonizing moments.

Merrill knew, without a shred of doubt, that Hawke was coming for her. At least the poor sods he laid into with his greatsword only tended to suffer his wrath for brief periods before they died. Merrill had been down here for nearly an hour already.

When Hawke made his move, she would have one chance – if she even saw him coming – to disable him long enough to flee.

And then he would recover, and come after her again anyway. Basically she was doomed.

Merrill would have gladly found a little nook to hide in and stayed there if she thought it would work, but her only real chance at survival lay in finding the others. She had no idea how they were going to incapacitate the possessed Champion without killing him, but surely they could figure something out.

Her own blood magic was somewhat effective, and Anders had Justice to call upon. Eingana had her enchanted longsword and a Grey Warden’s endurance. Varric... Varric was really smart. If Fenris, Isabela, and Aveline somehow got word and showed up to help as well, their chances would only improve.

Together, they would have to be enough. All they needed to do was keep Hawke contained until
Wynne arrived.

Still, as eager as Merrill was to reunite with her friends, she couldn’t muster the courage to move faster than a creep. The floorboards and walls down here were creaky and old, and she didn’t dare make more noise than she had to.

A faint rustle made her pause. She held her breath and listened.

After about half a minute, she made out the sound of soft footsteps above her. Someone was passing through the corridor on the level above.

Merrill waited, her body as still as the stale air around her, convinced that it was Hawke and he could hear the pounding of her heart. Any moment now, he would blast down through the ceiling and commence carving her up with his stupidly big sword.

Really, Merrill thought-babbled to herself, why was his sword that big? It didn’t seem necessary at all. Michael Hawke could have cut a person in half with a cheese knife if he really wanted to. The big sword was surely a lot faster, but Aveline had one that was a reasonable sized which seemed to work just as well. Aveline could even carry a shield in her other hand, and that doubled as a weapon as often as it protected her.

Merrill tried to picture Hawke using a shield. She couldn’t. The best she could come up with was him picking up a round one from a dead person and throwing it at someone else.

Gradually, the footsteps receded into the distance.

Two minutes after silence had fallen once more, Merrill began moving again.

A while later (it could have been anywhere from ten to twenty minutes) she arrived at an intersection, the first she’d seen since she’d been sent down here. There were three choices. Which to take?

Merrill risked increasing her staff’s light output a fraction so she could see farther ahead in each direction. She made out nothing except more dusty, mouldy floor.

Any one of these passages might lead her to Varric, Anders, or Eingana, or even back to the familiar cellars beneath the Hawke estate. Of course they might also lead her right to Hawke himself, or get her even more hopelessly lost. There was no way to know which was the best choice, if any.

It occurred to her that the footsteps she’d heard might have belonged to one of the others. Varric, perhaps, or Anders; Eingana would never have plodded her feet like that.

Merrill would have given a great deal to have her wisecracking dwarf friend at her side right now. He would have just picked a corridor and stuck to his choice, rather than dithering over all the unknown variables.

She would have welcomed Anders’s calm insight and finely developed arcane senses, too. He was much better at using magic to find his way through confusing, unfamiliar environments than she was.

Should she have called out when she’d heard the footsteps?

No – that would have been foolish. All she would have done was signal her position to Hawke.

Merrill fretted silently in the darkness for another minute or two, even though she knew she would have to stop waffling and pick a path eventually. If her fear of danger froze her with indecision for much longer, she risked allowing the actual danger to catch up with her.
The problem was that she wasn’t any good at this sort of thing. Merrill did not consider herself an adventurer. She was a Keeper, despite being exiled from her clan – a sage, guide, and storyteller, not a trailblazer. Or so she preferred to think of herself.

It was beside the point. Hawke was the adventurer, and she was just a friend of his who sometimes tagged along on his quests when she didn’t have her own stuff to do. She was his friendly local blood mage. She helped him by fighting nasty people who used the same kind of magic she was good at, and by taking out sneaky types who were going for his dog or his back while he was hacking up whatever was in front of him. She never had to decide where they went or who they fought.

Merrill asked herself: what would Hawke do, in this situation?

Obviously, savage her to death. Bad example.

What would Eingana do? She was a competent adventurer, and certainly not evil; she was the Hero of Ferelden, after all.

Regroup, Merrill thought. Strength in numbers. She was doing that already, so yes, good.

Get back into known territory so she could stop creeping around like a terrified... snail. Also good.

Finding the others and finding familiar territory were of equal priority, Merrill decided. She and her friends would be safer together, but if she could get back up to the estate cellars and find the laboratory, she’d have a few more magical options at her disposal. And from there she could reach the ground floor and summon help.

All this thinking was making her feel a little calmer and more in control of the situation, but she still had the problem of deciding which direction to take. The possibility that she might head deeper into Darktown or further from her friends still rankled. She wanted – no, she needed to be sure.

Merrill chewed her lower lip anxiously. She didn’t like using blood magic to solve problems that could be solved in other ways, for a variety of reasons. And there was arcane magic that could be used to find paths or people. She just didn’t know any of it.

She did know a blood magic spell that would indicate which direction she ought to take to find the nearest living person. Right now that was sounding pretty good.

Merrill bit off a small sigh as she realized she’d talked herself into doing it. Well, there was nothing left but to follow through.

Holding her staff in the crook of her arm, Merrill drew her knife and carefully reopened one of the casting wounds on her forearm. She frowned at the pain, but much experience using blood magic had numbed her instinct to make a noise.

She replaced her knife in its sheath and dipped her fingers in the pooling blood on her arm, using her magical senses to tap into the symbolic life force and unbind it to power her spell.

Dim red magic flitted around her fingers as she held them out to each of the three corridors in turn.

Varric, she thought. Anders. Eingana. Where are you?

There was nobody for a great distance down the right-hand corridor or straight ahead. But there was a heartbeat within walking distance down the left-hand path. It was elevated, which made her think it might be one of her friends – also alone in the dark, experiencing uncertainty and fear.
Still being careful not to make a noise, Merrill closed her hand over her casting wound, applying pressure to stop the bleeding faster. She headed off down the left-hand corridor, allowing herself to feel a little trickle of hope.

Briefly, her step faltered. What if the heartbeat she’d sensed was Hawke, or some other trick he’d devised to lead her into a trap?

After only a moment’s consideration, Merrill shook her head and kept going. She simply could not afford to keep doubting her choices. She had to commit to something and do it, or she’d certainly die down here.

If she did run into Hawke, well... she would just have to do her best.

That was a very brave attitude to take, Merrill thought, pleased with herself. Maybe she wasn’t such a bad adventurer after all.

As she was thinking that, hot breath touched her neck and fingers of cold, sharp metal trailed lines down her right arm. Directly beside her ear, Hawke whispered “Shhh... don’t make a sound.”

Merrill screamed and broke into a run. Hawke’s gauntlet scratched her arm painfully as she tore away from him. His deep, resonant laughter welled up behind her, making the walls and ceiling tremble.

She stumbled once as she fled, nearly choking on a terrified sob as she kept herself from falling. She hurtled onward into the darkness.

∞

On her way to the Hawke estate, Isabela found herself wondering (not for the first time) just why she’d returned to Kirkwall with the Tome of Koslun.

The answer always the same: Hawke. Things always seemed to come back to him. Aveline had once described the man as ‘the center of a hurricane’. Isabela, who had experienced actual hurricanes, could find little fault with the metaphor.

Trouble naturally arose in the effort to stay close enough to Hawke to remain within his sphere of deadly calm. Past a certain critical distance, people and things were torn apart by the chaos and destruction that swirled around him.

Sometimes Isabela wondered why she didn’t just try to put enough distance between herself and Hawke to avoid the danger completely. So far, she’d kept finding reasons to stay.

She’d stuck to the shadows during her walk from the Hanged Man, avoiding numerous minor skirmishes between the Guard and the forces of evil. She’d observed with interest that each squadron of guards had a few templars with them, annulling demonic magic and using their lyrium-enhanced abilities to tear shades and rage demons apart.

Apparently Captain Man-Hands had managed to get the Templar Order to fall in line. Isabela was impressed, although not greatly surprised. Aveline was awkward and comically uptight, but she got things done.

Isabela was rather less impressed by the sheer number of demons that were wreaking havoc throughout the city. She’d counted three desire demons in Lowtown alone, and one more in Hightown that had been directing shades against the guards with tactical intelligence on par with a human commander. And that had just been along her route to Hawke’s mansion.
She didn’t care to make a guess as to why this was happening. But it was obvious that the impromptu demonic siege was intensifying, not fizzling out. More powerful demons were beginning to breach the Veil, and in force. She thankfully hadn’t seen any pride or fear demons yet, but she had an uneasy feeling that it was only a matter of time.

As for the Hanged Man, it had been doing its usual business when she’d left. Not even incursions from the spirit world could deter the most determined alcoholics, and in fact the present climate seemed to be driving more people to drink.

Driven by spirits to spirits of another kind. Isabela snickered at her own mental pun.

She could hardly fault the ones who’d sought solace in a cup. She’d be after a stiff one too, if she’d seen her friends or loved ones shredded, burned alive, drained of life force, or possessed and mutated into malevolent horrors.

Demons, if they had no other redeeming features, were certainly inventive.

Isabela was adept at finding humour in the grimmest of situations, but she wasn’t eager for the city to be overrun. Not before she’d found a ship, at least. If only she could think of something, anything she could do to ameliorate the situation.

Normally when something like this happened, she went looking for Michael Hawke. Stay within the eye of the storm, and all that. And despite the danger Hawke presented at the moment, she still kind of felt like that was her best option. Hawke was the fulcrum of whatever was going on – if there was something she could do, the people trying to keep him contained would know what it was.

As she’d expected, the square outside Hawke’s mansion was deserted when she finally reached it. It was still odd to see a place by daylight, when it was usually its busiest, as quiet and empty as if it were midnight.

She did see a lot of burn marks and damaged masonry, enough bloodstains to make her nervous, and two corpses. One wore mangled armour she didn’t recognize – neither a templar nor a city guard. The other body looked like a merchant.

Isabela gave these signs of battle a wide berth, keeping to the few shadows at the square’s edge as she made her way around toward Hawke’s door. Usually this time of day and year, when the sun was high in the sky, was the least viable for sneaking around Hightown. But today had followed the gloomy example of yesterday, with its unseasonable chill and overcast skies. That at least gave her a bit of gloom to work with.

It was unnerving not to hear much from the rest of the city besides distant clashes of battle, screams, and the occasional explosion. Surely there were just a few particularly intense skirmishes going on relatively nearby – the entire city couldn’t be choked with demons already. Could it?

“Isabela,” said a voice as she approached the door to Hawke’s mansion, making her jump.

It was Fenris, his arms folded as he leaned against the wall beside the door. He straightened as she sidled up to him.

How had she not noticed him before he spoke? Isabela prided herself on being quite perceptive – and for knowing nearly every trick there was for staying hidden, if not all of them. Then again, Fenris had a knack for keeping even her guessing.

“Hi there,” she greeted him. “Out for a relaxing day-time stroll, are we? Taking a break from brooding?”
“I’m keeping watch,” Fenris informed her.

“For what? Looters?”

Fenris arched one eyebrow. “Demons,” he said.

Isabela made an ‘Oh, right’ expression, and the corners of Fenris’s mouth quirked up a bit. She smiled.

“Seen any?” she asked.

“A few.”

“Have you-

Her question was cut off as a tremor rippled through the city. The ground beneath their feet shook as a sound like close-by thunder rumbled through the square.

Startled, Fenris had to clutch some of the greenery festooning the mansion to stop himself from losing his balance. Isabela’s sea legs emerged spontaneously, keeping her stable as she rode out the shuddering of the ground.

Feeling quite pleased with herself, Isabela resumed her question as soon as the tremor subsided, charitably allowing Fenris to recover his dignity without comment. What might have caused the tremor, she refused to even contemplate.

“Have you checked for demons inside the mansion too?” she said.

“Not within the last hour,” replied Fenris. “The last time I looked in, Hawke was securely contained. Eingana is within, and Merrill and Varric stayed the night to help if necessary. The Enchanter is due to arrive later today.”

Isabela folded her arms and glanced upwards. “And you’ve been right here since then? The whole time?”

“I took a walk,” Fenris said suspiciously. “Why?”

Isabela raised her eyebrows and nodded pointedly. Fenris turned around to follow her gaze. Several windows on the estate’s upper levels were cracked, and a few were broken.

“Did that happen yesterday, or today?” said Isabela. “I don’t remember noticing it last night.”

“No,” Fenris said slowly. “That is new.”

“Shall we check inside and see how things are going, then?” Isabela suggested.

Frowning, Fenris gestured to the door for her to enter first. She did so.

The antechamber was empty. She could see into the common room, which also seemed empty. Hawke’s enchanted cage wasn’t visible from this angle.

There was an eerie stillness about the place that set Isabela’s nerves on edge. No sound came from within the mansion, except for the breeze whispering through the windows. It felt the same in here as it did in the square outside.

“Hello?” she called. “Bodahn?”
“Bodahn left with his son some time ago, to shop,” Fenris said as he entered behind her.

“During a demonic invasion?” Isabela asked, looking around at him incredulously. Fenris shrugged.

Isabela tried again, calling loudly so that her voice might carry into the depths of the house. “Eingana! Merrill! Anders! Varric!”

There was no answer.

“I don’t like this,” she muttered.

Fenris’s scowl made it apparent that he didn’t either. He sniffed the air.

“Do you smell that?” he asked.

Isabela frowned, closed her eyes and inhaled.

It took her a few whiffs, but she picked up what Fenris was talking about. Aside from the usual smells she associated with Hawke’s home, there was a hint of something else. It was unfamiliar to her, but there was definitely something off about it – like it was tinged with rot.

“Yes,” she said. “What is it?”

“Saffron,” Fenris said darkly.

Isabela had no idea what that was supposed to signify. Ignoring her questioning look, Fenris moved past her into the common room. She followed.

Both of them moved with caution, looking around for any sign of what might be wrong. That turned out to be unnecessary, for the problem was obvious as soon as they entered the room: Hawke was gone.

Fenris began cursing vehemently in Tevene. Isabela grimaced as she came around him to see the cause of his annoyance.

“Shit,” she said, distilling his sentiment.

What were the chances Hawke was just... doing okay, and had been let out for a walk? She could hope, right?

“Look,” Fenris growled, pointing.

Isabela followed his gaze to the burst manacles on the floor. From them her attention moved on to the warped, blackened halves of the metal collar.

“Oh,” she said softly. No chance at all, then.

Blade already drawn, Fenris slipped away to search the rest of the house.

Isabela went over to check the writing desk on the off chance someone might have left a note. No one had.

She went over to where the magical barrier had confined Hawke. No trace of Anders’s magic remained, not even a circular mark on the carpet.

She nudged the discarded manacles with her foot. She was a bit sad that they were broken, but the
feeling was a long way down her current list of emotional priorities.

The stretched and twisted scraps of metal that had been the collar held her gaze for longer. What kind of muscular/magical force could do that to inscribed silverite?

What would that same force do to a person? She shuddered to think of it.

Fenris re-entered the room. Isabela looked at him hopefully, but he only shook his head.

“But...” Isabela was growing more worried by the moment. “Where is everybody? Where’s the dog? Hawke didn’t...”

She swallowed involuntarily. When she spoke again, her voice was hushed.

“He didn’t kill them, did he? He couldn’t have. There’d be... signs of battle. Bodies.”

She didn’t want to seriously consider the possibility. It was bad enough that Hawke was possessed by a scary eldritch Thing, whatever kind of Thing it was. His sheer hotness alone was motivation enough to keep him around and in his right mind, not to mention his talent for comedic gold by way of irate snarking.

If Isabela cared to be honest with herself, she liked him a lot as a person too. After all, the list of people for whom she’d have risked the Arishok’s wrath was extremely short, and he was on it.

But the others – even Hawke’s odd little manservants, who were hopefully unharmed – had won her over too. Merrill and Varric were two of the best friends she’d ever had, and she even considered Anders a friend, despite their occasional personality clashes.

So she was dearly hoping that Fenris would deploy his usual cold logic to disabuse her of the notion that any of them might have perished. He disappointed her hugely by doing the exact opposite.

“He may well have,” he said. “I’d even call it likely. Look there – burn marks on the carpet.”

Isabela looked. An intricate charred imprint was faintly visible in one spot. The design was familiar, and after a moment’s thought Isabela recognized it as Anders’s paralysis glyph.

“And blood, over here,” Fenris said from near the door to the cellar. “A few spots... not as if from a grievous wound, but perhaps-”

“Blood magic,” Isabela finished for him, and he nodded grimly.

“Merrill,” Isabela said with an ache in her heart. “Oh, Kitten.”

“They are not necessarily dead,” Fenris reminded her. “There are no bodies here, or elsewhere in the mansion. I didn’t examine every room, but the only obvious signs of battle are here.”

“So what? For all we know he might have killed them and... and ate them, or something.” Why had she said that? Why?

“That hardly seems likely,” said Fenris. “I rather think he may have chased them into the cellars.”

He gestured towards the cellar door, which was slightly ajar.

Isabela frowned in that direction. She’d been down there a few times, and she didn’t like it. It was like Darktown – it was Darktown, in a few places – except even darker and dustier, and with less people. Down there a person could take a wrong turn, end up in the Undercity, and become
hopelessly lost.

Isabela sighed dramatically. “Well... I suppose we should – FENRIS!”

Fenris whirled at the same time Isabela shouted her warning, raising his greatsword just in time to prevent gnarled, clawed hands from descending across his face. The cellar door was shoved open the rest of the way and a partially decomposed corpse staggered up the last step, swinging at Fenris a second time.

Fenris backed up a step, adjusted his stance a little, and then cut calmly with his blade, bisecting the rotting carcass with a single swing. It fell in pieces to the floor, although the upper half continued to claw ineffectually at his feet.

“Undead,” Fenris spat. He stomped on the corpse’s head until its futile thrashing ceased.

“Bloody Void,” Isabela muttered, fingering the daggers she’d drawn without consciously being aware of it. “Where did that thing even come from?”

“The Veil is likely thin down there,” Fenris said. “Thinner than the rest of Kirkwall, even. They may have been summoned by Hawke’s demon to prevent us from coming after it.”

He backed up further as a chorus of groaning and grunting arose from the darkness of the cellar. More undead hands became visible, dragging and clawing themselves into the light of the common room. The powerful stench of their decaying flesh wafted out of the cellar with them, and Isabela stifled a gag.

“If one of them gets close enough, will you do the magical fisting thing? Just for me?” she asked Fenris hopefully, not taking her eyes off the writhing mass slowly emerging from the stairway.

“I suggest you pay more attention to defending yourself than to my magical fisting thing,” Fenris said, but Isabela could tell he was amused.

The first corpse staggered to its feet, lugging a rusted, filthy longsword in one hand. It made for Isabela, slowly raising the sword to strike. She darted forward and delivered a hearty kick to the zombie’s head, sending it flailing backwards and knocking over several of its ghastly brethren behind it.

Fenris took advantage of their incapacitation, lunging forwards and stabbing the confused ones through the face with his blade one after another. Those he ‘killed’ immediately fell still. Vaporous demonic energy dissipated from the macabre shells, accompanied by otherworldly groans and hisses of rage. The cacophony from below did not abate.

“More coming?” said Isabela, annoyed. She’d tried so hard to avoid demons throughout the city, and when she finally got where she was going, not only were the dead rising, but they were doing so in number.

Fenris went over to the door long enough to peer down the stairs, then retreated quickly, nodding.

“I can’t imagine there were that many corpses in Hawke’s cellar,” he remarked. “They must have been buried in the walls or sealed crypts.”

“Corpses, buried in the walls,” Isabela muttered. “Rising out of the cellar to eat our flesh. How utterly, utterly charming.”

“It happens in places like this.”
“I’ve noticed. You know, sometimes I really hate Kirkwall. I can’t believe I didn’t bring any fire bombs.”

“You came all the way from Lowtown during an incursion of this scale and you didn’t bring any fire bombs?” Fenris asked her incredulously.

“I was trying to be stealthy, okay?” Isabela retorted. The next wave of zombies was beginning to climb over their dead-again comrades. “Throwing grenades into a horde of demons isn’t the best way to keep out of sight.”

A thought struck her. “Although... hang on.”

She went over to the wall below the mezzanine, where a number of chests sat between the writing desk and the hearth. Isabela opened one of them and rifled through its contents.

Fenris glanced at her curiously, not taking his eyes off the cellar door for more than a moment. A few corpses that had clawed their way ahead of the pack were rewarded with his greatsword through their heads as soon as they entered the common room.

“Hawke lets me keep some stuff here, for when I come around looking for adventure and he indulges me,” Isabela explained, shifting aside several sealed jars of her favourite plant toxins. “Aha! There you are,” she murmured as she found what she was looking for: a trio of round, deceptively small glass bottles. The liquid inside was translucent and had an oily sheen.

“Thank you, past me.”

“Sooner rather than later would be appreciated,” Fenris said, voice rising slightly. His lyrium tattoos were starting to glow softly in his agitation.

Several mouldering, dirt-encrusted bodies were now stumbling out of the cellar. Most promptly tripped over the pile of their defeated ilk; the lucky ones were cut up as Fenris darted into range just long enough to strike before retreating again.

“Here we go,” Isabela said, returning to his side. She selected one of the bottles and clipped the other two by their hooked necks to her belt. “Might want to back up a bit, pet.”

Fenris did as she suggested. More undead were piling up on the stairs, pushing those at the front into the common room. When a good handful had shuffled into view and were making their way forward, Isabela took careful aim.

“Sorry about your wallpaper, Hawke,” she said apologetically as she lobbed the bottle.

With a tinkle of breaking glass and a whoosh, the possessed corpses were suddenly awash in flame. Their quiet groans rose into an unholy chorus of wails and shrieks as they burned.

Isabela winced, more at the noise than out of any kind of sympathy, while Fenris watched with a grim smirk. One by one, the undead collapsed into foul heaps of charred, reeking matter. Fenris easily dispatched the few that made it far enough to threaten him or Isabela.

The flames belched greasy smoke that carried a truly horrifying stench, occasionally flickering exotic colours as spirits fled their ruined hosts. Isabela looked around for some possible relief, not wanting to leave Hawke’s mansion stinking of burning undead, but all the windows in the room were already open or broken.

A sudden commotion in the antechamber made them both spin around to face that direction,
weapons raised. But it was just Bodahn and Sandal, returning from the market. Isabela lowered her daggers with a relieved smile, glad to see them unhurt.

“Goodness me,” Bodahn said from behind a bulging paper sack of groceries. “The city is in absolute-”

He stopped walking and talking abruptly as the stench hit him like a wall. He peered around his sack and saw Isabela and Fenris through the doorway.

“Mistress Isabela?” Bodahn said. Next to him, Sandal was making a face and had his hands over his nose.

“Hi, guys,” Isabela said. “Glad you’re okay. Wow – are the merchants really still selling, with the demons and everything?”

“I tell you, it was a chore to find one open for business,” Bodahn admitted as he removed his traveling boots. “But there are certain essentials we could no longer do without, demons or no demons. We ourselves ran afoul of a few shades on the way back, but they were no match for my boy’s enchantments.”

He smiled proudly at Sandal, who clapped his hands and said “Enchantment!” with his usual uncomplicated enthusiasm.

Bodahn entered the common room and his face grew pale as he took in the pile of smoldering zombies and the lack of Hawke.

“Where is... blessed ancestors! What happened here?”

“We’ve had a setback,” Fenris informed him.

Isabela rolled her eyes and went to help the unsettled dwarf with his sack, carrying it to the writing desk. Sandal looked at the carnage with wide eyes.

“Is everyone alright?” Bodahn asked with concern. “Where is Master Hawke?”

“He appears to have broken his confinement,” Fenris said, gesturing to the destroyed metal collar. Bodahn’s face, already pale, became positively ashen.

“Oh, dear Paragons,” he whispered. Having put down the sack, Isabela went back for Bodahn himself, leading him to the chair at the desk. He sank into it, patting her hand in a grateful, distracted manner.

“Is he... the others? Do you know what’s happened to them, messeres?”

“We just got here,” Isabela explained. “They don’t seem to be anywhere in the house. We haven’t checked the cellar yet, but before we could, well....” She gestured to the undead.

All of them eyed the cellar door. The awful smell of burning corpses made it impossible to tell by their stench alone if more were approaching, but there was at least no more of their telltale hissing.

“It’s not looking good,” Isabela concluded.

Bodahn had one hand over his chest. Isabela was struck by how very old he looked. How long did dwarves typically live? She didn’t know. Bodahn wasn’t exactly ancient, but he wasn’t young, either.
“Should we... call for help?” Bodahn asked anxiously. “From Captain Aveline, perhaps? Or... I know Master Anders does not wish to involve the templars just yet, but....”

“Aveline has her hands full,” said Fenris. “I think we should wait a few minutes to see if more undead emerge from the cellars. By the sounds of it, there were a lot more down there than what came up the stairs. If things up here stay quiet, I intend to go down there and search. If Hawke or any of the others are still here, that is surely where they’ll be.”

“Good idea,” Isabela said. She heaved a reluctant sigh. “I guess... I’ll go with you. I hate those bloody dark tunnels, but you shouldn’t go down there alone.”

Fenris nodded his thanks.

“I... will remain here, then, in case any of them make their way back from – from wherever they are,” Bodahn said. “And someone must be here to receive Enchanter Wynne when she arrives.”

Fenris shook his head. “I do not think that’s wise,” he said. “It is much more likely that Hawke will return here before any of the others do. You can see what he did to the enchanted collar. The beast has overtaken him. I doubt even Sandal’s enchantments could keep him at bay for long.”

And if we meet him, Isabela wondered silently, how will we keep him at bay at all?

“I suppose you’re right, messere,” said Bodahn. “But where will we go?”

“I heard some guards talking on my way here,” Isabela offered. “They were telling people to go to the Viscount’s Keep. The guards are protecting civilians there whose homes have been invaded or destroyed by demons.”

“Wise,” said Fenris. “The Keep isn’t far. I suggest you and Sandal make your way there soon, if not now – but try to stay out of sight.”

Bodahn nodded. “Then that is what we’ll do. Thank you for everything you’ve done, and are planning to do, messere.” He nodded to Isabela. “And you as well, mistress.”

Isabela smiled resignedly, too nervous even to quip about him calling her ‘mistress’.

“If you see her, tell Aveline what’s happened here,” Fenris said. “But only her – for now, at least.”

“Very well.” Bodahn stood. “I really should leave a message for Enchanter Wynne, too. If she is to be of any help, she must know what’s going on. And please, allow me to find some lanterns before you enter the cellars – those corridors are quite extensive, after all, and few of them are properly lit.”

“That would be helpful,” Fenris said.

“I’ll do the note,” Isabela said. “You go find some lanterns.”

Bodahn bustled off to see to his task, taking Sandal with him.

Fenris set about using his feet to shove the heaps of partially disintegrated bodies away from the cellar door, making it easier to enter the steep, narrow staircase. Isabela sat down at the writing desk and penned a brief note to Wynne – using circumlocutious language to avoid explicitly describing the situation, just in case.

Presently Bodahn returned with a light traveling bag as well as two fully-fueled lanterns and a tinderbox with which to light them. Fenris accepted a lantern and the tinderbox with a nod of thanks.
“Oh,” Bodahn said as he was handing the other lantern to Isabela. “Before I leave, I should also just quickly put the groceries away.”

Isabela raised her eyebrows. “Priorities, Bodahn,” she said with amusement in her voice.

“Yes, yes, I realize, but it won’t take long,” Bodahn said, grabbing the paper sack and waving for Sandal to follow him again. “Demons or no demons, Master Hawke has never appreciated an untidy household. Drilled into him by the Lady Amell, I suspect, Stone preserve her.”

Isabela shook her head as Bodahn and Sandal left the room. She accepted a burning splint from Fenris and lit her lantern.

The two of them stood at the top of the stairs, peering down into the gloom.

Isabela squinted, trying to make out any sign of movement. She had no desire whatsoever to go down there, but letting Fenris go wandering by himself through a labyrinth infested with zombies and probably demons struck her as an even worse idea. Not to mention leaving Merrill, Varric, Anders, and Eingana at the mercy of whatever Hawke had become since she’d seen him last.

Still....

“You go first,” she said to Fenris.

He obliged her without comment. Isabela took a deep breath, steeled her nerves, and followed him into the darkness.

∞

Varric was teetering right on the cusp between the kind of terror that kicked one’s legs into high-intensity flight mode and the kind of that merely paralyzed one’s whole body.

He’d been lost immediately as soon as demonic-Hawke had dumped him here. He knew he was in the estate’s cellars, but the corridors were endless and identical, and thirty minutes of walking had turned up nothing familiar. He counted himself lucky to have found a lantern that still had some fuel in it.

After finding the light, he’d simply picked a direction and walked. It hadn’t taken long for thin skins of frustration and boredom to develop over the simmering depths of his fear. What had he ever done to this damn demon, or whatever it was? More importantly, what was it going to do to him?

Varric rather thought he’d been unusually tolerant when Hawke’s behaviour had first changed. Maybe he should have been firmer in his objections – but if Anders got off on Hawke beating and cutting him while they had sex, wasn’t that their own business? At what point had the line been crossed when it became Varric’s concern?

Far be it from him to stop men who loved each other from having fun in whatever way flipped their respective switches. Really, more unusual or exotic sexual activities made for much more interesting stories. It was win-win. But not if the injuries were lethal, or went more than skin deep.

Varric reminded himself that if he’d spoken up at any point, Hawke might well have objected in the way that Hawke sometimes objected to things, i.e. with fury and bloodshed. Should he have stood up to him anyway? Or was it better not to have risked himself over something that didn’t involve him?

Probably the answer was yes. Maybe if he’d said or done something earlier, things wouldn’t have
gotten so bad. Now Hawke was on the point of losing himself completely to this madness, if he hadn’t done so already. He was performing magic that even trained mages believed was impossible, and now he was hunting his friends through a dank maze of cellars and indirectly bringing demons down on the entire rest of the city.

Things had escalated massively since their fight with the spiders, bandits, and Tal-Vashoth out on the coast. When would it end? Who would be left standing when it did?

Most importantly, what was taking the Enchanter so damn long to get here?

Varric was annoyed. And now there were corpses after him.

The stench was unbelievable. At least he could tune out their unsettling hissing by humming Bianca’s song as he fired bolts into their rotting eye sockets.

Where had they all come from? The walls? Hadn’t Hawke checked before he bought the place to see whether the honeycomb of tunnels underneath it was filled with unmarked graves?

No... that wasn’t the kind of thing that Hawke would do, or even be bothered by. The man had no business sense and no human capacity for fear.

At first, Varric was able to retrieve salvageable bolts from the corpses he ‘killed.’ Humming Bianca’s song always helped him focus, and he tended to shoot better under duress — a trait which had undoubtedly saved his life many times. Also, undead weren’t exactly hard to hit.

Not a single bolt was wasted. Every shot found its mark in a shambling corpse’s eye, destroying the brain and with it the animating spirit’s ability to control its host. The bolts that could be used again would be. Varric had no idea how long it would take him to find his way out of this accursed sewer, or how much more shooting he would have to do between now and then.

It wasn’t long, however, before he had a different problem: undead so old and decayed that they were mere skeletons, bones yellowed with age and crusted with fungus and mildew. Some were even aglow with sinister flickers of power, reflections of the spirits that animated them.

These creatures were much harder to destroy, for they no longer had conveniently targetable organic brains. Varric had fought skeletons before, but always with help: Hawke with his greatsword and crazed urge to utterly destroy things with it, Anders with his dazzling bolts of lightning and balls of fire, Aveline with her shield that was also brilliant at bone-bludgeoning.

On his own, Varric had precious few options for dealing with fleshless skeletons. His explosive bolts were effective, but he had so few of them that he couldn’t waste one on a single undead. He had a few tar bombs that had remained miraculously unbroken after his forced magical deposition in the tunnels — those he was saving for emergencies. He had his wits, which were already nearly stretched to their breaking point. And... that was it, really.

The solution he developed for skeletons he couldn’t outrun (and that was another thing – why were they so bloody fast? Not weighed down by flesh like the zombies?) was to pin them to the walls by their gaping skulls or ribcages. Unfortunately, that meant he couldn’t retrieve the bolt afterwards – and he was running dangerously low.

It was around this point when the bubbling fear started to well and truly dissolve any trace of boredom or other emotion. Varric wondered if he’d be able to tell when it started making him irrational.

When it came down to it, he wasn’t deeply concerned about death. Dying, though, was a different
story. Varric had no desire to be eaten or otherwise bodily damaged to the point of expiration by walking corpses and skeletons, especially not while trapped and alone in a cramped, dusty tunnel beneath Kirkwall. Especially especially not at the whim of some Maker-cursed demonic thing that had taken over the body of one of his best friends and twisted him into a horrible sadistic bastard. Well, more of a sadistic bastard. It was... well, it was ignoble for starters.

Varric launched one of his last explosive bolts into the crowd of undead he’d accumulated over the last several hundred paces of running. It knocked them all down to perish in flames, but if the cacophony moaning was any indication of their remaining numbers, there would be more very soon.

It seemed like the more he killed or disabled, the faster they regrouped, and in progressively greater numbers. By this point he was barely keeping abreast of his panic, barely keeping it together enough to continue running away from the horde instead of directly towards it.

Then he met a wall and realized he was at a dead end, at which point panic started to look like a decent and viable option.

Mercifully (or was it the opposite?) there was a room at the end of the corridor with a few bits of mostly-unidentifiable wreckage in it. Varric entered swiftly and looked around by the pitiful light of his lantern.

There were no other exits. It was a true dead end. This was it.

Varric swore loudly and more colourfully than he ever had in his life. His mother would have been horrified and ashamed to hear him speak such things, and after a few moments he stopped.

*I will not die gibbering like a lunatic, crazed with fear, Varric vowed. Well... I’ll try really hard not to, anyway. I will die with dignity. The final story I tell will be my own, and it will be glorious.*

Of course if he survived, that would be even better, and was indeed the option he greatly preferred. But Varric wasn’t going to kid himself about his chances. It would take a miracle to save him at this point.

Before the approaching undead could reach the doorway of the room that would become his grave (don’t think that, don’t think that), Varric gathered up some wood scraps and decayed remnants of sofa cushions to form a barricade. It was the most pathetic barricade he’d ever seen in his life, but it would have to do.

He set his lantern down before the doorway to light his shots. He could shoot it when the undead began to pile up, spreading the last of its oil around to burn a few more of the rotting bastards. If he was going to die here, he might as well take as many horrors down with him as he could.

How best to use his remaining explosive bolts? His tar bombs? Should he reserve one final bolt for himself to use when his defenses eventually failed, and thereby spare himself a horrible, painful death? Did he even have the guts to do such a thing?

Varric ran an affectionate hand along Bianca’s firing mechanism, wondering if he should say a few words to eulogize the beautiful device that he loved so much. Bianca had saved his life so many times, but when you got right down to it, she was still an inanimate object. Would saying a tearful goodbye to his weapon be excessively maudlin?

The thought of his crossbow lying abandoned, buried with his broken body amidst a pile of desecrated corpses, was almost more painful to Varric than the prospect of his own imminent death. Perhaps Bianca would be discovered by a wandering adventurer decades or centuries from now. If
she didn’t sing in the hands of that adventurer or any of their adventuring friends like she did in Varric’s, she would no doubt be callously sold to the nearest merchant.

Varric shook his head and dislodged a reluctant, painful tear from his eye. Waiting for the undead to reach his position was driving him crazy in stages. Now he was getting upset about a situation that hadn’t actually happened.

Of course he was a storyteller, so that tended to happen sometimes, but this was hypothetical, not intended as fiction. He had to get a hold of himself. Bianca was a prize, no doubt about it. No way would a future adventurer be so foolish as to sell her! Andraste’s tits, the stock had enough etching space for three lyrium runes. That brought Varric some comfort.

The shuffling, clacking, groaning undead were almost upon him. He could hear them out in the corridor. They were very near the doorway, although still cloaked in shadows. The light of his valiant lantern barely reached a few meters. It was almost time.

**Be calm, Varric. You’ve reached the end of your tale, but you did okay. You had a good life. You contributed to the shaping of history. You entertained people. You had some laughs and some good times. You met the Champion of Kirkwall and the Hero of Ferelden. You’ve seen a lot of awful, horrifying shit too, but none of that matters now. Remember Bianca?**

“This is it, girl,” Varric murmured, not even sure if he was speaking to his crossbow or to that memory of a girl with a musical laugh and a razor-sharp mind for mechanics. “It’s been good. I’ll miss you.”

The first corpse appeared in the flickering light past his barricade. Varric raised his crossbow to take aim. He had an explosive bolt loaded. Wait for more, he thought. A few more....

More appeared.

Varric’s trigger finger twitched.

A few more undead shoved into view as the first kept pushing itself against the flimsy barricade. Its incompetence might have been funny if the its success hadn’t been so terrifyingly inevitable.

*I really should fire, Varric thought. But I should also make the best use of what I have left. Just one more....*

A skeleton stumbled against the corpses crowding the barrier, somehow slipping between them and flipping head first into the room. The sight was so ridiculous that Varric couldn’t help laughing.

And as if his mirth had summoned the wrath of the Maker, brilliant azure flames suddenly washed down the corridor in a tide of spectacular magic. The corpses and skeletons were consumed in a grand, symphonic *whoaaaaaaaaaash.*

The undead barely had enough time to alter the pitch of their hissing from generally bloodthirsty to angry and confused before they exploded into powder and sludge from the intense heat.

Varric laughed some more (this time with a definite tinge of hysteria), momentarily convinced that his ordeal had unhinged him and he was hallucinating some impossible rescue scenario.

But the heat on his hands and face felt real. The sight was as vivid as the reality he knew, not fevered or dreamlike. He felt completely lucid. And the colour of that fire was... familiar.

“...Blondie?” Varric said tentatively.
Another rolling wall of blue fire cleansed the last of the undead from the corridor. Varric’s pitiful barricade burst into flame, reduced to ash and char in a matter of moments. The flame in his lantern fluttered in the intense drafts of moving air created by the magical spectacle. After a moment, it went out.

Instead of plunging the room into darkness, the extinguishing of the lantern allowed Varric’s dark-adjusted eyes to notice another light source in the corridor. Its origin became clear a moment later as Anders emerged from the shadows, the crystal atop his staff flaring with blue-white light.

“Blondie!” Varric shouted joyfully, also crying a bit. “Maker’s breath, your timing is divine! Thank you! Holy shit! You have no idea how happy I am to see you.”

“Varric,” said Anders. His voice was deep, resonant, and a long way from human. Varric was startled to feel the thrum of a spirit’s power in his chest.

That was when he noticed the crackled patterns of light on the mage’s skin that shone with blue Fade fire. His eyes glowed like twin full moons. With the crystalline apex of his staff poised at eye level, the whole vicinity of his face was hard to look at directly.

Varric felt some of his euphoria deflate. This was clearly Justice, not Anders.

The spirit regarded him for a moment with a piercing gaze. Apparently determining that Varric was uninjured, he gestured sharply with his head and turned to leave.

“Come,” said Justice, already striding away. Varric followed immediately, not about to leave the powerful spirit’s protection now that he had it.

Anders hadn’t gotten glowy and wrathy for a long time – not once that Varric knew about since that day in the smuggler tunnels beneath Darktown. After the fight with Ser Alrik and his men and Justice’s murder of the young mage, Anders had seemed to try even harder to repress his spirit companion. He’d been tormented with guilt for a long time, but his mood had improved eventually. It had helped that Hawke hadn’t lost control again either.

Varric had mixed feelings about this resurgence. He was definitely more afraid of Hawke’s demon and its minions than he was of Justice, and he was unquestionably grateful for the spirit’s help, but he would have been quite happy to have plain old Anders at his side.

On the other hand, Hawke has already proven that his resistance to Anders’s magic was growing. Maybe Justice was exactly what the good guys needed to tip the scales in their favour.

Regardless, it wasn’t like Varric could have convinced Justice to let Anders retake the reins. Justice would only subside when he’d addressed the injustice of Hawke’s treatment of his friends: namely, banishing them into darkness to be hunted as playthings while the city above suffered a demonic invasion. All Varric could do was tread carefully around the possessed mage and try hard not to piss him off.

“So uh, Justice,” Varric said, panting a bit with the effort of keeping up with the taller man’s strides. He kept Bianca deployed just in case, although he had less than a handful of bolts left. “Long time no see.”

“Quite,” Justice replied. Varric fancied that he could hear some of Anders mixed in with the spirit’s deep, gruff voice. “I am pleased you are unharmed, Varric. There is no time to waste.”

They were now passing some of the skeletons that Varric had pinned to the wall earlier. Justice didn’t even slow down, but simply washed the undead away with more waves of blue fire. Had he
ignored the disabled targets just to get to Varric in time? That was nice.

“None at all,” Varric agreed. He yanked several salvageable bolts from the wall as he passed, wiping charred skeleton residue from a few of them. “Thanks for saving my life. Do you have a plan?”

“To deal with Hawke? Yes.”

Varric’s unease kicked up a notch at the way Justice said _deal with_. “I hope you’re not planning on killing him,” he said cautiously.

Justice said nothing.

“You must be aware of how horrified Anders was after you killed that mage in the tunnels. You know – the one who wasn’t possessed, but was in fact fleeing from a sadistic, awful templar who wanted to do horrible things to her?”

More silence from the spirit. Varric wondered if Justice was able to feel shame or regret, or if those feelings came only from Anders. If the latter was true, then maybe not. After all, if Anders could repress the part of himself that was Justice, then Justice could do the same thing to his human side.

“Come on,” Varric went on, pressing his luck since Justice didn’t seem about to make him shut up. “I know that justice is what defines your existence, but when you allow yourself to be warped by rage, the result is the exact opposite. I’ve _seen_ it.”

“Michael Hawke threatens the entire city,” Justice said, not looking at Varric as he strode onward. “He has beaten Anders for pleasure and made him feel shame for being what he is. He has thrown you, me, and the others into this demon-infested labyrinth to die. And he condones and perpetuates the crimes of the Templar Order and their Chantry.”

Varric could refute none of this, so he didn’t try. When Justice spoke again, his voice was softer, but it held no trace whatsoever of his host.

“Anders has suffered at his hands perhaps more than any living being,” Justice said. “He will understand what must be done.”

Okay, this was bad. This was very, very bad.

“No, Anders would _not_ understand,” Varric said as firmly as he could while taking care not to sound too confrontational. “If you killed Hawke, he’d be crushed. He might even break. They _love_ each other, Justice.”

“Irrelevant. Hawke’s actions are not those of a loving man.”

“It _is_ relevant!” Varric insisted. “Listen – you’re absolutely right that Hawke’s a bastard, and what he’s done to Blondie is completely fucked up. _And_ that whatever’s possessing him is massively dangerous and we have to find a way to kill it. But there _has_ to be a way to do it without killing Hawke! He’s not irredeemable, in the grand scheme he’s done a lot more _good_ than bad. And he’s suffered too! Remember what triggered all this, what that blood mage did to his mother? Doesn’t he deserve justice for that?”

“He had it,” Justice spat. “And then he kept on taking more, turning his wrath on the closest available target – Anders. The man you claim he loves. _He_ is the one warped by rage.”

Varric clenched his fists and stifled a growl of frustration. “There’s no monopoly on being corrupted, Justice! Don’t you think we all deserve a chance to be better? Hasn’t Hawke earned the right to _try_?”
Once he understands the mistakes he’s made, he could well turn out to be the ally Anders and the mages need. If you kill him, that will never happen, and then the mages might die anyway to something only he could have stopped – like another big demon, or Meredith. Apart from that, Anders would never forgive you for it. You and he would always be in conflict with each other, and that way lies madness.”

Justice was silent once more.

“Believe me, Justice,” Varric said wearily. “I know how we mortals think, and I know what Blondie would say. So do you, if you’d just think about it.”

Anders’s cracked, glowing face was creased in thought. Varric waited for him to think it through, concentrating on keeping up with Justice and quietly holding on to hope that he’d made his point well enough.

“Hawke’s crimes must not go unpunished,” Justice said eventually.

“Sure. But there are punishments other than death. Some of them are a lot worse. I agree that Hawke should be held accountable, but let’s not forget there are other forces at work here. Can you say how much of his recent mistreatment of Anders is because of him, and how much is because of the monster inside him? It’s only been really bad since that thing came into the picture, and we both know Hawke’s not happy about it. He doesn’t want to kill or hurt Anders any more than Anders wants to kill Hawke. He’s corrupted by more than just his rage – there’s a hugely powerful spirit inside him that he can’t fight. Not without our help, at least.”

The two of them were now striding past more of the singed and inanimate corpses that Varric had dispatched earlier. Varric paused long enough to retrieve a few more usable bolts and then ran to catch up.

“Much of what you say... is true,” Justice said. “This entity, this... wyrd, has made Hawke its victim as much as Anders.”

“Absolutely,” Varric agreed, using a rag from his pocket to clean a few bits of decomposing eye and brain from the bolts he’d retrieved.

“And... you are correct about Anders as well,” Justice went on, prompting another wave of cautious relief within the dwarf. “When I think in his voice I feel his love for Hawke, and his want to keep the man safe. But I tell you this, Varric – I do not know if he can be saved. Not without destroying everything he is. Perhaps he even deserves a chance to redeem himself, but before that and all other considerations, the wyrd must be banished or killed. If the cost of its defeat is Hawke’s life, then so be it. There can be no compromise there, for if left unchecked, it will destroy Kirkwall.”

“Yeah, no,” Varric said reluctantly. “I can’t argue with that. But we’re not at that point yet. Until there’s no choice at all, I have to believe we can save him. We have to try.”

“When will the Enchanter arrive?” Justice asked, surprising Varric with the sudden change of subject.

“Uh – well, today, I thought. She’s supposed to show up by this evening, or tomorrow morning at the latest. Blondie and the Warden-Commander seemed pretty convinced that Wynne would know how to fix this mess.”

Justice turned a corner at a T-intersection. Varric followed, thinking ruefully that he should have turned this way when he’d come by earlier.
“Then... I may know a way to keep Hawke and his parasite contained until she arrives,” Justice said. “For the reasons you have outlined, I will assist Wynne with whatever plan she concocts to defeat the wyrd and spare Hawke’s life. But if it fails—”

“Yeah, yeah, fire and death. I know,” said Varric. “So what’s your idea?”

“The last time Anders disabled Hawke, he did so by tapping into ancient reservoirs of mana held by the city itself,” Justice told him. “We will affect something similar on a larger scale. I had planned to kill Hawke, but we can manipulate the discharge to hold him in stasis instead. Even the wyrd’s power won’t be able to break him free.”

“That sounds great, but it was dumb luck the first time,” Varric pointed out. “Blondie didn’t even know that was going to happen. How are you so sure you can replicate it?”

“When I control our body, I see flows and channels of energy that Anders cannot,” said Justice. “I can determine exactly where we need to push and pull the magic, and how hard. The challenge will be in luring Hawke into the right place to spring the trap. Once it is done, he will be contained – and this time there will be no calamitous shockwave that cracks the city’s very foundations.”

Justice smiled wryly with Anders’s lips, startling Varric with the simultaneous familiarity and strangeness of the expression. He’d never seen Justice smile before.

“Did you just... make a sardonic aside?” he asked, bemused. “Do you in fact have an actual sense of humour? What newfangled sorcery is this?”

“Be silent,” Justice commanded. Varric immediately reined in the smirk that was threatening to overtake his face.

“The city’s magical channels have a focal point, a nexus much deeper below the city than our present location. Hawke must be in that chamber when the trap is sprung, or our efforts will be for naught. I will need your help luring him there.”

“Oh,” Varric said with dry, false enthusiasm. “Sure thing. Sounds fun.”

“We must also find Merrill,” Justice said. “It will not be practical to conduct the invocation while Hawke is active. Her blood magic can disable him without causing death, allowing us the time we need.”

Varric stared in open-mouthed shock. Justice wanted to make use of blood magic?

“The Warden-Commander’s experience and help would be invaluable as well,” Justice added. “Eingana Tabris is known to me. She was once a friend of Anders, and an ally to the Fereldan mages. I do not wish to see her perish in these tunnels.”

“Alright then,” Varric said, recovering himself. “First we find Daisy and—”

He realized he hadn’t yet come up with a nickname for Eingana, so he invented one on the spot.

“-Swords. I’m down for that part. But, uh... why do we need blood magic? And why don’t you sound even a little bit annoyed about that?”

“Make no mistake,” Justice said dourly. “Merrill’s use of blood magic and communion with demons is naïve, reckless, and dangerous to everyone around her. Her clan was right to banish her.”

“That sounds more like the Justice I know,” Varric commented.
Justice ignored him. “However, I cannot deny that her spells were considerably more effective against Hawke than Anders’s were. You may similarly recall.”

Varric nodded. That was true enough.

“I suspect her abilities, vile though they are, will prove crucial in keeping Hawke under control long enough for my plan to work,” Justice continued. “And there is something else: she will need to protect him.”

“Protect Hawke?”

Justice nodded. “The invocation will call forth a tremendous magical surge. At that moment, I will be occupied directing the energetic flows to avoid catastrophic damage to the city. Merrill must be there to create a buffer around Hawke, or the surge will simply kill him. A shield formed of mana will not be enough – only blood magic will do. Instead of reducing him to ash, the surge will suspend Hawke within a static prison. He will be unable to escape, act, or even think. Once he is thus contained, we can begin formulating a plan to deal with the wyrd.”

“Are you... sure about this?” Varric said. “It sounds very complicated. A lot of things could go wrong. And reducing Hawke to ash doesn’t sound like a risk Anders would want to take.”

“He does not,” Justice confirmed. “However, Anders acknowledges that the risk is acceptable given the many unpleasant alternatives. Hawke’s rampage must be stopped one way or another, and this will serve all our purposes.”

Varric sighed heavily. “Okay. I don’t like it, but I don’t see that we have much choice. This is your show, Justice. I’ll stand wherever you say and shoot whatever needs shooting. Just please, promise me-”

“I have,” Justice interrupted. “I said I would allow Wynne her opportunity to save Hawke, and I will. He will not die today.”

“Good,” Varric muttered. “Thanks. Let’s hope the rest of us make it too.”
An alien is involved, but not that one.

Folded uncomfortably into an alcove somewhere in the Undercity, Merrill held herself absolutely still.

Though her heart was racing painfully in her chest, she barely breathed. Her ears strained to listen. Were those soft falls of noise Hawke’s bare footsteps?

That breath of air – there was no ventilation down here. It had to be him.

He was close. It was only through a supreme effort of will that Merrill kept herself from whimpering in fear.

In her life, she had said more grateful prayers to Andruil than she could remember for the game brought back to camp by her clan’s hunters. Yet until right now, she’d never thought to feel sorry for the hunters’ prey.

Now she couldn’t help wondering if all their lives ended this way: in abject terror. Were they always alert for the slightest scent on the shifting breeze, the telltale snap of twig or crunch of leaf? Did they realize when they saw elven hunters in the woods that their lives were as likely to be ended by them as spared? Did their fear ever truly leave them?

Merrill almost wished she were a deer. A Dalish hunter took no wanton pleasure in killing. They might relish the thrill of the hunt, exhilarated by an unexpected chase or particularly elusive prey. They might feel satisfaction after their success, knowing it would contribute to the survival of their clan.

But they were never cruel. The lives of the creatures they killed were taken quickly, as painlessly as possible, and only so that the Dalish might live on.

In stark contrast was Hawke, who was playing with her. He laughed in the darkness as he chased her. He brushed the claws of his gauntlet along her neck or against her cheek, then stood still and bathed in her shrill cries as she fled. He hung back again and again, each time allowing her another chance at escape.

When she turned and fought, he snarled. He became instantly vicious and deadly, convincing her every time that she could not survive close combat with him. He didn’t want to fight her – he wanted her to run. And when she ran, he chased her.

What was he waiting for? Merrill asked herself. She knew the answer was nothing. He was simply having fun. He was indulging himself in the pleasure of inflicting pain and fear on another living being.

Perhaps worst of all, the actual demon (or whatever it was) barely seemed interested in the hunt. Hawke’s eyes were black with hunger, his pupils dilated, but there were no waves of red energy. He hadn’t used any magic at all, except to deflect her own. His voice held only a trace of eldritch
Merrill knew Michael Hawke, and she recognized him. She’d seen him act this way long before he’d lost control of himself to a demon. The few times she attempted to communicate, her evident confusion and hurt at this betrayal only seemed to amuse him.

Over the last few hours of being chased like an animal, Merrill had come to believe that Hawke was broken. Harbouring the malevolent spirit in his body had already changed him, perhaps forever. His bloodlust and cruelty were accentuated, and the faculties of reason (and yes, even mercy) that she knew he’d once possessed were diminished.

The notion filled Merrill with cold anger. For the first time, she was beginning to sympathize with Anders’s heated objections to her use of blood magic. She’d always understood his reasons, but disagreed with them. Now she was faced with an unstoppable force of a man, once a friend of hers, whose personality had been altered for the worse by blood magic.

It was Quentin, she thought bitterly, who had really done this to Hawke. His gruesome murder of Leandra and the obscene magic he’d used against her son had led to all of this. Because of that man’s selfishness and evil, Merrill was now exhausted, terrorized, and still being hunted in the dank cellars beneath Kirkwall.

She wondered despairingly if Hawke would ever be the same again – even if they did somehow manage to free him from the demon’s influence.

These were the thoughts that occupied her mind when she’d had some time to calm down after her latest encounter with Hawke. Inevitably – he had the timing down to a science, she thought – he would catch up to her again, and fear would scramble her thoughts.

He was drawing close once more. Merrill’s nerves were stretched to their breaking point. She was light-headed from blood loss, both from the slashes Hawke had inflicted on her and from her own casting wounds. Her mana was quite depleted, and with no chance to rest or eat, it wasn’t coming back anytime soon.

It had all come down to this. Right now she was too tired to keep moving, let alone fight. She needed another few minutes’ rest before she would be able to get up and leave her alcove.

If Hawke noticed her, she was dead. She had no doubt that his game had an endpoint: if she couldn’t defend herself and couldn’t keep running, he and she would be done.

There was one weapon left in her arsenal, and that was reason. She could try to call forth the Michael Hawke she knew, try to reach him through the demon and whatever red haze had changed the shape of his mind.

The thought of gambling her survival on convincing Hawke to let her live was enough to make Merrill weep with despair. Yet her stubbornness refused to allow her to give in. So she made no sound at all, keeping absolutely silent as the occasional tear rolled down her face.

She was not dead yet. Her outlook might be grim, but as Keeper Marethari had often said: nothing was certain.

Hawke would pass by her hiding place in less than ten seconds. Merrill could smell him coming even before she heard him. He stank of blood, sweat, and something else – something sour and unpleasant, like a herb left for days to rot in dampness and the summer sun.

He was near. Already on edge, Merrill tensed even further, wondering if these were the last moments
of her life. There was so much left unfinished....

Hawke’s slow, confident steps didn’t even hesitate as he walked right past her. Merrill felt the brush of air of his passing.

Bewilderment warred with relief in her mind. Why had he just... walked right by? Was it possible he hadn’t even noticed her? It seemed far too good to be true. Every time she’d tried to hide down here thus far, Hawke had found her without apparent effort.

It all depended on what he did next. Most likely, this was just his latest game, and he would be upon her in moments after all. But on the off chance....

*Keep walking,* Merrill urged silently as Hawke’s footsteps continued down the corridor. *Keep walking that way. Don’t turn back.*

As if he’d heard her thinking, the footsteps paused.

Merrill’s relief melted instantaneously. Were her worst fears true? Could he hear her very thoughts?

She still didn’t move. She barely breathed, and she stopped thinking. She concentrated hard on becoming the wall. She made her mind as wood and dust.

She wasn’t here. There was no she. There was only the floor and walls and silence.

There were no sounds of further footsteps, either toward her or away.

What was Hawke doing? Just standing there? What was he waiting for?

“Here she is,” Hawke said softly, right in front of her face.

Merrill whimpered. Metal claws traced the underside of her chin.

“My lovely Dalish lady, the blood mage. So tired. So timid.”

How he had moved the dozen or so paces between where’d been and right in front of her was beyond Merrill. There had been not so much as a shift or air or a whisper of noise. It was so dark that she couldn’t even see him silhouetted in the gloom, but she could feel his presence looming over her.

The smell was overpowering. Hawke usually smelled of blood, but the addition of the rancid spiciness reminded Merrill strongly of the stomach-turning odour that arose when animals were skinned and gutted. She had to struggle not to gag as Hawke’s gauntleted hand gripped her chin and turned her head.

Her whole body trembled as she felt the bristles of his beard brushing against her cheek. She heard and felt him inhale deeply. A pleased rumble followed, from deep in his throat.

“You are so afraid,” Hawke murmured. “That’s very exciting.”

Merrill felt a warm, wet tongue sliding along her neck. Something inside her snapped.

“Enough!” she exclaimed, shoving Hawke away as hard as she could.

The physical force she could muster was next to nothing, but a few of her casting wounds were still bleeding, and the magical punch she added was a bit more impressive. By the purple light that flared, she saw Hawke stumbling back into the middle of the corridor.
He chuckled, low and husky. Glints of light like red stars blossomed in his eyes.

Merrill shoved herself to her feet and pulled on one of the last remaining threads of true mana within her spirit. A curve of light ignited around her staff.

The dim glow illuminated Hawke standing before her. He was smirking, eyes black and evil but for those red points. He was still dressed only in his worn trousers and metal gauntlets.

To Merrill’s further infuriation and bewilderment, despite being unarmed (except for his gauntlets) during their previous confrontations, Hawke had somehow acquired his greatsword since the last one. The wickedly sharp blade rested unguarded against his bare shoulder, one hand casually holding the long two-handed hilt. He seemed quite unconcerned by the self-inflicted cuts the blade had left.

“Now this time, I think we shall fight to the very end,” Hawke told her in a low, seductive voice as he stepped forward. “I understand you’re exhausted, but do give it your best go. It will be much more for fun for both of us if you struggle a little bit. Keep your heart rate up, get the blood nice and hot. No new casting wounds, though – only those still bleeding. If I see you trying to cut yourself, I’ll do it for you.”

One eyebrow arched. “Everywhere.”

Merrill glared at him as she tried to catch some of the breath she’d been holding. She was backed into her alcove, and Hawke was right in front of her. There was no way she could slip around him.

She was well and truly trapped, and she was physically drained almost to the point of nausea. Her options at this point, to put it lightly, were limited. What would Eingana do?

Talking was all she had. It felt hopeless, but she had to try.

“Hawke,” said Merrill, in as steady a voice as she could muster. “Listen to me, please. Listen carefully. I know this isn’t what you want.”

Hawke blinked at her a few times and then burst out laughing.

Merrill waited, letting him roll with it for as long as he wanted. While he was cackling, he wasn’t disemboweling her – and she regained more breath with each passing moment.

“You know,” he chuckled after the crest of his mirth had passed. “What is it you think you know, Merrill?”

He reached out to trace an icy claw along her chin. “Haven’t you been paying attention? At all?”

“I know that the real Michael Hawke wouldn’t want to do this,” Merrill asserted, pushing his hand away. “Specifically, not to someone he called friend, someone whom he’s helped and has helped him in turn. You’re mean, Hawke, and you’re scary when you’re angry, and you hurt your enemies more than you need to. But you’re a good man, too. You have goodness in your heart. I’ve seen it.”

Hawke shook his head matter-of-factly. “No... you haven’t seen my heart. It’s an idea, though. Maybe I’ll show you yours. I imagine Fenris would find that deeply amusing. I should do it in front of him....”

Even as his voice was trailing off in thought, he was shifting closer to her, filling her space. Merrill tried to back further away, but she was already pressed to the back of the alcove. Instinctively, her free hand came up to defend her chest.
Hawke resumed paying attention and looked down at her hand. He laughed at her again.

“I have seen your heart,” Merrill argued, doing far better at keeping her voice calm than she’d thought she would. “Sometimes when you think nobody’s looking, I am. I’ve seen you slip coins to beggars in Darktown on multiple occasions.”

Hawke frowned at her and started to interrupt, but Merrill plowed on.

“They were Fereldans, like you. You felt badly that you’d made it here and they hadn’t. You knew there wasn’t much you could do for them, but you could pay for their next few meals.

“And that’s not all. Remember Lord Harriman? You spared him because he’d convinced the Viscount to send aid back home during the Blight. And you saved the whole city from the Arishok. You fought him yourself, and he nearly killed you, because the alternative was letting him take Isabela. I could go on! You wouldn’t have done all those things if you didn’t care about people, Hawke.”

Hawke was scowling at her and had started to lick his lips in a dangerous way, but when she paused her rapid speech long enough for him to get a word in, he didn’t. Neither did he move. Merrill had no choice but to continue.

“I see how you are with your dog,” she said. “You love him, Hawke. You let him lick you and you give him treats. You throw sticks for him on the coast. You call him a good boy. And he is a good boy! Isn’t he?”

For a moment, she thought she saw his scowl flicker.

“I see how you are with Anders, too,” she said carefully, aware that this might be the sentence that killed her. “You’re quite capable of being affectionate and gentle, Hawke. I’ve seen it, so don’t try to deny it.”

She paused, staring into the black pits of his eyes. His brows were furrowed in clear annoyance, but the red glints had disappeared.

The light of her staff was quite dim. Could she believe what she was seeing? Was there actually a ring of white sclera beginning to show around the pools of black?

Merrill hardly dared hope, but if she didn’t, she had nothing.

“I’ve seen how you treat Anders when you think you’re alone,” she continued. “How you used to, anyway. I once saw you touch his face after he’d healed you. You looked into his eyes and leaned in and kissed his cheek.

“When you want to be, Hawke, you’re a loving, caring man. You just... prefer to show the world a different face. And that’s fine! But your other face is just a different side of who you are. Sometimes when Anders whispers to you, I’ve seen your whole expression change. You can glare all you like, but I’ve seen you smile – and not in cruelty, nor in wrath. Your whole face lights up. In those moments, I’d swear I can almost see the love you-”

“Stop. Talking,” Hawke snarled.

Merrill fell silent.

He said nothing else – and he avoided her gaze. One gauntleted hand came up to pinch the bridge of
his nose.

She was getting through to him! She knew it. But how far could she push?

Ideally, just far enough to bring him to his senses – but not so far as to provoke the demon.

She was walking a very delicate path, here. It might well turn out that the line was too thin. She could prod Hawke right up against the edge of his rational self – but one iota further, and the demon would emerge.

“Hawke,” Merrill said quietly. “I know you like people to know how tough and independent you are. You have a lot of hate for a lot of people, and for... the world. For the way things are. You’re angry and violent with people who aren’t your friends, and sometimes you’re like that with us too. All of that is real. It’s part of who you are.”

She felt tears gathering in her eyes. She let them fall.

“But it’s not everything you are. The sum of Michael Hawke is so much richer than that. Do you remember—”

Her voice caught, and she forced herself to recover quickly. Hawke was watching her, black eyes glittering.

“That time when Anders got hurt, out on the Wounded Coast? He was hurt so badly he couldn’t stay conscious long enough to heal himself. We still had jobs to do, but you said we were done. You weren’t about to risk him dying out there. You carried him all the way home. You went as fast as you could, without making his wounds worse. You ran with Anders in your arms, for hours, all the way back to the city. Remember?”

Hawke regarded her for a moment. His expression didn’t change, but he shook his head.

Merrill felt a brief crush of discouragement, but she knew she was close. Just a little more pushing, and he’d come back to himself.

“Try!” she urged. “Please try to remember, Hawke! Remember everything you are. Fight this thing that has control of you! It’s taken you away from us, and it wants to take us away from you. Don’t let it! We’ve fought monsters before and won. We’ll win this time too, but we need your help, Hawke! Please! Make it stop hurting us. Make it stop hurting you. The Hawke I know would never lie down and let some evil thing take over his life!”

“Life...” Hawke said slowly, as if the word were unfamiliar.

Merrill nodded, waiting with bated breath. This, she sensed, was as far as she could go. In the next few moments he would either come to his senses or kill her.

“Life,” Hawke repeated more firmly. He blinked a few times and briefly shook his head.

His eyes flashed red, and suddenly his hand was locked around Merrill’s throat.

“The sensual violence of lust is all we will ever need from life,” the demon intoned.

Merrill couldn’t hold back a despairing sob. She’d been so close, and she’d failed.

Not only had she failed to save herself, but she’d failed Hawke. And once he was done with her, he’d go on to hunt and hurt the others.
Her thoughts lost coherence as she struggled to breathe. Both of her hands on his gauntlet couldn’t budge his grip an inch.

“It surprises, that more of our kind do not reach for it here,” Hawke went on musingly. Red magic wriggled around his skin, and his voice carried an otherworldly echo.

“Here where the walls are so thin, the magic so strong... life is quite powerful. It is full of feeling, full of warmth.”

Hawke’s eyes drifted closed and he shuddered with apparent arousal. His armoured hand contracted more tightly around Merrill’s throat as his eyes opened once more.

“Full of tastes,” he said softly. “Full of pleasures.”

Merrill struggled vainly against him. She reached down with one hand, seeking the knife on her belt. She would fight to her final breath, her final drop of blood.

Hawke was aware of her intent. As his gaze went to the hand scrabbling at her waist, his eyes narrowed.

Before Merrill could draw the knife or Hawke could try to stop her, several aggressive barks shattered the pitch-black stillness of the Undercity.

With a suddenness that startled both Merrill and Hawke, Reaver shot out of the darkness and pounced. He rammed into Hawke’s bare ribs hard enough to send them both careering down the corridor, Hawke with a furious snarl. His metal claws left another shallow scratch on Merrill’s neck as his arm was yanked away with the rest of him.

Merrill gasped, overwhelmed by both fear and relief. She coughed as her bruised throat tried to recover.

Gripping the handle of her knife with one hand and massaging her neck with the other, she peered down the corridor in the direction of Reaver’s charge. Her staff was leaning against the wall of the alcove, but its illumination had gone out when she’d lost contact with it.

She couldn’t see anything, but she could hear Hawke struggling to fend off his own hound. Both of them were snarling; she could hardly distinguish one from the other.

If only she could see what was happening, she could help. Reaver was a new element – together, they might win.

But she was so weak from exhaustion and fear that she couldn’t even relight her staff. She had no mana left at all. If she wanted light, she would have to bleed for it.

Quiet footfalls alerted her to the presence of another. Still coughing, Merrill looked around, hoping desperately for more allies.

“Merrill!” Eingana evolved from a shadowy shape, limned by a faint glimmer from her enchanted longsword. “Are you-”

She was cut off in surprise as Merrill rushed into her arms.

“Thank you so much,” she sobbed, hugging Eingana weakly and shaking like a leaf. “Thank you, Commander. You and Reaver saved my life. I was so close to dying, he had his hand... he was going to....”
Eingana recovered from her surprise and returned Merrill’s embrace with the hand that wasn’t holding her sword.

“Shhh,” she soothed. “It’s alright, Merrill. You’re safe for the moment. But we don’t have much time.”

Merrill backed out of the embrace, fumbling around for her staff and knife. “You’re right. I’m sorry. But he....” She shook her head as she sheathed her dagger and then reached up to brush tears out of her eyes. “It’s so awful and evil, that thing that has him. I hate it, Eingana. I want the old Hawke back.”

Eingana nodded. “I like his own brand of surly a lot better than that thing’s, too.”

“I was almost through to him,” Merrill said ruefully, reminded of what had happened just before she’d almost died. “I was telling him about his love for Reaver and Anders and all of us, and how that part of him is real too even though most of the time he’s angry and mean. Eingana, I swear by the Creators, I saw him start to fight it. Just for a moment. But then the demon came out. It had his hand around my throat. If you and Reaver hadn’t shown up when you did, I’d be dead. I’d have died already, by now.”

“I’m extremely glad to hear that,” said Eingana, her relief obvious. “Not the last bit, but the part about you communicating with Hawke. The fact that he’s still fighting for control is a very good sign. Somewhere inside, he isn’t broken. He hasn’t given up. So neither can we.”

Merrill nodded firmly, looking over her shoulder in the direction Reaver and Hawke had gone.

“There must be a way to save him,” she said. “If only Wynne were here-”

“We have to trust she’ll reach us in time,” said Eingana. “But she’s going to arrive at an empty mansion above us. We need a way to get Hawke back up there, and back under control.”

Merrill turned around fully, facing the direction Reaver had taken Hawke. After a few more deep breaths, she found one more sliver of mana and used it to light her staff. Pushing back the darkness made her feel marginally better, but the sounds of the struggle had completely died away.

Her heart clenched in fear for Reaver. Had the brave hound sacrificed himself for Merrill and Eingana? Surely Hawke wouldn’t kill his beloved Mabari, even under the influence of the demon!

“Reaver?” Eingana called out cautiously. An answering woof from the darkness prompted sighs of relief from both elves.

Reaver limped back into the circle of light cast by Merrill’s staff. He wasn’t grievously wounded, but his fur was ruffled and bloodied in several places, and he favoured his front right leg.

Merrill knelt down as he approached and hugged the dog with gentle gratitude.

“Thank you, Reaver,” she said with heartfelt sincerity. “You fought your own master to save me. I won’t forget your kindness.”

Reaver sniffed at her and licked her cheek in an exhausted kind of way. Merrill smiled sadly.

“Why did Hawke flee?” she wondered as she stood up. “I doubt he’d have had much trouble even fighting all three of us. I barely have enough power to keep my staff lit.”

“Well, here’s the thing,” Eingana said, peering into the gloom behind her as shuffling and grunting
sounds became audible. “Reaver and I had to do a bit of fighting to get this far.”

“Fighting? Fighting what?” Merrill asked. She turned to look in the same direction as Eingana.

Something was moving out there. Brows furrowed in concern, Merrill raised her staff. She gritted her teeth with effort and managed to intensify its light into a beam. She pointed it down the corridor in the direction Reaver and Eingana had come.

“Merciful Creators,” she breathed.

Eingana cursed, rather more crudely and at length.

Far down the corridor, the light fell across a solid wall of undead. They staggered towards the elves, many dragging dirt-encrusted blades or axes. About half were no more substantial than skeletons held together by tendrils of spiritual energy. The ones that still possessed flesh were invariably in a state of advanced decomposition.

As the light revealed them, their hissing and moaning arose into a chorus of unholy wails.

Merrill shrank back in fear. Barely a moment later, the awful reek of the monsters reached her nostrils. She covered her nose with one hand, while beside her Eingana did the same and turned her head away in disgust. Even Reaver made gagging noises.

The zombies and skeletons were still some distance away, but they would be upon them in minutes. Merrill looked at Eingana, her eyes wide.

“The unnatural are always so bothersome,” Eingana commented peevishly, frowning at the wall beside them.

“Warden-Commander... what do you think we should do?”

“We could fight them, but it would be pointless,” said Eingana. “You’re exhausted and I’m not exactly fresh myself. There are too many of them... we’d soon be overwhelmed.”

“Do you have any idea where we are?” Merrill asked, barely keeping her voice from rising hysterically. “I’ve gotten lost since Hawke’s been hunting me. I don’t even know how long I’ve been down here.”

“I don’t know where we are, but Reaver can find us a way out,” said Eingana.

“Oh! That’s right!” said Merrill, relieved. “We need to find Varric and Anders too, but I also had the idea of trying to get to the laboratory beneath Hawke’s mansion. There are poultices and potions there, and some books that might be useful. And if we reach the surface, we can send a message for help.”

Eingana turned to her, still keeping one eye on the advancing horde. “This laboratory,” she said. “What kind of potions do you have there?”

“All sorts,” said Merrill earnestly. “Anders and I have been researching there for months, trying to figure out Hawke’s condition. Anders has been using it for even longer than that. He has restorative draughts there he said he was saving for emergencies – stuff like what he gave Hawke after he fought the Arishok. Medicine to treat blood loss, and draughts for energy. Poultices too. And lyrium potions, which I could really use right now.”

“That sounds like a lot of things we need,” Eingana said. “We’ll be no good to anybody if we’re
collapsing from exhaustion while the undead advance. We should get to the laboratory first, and up to the mansion. If Bodahn’s back, we can send a message with him to the Guard-Captain. Then we can come back down and find the others.”

Merrill nodded. “Alright. I trust you, Commander.”

Eingana smiled at her, then looked down at Reaver.

“Do you know how to get to the laboratory Merrill’s talking about?” she asked.

Reaver woofed an affirmative, but followed it up with a concerned whine.

“What?” Eingana asked.

Reaver turned around and gestured towards the advancing horde with his snout. He barked aggressively at them.


Reaver whined apologetically.

“Is there another way around?” Merrill asked.

Reaver sniffed around in a circle a few times. He didn’t know.

“Damn,” Eingana cursed.

“Eingana?” Merrill asked with rising concern in her voice, eyes on the undead. Their one advantage was that the corpses were slow and ponderous, the demons within them barely competent at controlling their shells and hampered by rotted muscle and softened bones. But the longer they stood here, the closer they got.

“Maybe we should, uh, just start heading that way anyway.” She pointed behind them.

“Reaver,” Eingana said quickly, “do you think you can find another way to get us up there? Without having to fight through an army of corpses?”

Reaver tilted his head at her and whined.

“I will, I swear it!” Merrill insisted. “And if I don’t, I’ll make it up to you. Consider it a free pass for twenty-one belly rubs to be redeemed at your leisure.”

Reaver considered. He eyed the undead for a moment or two, growling very quietly. Then he turned back to the elves and sat down. He snapped his jaws at Eingana.

“You have my oath as Warden-Commander of Ferelden that you will have a lamb bone for your efforts thus far, and if you can get us to the laboratory, six more,” Eingana said ceremonially.
Reaver ducked his head and growled in a way that seemed to indicate he was making no promises. Then he bent his nose to the floor and began to sniff.

He pawed around for a moment before seeming to find the scent trail he was looking for. He started off, away from the corpses.

The horde was less than ten meters from them at this point. Both elves were relieved to get going.

“I might be able to slow them down if they get too close,” said Merrill, “but I would very much rather they not. The effort might just do me in.”

“Save your strength for running,” Eingana said. “If it comes to that, I’ll just cut a few of them up and make a barrier of bodies for them to trip over.”

“Alright,” Merrill assented, “but if you need my help and you’ll die without it, don’t just die. I have one or two good spells in me yet.”

“Agreed,” Eingana said.

She gestured towards the dog they were following. Reaver had his nose to the ground, following a trail neither of them could sense.

“Dog drives a hard bargain,” Eingana remarked.

“Yes, he’s quite good,” Merrill said. “You should see him play Diamondback. Varric made the mistake of pointing out his only real tell – he used to wag his tail when he got a good hand. He doesn’t anymore, and now none of us can beat him.”

Eingana laughed.

“I miss Ferelden, sometimes,” Merrill said wistfully. “Reaver’s pretty much the only Mabari I know. The normal dogs here are all so stupid. You can’t bargain with them at all.”

“I know, right?” Eingana exclaimed. “I hate the Free Marches!”
Intervention

Chapter Summary

It has access to his memories.

Chapter Notes

Revised 04/01/2019

Fenris and Isabela had descended into the cellar of the Hawke estate. They were proceeding down a corridor that ended at a closed door not far ahead.

“Stop,” Fenris commanded as they neared the door. Isabela froze.

She watched as Fenris lifted one arm, the lyrium in his hand emitting a soft glow. He brushed his fingers slowly through the air, searching for something. His brands alternately brightened and dimmed as his fingers traced the outline of an invisible glyph only he could detect.

Isabela listened for any reaction from the cellar around them, but she heard nothing other than her own anxious heartbeat and breath.

She had no idea what Fenris was seeing, so she looked behind her, raising her lantern. It was burning as brightly as the wick would allow.

The rest of the corridor appeared to be empty, at least as far back as the right-angle corner that turned back the way they had come.

They’d been down here for less than five minutes. This section was technically within the Hawke estate, although stone walls, ceiling, and floor were indistinguishable from much of Darktown. To get this far, they’d passed a number of other rooms (mostly empty of anything but junk) as well as several corridors branching off into gloom.

Since they’d been down here, they’d seen no movement beside themselves, and no sign of any more undead. Still, Isabela wasn’t about to assume that something wouldn’t try to sneak up on them.

She shivered and wished she hadn’t had that thought.

Resentfully, she eyed the unlit gas lamps placed along the corridor. These passages seemed very dark and narrow and cold to be part of a Hightown estate. Why weren’t those lamps lit? It was midday outside, and this place was as dark as a tomb.

Don’t think the word “tomb.” It won’t help. More like a cave... no, not that either, damn it. Focus.

“Any ideas?” Isabela asked, keeping her voice hushed.

She looked up at the ceiling, which remained shadowy despite their lanterns. She rubbed her free
hand on her arm, trying to shake off the feeling of chilly dampness that clung to her skin like cobwebs. She’d thought she would hate it down here, and she’d been absolutely right.

“The entrance is protected by magic,” said Fenris. “Can you feel it?”

“No,” said Isabela, surprised. “Should I?”

Fenris shrugged. “I don’t know, but you’ll have to try if you want to get through. Come over here.”

Reluctantly, Isabela came level with him, eyes on the glowing lyrium etched into his skin.

“What exactly are you expecting to happen?” she asked. “If there’s magic here, you can feel it because of your brands. You know I think they’re gorgeous, but I’m not really up for getting a full-body lyrium tattoo. I’m quite happy letting ripples in the flow of magic pass me by, thanks, especially if they-”

“The keyhole is right here,” Fenris cut her off, indicating a spot in midair at about head height. “Put your hand in it.”

Isabela looked at the patch of empty air and then at Fenris, making no move to obey.

“What’s going to happen?” she said warily.

Fenris grunted impatiently and grabbed her hand, lifting it to the spot before she could do more than utter a wordless protest.

Immediately, Isabela felt a fierce tingling in her fingertips. The sensation was like an itch that compelled her to adjust the position of her hand a little. Something in her mind reacted to the probing magic, letting her know that the itch would abate if she spread her fingers.

She did so as Fenris let go of her. The tingling became a pleasant warmth that slipped over her fingers and the tip of her thumb.

For the span of a heartbeat, a blurry image wavered in her field of view. It was fleeting, like an afterimage, but with more substance. It was only visible for a moment, but it was long enough for her to recognize Michael Hawke in his plate armour.

She gasped and yanked her hand away in surprise. The warmth immediately vanished along with the image, although she could still see it in her mind’s eye.

“What the crap was that?” she said, unnerved.

She looked at her upraised hand, turning it this way and that. The sensation was gone, but like the image, she could almost still feel it – like a warm, damp strap of leather had just been curled around her fingers.

“A ward set by Anders,” Fenris said. “His laboratory is just ahead. This kind of magic is meant to keep out anyone who doesn’t belong.”

He grimaced. “Primarily templars, I imagine.”

“Oh,” Isabela muttered. “Well, great. We’re not templars, so we should be fine. Hey, do you think there’s a switch in there that can turn on the gas flow to these lamps?”

Fenris looked at her oddly. “Perhaps, but why? We have lanterns, and we’re heading deeper in, not staying here.”
Isabela sighed and shook her head. “Never mind. So can we get through this? Do we need a special key or something to stop it from blasting us to bits?”

“I don’t think it will blast us,” Fenris said. “I would have felt magic that strong from farther down the hall. You’re right about needing a key of sorts, though. Did you see the image of Hawke?”

“Yes,” Isabela said.

“Was one of his hands raised?”

Isabela’s brow furrowed as she tried to remember. “I don’t think I saw it long enough to notice his hands.”

Fenris gestured for her to put her hand up to the magical ‘keyhole’ again. Isabela didn’t really want to, but it hadn’t blasted her the first time and she trusted Fenris’s intuition, so she did.

This time she left her hand in place long enough to let the warmth spread over her whole hand. The image of Hawke reappeared and became clearer, although it continued to waver. After a few moments it was about as stable as a reflection on an almost-still pool of water.

The illusory Hawke met Isabela’s gaze. One of his eyebrows arched, and the corners of his mouth twitched up – about as close to a true smile as the real Hawke ever got. Slowly, he raised his left hand and held it out to her, palm forward.

“Yes,” she said.

“Place your hand against his,” said Fenris.

Now that the image was stable, when Isabela moved her hand away it lingered long enough for her to cover Hawke’s phantom hand with her own. In a flash, the warmth spread down her arm and over her entire body.

“Now you can go to the door,” said Fenris.

Isabela stepped forward as the illusion dissolved. The warmth became a pleasing coolness that passed over her in a wave and then disappeared, as though she’d walked through a sheet of falling water.

Then she blinked and her mouth fell open as another door, previously hidden, materialized in the right-hand wall. It creaked open a little ways invitingly.

“Huh,” Isabela muttered, impressed by the quality of the illusion. She’d never have guessed that the laboratory entrance wasn’t the already-visible door a few steps away, let alone that the true door was glamoured to look like a solid wall.

As she walked into the room, she sensed rather than heard the air pressure shift. Soft light bloomed within as a cheery fire burst into life in a hearth on the far wall. Several candles around the room ignited at the same time.

Isabela turned back to look at Fenris. He had his hand spread in a different spot in the air than the one she had used. As she watched, he stepped forward and a glimmer of light flashed over him with that strange, rippling quality of a reflection on water.

“The magic keeps out those who are no friends of Hawke’s,” Fenris said in response to her curious expression. “Or at least, who have no serious designs on his life.”
Isabela closed her mouth and tried not to look too ignorant.

“Why wouldn’t Anders want to keep out his own enemies?” she wondered as Fenris joined her inside the laboratory. “Like... if that’s the case, what’s to stop templars from coming in here?”

“Howe’s status, perhaps,” said Fenris. “Hidden as it is under his estate, few should even know this room exists. But you’re right – it does seem odd. Hawke isn’t exactly friends with Meredith, but he isn’t her enemy either. Not since Bethany died.”

As he spoke, Fenris scanned the walls of the laboratory with his gaze. The room was lined with shelves full of books and countless other items of a seemingly alchemical nature.

“Do you know what kind of magic that was?” Isabela asked, watching as Fenris headed for a long, cluttered workbench below some of the shelves. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Yes,” he replied. “It’s called a gatekeeper ward. Quite rare outside of Tevinter, but common there.”

“Ah,” said Isabela. She didn’t press for more details, although she was hoping he’d give her some. After a moment, he obliged her.

“It is a versatile spell,” Fenris explained somewhat absent-mindedly as he reached out to run a finger along the spines of several books. “Its effects can vary widely, although it always protects a door. They can be lethal if the wrong person tries to pass. Supposedly they predate the First Blight, but the spell may actually be elven in origin. Many magics claimed by Tevinters to be their own inventions are.”

“Lucky for us you know how they work,” Isabela remarked.

Fenris dropped his finger from the books. Without turning around, he said, “They were explained to me once in exhaustive detail. Danarius had a... colleague whose mansion was full of them.”

The way he inflected the word colleague gave Isabela the feeling that he’d said it instead of something obscene.

“I would very much like to know how Anders learned it,” he added, turning around to face her again with a scowl. “The version I know requires blood from the gatekeeper to be set – in this case it would be Hawke’s blood. Perhaps Anders modified the spell, for I find it difficult to imagine Hawke agreeing to such a thing.”

“Yeah,” Isabela agreed.

Fenris folded his arms and leaned against the workbench. “Regardless, its presence at least tells us one thing useful: Anders must still be alive. If he were dead, the spell would have ended.”

“Will he know?” Isabela asked. “That we’ve passed through it?”

“Yes. With any luck, he’s on his way here now.”

“As long as Hawke doesn’t have him nailed to the floor with knives, you mean.”

Fenris grimaced at her as he crossed the laboratory to another workbench. Isabela joined him.

Several more candles lit themselves with a soft whoosh as they approached. More books lay open across the wooden surface; many were obscured by scattered sheets of parchment and vellum that were densely covered with scribbles and diagrams. What free space remained was filled with
experimental equipment, only some of which Isabela could identify.

Fenris leaned over to examine one of the open tomes. His lyrium brands shimmered faintly in sympathetic resonance as the magic candles activated.

Even if Isabela hadn’t known about his intense distrust of magic, the expression on Fenris’s face as he looked at one particular book convinced her to give him some space. She drifted away to wander around laboratory’s perimeter, looking over the extensive collection of curios and paraphernalia for anything interesting.

Aside from books, the shelves held jars and bottles containing an impressive array of herbs and other substances. As with the equipment, Isabela recognized the contents of some jars, but far from all of them. Quite a few held objects or substances that were visibly magical.

The dozens upon dozens of books might have been interesting, but all the titles whose languages Isabela knew concerned obscure arcana that she had no real interest in trying to understand even if she could have.

As Fenris paged through one of Anders’s journals, Isabela ended up over by a door in the wall opposite the one they’d entered through. It was closed and barred, but it sported a small knothole at eye level. Isabela placed one eye up to the hole and peered through, but all she could see on the other side was darkness.

She turned away, considering. The door was barred from this side, so there was no way it could be opened from deeper in the cellars except by overwhelming force. It was probably enchanted too, although she had no way to know in what way.

None of the branching corridors they’d passed through earlier connected to Darktown. As far as she could recall, beyond this room was a vault, another thick door that could be bolted and barred, and then the endless tunnels and sewers of the Undercity.

The cellars behind them, directly below the estate, had been empty. That meant that Merrill, Varric, Anders, Eingana, Hawke, and perhaps even Reaver had to be beyond this door. It was unclear how they could have gotten down there, seeing as how the door was still barred from this side. Magic, perhaps. All she knew was that if they’d left by the Hightown entrance, Fenris would have noticed.

If the others really were down here somewhere, they would have no way to get back into the estate unless Isabela and Fenris opened this door, possibly allowing more undead inside as well. Hawke, aided by the demon’s magic, was the probable exception.

Isabela looked over at Fenris. He was still somewhat of a beginner when it came to reading, and Anders’s cramped handwriting would have challenged anyone to decipher it, so she’d give him more time. If he thought there might be something useful to be gleaned from the mage’s notes, then she wasn’t about to insist they proceed deeper right away. It was nice enough right here where it was quiet, cozy, and well-lit, with no monsters trying to do horrible things to them.

Even so, Isabela’s anxiety gradually increased as they continued to stand around doing nothing much. Maker only knew what was happening to the others right this moment.

She chewed her lip, eyes once again wandering the walls of the room for clues, or at least a distraction.

Her gaze fell on two books that lay open side-by-side on a different workbench than the one Fenris was at. Next to them sat a small glass jar of what appeared to be blood.
She went over to the bench and examined one of the books. The displayed pages were dense with drawings and text. She knew enough to recognize the language as old Arcanum, but that was all.

More interesting was a drawing of a shade. Amusingly, it was depicted with its shapeless body extended and its arm-like protrusions outstretched in the manner of the Vediusian Man, a famous sketch of human proportions by the legendary Antivan polymath Leonidas da Trevisi. Was this a treatise on demonic anatomy? _Oh, those wacky Tevinters._

She made to look over at the other book, but the jar caught her gaze along the way. It had no label or markings of any kind.

Isabela reached out to pick it up, but a strange chill emanating from its surface stopped her fingers before they even touched the glass. The jar was either enchanted to preserve the blood, or... it was evil. In her experience, jars of probably-blood that emanated a mysterious, unnatural chill were almost always evil. She let it be.

The other book had a scrap of parchment atop its spread pages with a few reference numbers recorded. At the bottom of the parchment was a hastily scrawled half-sentence: _distraction/convergence – Emergent Compendium??_

Isabela brushed the parchment aside to see the page of the book and was met with an engraving of a beautiful, intricate sigil. The writing around it was composed of more Arcanum she couldn’t read. She barely glanced at the text, more fascinated by the spikes and whorls of the sigil.

Isabela’s eyes traced a line which seemed to run unbroken throughout the sigil and shape many of its features. She followed the line as it looped and curved around various glyphs, back in on itself multiple times, over and under....

Her blood was heating up, and her pulse was accelerating. Isabela shifted, her antsiness and discomfort in this stale, musty cellar suddenly coming into sharp focus.

An urge to exert herself developed and rapidly intensified. She wanted to run – through fields of grass, through dunes of sand, through shallow surf. Anywhere. She wanted to feel the wind in her hair. She wanted to _fight._

That, or....

Isabela’s eyes were locked on the sigil in the book, but her mind was racing through memories, imagining different outcomes to situations from her past.

She saw Lucky confront her at the bar in the Hanged Man. He grabbed her wrist, tried to hit her a few times, grew frustrated when she dodged him easily... and then she slit his throat and impaled him through the stomach at the same time, revelling in the hot blood pouring down her blades and over her hands. In her imagination, she lifted a blade to her mouth and ran her tongue along it-

The book slammed shut in front of her. Isabela leapt backwards with a yelp, more afraid of her own mind in that moment than of the loud, sudden noise. The brown, lyrium-etched hand on the book belonged to Fenris.

She barely noticed. She was breathing as hard as if she’d just been chased across Lowtown. Her face was flushed and sweaty. There was a curious hollowness in the pit of her stomach – something that been writhing and growing a moment ago, and now longed to feel vicious bloodthirst once again.

Unthinkingly, Isabela moved forward to reopen the book, conscious of only a dim annoyance that Fenris had intervened. Her eyes hadn’t finished tracing that sigil. There had been fear for a moment
of where it was taking her, but now she only wanted to see it to the end. She wanted-

“Isabela!” said a voice that pierced through the fog. She looked up in time to see the palm of Fenris’s hand erupt with brilliant radiance. The lyrium flash momentarily stunned her.

When she recovered, blinking furiously, her mind was clear. Or... clearer, at least. What the Void was going on?

“Get a hold of yourself!” said Fenris, and Isabela realized with an unpleasant shock that she had her daggers drawn and raised in front of her. Also her head hurt, really badly.

She sheathed her weapons and raised her hands to massage her temples, keeping her eyes shut as she took deep breaths. It felt like someone was slamming a snare drum right behind her eyes.

When the pain had mostly abated, she peered at Fenris through her fingers. “What in the world-?”

“That mage is a fool,” Fenris spat, glaring down at the book she’d been examining. “He would be at home in Tevinter. There, too, mages often leave dangerous knowledge lying around, where people they claim to care about can easily stumble upon it.”

Isabela stared uncomfortably at the closed book.

“Fenris, please. Tell me what just happened. What was I doing? What kind of book is that?”

“It was the sigil you were looking at that affected your mind,” Fenris said. “Not the book itself. Probably.”

Chilly with fear, Isabela rubbed her forearms as she backed away from the workbench. Her eyes darted around the room, trying to get a bead on anything else that might try to take over her thoughts and turn them unnervingly violent.

“Right,” she said. “That is beyond creepy. Can we get out of here?”

“Soon,” said Fenris distractedly. He looked down at Anders’s journal, which he now held in his hands.

“Anders has written here about what happened when Hawke set off his magical trap... I think.”

“So?” asked Isabela. “Do we really need to know the arcane details? Shouldn’t we get going, look for the others?”

Still gazing down at the journal, Fenris didn’t answer until she’d walked back to his side, repeated her question, and poked him a few times.

“I think we may be able to replicate the effect, if we lure Hawke to the right spot,” he told her. “Perhaps my brands can affect these ‘channels’ Anders talks about.”

Isabela sighed and turned away. She wasn’t about to leave Fenris to go looking by herself, but his talk of magic and lyrium frustrated her. She wanted to do something now, and all that was beyond her understanding.

She had heard Anders’s theory about Kirkwall’s magical channels and reservoirs, and how waking them up had apparently brought demons down on the entire city. None of it sounded like anything she could work with.

Isabela was a woman of the world: the real one, the one in front of her and around her. Not the
world of dreams and spirits on the far side of the Veil. She was the last person who could say whether recreating a magical accident was a thing Fenris could do. He wasn’t even a true mage and he knew far more about it than she ever would.

Warm breath touched her neck, and an armoured finger traced a line down her arm. Despite her mood, Isabela smiled.

“Fenris, my dear,” she said. “I’m always in the mood for you, but... this really isn’t the time or place, is it?”

“What?” said Fenris.

She looked over at him just as he looked up at her.

His eyes widened at the same moment Isabela realized that someone was behind her who was not Fenris.

His mouth opened in an angry snarl as he reached for his blade. Isabela leapt forward on instinct, her heart immediately jumping to a terrified race.

Fenris lunged. There was a clang and scrape of metal on metal as he barely deflected Hawke’s claws from carving a terrible wound into Isabela’s back.

“Holy shit!” Isabela yelled, drawing her daggers as she spun around to face her attacker.

Hawke shoved Fenris’s blade away from himself one-handed and stepped forward, ducking under the elf’s next swing with eerie, preternatural grace. His black eyes glinted with reflected firelight as he tried again to hit Isabela – this time with claws of eldritch red force that extended from his gauntlets for half the length of his arms.

For the second time in as many moments, Isabela barely evaded a slash that would have eviscerated her. The extreme speed, silence, and above all suddenness of Hawke’s assault had her breathless and panicky, a far cry from her usual cool confidence during a fight.

As she tried desperately to find her poise, Fenris took a guarded stance and aimed a precise blow at Hawke’s hands, meaning to test the durability of his magical claws.

His element of surprise lost, Hawke dispensed with any pretense of stealth. He let out a terrifying demonic roar and turned to Fenris, deflecting his incoming blade with a savage double swipe. He struck the weapon hard enough to shatter Fenris’s stance, forcing him to stagger backwards or risk falling right onto Hawke’s claws.

Fenris barely managed to regain his balance as Hawke advanced. Still gathering her wits, Isabela glanced at the door behind them. It was still closed and barred.

How was that possible? She hadn’t even heard a sound!

She refocused on Hawke as he and Fenris began to trade blows. Maybe she could go for the warrior’s legs and hamstring him while he was distracted.

Her only real advantage in this fight was that she had an ally and Hawke did not. Likewise, Fenris would no doubt soon count on her help. There was no way she could hold off Hawke if he came at her directly – not like Fenris was doing now. His reach with those red magic claws was nearly twice that of her daggers.
The claws in question were currently inches from Fenris’s face. Fenris kept them back with the flat of his blade, his muscles bulging with the effort. His expression remained cold and hard.

Isabela felt a surge of fond admiration for her sturdy, stoic friend. Fenris was far better at heavy bladework than she was, and much better able to fend off Hawke’s assault – at least for a little while. If she’d been down here alone, Hawke might well have killed her before she’d ever known he was there.

But what could she do? There had to be some way she could give Fenris an edge, but if she attacked him from behind, Hawke could simply round on her and kill her anyway.

As well, both she and Fenris were hampered by their desire not to kill Hawke. He, evidently, had no such concern.

Maiming Hawke without killing him was something she could do, but only if she had an opening. Finding one ought to be easy enough; Hawke’s feet and most of his upper body were bare, so it wasn’t like she’d have to get through plate armour to injure him. If he was disabled, he could always be healed later-

Then, with a groan, Isabela remembered something crucial of which Anders and Eingana had reminded her the previous day: Hawke was still a reaver. In his battle rage, superficial wounds only made him stronger. If she cut him at all while the demon was near the surface, as now, it would accomplish nothing except angering the monster and increasing its magical power.

At the moment, Fenris was still on the defensive. He’d kept Hawke from clawing at his face, but now he was being forced steadily back toward the door they’d entered through. Blow after blow from Hawke’s claws rained down on him, each barely parried.

Hawke attacked so fast that Fenris had no opportunity at all to counterattack. Often Hawke slashed downward or horizontally at him with both claws at once, and it was all Fenris could do to avoid losing his hands or eyes.

Desperately, Isabela looked around for something to throw at Hawke that wouldn’t cut him, but might at least distract him long enough for Fenris to gain the upper hand.

Her eyes settled on a tarnished silver candlestick sitting on one of the workbenches. She darted over and grabbed it, sheathing a dagger to pick it up.

Fenris’s back was now against the door. Isabela noticed with alarm that he’d already taken a number of serious slashing wounds to his arms. He was only keeping Hawke back by delivering precise, lyrium-enhanced kicks as often as he parried with his blade.

Hawke, meanwhile, was snarling like an animal. The resonance in his voice was sending arcane ripples throughout the room, each growl rattling the jars and objects on the shelves.

Isabela gathered her nerve and adjusted her grip on the candlestick. Ordinarily she’d have made a flippant comment, but right now she was too tightly wound with anxiety and fear to think of one.

She took aim, throwing the candlestick with a perfect spin towards Hawke’s head. She knew as soon as it left her hand that the toss was dead on. Its weight ought to hit him on the skull hard enough to stun without causing death – or so she hoped.

As it turned out, she’d underestimated Hawke’s reflexes.

Just before the candlestick hit him, he spun around with a growl and knocked the missile right out of
the air with a clang.

Isabela didn’t even see where it landed. Almost before she could register what he’d done, Hawke was charging at her with his teeth bared and his claws raised.

Shrieking with terror and shock, Isabela scrambled away, only her years of experience in knife fights and duels allowing her to evade Hawke’s two-handed swipe.

She’d succeeded in drawing his attention away from Fenris, but now Hawke was coming after her. She was fortunate to have a split second to draw her other dagger before he closed what little distance she’d gained.

Now Isabela knew how Fenris must have felt as she retreated under an unrelenting storm of blows, deflecting furiously with her knives when she could and evading narrowly when she couldn’t. She was forced to call upon every twist and trick her body could perform just to stay ahead of Hawke’s wrath.

Being face-to-face with him was almost the worst part of being his target. Hawke’s handsome features were twisted with monstrous, furious hate. He snarled and roared like an enraged bear. Red steam drifted from the corners of his mouth. His eyes were utterly black but for tiny, blood-red sparks where his pupils should have been.

Logically, Isabela knew that it was a demon making Hawke behave this way. Yet the sight of her friend (and occasional object of desire) so corrupted, all while having to dodge harder than she ever had in her life to escape his lethal attacks, would haunt her nightmares for many years to come.

“Fenris?!” Isabela called, her voice high with panic. She was doing her best to dance around the room, but just like he had with Fenris, Hawke was driving her relentlessly towards the wall. “Help?! Please!”

“Hawke!” Fenris roared. “Get back over here!”

He slammed his foot down on the wooden floor of the laboratory. A pulse of spirit energy from his lyrium brands raced outwards in an expanding circle.

The entire room trembled at the impact, and when the shockwave reached Hawke, he stumbled, shoulders twitching a little with apparent pain. Catching Fenris’s urgent look, Isabela’s lightning reflexes allowed her to leap over the wave of force as it rolled past her. Even through the soles of her boots, she felt a wash of prickly heat pass her by.

Hawke stumbled around in a wide circle to face Fenris. His bare feet were singed, but no skin had been broken. Clever, Isabela thought.

Fenris stood poised with his sword in a ready position in front of him, eyeing Hawke warily.

Hawke glared back at him, hunched over, shoulders and chest heaving with harsh breaths. He straightened slowly, one hand flexing at his side.

There was a shimmer of crimson magic as, before their stunned eyes, Hawke’s greatsword materialized in his grip. He raised it to a ready position in front of him, curling the fingers of his other hand around the hilt as the spectral claws on his gauntlets faded away.

Fenris made to advance, but Hawke stepped forward threateningly, giving him pause. Seeing her chance, Isabela darted around him while his attention was diverted.
Relieved to no longer have Hawke between her and Fenris, she took up a position beside and slightly behind her friend, daggers held ready to defend his flank.

Hawke’s gaze moved from Fenris to Isabela and back again. Slowly, he lowered his sword.

His breathing slowed, and though his expression remained menacing, the red sparks faded from his eyes. For the first time since appearing out of nowhere and attacking them, Hawke spoke.

“Fenris,” he said, and Isabela was surprised to hear almost no hint of the demonic resonance in his voice. “I may have something to show you later. I think you’ll enjoy it.”

“Hawke,” Fenris said. “What just happened? You’ve suppressed the demon! Don’t waste time – keep doing it! Let’s go upstairs and restore your bonds now, before it retakes control!”

Hawke’s expression slowly shifted into an unnerving smile.

“Oh... this again,” he said. “Right. People keep making variations on that same demand. I’m getting a bit sick of it, to be honest.”

Isabela urgently wanted to know who had tried getting through to him and whether or not they were still alive, but she couldn’t bring herself to ask. She was afraid to hear an answer she wouldn’t like.

Hawke began to move in a slow, unconcerned circle around the two of them. Fenris mirrored him to keep them the same distance apart, with Isabela sidling along behind in concert with his motion.

“Now, I realize this may be difficult for you to accept,” said Hawke, his voice laced with a hint of sarcasm, “but I am not a demon.”

Isabela raised her eyebrows and exchanged a glance with Fenris. He looked as nonplussed as she felt.

“Obviously you’re not a demon,” Isabela said. “You’re you. The demon is a demon. Fenris meant you should-”

“No,” Hawke interrupted her. “You misunderstand. There is no demon.”

Isabela’s shock silenced her as her mouth fell open. She looked at Fenris again, hoping he’d understood something she’d missed, but he’d evidently heard no more than she.

“Now, I realize this may be difficult for you to accept,” said Fenke, his voice laced with a hint of sarcasm, “but I am not a demon.”

Isabela began to move in a slow, unconcerned circle around the two of them. Fenris mirrored him to keep them the same distance apart, with Isabela sidling along behind in concert with his motion.

“Now, I realize this may be difficult for you to accept,” said Hawke, his voice laced with a hint of sarcasm, “but I am not a demon.”

Isabela raised her eyebrows and exchanged a glance with Fenris. He looked as nonplussed as she felt.

“Obviously you’re not a demon,” Isabela said. “You’re you. The demon is a demon. Fenris meant you should-”

“No,” Hawke interrupted her. “You misunderstand. There is no demon.”

Isabela’s shock silenced her as her mouth fell open. She looked at Fenris again, hoping he’d understood something she’d missed, but he’d evidently heard no more than she.

“You can’t possibly expect us to believe that,” said Fenris, watching Hawke with narrowed eyes. “You and I spoke about this not two days ago. You made quite clear then that this behaviour was out of your control, and not want you wanted. At the very least, you were worried you’d been affected by blood magic.”

“I thought so then, yes,” said Hawke airily. “I thought I was a terrible person for treating Anders the way I did. It’s... really nasty, some of what I did to him.”

His eyes drifted half closed and a slow, erotic smile crossed his lips. His tongue flicked out briefly.

“I’ll tell you all about it, Isabela, if you like,” he said, looking at her as he opened his eyes. “I know you’d appreciate it.”

His eyes were still totally black, so it was hard to say for sure where his gaze really rested, but Isabela could feel it on her face.

Despite the lust in Hawke’s voice and his wistful expression, she was dead certain that she would not
remotely appreciate such a tale. In fact, there was an unpleasant churning sensation in her stomach that she usually only felt when she drank too much sour whiskey.

“But as it turns out,” Hawke went on, looking back at Fenris, “it wasn’t terrible at all. In fact, Anders likes what I do to him. He just pretends not to, because he knows it turns me on when he struggles and cries and begs me to stop. But really, he wants it as much as I do.”

He laughed wickedly. Isabela shivered, wishing she were anywhere but here.

“Believe it or not, sometimes he actually wants more, even after I’m done! The man is an absolute glutton for punishment. I’d almost be worried about it if it weren’t so... hot.”

He licked his lips again and took a deep breath.

“You’d be proud of him, Fenris,” he said. “Anders knows exactly what he is, and he’s properly ashamed. He comes to me for punishment because he knows he’s due for pain, but also because we love each other and I make it extra special for him. He gets what he’s got coming and he gets to pleasure me like no one else can.”

“What are you talking about?” Fenris demanded, and Isabela almost yelled at him to shut up. She had her kinks, and she was certainly no saint, but she recognized horribly abusive rhetoric when she heard it. She had no desire whatsoever to hear a single word more of this awful conversation.

“Surely you know,” said Hawke softly.

He continued to circle, and they continued to move to stay across from him. Neither noticed that Hawke was gradually spiraling inward, fractionally closing the distance to them with each careful step.

“Anders is an abomination,” said Hawke intently. “An unholy union of man and spirit that should not be allowed to exist in our world. He is a textbook example of everything the Chantry teaches about the dangers of magic. Look at what he’s made of himself, free of their oversight.”

Isabela’s confusion deepened with every sentence. Hawke wasn’t exactly a champion of mage rights, but nor had she ever known him to take the Chantry position so explicitly. He’d protected Bethany from templars for years, and he’d chosen to take her into the Deep Roads – where she’d died – rather than leave her unguarded in Kirkwall.

Most of all, Isabela had never known Hawke to express such contempt for Anders because of his bond with Justice. She knew he disapproved of it in principle, but if he really felt Anders deserved punishment, why hadn’t he turned him in to Meredith after the Deep Roads expedition? Even after Anders had been unable to save Bethany, Hawke had continued to protect his secret. He’d killed templars in Anders’s defense on multiple occasions.

Furthermore, Justice’s existence within Anders had been no barrier to him and Hawke falling in love. Isabela had watched it happen! Sure, as romances went it was a long way from typical, but she knew passion and commitment when she saw it. Despite their differences, Anders and Hawke had been solid for years.

Whatever Hawke might think was going on here, Isabela thought – whether or not there really was a demon – he was definitely not himself. At the very least, he was not the same person he’d been even a few days ago.

But if he believed he was... could he even be saved? Would he let himself be saved?
Fenris, meanwhile, was confused for an entirely different reason.

“What kind of nonsense is this, Hawke?” he demanded scathingly. “What exactly do you take yourself for? You say there is no demon – pah! Why then do you bleed red energy when you’re wounded? Why are your eyes right now black like the sky on a moonless night? You are yourself an abomination, and you revel in your depravity while condemning Anders for the same!”

“No I’m not,” said Hawke, spreading his hands. He easily lifted his greatsword toward the ceiling with one hand, and although Isabela’s eyes naturally went to the impressive flexing of his arm and shoulder, she made sure she knew where that blade was pointed at all times.

“As I’ve said, there is no demon. There’s a spirit, yes – a being from the Fade that’s taught me a few things and trusted me with its power. But I assure you, it’s not a demon. I’m certainly not possessed by it.”

“Then why the personality change, Hawke?” said Isabela, bursting with her need for answers. “Why this sudden hate for Anders? Controlling him, punishing him and getting off on it, saying he’s exactly what the Chantry fears, saying him crying no and asking you to stop means he actually wants it? Where did all this rapey mind-control bullshit come from? You’ve never been about stuff like that before, never.”

Hawke scowled at her. “Simple. My eyes were opened.”

“By what?” Isabela pressed. “You must be able to see how drastically you’ve changed since this monster came into the picture! What was it that triggered all this? Was it-”

Sadness panged through her as she suddenly understood.

“-your mother? Quentin, and what he did?”

Hawke was silent. She felt his empty eyes boring holes into her. After a few moments, he nodded. Isabela’s heart sank. “Oh, Hawke.”

Could it be true? Had he really just been broken by Leandra’s death and put himself back together wrong? Had the demon heard his grief and rage and hate echoing through the Fade, and offered him the power to act on those feelings?

Hawke’s response to Quentin’s violation had been to kill him, but it hadn’t made the pain go away. It hadn’t brought Leandra back. He’d needed a way to cope – and the demon had provided one, the worst of all possible answers.

If it was true, then even if they freed Hawke from the demon or killed it, it wouldn’t fix the way he was now. That would be even harder, for Quentin’s cruelty and madness lived on in the violence of his final victim’s son.

“Isabela, he’s lying,” Fenris hissed. “He says he isn’t possessed, but that could not more clearly be nonsense. What would a spirit ‘teach’ him that doesn’t involve magic? How could it ‘trust him with its power’ without pouring itself into his body? The very fact that he, a non-mage, is now able to use magic should be all the indication you need.”

Isabela looked at Hawke. “Well?” she asked, knowing in her heart that Fenris was right, but desperate to envision an outcome in which everyone survived.

Hawke shrugged. “I don’t know how it works, exactly. I believe it’s a being that first spoke to me in
dreams several years ago. Do you remember that blood mage Tarohne? The one who was kidnapping templar recruits and forcing demons down their throats to corrupt the Order from within?”

“Yes,” said Fenris suspiciously. “I was with you when you killed her.”

Hawke nodded. “Right. I think she must have been the one who summoned it initially. She wanted a demon, a minion she could shove into some hapless host and take control of. Unfortunately for her, she was an idiot. What she actually got was a spirit far older and stronger than she could control. I don’t think she ever even realized her mistake.

“That templar meathead Keran proved unsuitable to host the being she woke up. For that matter so did I, but I at least had the mental fortitude to withstand contact with it. Or so I gather, from my dreams.”

Isabela shook her head in horror, covering her eyes against a welling of tears. Fenris was right – that much was painfully obvious. At best, Hawke was in denial about the fact that he was an abomination. Much more likely was that he, or rather the demon, was simply trying to manipulate them.

_Hawke... you poor, poor thing. And poor Anders._

Fenris was determined to get to the heart of the matter.

“Do you mean to say,” he said with quiet, dangerous calm, “that this thing has been influencing you for the past several years? Since the day we fought Tarohne?”

“Possibly,” Hawke said. “Actually... probably. Like I said, it’s only spoken to me in dreams until very recently, and most of those I forgot as soon as I woke up – again, until recently. The few times I remembered it talking to me, I thought it was just a strange dream. Doesn’t everyone have dreams like that in Kirkwall?”

“So when did you realize what it was?” Isabela wanted to know. “When did it start... giving you power?”

She was doing her best to stifle her tears, and forced her voice to remain steady. She sensed the demon wanted her upset, so hiding her emotions seemed the best course at the moment. It was only a matter of time until it attacked them again; showing any perceived weakness would just bring that about sooner.

“It gave me power the night my mother died,” said Hawke. He was watching her face intently, and she felt a clench of fear in her gut. “I still didn’t realize what it was until... well, today, really, but I felt its power. Memories of my dreams started coming back to me.”

Fenris was shaking his head with a disgusted look on his face.

“Anders has a theory about it,” Hawke went on. “Quentin’s blood magic altered my body chemistry somehow, allowing it to speak to me more clearly.

“It showed me how to overcome my own weaknesses. I fought against it at first, because I believed my awakening was hurting people around me. Hurting Anders, mainly. I know what you’re thinking – don’t deny it, Isabela, I can see it on your face – but I’m not trying to manipulate him. Despite what he is, I love him deeply. I love him as I’ve never loved anyone else. And he loves me. He needs this just as much as I do. He doesn’t understand yet, but he will.”
“You are a fool,” Fenris spat. “That is, if you even are the real Hawke we’re talking to – which I doubt! You can pretend as hard as you like, monster, but I see the truth. Hawke is your puppet, and he would never behave this way if he had a choice.”

He leaned forward. “Hawke, listen! If you can hear me, know that we’re not giving up. I promise you, we won’t rest until we find a way to free you from this wretched creature. Keep fighting it! Keep resisting! Don’t give in, remember your true self!”

“That’s right!” said Isabela urgently. “We’re here, Hawke, and we know the real you! This... thing controls you for now, but you’re strong enough to fight it, and we’re not going to let it eat you alive! Just hold on, please!”

But in her mind she was thinking – hold on until what? What can we, what can even Wynne possibly do against something this powerful, aside from killing our friend?

Hawke sighed and palmed his forehead tiredly. When he looked at them again, disappointment was writ plain across his face.

“You’re so misguided,” he said. “Your hearts are in the right place, and I won’t forget that, but you can’t even truly know how wrong you are. So I’m sorry, my former friends. I like you both a lot, and I could have forgiven you if you’d learned to be content with your lack of understanding. Your acceptance would have been enough for me. But since you insist on taking it further than that, you should know that there’s no way I’m going to just let you strip me of everything I’ve gained. In fact, you won’t even have a chance to interfere with me again. Both of you end, here and now.”

He raised his arms.

Isabela tensed, preparing to fight for her life. Beside her, Fenris raised his sword.

Yet Hawke didn’t attack – at least, not physically.

His sword became insubstantial. With a wisp of magic, it disappeared completely.

An intense aura flared around his hands. With a roll of his shoulders and head, the ripple of magic bloomed from his outstretched fingers into an expanding crimson sphere.

Fenris and Isabela stumbled as the floor unexpectedly shook beneath their feet. They were unable to even try to get out of its way as the red magic passed over them. Both simultaneously collapsed in agonized convulsions.

The barred door that led deeper into the cellars suddenly trembled under a barrage of blows. Hawke glanced over at it.

“Ah – some friends of mine have finally arrived,” he said, and the otherworldly resonance in his voice made Isabela’s teeth throb. The pain that wracked her entire body was worst in her chest and head; she could barely even make out his words over the roaring in her ears.

Hawke curled two of his fingers, and the bar across the door shriveled into denatured grey slag. The door burst open and a mass of walking corpses spilled into the room, knocking those in front over and trampling them indifferently in their frenzy to reach their prey.

Fenris and Isabela were on the floor, totally incapacitated by searing pain. They could only watch in futile horror as the corpses and skeletons, animated by spirits of rage and hunger, lumbered towards them.
Isabela’s hands spasmed with pain and her throat had seized up, leaving her unable to produce more than a few strangled gasps. Still, she was determined not to die alone.

Inch by agonizing inch, she shoved her hand across the floor and found Fenris’s, limp and nerveless at his side. She squeezed his hand as best she could through her anguish, and took some small comfort when he weakly squeezed back.

“Wh- no,” said Hawke suddenly, and he snarled in anger.

He stalked towards the seething mass of undead. The magical agony paralyzing Fenris and Isabela stopped abruptly.

Startled, Isabela picked herself up off the floor as fast as she could, fighting against the residual cramps and aches of the spell. This would be their once chance to escape with their lives, and she wasn’t going to waste it.

Fenris, too, was struggling to his feet. She helped him as best she could. He was clutching his head and taking deep, wracking breaths, and his lyrium brands flickered erratically. After a moment he nodded to her, able to stand on his own.

Both of them looked up in time to watch the zombies Hawke had summoned be engulfed and flash-incinerated by a tide of blue fire from behind them. In an instant the corpses became sludge, the skeletons filaments of ash.

Through the swirling cloud of heat and foul debris, a single crossbow bolt flew out of the darkness. It struck Hawke in the shoulder hard enough to send him spinning backwards. He roared in anger and, apparently, even pain.

Through her surprise, Isabela blinked away the tears that lingered from the agony spell, tentatively allowing herself to feel hope. Varric? she thought. Anders? Who else could it be?

Sure enough, the blonde mage strode through the dissipating blue firestorm with an upright confidence that Isabela hadn’t seen him bear in a long time. Not all of the blue light faded as he entered the room, however, and Isabela realized with a jolt that it wasn’t exactly Anders – it was Justice.

His eyes and skin crackled with power. As he waved his staff in a casting gesture at Hawke, more of his signature azure energy danced along its length, coiling like a snake preparing to strike.

Varric appeared behind Anders as the bolt he’d fired returned to his outstretched hand with a thwit. Isabela watched with increasing delight as the wound on Hawke’s shoulder, emanating smoky tendrils of red power, rapidly closed over in the only instance she’d ever seen of healing magic used offensively.

Anders brought his hands together with a clap, his staff locked between them. Crackling bands of blue energy shimmered into being around Hawke’s ankles, wrists, and neck. They constricted immediately, binding him and lifting him into the air.

Hawke struggled, radiating his own red magic to counter the blue fire. Justice recoiled visibly at the resistance, but leaned into his spell, keeping it up for a few moments longer. His determined expression never wavered, only grew harder.

Finally, with a great roar of effort, Hawke wrenched himself free of the magical bonds, falling a meter to the floor. Justice staggered as his mana whiplashed back against him.
Hawke recovered first and charged past both Justice and Varric, knocking them off their feet. He disappeared into the darkness beyond the door with barely a sound to mark his passing, apart from Varric’s curse and Justice’s grunt of pain.

“He flees,” Fenris commented, his smugness blunted by the hoarseness of his voice. “He won’t fight all four of us at once.”

“Even if he did,” said Isabela wearily, dragging herself over to lean against a workbench, “he’d probably still win. And what would be the point? I think he’s lost, Fenris. What can we even do?”

Fenris heard the despair in her voice, because he’d been part of the same conversation she had. Varric, however, looked confused, and Justice angry.

“Do not give up just yet,” said Fenris quietly. “We promised, remember?”

He didn’t sound very hopeful either. Isabela shrugged, too exhausted from fear and pain to talk about it further.

“Lost?” said Varric as he brushed corpse dust off his coat, having picked himself up off the floor. “What you mean lost, Rivaini? I assume he attacked you, but you’re still alive – what happened?”

Isabela avoided his gaze as she tried to rub some of the lingering pain out of her arms. “Varric, I... I don’t really want to relive it right now. Maybe later.”

The dwarf looked stricken at her lack of usual charm. He moved towards her, concerned.

“Are either of you injured?” asked Justice. Isabela hadn’t even noticed him regain his feet, but he was right there beside Varric, clearly ready to heal either or both of them if needed.

Fenris extended his arms to display the gashes he’d received during his brief fight with Hawke. Justice gestured with his staff, expertly knitting the wounds closed.

He looked at Isabela, who shook her head.

“I’m fine,” she said. “I hurt all over from what he did to us, but I don’t think that’s something you can heal. Not quickly, anyway. Um... thanks, Justice. Thanks for saving us. For a moment there I was sure that was... it.”

Varric reached her side and patted her arm, quite gently. She mustered a relieved, grateful smile for him, but it faded quickly.

“My thanks also,” said Fenris. “And for the healing. If you had not arrived when you did, we would surely have perished.”

“Do you know the whereabouts of Eingana or Merrill?” Justice requested.

Neither of them did. Justice frowned.

“We must locate them without delay. I believe I can find them in the labyrinth below, but I may need lyrium to do so. The magic of Hawke’s demon is-”

“There’s no need,” said an exhausted voice behind them.

All four turned around to see the two battered elves at the door to Darktown. Reaver was with them, his muzzle lacerated and much of his fur matted with dried blood. At the sight of them, he wagged his tail half-heartedly.
“Seven lamb bones,” Eingana muttered. “Where....”

“Kitten,” said Isabela, the intense relief flooding through her like a cool balm on her aching body. “Eingana! I’m so glad the two of you are safe!”

Merrill smiled as she trudged across the laboratory, meeting Isabela halfway for a gingerly hug. “Me too,” said Varric. “Thank the Maker! I was sure we’d all end up dead down there, but here we all are.”

His face curdled. “Except Hawke, of course.”

Eingana smiled sourly with half her mouth. “I think he passed us a minute or so ago,” she said. “Didn’t even stop to taunt or attack. Nicely done, whatever you did.”

“Good,” said Justice. “Everyone is accounted for. Now, we must-”

“Hold, spirit,” Fenris interrupted.

Justice turned to stare at him, eyes blazing.

Fenris was unmoved by the spirit’s intense regard. “Why have you emerged? Did Anders summon you, or have you taken control of his body from him?”

“Anders and I are one,” Justice said coldly. “He is as present and aware as I am.”

“Then where have you been for the past several months?” Fenris countered.

“Dormant. Anders brought me forth to take advantage of my superior command of magic.”

Fenris scowled, clearly not satisfied, but he raised no further objection. After Justice’s eyes had bored into him for a few moments more, Fenris waved at him to continue.

“Tread lightly, spirit,” was all he said.

“It is not I you need fear,” said Justice, his voice crackling with power. “Now that we are all together and have a few moments of safety, I will tell you what must be done.”

“Justice has a plan,” Varric chimed in. “He knows how we can use the city’s magic to trap Hawke – like Blondie did before, but this time on purpose. Obviously it’s going to be difficult and dangerous, but if we play our cards right we can keep Hawke contained until the Enchanter gets here. Then, hopefully, she’ll come up with a more permanent solution.”

Isabela shook her head mutely, but only Fenris noticed.

“What’s your idea, Justice?” asked Eingana.

Beside her, Merrill was running her fingers along the multitude of jars that occupied one shelf, searching for one in particular.

“First, someone must return to the mansion above, to determine roughly how long we have until Wynne arrives,” said Justice.

“Oh! I can do that,” said Merrill, turning around with her hand still extended up to the shelf.

Justice shook his head. “No, Merrill. You are the only one here who is adept at blood magic. You
will be needed with me below.”

“...Oh.” Merrill looked at once disappointed, frightened, and interested. “You need blood magic for this trap you have in mind to work? Really?”

“If we are to capture Hawke without killing him, then yes,” said Justice.

He explained to them his intention to tap into Kirkwall’s ancient ritual channels, and how only blood magic could keep Hawke alive during the process that would isolate him from the world until Wynne arrived.

“What about me?” asked Isabela during a lull in the discussion, while Merrill was absorbed in thought. “If you don’t specifically need me for anything, I can go up to see what time it is. Wait for the Enchanter, maybe. I don’t like these cellars much.”

She shivered theatrically and kept her tone light-hearted, but even Justice could tell she was deeply uncomfortable. Her usual glibness and innuendos had all but faded in the face of shock, fear, and pain.

“Very well,” said Justice in a tone that was almost gentle. “You may also wish to send word to Aveline, then return afterwards to help us – but only if you are able.”

Isabela nodded, relief at the prospect of getting out of here warring in her gut with concern for her friends. For the time being, relief won.

“Isabela,” said Eingana, attracting her attention. “If we don’t get back up there in time, show Wynne the notes Anders and I copied from the book at the Black Emporium. There’s a sheaf of information about the rare kind of spirit that’s got Hawke under its control. She ought to see it before she decides what to do. The pages are hidden in a book in the drawing room at the back of the first floor called Songs of Old Marches: Inscriptions collected by Philliam, a Bard!”

“Okay,” said Isabela. “If you’re not back by the time Wynne arrives, I’ll make sure she sees it.”

That was about it, then. She was looking forward to going back upstairs, and potentially leaving the mansion. Despite the demons on the streets above, she’d take them over this hellish basement any day. But she wasn’t quite ready to go yet.

Leaning against the wall with her arms and legs crossed, she said to Justice, “Tell us the details of your plan before I go – just in case.”

Justice nodded. “Listen very carefully. We will have but one chance.”
Hawke’s mind, like the surf before a tsunami.

Hawke was angry. He killed things when he was angry.

The things he was trying to kill were cunning. They knew him, and they weren’t cooperating. This made him angrier.

He vented his anger by hacking apart corpses animated by spirits he’d summoned, but it wasn’t the same. It wasn’t satisfying.

The undead produced no screams of pain or fear. Their rotting flesh and bones fell apart all too easily under the onslaught of his blade. They bled no hot, living fluid, only sludge and dust.

Even when he commanded them to attack him, it barely got his blood pumping.

Slaughtering his own ghastly servants served to expel some of the turbulent energy Hawke’s rage built up inside him, but it didn’t make the rage go away. There was always more energy.

Still, it was better than nothing.

He was increasingly tempted to summon more powerful demons to fight, just for a challenge. Or perhaps he’d call forth something truly horrifying and beat it into submission, so that he could co-opt its powers to help him track down his true enemies: those bloody wannabe adventurers who just wouldn’t die.

Wannabe adventurers? whispered a quiet voice in the back of Hawke’s mind. Have you forgotten who these people are?

Hawke considered. He supposed they qualified as actual adventurers. They were certainly canny and capable fighters, even without him to lead them.

That damnable spirit that lived in Anders, for instance, was now employing a powerful abjuration Hawke’s benefactor had never encountered before. No matter how hard he exerted the magical senses the ancient wyrd had gifted him, he could no longer tell where his former friends were.

He’d been an idiot to leave them all together in the laboratory. No doubt they’d remained together for mutual protection, allowing Justice to veil them all from his sight with a single spell.

Probably they were busy scheming against him right now. They all seemed, quite stupidly, not to want him dead – which meant they would try to trap him again soon.

Hawke shuddered at the memory of that tube-shaped prison in which they’d held him. Less than a day of it had nearly driven him mad. He would not allow himself to be caged ever again, magically or otherwise. He’d kill himself first.

Before it even got to that point, he would kill countless others. He would destroy everything he could
reach. All of Kirkwall would pay a devastating price for any attempt confine him. And if they failed, well, the world would be next.

But the more time he gave them to plan, the more likely it was they’d find a way to succeed.

Well, so what if his former friends weren’t quite as powerless and witless as he’d thought? That didn’t mean they weren’t misguided fools who needed to die.

*Violence is your solution to every single problem*, said the voice. *Kill everyone and destroy everything in your way. It’s what you’ve always done, so why should this be any different?*

The voice was his own, but it spoke like his mother. She’d once said something much the same to his father.

Years later, many times, she’d said it to him. When Leandra disapproved of some dangerous plan of his, she hadn’t rested until she’d talked him out of it.

Bitter regret welled up inside Hawke. Not for the first time, he wondered if his life would not, in this moment, be careening horrendously towards ruin if Leandra were still around to talk him out of things.

*She might be gone, but she didn’t leave you alone*, said the voice. *You’re not without guidance.*

Hawke willed his conscience, or whatever it was, to shut the fuck up. It didn’t. Just like Leandra, it refused to be silent.

*Your friends love you*, it insisted. *They believe you’re in terrible danger. They’re afraid they’re going to lose you, and they keep trying to pull you back towards them. How is that any different from Leandra showing you the right path? The gentler path?*

*They’re not trying to save me*, Hawke argued with himself. *They’re trying to save themselves from me.*

His inner Leandra retorted: *Those two things aren’t mutually exclusive.*

Hawke missed her terribly. An unbearable ache had filled his chest for months, echoing back and forth endlessly through the empty space where she’d been.

Nothing would ever fill that void. Only the wyrd had tried... and now it was going to kill everyone he cared about.

Worst of all, he was going to let it.

More livid with himself than with his friends, Hawke roared as he sundered the Veil.

His fury was broadcast into the Fade. Five rage demons were drawn to him instantly, like nails to a magnet. They incarnated through fiery gates before him, and he tore into them lustfully.

He tried to ignore the voice or shut it out as he fought, but stubbornly, it kept on talking.

*Your friends know you’re being influenced against your will. They believe the wyrd is demonic and malevolent and has its own purposes for the powers it’s given you. They’ve done research on creatures like it. They have every reason to believe it will eventually overwhelm your sanity, and in fact already doing so.*

*When it’s done, your body will belong to it fully. By then your mind will be but a shadow – if you still*
exist at all. You will be an impotent husk of a soul, forced to watch murders and atrocities being committed by the flesh and blood that should belong to you.

Hawke screamed at the rage demons as he killed them, but he wasn’t sure if it was fury or terror that fueled his unearthly cry.

Your friends are anxious and afraid, not just for themselves but for you. They’re trying to help you the only way they can: by keeping you under control until expert help arrives. And for this they must die?

Yes, Hawke thought desperately, miserably. Yes, they must die.

He clung to that thought even through its sheer irrationality, trying to redirect the terrible rage that scorched his insides against his friends instead.

Less than an hour ago he’d had no trouble with the idea. His desire to end them had been as clear as a cloudless sky. Now he was struggling – barely in control of his own mind, let alone anything else. What had they done to him?

Why must they die? his inner voice demanded mercilessly. For what possible reason? Because they love you and they’re trying to save both themselves and you?

Must Varric die? Varric, the best friend a bitter, cruel bastard like you could ever hope to have?

Those weren’t Leandra’s words, not anymore. That was all Hawke. Leandra wouldn’t have called him a bitter, cruel bastard.

Not out loud, anyway. Leandra would have lied to him out of love, lied to shield him from pain.

Or perhaps... perhaps she would have told him the truth, as she saw it. Not to spare his feelings, but to bolster them. She would have wanted him to believe about himself what she thought she knew to be true: that he was capable of being kind and gentle, when he wanted to be.

So Leandra might have thought. But she would have been wrong.

He had no feelings, none that made him worthy of love. He was an inhuman monster, a creature hollowed out by hatred and filled to the brim with rage. That was everything he was, so he might as well act like it.

So Varric must die. You think you owe him nothing, despite the fact that if he’d never recruited you, you’d still be a penniless mercenary scraping by out of Gamlen’s hovel in Lowtown.

Yes, Hawke thought. Varric’s Deep Roads expedition got Bethany killed.

His heart clenched with pain. Bethany. He hadn’t allowed himself to think about her for what felt like a long, long time.

How he missed her kind smile, her easy laugh. Unlike him, and despite having far greater reason, Bethany had never grown bitter living the cramped, secret life of a Chantry fugitive. At least, not that she’d ever allowed him to see.

Bethany had given him purpose. He’d protected her for so long that absent that need, he’d been aimless.

More than purpose, Bethany had given him something else: comfort. She’d forgiven him his violence
when nobody else would, or could. She’d been sunshine in his darkness.

Then he’d pulled her into that darkness with him, and she’d never emerged again.

And her twin, their brother Carver – longer still since Hawke had thought of him.

Would Carver have allowed him to act like this, if he’d survived their flight from Lothering? Would Carver have stood by and let his brother tear apart everything he’d built and kill everyone he’d come to love?

No, Hawke knew. Carver would never have stood for this. He’d have planted himself between Hawke and everyone else and punched him right in the jaw for daring to even consider venting his rage on innocent people. If only Carver were here now.

But like Leandra, Bethany and Carver were long gone. His memories of them felt so distant. In his mind they were as silent as shadows, waiting for him with Leandra and Malcolm in the warmth of the Maker’s side.

They would wait for him forever. He’d lasted less than a year without his family before managing to damn himself completely. But at least they were at peace, and could suffer no more.

He envied them.

What about Merrill? his inner voice spoke up again.

On cue, his mind called up his elven friend’s earlier words: When you want to be, Hawke, you’re a loving, caring man.

Merrill is a blood mage, Hawke thought.

So? Why is that relevant? You’ve summoned more demons in the past hour than she has in probably her entire life.

Why would the damned voice not shut up? Why did it torment him so?!

You’re angry and violent, Merrill had said. It’s part of who you are. But it’s not everything you are. The sum of Michael Hawke is so much richer than that.

How could she possibly know such a thing? She had to have been lying.

But why? Why would Merrill make up something like that? He wasn’t even sure she possessed the necessary guile.

She saved you from Fell Orden. She’s healed Reaver before, when Anders was too exhausted. She’s helped you countless times over the years, risking herself every single time. She follows you, even though you often side with templars, because she believes you mean well. She follows you, even though you don’t believe in her or what she’s trying to do, because she respects your opinion and your experience.

She’d said, You have goodness in your heart. I’ve seen it.

No. She was mistaken. He had nothing in his heart but evil.

Maybe before all this, he’d been gentle. Before each and every member of his family had died and it had been his fault every single time. Maybe even after that, for a little while, with Anders now and then.
But there had been so many demons, so many monsters, so many blood mages. They’d sucked away everything that made him human and left him bare, revealed for what he really was: a creature of agony and wrath that spread its desolation to everything it touched. Something like him deserved nothing in the way of sympathy. That made anyone who offered it an idiot.

What, Hawke wondered, had Anders ever seen in him? How could he have possibly loved such a fiend, let alone _continued_ to love him after everything he’d done?

The corridor ahead of him was filled with aimless undead, staggering around in circles as they waited for his orders. Hawke carved into them with a furious roar.

Why couldn’t his friends have just _abandoned_ him, like smart reasonable people would have? Why couldn’t they _understand_? It would be so much easier for them, for all of Kirkwall, if they’d just killed him and been done with it.

Of all of them, Hawke had thought at least Merrill would see the truth. She used blood magic and had consorted with demons before. Her people lived outside of Chantry supervision, and they knew what had to be done if one of their own succumbed to possession. She knew that true power had a price.

*Make it stop hurting us*, she’d begged. *Make it stop hurting you. The Hawke I know would never lie down and let some evil thing take over his life!*

Well, it was _his_ life to ruin. And ruin it he had – grossly and irreparably.

He was such a fool. He never should have gone dragon hunting with that lunatic stranger he’d fallen in lust with in the Dane’s Refuge, all those years ago in Lothering. He shouldn’t have killed the stupid dragon, and he _especially_ shouldn’t have drank its fucking blood after some random person had altered it with chemicals and blood magic!

What had he been _thinking_?! How far would the ripples of that stupid decision spread? How much more destruction would they cause before they dissipated, finally and forever?

_How about Fenris?_ his inner voice barrelled on. *Fenris shares many of your views on mages. He’s suffered at their hands as much as you have, if not more! He’s seen horrors you can only dream of. You and he shared a friendship built not so much on words as on mutual respect and quiet understanding.*

Fenris’s words came back to haunt him. *You can pretend as hard as you like, monster, but I see the truth. Hawke is your puppet, and he would never behave this way if he had a choice.*

Fenris had seen demons, had seen abominations. He knew how they behaved and what they did to their victims. Fenris had never lied to him.

_Must Isabela die? The woman who risked a fate worse than death on your behalf? She returned with the Tome of Koslun, risking capture by the Qunari – who would have destroyed her mind – rather than leave you to take the blame. She’s stuck by you for years. She believes in you, sometimes against her own judgement. She cried when she realized what you’ve become._

_Eingana? She came here to help you because Anders asked her to. She’s the Warden-Commander of Ferelden. She has pressing business that concerns the safety of the entire world, and instead of seeing to it, she’s been hunted by undead through a mouldy underground maze. Because she chose to help a stranger, for her friend._

_Aveline? The Captain of the Guard who could have made your life the living Void if she chose, with_
what she knows about you? Aveline, who has risked so much for you because of what you did for
her during the Blight and afterwards? She’s long since paid her debts, and both of you know it. Still
she makes sacrifices for you, because it’s you.

Hawke had no arguments. All of it was true.

But none of it felt true. None of it felt, period. Hawke’s spirit was as dead as the corpses he was
slashing to pieces.

The violence he inflicted was mindless, devoid of emotion. The limit of his involvement with the
world was to use his muscles to exert force against it.

*The sensual violence of lust is all we will ever need from life* – so the wyrd had said.

Hawke might have sympathized, once. There was a time when that was all he’d ever needed, either.

No longer, he realized. He no longer felt any pleasure at all in what he was doing. Not the tiniest
spark of lust remained.

And yet... it was too late for him to deviate from his path. He’d launched himself into the final,
unending violence of not caring, and there was no turning back.

Hawke so missed feeling alive. So few things had ever made him feel that way. Killing; sex; Anders.

Only the last of those continued to hold any interest for him.

But how could Hawke face the man he loved, after what he’d done? How could he not?

A confrontation was unavoidable at this point. He’d finally pushed too far and cut too deep,
provoking Justice to emerge.

Now there were many spirits involved: not just the wyrd and Anders’s companion, but hundreds if
not thousands more. The city of Kirkwall was being invaded from across the Veil, and it was
Hawke’s fault.

If only he’d known.

Fenris was right, of course, and so was Merrill. So were all of them. He was at the wyrd’s mercy.

This bizarre creature from the spirit world had been drawn to his taste for violence, and now it was
pulling his strings. It had usurped his rage and bloodthirst to gain a foothold in the waking world and
thereby increase its power. He was its plaything, and as long as it had some hold over his body and
mind, Kirkwall and perhaps all of Thedas was at risk.

The realization washed over Hawke slowly, coldly, like a pond freezing with the onset of winter.
With it came yet more rage, along with muted shame, terror, and most of all despair. Hawke wanted
to weep, so wretched was the hopelessness that choked him.

His maddened, senseless hacking at the animated corpses slowed and finally stilled. His eyes were
dull and black. His sword drifted down until the point came to rest against the dusty floor, feeble
fingers barely clinging to the hilt.

Within him, the rage boiled hotter than ever. This was *his* body, and he would *not* relinquish it
without a fight. He would see to it that the wyrd would not use him as its apocalyptic instrument –
even if he had to engineer his own death.
He began to walk, gathering the remaining undead to follow him.

Inside he screamed unendingly, but he could exert not the slightest control over his own flesh.

There would be no fight. This was no longer his body.

Desperately, Hawke reached for the voice that he’d shoved away, calling and crying out for its words of shattering insight and inevitable truth.

Only silence answered him.

The voice was gone. If it had truly been Leandra, she’d moved on in despair, abandoning her son to his chosen fate. If it was himself, he’d been ground down into submission by the wyrd’s hateful encouragement of his own self-loathing.

Hawke had never been beaten into submission in his life. Not once, ever, had he yielded to any opponent.

He had intended to remain undefeated his entire life. There was nothing that would not die when stabbed deeply enough, cut into enough pieces, or burned with a hot enough flame of rage. Other enemies fell to barbed insults, spitted curses, or intimate, cruel secrets. Or so he’d once thought.

Now, at long last, Michael Hawke had met something he couldn’t kill.

Truly, what hope did he have?

Anders, he thought. Anders would fight for him, curse the man’s pigheaded devotion. If there was a way to save his sorry soul, Anders would be the architect of that plan.

But at what cost? What price would Anders pay to save the despicable creature his lover had become?

Don’t sacrifice yourself for me, Hawke pleaded silently, and he clung to a vain, irrational hope that somehow Anders would hear him, and listen.

In truth, Hawke rather doubted it was even possible for him to live through this with his mind intact. Even if the wyrd could be killed, he himself would be lost to madness long before then.

When the enchanter finally showed up and worked some miracle to free him from the creature, he would be insensate and crazed: lacking both language and reason, knowing only bloodlust. He would attack whatever was in front of him until it was paste and shreds of bone.

He would have to be put down, then, for the safety of the city.

Yes. That would be better, Hawke thought. Better to die for the good of the world than to be twisted into its worst nightmare.

Aveline would see to it. She would see him consumed by his own fire before he could spread his wash of destruction outward. Anders and Aveline would stop him, somehow.

If he had one chance of redemption left, it would be to force his commandeered body to stand still for the one crucial moment it would take for her to strike the killing blow.

These thoughts brought Hawke a measure of comfort. Make it quick, Guard-Captain. We’re all counting on you.
Hawke only hoped she wouldn’t allow Anders to watch. He had hurt the man so much already; he’d caused so much pain. He couldn’t bear the thought of adding yet more.

Hawke realized at last that he wanted to die, and that perhaps he even had for a long time. Only the subconscious fear of Anders’s grief had stopped him from doing it himself, or from throwing himself into a suicidal battle he knew he couldn’t win.

Well – the time had finally come. Anders would just have to understand. He would have to be strong. He had Varric and Isabela and the others, and he would have Hawke’s estate and his wealth to do with as he saw fit – Hawke had seen to that, discreetly, after Leandra’s death.

So that was it. His fate was in their hands, and all he could do was trust they would get the job done.

Inside himself, Hawke closed his eyes. He allowed his mind to drift, paying no attention to what the wyrd was doing with his mouth and eyes, his hands and his sword.

He was so tired. He’d convinced himself that things would somehow, eventually, be okay. When had Aveline ever let him down?

Gradually, having at last found a measure of peace, Hawke went to sleep.

As his mind slipped away, his body swept onwards, towards devastation.

∞

The sun had begun to set as Cullen and Wynne paused at the crest of a hill. Amid the darkness gathering on the eastern horizon, the city of Kirkwall burned.

Plumes of smoke rose from the skyline in several places. Canted with the wind, they washed indistinctly into the deep blue of the encroaching twilight.

The lights of several fires were visible amongst the blocky spires of Hightown. Most of the smoke, however, originated from the Lowtown sprawl that filled the vast and ancient quarry pit.

Every so often, quiet but palpable tremors rippled the earth. Even here, miles out on the coastal road, bits of ash occasionally drifted down on the wind.

Cullen frowned and wrinkled his nose as he caught a faint but unmistakable whiff of burning flesh. He’d have been happier not knowing what it was, but he’d been present at enough Harrowings and Rites of Tranquility to sear the smell into his memory for life.

The city’s apparent condition worried him deeply. He was sure there hadn’t been that many fires ongoing when he’d set out, half a day earlier.

“I see Kirkwall is having an eventful evening,” Wynne commented wryly. “You did mention a ‘minor’ demonic emergence, didn’t you?”

“So I did,” said Cullen, grimacing. “I see now that was a poor choice of words. The situation has evidently deteriorated since I left.”

“All the more reason to get there as soon as possible.”

Wynne waited for a moment while Cullen stood there, trying to count the distinct blazes he could see. Then she tapped her staff emphatically on the ground and waved him onward.

“Move along sharply, young man, or I shall have to cast haste on you out of sheer impatience.”
Cullen bit back a sigh and nodded. They resumed their course towards Kirkwall.

Wynne had been a respected Senior Enchanter at the Fereldan Circle when Cullen had first known her. In the intervening years her reputation had only grown, particularly after helping Eingana Tabris defeat the Blight.

She hadn’t been young then, but in the years she’d been in Cumberland and he in Kirkwall, Wynne seemed to have aged a great deal. Her skin was papery and speckled with liver spots, almost translucent in places. Her face was lined with innumerable wrinkles, her hair insubstantial and snow white.

Yet in spite of her apparent frailty, her mind was lucid and clear. Her eyes were ever attentive, and as far as he could tell, her compassion (and sternness) were utterly undiminished. The aura of magical power that surrounded her was palpable, almost crackling in its intensity.

Furthermore (as Cullen had learned since meeting her on the road), her physical appearance belied a core of endurance and strength that would have rivalled a woman forty years her junior.

Despite his periodic and pointed suggestions that they conserve energy, Wynne had maintained a strenuous pace since they’d met up. Contrary to his expectations, Cullen had found himself lagging behind her more than once. The fast jog she set was much like one he would have tasked to templar recruits building their stamina in preparation for combat training in heavy plate.

He wasn’t annoyed, exactly. She had clearly been right not to take her time, and it wasn’t like he wanted to delay getting back to the besieged city. It was more the fact that Wynne was old, and Cullen worried about her health.

It was obvious by now that his concern was misplaced. Quite apart from taxing herself unduly, Wynne didn’t even seem tired — despite the fact that she’d been walking all day before he met her and had jogged with him for two hours since.

Cullen had come close a few times to asking her to slow down so that he could catch his breath. He might be younger than she and physically fit, but he was also wearing metal armour. She was merely garbed in her voluminous but light Nevarran robes.

(He had accepted his offer to carry her small travelling pack. He regretted it now, but he wasn’t about to give it back.)

A memory stood out in Cullen’s mind of Wynne, years ago at Kinloch Hold, scolding him for some offensive remark he’d made. He didn’t care to remember what it was, but he did recall burning with shame for days afterward. He’d felt then like a little boy who’d misbehaved, and rightly so.

He had no desire to repeat the experience, so rather than risk a tongue-lashing, he’d sucked it up. At least they would get back to Kirkwall all the sooner.

As they closed in on the city, both keeping an eye out for emerging details, Cullen’s thoughts turned to the reason for Wynne’s visit. A quarter hour of silence later, he finally repeated the question that had been bothering him for some time.

“Enchanter,” Cullen said carefully, “you never did answer me when I asked about the nature of the spirit possessing the Champion.”

“That is because I do not know what it is, Knight-Captain.”

“Please call me Cullen,” he said, wanting to avoid reminding Wynne of Meredith’s overt mistrust by
flaunting his rank.

“I will if you call me Wynne,” she replied.

He flushed as he realized he’d been the one to call her by her title first. She smiled at him to show she was teasing.

“You must know something,” Cullen said determinedly. “I’d appreciate even an educated guess. Didn’t you and Eingana Tabris fight a creature of the same type at the Fereldan Tower during the Blight?”

“We... may have,” said Wynne, taken aback. “To be frank, we fought demons of nearly every type known during the Tower crisis. When Anders last contacted me, he didn’t know what kind was involved in Hawke’s case. Has he learned something new since I set out from Cumberland?”

“I was not privy to all the details they’d uncovered, but Guard-Captain Aveline – another friend of Hawke’s – seemed to think progress had been made,” said Cullen. “She only mentioned the battle at Kinloch Hold in passing.”

“Well... let me think, now. If Eingana spoke of it without being specific, she must have meant one of the unique creatures we fought. There was only one pride demon, but she would have referred to Uldred by name if that was what she meant. Perhaps... perhaps she spoke of the wyrd.”

“The wyrd.” Cullen scratched his chin. “Right....”

He knew that word, didn’t he? Something different from both spirit and demon? He’d studied all known types of Fade creatures years ago, as part of his templar training. What was it...?

Wynne saw his look of suppressed bewilderment and huffed impatiently.

“A wyrd,” she said in the tone Cullen imagined she reserved for fresh apprentices, “is an entity born of the Fade composed of errant thoughts that lack the focus and singularity of purpose required to produce a true spirit.”

Cullen snapped his fingers. “Yes! I knew that. It just... slipped my mind.”

“I'll have none of your lip, young man,” said Wynne severely. Cullen cracked a smile.

She went on, “A wyrd coalesces from many unrelated thoughts that form with great intensity, which equates to power in Fade. Because of their disparate makeup, they tend to embody nondirection and purposelessness. They prey on distraction, attempting to divert unwary travellers or dreamers from their focus. In so doing they render their victims helpless, to be kept as slaves and ready sources of nourishment.

“There are a few different varieties, just as there are different types of spirit. The one that was released into the Circle Tower during the Blight was a Shah wyrd. It had incarnated in the waking world without a host and then been bound in stone for centuries, so it was much reduced from the height of its power. Even so, destroying it was no small feat.”

Cullen was frowning with distaste at the thought of malevolent entities that attacked people who weren’t paying attention.

“But you did kill it,” he said. “How powerful was it?”

“I didn’t kill it,” said Wynne. “Eingana did, with help from Leliana. She was the archer with us
when we found you beneath the Harrowing Chamber. I helped by keeping them both alive, but it was close. The creature was very strong, even after its long sleep. Alistair nearly perished in its initial attack, and he couldn’t help us in the ensuing battle.”

Cullen was about to ask something else, but Wynne wasn’t finished.

“From what Anders told me in his letter, and from my own research, whatever possesses Michael Hawke does not sound like a Shah wyrd.”

“Oh?” Cullen asked, afraid but curious. “But it could be a wyrd of another type?”

“I cannot say without having examined Hawke myself. Anders believes the creature is feeding on Hawke’s anger and grief, which does not fit the usual profile of a wyrd. By his account, it acts more like a rage demon when its behaviour is classifiable at all. Yet he was convinced it was something other than that.”

“Do you trust his opinion?”

“Yes,” said Wynne. “He has not studied spirits as long as I have, but he has an equally strong connection to their powers of healing, which are relevant to diagnosing victims of possession. I wish I could grant you your educated guess, Cullen, but it will have to wait until Anders and I can discuss the case in detail.”

“Then I shall wait,” said Cullen. “As for the prognosis – Captain Aveline also passed on that you’d indicated you believe Hawke can be saved. If it is a wyrd, do you still think so?”

“There may be a way, yes,” said Wynne. “It will depend on the creature’s nature and the extent of its control over him.”

Cullen chewed his tongue, worrying. The potential threat posed by the possessed Champion seemed like the biggest demand on his attention, but there was also the matter of the rest of the city.

He wondered if it would be wise to postpone their visit to the Hawke estate to check in with Aveline first. Depending on how much power the creature had granted its host, they might well need additional reinforcements to control him.

Yet there were precious few templars Cullen could trust not to inform Meredith too soon. Many, like Knight-Lieutenant Karras, would simply leap to their own conclusions about any secretive mission involving the Champion he assigned to others. If Karras knew something was going on but none of the details, he was liable to report to Meredith with whatever wild story he came up with.

Going against Meredith’s implicit wishes, let alone her direct orders, made Cullen uneasy. That was nothing new; these days, many things about the Knight-Commander made him uneasy.

Dark whispers abounded in the Gallows among both mages and templars that Meredith was insane. Most such stories Cullen dismissed as mean-spirited drivel, but he couldn’t deny he had a few suspicions of his own.

When it came right down to it, it was his duty as Knight-Captain to protect Kirkwall from threats both magical and demonic. Whatever name the arcane specialists decided on for the thing inside the Champion, to Cullen it was a demon – and that meant he had to act.

Meanwhile, it was also his duty to protect the mages under his care from persecution by the mundane populace. And in situations like this with demons popping up everywhere, most people reacted first by blaming mages.
In Cullen’s view, the people were usually right about that. But in this case, allowing the true cause to become known would accomplish nothing while spreading needless panic.

In neither duty was there room for insubordination against his Knight-Commander, even if she was corrupt and insane. Meredith was hardly the first bloodthirsty zealot to lord over a chapter of the Templar Order, and she wouldn’t be the last.

But if Meredith’s instability would worsen a situation in which the entire city was at stake... well.... Perhaps he would simply have to take matters into his own hands. Let Meredith worry about keeping the mages under control, while he saw to the more pressing matter of the Champion.

“Cullen,” said Wynne.

He looked over at her.

“I wonder if I might ask you something.”

“Certainly. What is it?”

“Does Knight-Commander Meredith consider me a danger to the city?”

Cullen winced.

Before he could form an answer Wynne added with a hint of wryness, “No – let me rephrase that. Does Meredith believe I present more of a danger to the city than a major uncontained Veil breach?”

It was as if she’d been listening to his thoughts.

“I, ah... no, I don’t believe so,” said Cullen uncomfortably.

“I am delighted to hear that. Still, I find it quite peculiar that she would insist I be escorted into her jurisdiction from several hours’ travel outside the city limits – and by no less than her Knight-Captain, who is surely needed elsewhere.”

Wynne maintained her light-hearted tone, but Cullen could hear the steel underneath it. Silently, he cursed Meredith’s paranoia.

“Actually... I volunteered to meet you, Enchanter,” he said, unconsciously slipping back into a deferential tone. “I do not personally agree with the Commander’s assessment that you need an escort of any kind. I realize such... attention... is an affront to a mage of your standing, whether or not it was meant that way.”

Wynne did not reply, but her lips pressed a little more tightly together.

“I had hoped, given our history, that you would instead see my presence and rank as a gesture of respect,” Cullen went on, knowing as he spoke the words how inadequate they sounded.

Wynne’s expression softened. “I see. How... thoughtful of you. Thank you, Cullen.”

Cullen smiled and nodded, relieved she’d understood. The blush of embarrassment that had been creeping up his neck gradually subsided.

Wynne seemed about to say something else, but as she was opening her mouth, a brilliant point of light flashed in the city ahead. A split second later, a violent tremor rocked the earth. Startled by the flash, both of them barely kept to their feet.
As the tremor died away, a thunderous wave of sound rolled past them. Dust slowly settled in its wake.

“What in Andraste’s—” Cullen grunted, but Wynne cut him off.

“Cullen, be careful! A demon is about to emerge!”

“What! Here?”

Wynne nodded, her staff already raised in a defensive position. Crystalline blue magic flared around them both as she cast a barrier.

Cullen furrowed his brow in alarm, looking around for the telltale distortion that presaged a demon’s appearance in the waking world.

He didn’t immediately see it, so he took the moment to draw his sword and unstrap his shield from his back. He readied himself for an attack, still searching for the emergence point.

The road behind them was clear, but when his gaze swept back to what lay ahead, he saw it.

A scant few metres in front of them, the air was rippling and bulging. A glowing tear appeared and rapidly grew bigger. Something large was pressing against the other side of the Veil.

“Cullen, listen carefully,” said Wynne. “It’s a pride demon.”

“Maker’s mercy! What is going on here?”

“Listen,” Wynne urged. “We cannot afford to be drawn into a long battle with the creature. As soon as it emerges, I will hit it with a lightning bolt to provoke its magic immunity. Then, once it becomes vulnerable, I will petrify it. You must be ready to go for its head and kill it with your first blow. Can you do that?”

Cullen tightened his grip on the handle of his shield and raised his sword into a ready position.

“Yes.”

Wynne was right. They didn’t have time to wear down a pride demon. The longer they spent fighting it, the greater the chance it would overcome one or both of them.

Wynne’s strategy was sound as well. Pride demons were notoriously resistant to magical attack, but only in bursts, and only if they saw it coming. Once she’d forced it to defend itself, they would have a short window in which her petrification would stick. Then it would be upon him to end the fight before the demon had a chance to do anything else.

He would have to hit it very hard in just the right spot: between the shoulder and where the horn emerged from its head. If his attack failed to shatter it, the demon would shake off Wynne’s spell and they would be dragged into a battle of attrition.

Adrenaline pulsed through his veins as he steeled himself, planning the motions he would make.

“I’m ready,” he said.

“Good. It will be upon us in moments.”

The tear in reality was now taller than both of them. Purple-black claws were forcing the edges wider. Both of them eyed it warily.
With a flash of green light and an ear-rending screech, the edges of the rift dissolved. Cullen shut his eyes against the glare.

There was a resounding **crack** as Wynne unleashed her lightning bolt. Cullen saw the blinding flash through his closed eyelids. When he opened them, a hulking pride demon stood before them, electrical energy sparking harmlessly off its hide into the ground.

The demon spread its bladed arms and roared. Cullen tensed up even more, bracing himself to leap into action. His timing would have to be perfect.

Wynne swept her staff in a gesture of power before her. Tendrils of grey-green light converged out of the air and entangled the demon. It went still as its skin hardened, becoming brittle and grey.

Cullen charged. When he was about a metre away from the demon, he leapt with all his strength and momentum into the air, yelling a battle cry. At the same time he swung his sword in a broad, horizontal arc.

His blade clashed against the petrified demon’s head with a bone-jarring **clang**... and kept going. The creature’s hideous visage, frozen by Wynne’s magic, exploded into powder.

Cullen twisted his shoulder with his blow to avoid slamming chest-first into the demon. His right pauldron collided first, cracking the desiccated body and knocking it over.

Rolling his landing in heavy plate wasn’t easy, but Cullen managed it, spreading out the force of his impact against the road throughout his body.

Disintegrating chunks of petrified demon flesh rained around him. Wynne’s spell, rendered permanent when the demon died, left behind little but gravel and dust.

Cullen picked himself up carefully. He felt bruised under his armour, but his landing could have been a lot worse. He looked at the fragments around him, taking in the sight of their kill.

He grinned and looked over at Wynne, who was now standing calmly with her staff planted on the road next to her.

“**We did it!”** he said triumphantly.

Wynne nodded.

“**Well done, Cullen,”** she said, as if he were an apprentice who had just solved a tricky bit of arithmetic.

“**You as well.”**

Cullen took a moment to examine his blade. Lyrium-infused, it was nicked a little by the impact with solid rock, but it was nowhere near as damaged as an ordinary blade would have been. Satisfied, he sheathed it and re-hung his shield by its strap on his back.

A single mage and templar working together, he thought, made a formidable team. Pride demons were feared for a reason, and the two of them had just killed one without it getting a proverbial word in edgewise.

“**This is... very bad,”** Cullen said of the situation in general as Wynne approached the pile of dust. “**For a pride demon to emerge this far outside the city, I fear what must be happening within it.”**
“The Veil here is very thin,” said Wynne soberly. “It gets thinner the closer we come to Kirkwall. I suspect that flash was a rift opening within the city – a much larger one than what we just encountered. The situation there must be dire indeed.”

Cullen kicked aside a chunk of bladed arm as, by unspoken agreement, they resumed making their way towards the city.

“Do you think we’ll be in time to stop all this?” he asked, dreading her answer.

Wynne frowned, considering before she responded.

“If the spirit within Hawke is truly behind the whole invasion, it must be extraordinarily powerful,” she said. “It may well be smarter than any of us. With the city’s ancient nexus active, the Veil is weakened even further. The spirit, or wyrd if that’s what it is, can exploit those conditions to summon ever more powerful demons to aid it. Until it is dealt with, the Veil will remain torn, and the situation will continue to escalate.”

She hadn’t exactly answered his question, but Cullen didn’t press.

Cold terror had taken root in his gut. More demons, and stronger demons, were coming.

He remembered all too well the power of the one that had emerged into Hightown Square the previous evening. Ser Lucian, the victim of its possession, had been a good friend of his.

The pain of Lucien’s violent death was still very fresh in Cullen’s mind. Informing his subordinate’s wife what had befallen her husband while under his command had been supremely awful. Hearing the cries of his children had been even worse.

Cullen wondered how many more peoples’ worlds he would have to destroy with messages of death before this was over.

He thought about the few people who would truly care if he died – and who, if anyone, would tell them. Meredith wasn’t like him; she wouldn’t be bothered enough to deliver the news personally.

“We must stop this,” he said quietly. “We and the Champion’s friends are all that stand between that monster and the city’s annihilation.”

Wynne looked over at him and nodded grimly.

“Let us make haste,” she said, and broke once more into a fast jog.

Cullen didn’t bother asking her to conserve energy. He simply matched her pace.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!